

TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES

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The Beginnings of the *Religion in America* Class at Pascack Hills/Valley Regional District

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This article is based on interviews with Marisa Mathias, teachers, and students of the Pascack Hills/Valley Regional District. Hank Bitten is the executive director of the New Jersey Council for the Social Studies.

The intent of this course was to introduce students to the more pluralistic world that they are likely to encounter. For much of human history most people lived in a world where they were likely to come across people much as themselves: that is all of their contacts would be with people of a similar ethnic, racial, social and religious background. As the world has become more interconnected students are likely to have to deal with people who have differing world views and the intention of this course was to use the study of religion as a vehicle for students to explore the diversity of religious belief and to see how religion can be a unique and distinct explanation of the human experience.

The goal of the course was to show how religion supports our understanding of how the world operates. Just as the physical and social sciences add to our understanding of how we experience life, so does religion but it does it in a way that that is unique to the core ideas of this discipline. This course was designed to explore the terms and language of

religion so that it speaks to the listener on the terms that most suits its distinctive message.

One of the guiding posits of this course is best summed up by the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein, 20th century Austrian philosopher:

“It is a grave mistake to make religious belief a matter of evidence in the way that science is a matter of evidence because theological language works on an entirely different plane. If religious language is interpreted symbolically it has the power to manifest a transcendent reality in the same way as the short stories of Tolstoy. They reveal a reality too wonderful for words.”

This course permits students to examine religion through the prism of myth and symbol, distinct from an emphasis on creed and ritual, for as Francesco Petrarch said in his 14th century treatise, *On Religious Life*:

“Theology is actually poetry, poetry concerning God, effective not because it ‘proved’ anything, but because it reached the heart.”

Religion is not supposed to provide answers to questions that lay with the reach of human reason. There are other disciplines that are designed for that.

Religion's task, closely allied with that of art, it helps us live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there are no rational explanations and for problems for which there are no easy explanations: mortality, pain, grief, despair and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life. Actually, the study of religion motivates inquiry, discovery, and exploration. When reason is pushed to its limits, we can arrive at a transcendence that may permit us to affirm our suffering with serenity and courage.

Interpreting religion through the use of myth and symbol opens up a new avenue of understanding religious stories that is not reliant on the historical validity of those stories. Those stories have something timeless to tell us about the human experience that transcend our ability to validate them as historical fact.

While there may be some who may doubt that which is neither apparent of the senses nor obvious to our intelligence, I would direct you to the words of Albert Einstein who said in *Living Philosophies* in 1931:

“The most beautiful emotion that we can experience is the mystical. It is the sower of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger is all but dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself to us as the highest wisdom and most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of all true religiousness.”

This is what we hope to convey to our students. That through a study of religion with the aid of an understanding of the myth and symbol we

too may receive a glimpse of the divine nature of our world. Finally, Carl Jung concluded that

“Science ... is part and parcel of our knowledge and obscures our insight only when it holds that the understanding given by it is the only kind there is.”

From a Teacher of the Religion in America Class:

When Dom started this elective course over 30 years ago, both his insight and perspective were brilliant. He held two master's degrees, one in American History and one in Myth and Religion. Challenging students to examine religion through the prism of myth and symbol offered the opportunity to see beyond creed and ritual. This focus allowed for a second, most important objective to be met for students - to help them understand individually why they believe what they believe. From my experience, this is what students appreciated most from the class. Dom and I have always believed in the art of discussion and have both witnessed throughout our careers that students became empowered when we created a comfortable atmosphere for them to listen, think, question, discuss and grow. This has been and continues to be the beauty and strength of the course.

In 2007, when I began teaching the class, I looked to Stephen Prothero, Religious Scholar and Professor at Boston University. In his book, *Religious Literacy*, he revealed that most of his students had no understanding of religious concepts. His belief was and continues to be that his students as well American citizens in general need to be religiously literate. Religious literacy, according to Prothero is, “a skill to engage in public conversations about religion” and requires

“knowledge of world religions, empathetic understanding, critical engagement, and comparative perspective”.

Our course at Pascack Valley is entitled *Religion in America* where we offer students a comparative study of World Religions as well as the opportunity to understand why they believe what they believe. And all of it is done through the fostering of lessons in empathy and critical engagement. Inviting guest speakers in to our class from various religions was yet another brilliant idea of Dominic when he began the course and it continues to be the highlight for students. We study religion through the understanding of myth and symbol and learn about multi-religious beliefs from those who practice.

Dominic, myself and now Marisa believe that religion matters and that students cannot make sense of global or American history or America or the world today without it. At a time when ‘information civility’ is waning and in dire need of resurrection, this course espouses it. And the great benefit for students is that they ultimately gain a better understanding of why they believe what they believe.

Comments from final reflection papers by students:

- Before taking *Religion in America*, I held the belief that religion is a form of guidance which allows its followers to feel a sense of purpose in life. This course has reinforced my understanding of religion but I realized there is a lot more to explore and dissect when it comes to religion. The comparative nature of this class has allowed me to find commonalities and debunk preconceived notions about certain religions, which has fostered a stronger sense of open-mindedness within myself. Now I see the

concept of religion as having different layers or components: spiritual, structural, and psychological. Moreover, this course has allowed me to analyze my own personal connections to religion and how they have altered my thought processes and behaviors. Despite the fact that I do not presently identify with any religion, this class has had a positive impact by allowing me to apply certain practices and tenets of other religions to my own life.

- “As each speaker came in and I listened to them speak so passionately about their religion and my eyes were really opened. Everyone was so humble and surprisingly open to other religions. All the stereotypes I once believed were immediately thrown out the window. I no longer believed that religion is merely for the purpose of worship and control of the masses. It’s about love, community, and giving up yourself for a higher power and cause. Whether it is through community service or the small everyday good deeds you can do.”
- “Now at the end of this course, if you ask me whether I believe in God or not, I will still say no, but I will tell you all about how there is something out there for everyone. There is some way to make life worth living, the experience may not be able to take all the bad out of the world, but it will be able to balance it out with the good. It took me a long time to understand why the dark in this world is so necessary, and with the help of this class I finally understand it is completely necessary so that each and every one of us can experience the good in extremes. I now understand that all we can do to live a healthy and happy life is to exist in the present at all times, forgive and forget, and make mistakes. Everybody may not be able to agree with me, but that is okay because religion is not just one thing, it can be anything you believe it to be.

- My time spent learning about religions in this class was not time wasted. I feel that I really did learn a lot about the beliefs of the world, the people who believe in them, and the cultures surrounding them all. I value the time I spent learning about all of this, and I feel it was something good for me to have experienced. I'm happy that I have, and I will take the information I've gathered this semester with me through the rest of my life. I hope to use it to become a better person, someone who's more equipped to be more accepting of people no matter what they believe, even if I don't think it is something I personally could ever subscribe to."
- "After every single speaker that came in, I went home and couldn't wait to tell my mom, dad, and sister about what I learned."
- "I'm excited to come to class every day. This class genuinely made me a happier and more accepting person."
- "This class is great because you not only learn about the different religions, and different parts of the world, but also about different cultures and the diversity within them."

From: Visualizing Lived Religion: Placing Doctrine in Context by *Thomas Sharp, Holland Hall School, Tulsa, OK* -

<https://www.religiousworldsnyc.org/sites/default/files/pdfdownload-sharplivedrelographic.pdf>

I teach sixth grade social studies in an independent Episcopal school. The course explores a narrative history of the Atlantic world beginning with the European Age of Exploration, particularly examining the theme of colonialism as it unfolds in Latin America/the Caribbean and Africa. The content of the course moves between the historical narrative and current global issues that, in some way, tie into that narrative. A major goal of the

course is building global citizenship and empathy among the students. The course includes a stand-alone unit on world religions with the goal of attaining a basic degree of religious literacy and understanding the religious components of the historical narrative and current issues we discuss. Another main objective is helping students develop a respectful understanding of and empathy toward diverse religious traditions. This project articulates the beginning point of the unit on world religions by starting with the concept of lived religion. Because sixth graders need to develop the basic content knowledge of major religious traditions as a starting point, it is important to precede any discussion of the "basic facts" of any religion with the explanation that each tradition is characterized by astounding internal diversity. Using this preliminary discussion as a starting point, students can then move into the discussion of each faith tradition understanding the nuances that there is no such thing as a "pure" example of any tradition.

How can we move beyond a monolithic treatment of religious traditions when introducing religious studies to middle school students? This is the main question behind this project. The NEH Summer Institute, "Religious Worlds of New York," has emphasized the concept of "lived religion" as an alternative approach to the more traditional model of focusing primarily on basic beliefs and practices as a way to learn about religious traditions. Rather than treating these traditions as monolithic or unchanging, the lived religion or cultural studies approach sees religion as a dynamic, constructed reality in the lives of practitioners that is situated in a particular historical context and, therefore, infinitely diverse in its expression.

The challenge I attempt to undertake with this project is how to communicate essential information about the world's most influential faith traditions to middle school students in a way that acknowledges the staggering internal diversity of human experiences of these traditions.

I have been persuaded by many of the readings and speakers in this institute of the value and need for the lived religion approach. In particular, Dr. Ali Asani, one of the foremost scholars of Islam in the United States, argued that treating religions monolithically is a cause of ignorance and dehumanization, which of course lies behind many of the religious conflicts we are experiencing in today's world. Clearly, there is an imperative to teach from a lived religion or cultural studies approach given my overall course goals of global citizenship, empathy and respect. However, in my context teaching sixth grade in a relatively religiously homogeneous community, I am starting from "square one" in terms of introducing these faith traditions for the first time. There is a clear tension between the task of learning the "basic facts" about each tradition and understanding religious life in context of the lived religion approach.

In thinking through how to alleviate this tension, I propose a new way of framing how I introduce the study of world religions for my sixth graders. Instead of launching into learning about history, beliefs, practices, geography, etc. for each religion, I will begin by introducing the concept of lived religion as a way of demonstrating the internal diversity of each faith tradition and the enormous complexity of factors affecting its expression in the "real world" where we live. In short, I want my students to approach the study of each tradition with

the caveat that there is no such thing as the "pure" expression of that tradition.

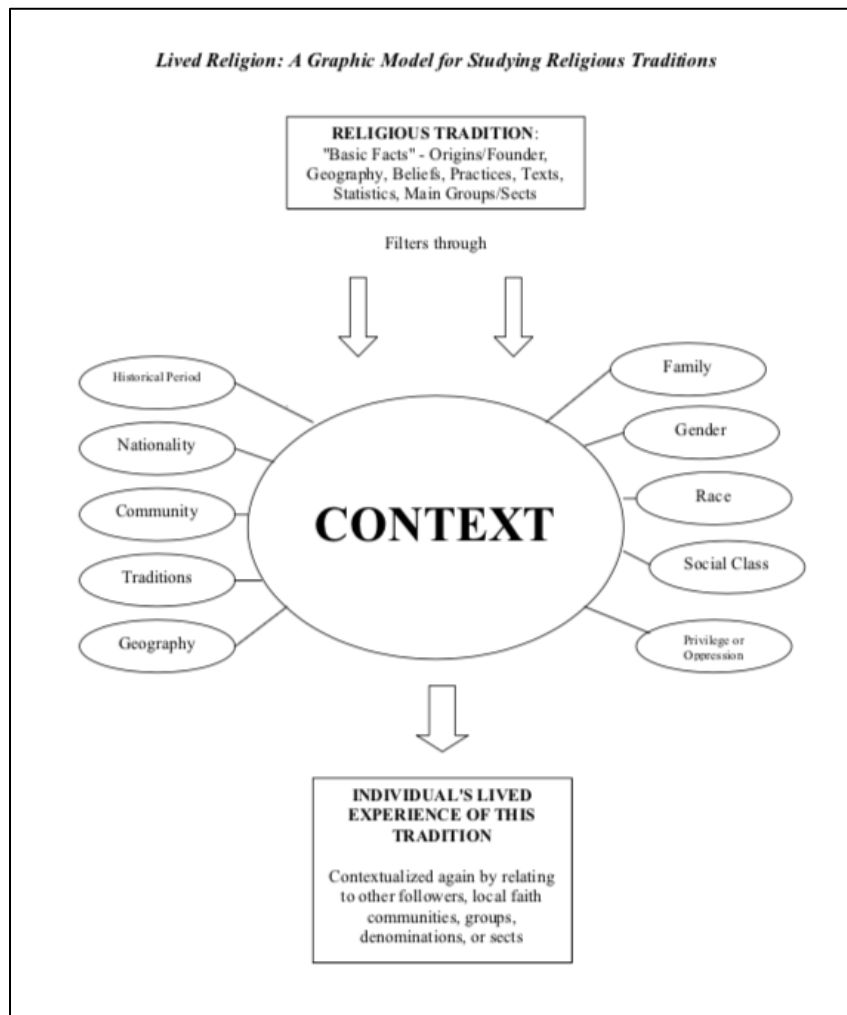
What I propose in this project is a visual model or template for thinking about lived religion. I will use the graphic resource I have created here to explain the concept of lived religion and to caution against projecting the basic facts of any tradition onto any individual practitioner, faith community, denomination, or entire religion. I will use this concept as a way of setting the tone for our study of religion as one of what Robert Orsi calls "radical empiricism" - that my students can approach the study of each tradition as a detached observer rather than a devotee, expert, or theological critic. This will allow us to explore the basic facts of each tradition in the context that these facts have no "pure" expression in the real world. Then, as we examine real examples of lived religion in our community through field trips and ethnographic research, students can explore questions surrounding the extent to which the examples they have encountered reflect the basic traditions we have discussed.

In addition to my emphasis on lived religion as an alternative approach to understanding religious studies, I will include some discussion of how the study of religion ties into the broader theme of colonialism, a major theme of our sixth-grade course. The very idea of "religion" is itself a cultural construct of westerners imposed on nonwestern contexts (Asani, Orsi, Paden, Diner, Hawley, and others we have read or heard from as guest speakers in this institute have emphasized this point). This graphic will help me return the discussion to the theme of colonizer and colonized as we study religions by looking at colonialism as one component of the historical context through

which we must filter our study of religion as a lived phenomenon.

I hope that through this careful framing of our discussion of the idea of lived religion, my

students will understand that the basic facts of the traditions are an important starting point for understanding religions in the world today, but never are they representative of the religious reality of lived experience.



C3 Framework on Religious Studies

<https://religiousworldsnyc.org/sites/default/files/Religious%20Studies%20Companion%20Document%20for%20NCSS%20C3%20Framework.pdf>

Steps to Begin an Elective Course in Your School

1. Develop interest and support from teachers in your department or school and supervisor.
2. Develop an objective, mission statement, and curriculum outline for a semester course.

3. Identify resources and speakers in your community. (museums, colleges, places of worship, demographic profile from the U.S. Census.) (www.census.gov)
 4. Identify online resources or cost of books and resources.
 5. Present plan to your principal.
 6. Present plan to your Director of Curriculum.
 7. Engage interested students who might sign up for this elective course in one and or two years. (Focus on freshman and sophomore students or middle school students.)
- Arrange for a discussion with teachers in your department and school about an outline for an elective course. Is this something that should be taught by one department, involve an interdisciplinary course offering (literature, science, art, music, etc., be structured around team teaching, etc.
 - Provide an opportunity for the public (parents and community leaders) to comment on the proposal.
3. Discuss the proposal with your school or district's Curriculum Team

Steps to Support your Course Proposal:

1. Benefits and Advantages for Students:
 - Colleges value the course for its emphasis on research, understanding of the cultural experiences of students from diverse populations, and the inherent qualities for inquiry and critical thinking
 - Social Emotional Learning connections support sensitivity to the experiences and beliefs of other students, emphasize ethical and moral discussions, and listening to a variety of perspectives.
 - Relevance to the content in the subjects of U.S. History, World History, English Literature
 2. Organize public discussion groups
 - Present an outline of an elective course on world religions to students and document their questions and statements about offering a course. What do they want to know, why do they want to know about religious teachings, do they have any experiences with the subject of different religious beliefs, etc.
- First, arrange for an informal discussion with your supervisor and building principal about the need, support, scheduling, and budget.
 - For example, is this a course that would be taught for a semester or a full year? Should this course be taught during the school day or offered online, after school, on Saturdays, etc.
 - Is the primary focus of this course content, enrichment, or exploratory?
 - Are there any concerns within the school or community?
 - Second, arrange for an informal or formal presentation with your supervisor and principal to your Director of Curriculum and Superintendent.
 - At this time, present the course outline, C3 Framework Religious Studies Companion document, examples from other schools, list of possible speakers, textbooks or online resources, the goals and objectives for this course, where it is most likely to fit in the schedule, a summary of your research, professional development and training for teachers, the course description for the Program of Studies, and a timeline for implementation.

**Appendix A: Scholarly Research on Teaching Religion from the National Endowment for the Humanities
Summer Institute (2019)**

Goldschmidt, Henry. (2013). From world religions to lived religion. In V.F. Biondo & A. Fiala (Eds.), *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education: Routledge.*

- Warren Nord - “[Even] if students acquire a basic religious literacy as a result of their courses in history and literature, they are unlikely to develop any significant religious *understanding* ... This kind of *inside understanding* requires that religion be studied in some depth, using primary sources that enable students to get inside the hearts and minds of people within a religious tradition” (p. 178)
- Goldschmidt - “This sort of empathic understanding is an essential prerequisite to civic engagement, and civil dialogue, among Americans of diverse religious and secular backgrounds” (p. 178)
- “What they need, I think, is an introduction to what scholars in the humanities and social sciences have taken to calling “lived religion.” They need to study popular beliefs and practices, in addition to canonical doctrines and rituals. They need to explore the process of interpretation - tracing how sacred texts may shape, and be shaped by, the practical concerns of contemporary communities. They need to question the boundaries of established religions, and the definition of “religion” as such. And they need to pay very close attention to the diversity within religious traditions and communities, by tracking the doctrinal debates that divide every community, as well as the relationships between religion and other forms of identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality ... They need to know how their experiences of American society may be radically different - and not so different at all - from the experiences of their peers living in different religious worlds” (p. 183)
- “I’m afraid world religions curricula may reinforce the divides among religious communities themselves, by painting an oversimplified portrait of these communities as internally homogenous and clearly bounded - wholly unified by their doctrinal commitments and hermetically sealed by their doctrinal differences” (p. 182)

- **Orsi, R. (1997). Everyday miracles. In D.D. Hall (Ed.), *Lived Religion in America - Toward a History of Practice: Princeton University Press:*** “The focus on lived religion ... points us to religion as it is shaped and experienced in the interplay among venues of everyday experience ..., in the necessary and mutually transforming exchanges between religious authorities and the broader communities of practitioners, by real men and women in situations and relationships they have made and that have made them” (p. 9).

- **Orsi, R. (2003) Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In? Special Presidential Plenary Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 (2), 169-174:** “The study of lived religion situates all religious creativity within culture and approaches all religion as lived experience, theology no less than lighting a candle for a troubled loved one, spirituality as well as other, less culturally sanctioned forms of religious expression. Rethinking religion as a form of cultural work, the study of lived religion directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas - all as media of making and unmaking worlds. They key questions concern what people *do* with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men and women, and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds. There is no religion apart from this, no religion that people have no taken up in their hands” (p. 172)

Paden, W.E. (1994). *Religious worlds: The comparative study of religion*. Beacon Press.

- “Like the study of music, which is not limited to examining a sequence of composers but also considers the special world of musical categories such as rhythm and harmony, so the study of religion is not limited to analyzing historical traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity but also investigates the religious “language” common to all traditions, the language of myth, gods, ritual, and sacrifice - in short, the language of “the sacred” (p. 1)
- “Many Westerners have found a “perennial philosophy” - as in the title of Aulus Huxley’s book on the subject - embodied in mystical experience and writings around the globe. Huxley stressed that the mystics of all religions express a common unity of vision because they have all alike experienced the one reality “beyond name and form.” Innumerable religious sects have maintained versions of the idea of a traditional wisdom that underlies all historical religions and have emphasized the great difference between parochial, literal interpretations of religion, on the one hand, and mystical or symbolic representations on the other.
- In the 20th century, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) developed a psychological approach to religion and mythology that stressed the role of universal, collective archetypes embodied in every psyche. The myths and gods here represent typical functions of the unconscious that get reenacted over and over again in similar ways in individual lives. Everywhere we find versions of the great mother, the hero, the tyrant father - all representing structures of the relationship of the ego and the unconscious. The archetypal self that is in all of us is “The Hero with a Thousand Faces,” as Joseph Campbell puts it in the title of his widely read book. The stages of the journey of the human spirit follow the same patterns, with but local variations, everywhere” (p. 32)