



Theoretical Foundations

What Is Religion?

Within the academic study of religion, a central methodological concern is defining the term religion. Defining religion first became a problem with the 'discovery' of non-Judeo-Christian religious beliefs. Rather than being solely a scholarly issue, arriving at and agreeing upon a workable definition has important consequences for the implementation of any project involving religion and the school system.

A key challenge is that many definitions of religion are implicitly tied to an individual's own faith commitments, or lack thereof, and thus reflect a particularistic or idiosyncratic notion of religion. For example, although most people would recognize as religious traditions not holding to the existence of gods, deities, angels, or concrete after-death existence, belief in a God or gods is commonly considered the hallmark of religion. Even within particular faith communities, the definition of a member varies according to interpretation and practice. There are thus two interrelated dangers in coming to a definition: that it may be too exclusive to capture what we commonly recognize as religious or that it may be so inclusive as to lack explanatory power.

As a concept, religion allows us to group, analyze, and understand apparently disparate human phenomena. With this in mind, we may understand a religion as any system of **thought, symbol, belief, and action**, possessing **explanatory power** with respect to existential or meaning-making questions, which speak to the foundations of reality, both physical and metaphysical.

What Are Some of the Different Approaches to Studying Religious Diversity?

Generally, teachers must teach about religious diversity in their classrooms for various reasons. The three most common reasons are

1. The curriculum requires the coverage of the historical roots of religious traditions and/or their continued relevance today.
2. The novels or stories used in the classroom deal with or include explicit religious themes or references and allusions.
3. Students raise questions about religion or religious diversity in reaction to news events or other issues in society and because of their own experiences, knowledge, and interests.

(Moore, *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*, p. 9)

There are many ways to approach the study of religion. The contentious issue is that of the 'insider' perspective compared to the 'outsider' perspective.

"Insider" or "Outsider" Perspective?

An "insider" (or emic perspective) view is that of a practicing member of that particular religion or religious tradition; one who is engaged and more or less committed to the religion about which they speak or write. The insider is expected to reflect the same views and beliefs about the world and engage in practices consistent with the religion about which they write or speak. This involves not only active participation in recognized faith activities, but the sincere attempt to understand fundamental tenets not so much in terms of their macroscopic/society-level effects, but in terms of their relation to the individual and their community. For some, only insiders' views about their religion are authentic while others contest this claim of authenticity by pointing out that insiders are likely to present a biased and non-critical perspective of their religion.

An "outsider" (or etic perspective) view is that of an individual who does not belong to the religion they are describing or studying, and who does not share the religion's worldview, or is not committed to the particular beliefs and practices of that religion. The outsider perspective approaches religion from an objectivising, external vantage point. This strategy is more akin to a scientific course of study. Here, questions of function often have precedence over those of meaning. An outsider perspective is not hostile to the truth claims made by religious traditions, but rather suffices to leave these claims hypothetical or otherwise unanswered. Its focus tends to be broader in scope, understanding religion as one component of social and cultural systems with effects on both the individual and collective.

For some, only an outsider can be a sufficiently neutral and unbiased observer whose observations about a particular religion are more likely to be accurate and balanced. Conversely, some may claim it is impossible to have a neutral position and that an outsider might in fact reflect biases concerning the religion or religions that they describe.

Four Approaches

Other approaches to the teaching of World Religions include the following:

The **Historical Approach** is primarily used in social studies classes where issues of religions and religious diversity occur within courses or specific lessons focused on history. A historical approach provides an opportunity for students to explore the origins of world religions. The development of these religions is studied in a historical context with a view of the political and cultural influences on the religion(s) in order to develop an understanding of how a religion emerged, gained followers, and expanded.

The **Literary Approach** has a focus on language arts classes in which students read religious texts themselves or literature (novels, stories, and poetry) with religious themes, references, or imagery. With this approach, teachers help students develop an appreciation for the way a religion infuses all aspects of culture by seeing how religious allusions and metaphors may become a common language shared by a people.

The **Traditions-Based Approach** is often used in elective or stand-alone courses in higher grades, or as the basis for comparative religious studies. With this approach, certain categories or themes that apply to many religious traditions—such as beliefs, texts, rituals, origins, and holidays—or to essential questions that religions address—the purpose of life, how one should live, and various interpretations of identity—are studied. The strength of this approach is that students may identify common themes in diverse religious traditions and it can provide a useful framework for understanding the diversity of religious expression.

The **Cultural Studies Approach** is often used in religious studies classes, which incorporate a multicultural/diversity lens of analysis. This approach builds upon and enhances the other three approaches with an emphasis on recognizing and understanding the ways that religion is embedded in culture and cannot be understood in isolation from the religion's social and historical expressions.

(Moore, *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K–12 Public Schools in the United States*, pp. 9–10)

The Importance of Multiple Lenses

In the past, world religions have been taught from a comparative lens, where other religions are studied with a particular religious lens, and described compared to that specific religious lens. The problem with such an approach is that the religious perspective or religion being studied is mediated or filtered by that particular religious lens. In Canada and the western world, that often means a Christian lens is used to study and try to understand world religions. It is important that the religion being studied is described and understood in an authentic manner, free from bias or the limitations of a particular religious perspective.

Given that the inclusion of religion within public school curricula has historically focused on the indoctrination of dominant belief systems, it makes sense to approach the study of religion primarily from an external perspective. Such an approach finds support in the diversity of Manitoba's population and the desire to value investigation over promotion. Yet, it would be fruitful to retain aspects of the insider view, where appropriate, in the form of educational activities like site visits (to temples, festivals, events, and so on) and presentations by adherents of specific traditions/faiths. Again, the purpose in such activities is not to promote faith commitments on the part of students or educators, but instead to expose them to the diversity of human experience and interaction. What is important is to encourage an attitude that promotes inquiry, understanding, and reflection, rather than naïve rejection or acceptance.

Guidelines

For the purpose of this course, and in keeping with Manitoba's and Canada's values and laws, we propose the following guidelines for the teaching of religious diversity courses. These have been adapted from the NCSS 1998 position statement on religion (National Council for the Social Studies). Study about religions should

- strive for awareness and understanding of the diversity of religions, religious experiences, religious expressions, and the reasons for particular expressions of religious beliefs within a society or culture
- stress the influence of religions on history, culture, the arts, and contemporary issues
- be conducted by qualified and certified teachers selected for their academic knowledge, their sensitivity and empathy for differing religious points of view, and their understanding of human rights legislation and laws concerning religious freedom
- permit and encourage a comprehensive and balanced examination of the entire spectrum of ideas and attitudes pertaining to religion as a component of human culture
- investigate a broad range of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices representing a diversity of origins and belief systems, both historical and contemporary
- examine the religious dimension of human existence in its broader cultural context, including its relation to economic, political, and social institutions, as well as its relation to the arts, language, and literature
- explore the world's religions from the same perspective (e.g., beginnings, historical development, foundational writings, oral stories, beliefs, practices, and impact on history, culture, contemporary issues, and the arts)
- be as objective as possible
- be academic in nature, stressing student awareness and understanding, not acceptance and/or conformity with a particular religion or perspective
- emphasize the necessity and importance of tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding in a nation and world of diversity
- be taught in an environment free of advocacy for a particular religion or religious perspective
- seek to develop and utilize the various skills, attitudes, and abilities that are essential to learning (e.g., locating, classifying, and interpreting data; keen observation; critical reading, listening and thinking; questioning; and effective communication)
- be academically responsible and pedagogically sound, utilizing accepted methods and materials of the social sciences, history, the arts, and literature
- draw on a range of materials and resources that provide a balanced and fair treatment of the subject

What Approach Will We Use to Explore Religious Diversity?*

In this course, the focus generally will be on taking an “outsider-academic” perspective that allows for interdisciplinary explorations.

Religious traditions have a diverse array of practices, beliefs, important figures, places, and times. To do justice to this diversity is a challenge. What is needed is both a solid content knowledge about various religious traditions and a holistic, guiding framework. This has the advantage of assisting educators in presenting an organized, comprehensible course, while providing clear signposts from which to follow community/classroom interests and needs. With this in mind, our approach for exploring each religious tradition or perspective is organized around the following categories.

1. Introduction to the religion (summary) and the religious tradition in Canada and the World
2. Origins and Timeline Charts
3. Significant Texts and Writings
4. Foundational Beliefs, Concepts, and Ideas
5. Change and Evolution—Diversity within the Religious Tradition
6. Significant Persons/Founders
7. Practices, Rituals, and Symbols
8. Significant Times and Dates
9. Places: Gathering Places in the World and Canada
10. Contemporary Issues and Challenges

This framework has the benefit of engaging student learning from both historical and contemporary perspectives. As the following demonstrates, we employ these organizing terms in the context of an essential questions approach.

* This section is adapted, in part, from www.worldreligions.ca/.

Course Outline

The following is an example of a course outline that may be appropriate for a high school that offers a full course.

In-Depth Study of a Series of Specific Religious Perspectives or Traditions
Part 1: Introduction and Setting the Stage for the Study of Diverse Religious Perspectives
Part 2: A Series of Units Exploring 5 to 7 Specific Religious Perspectives or Traditions
Unit 1: Aboriginal Spirituality
Unit 2: Hinduism
Unit 3: Buddhism
Unit 4: Judaism
Unit 5: Christianity
Unit 6: Islam
Unit 7: Humanism, Atheism, and Agnosticism
Part 3: The Reflections and Analysis Concerning Religious Diversity and Significant Issues
Note: In Manitoba, students are introduced to world religions in Grade 8 Social Studies: World History: Societies of the Past. As well, religion is one of the sub-themes in the optional Grade 12 Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability course. This optional Grade 12 course enables students to further explore contemporary world religions and religious diversity in Canada.

How Do We Study Religious Diversity in a Fair, Respectful, and Non-Judgemental Manner?

Because the course is academic instead of devotional, it aims at exposure, appreciation, and openness. Rather than a mathematical or scientific model, wherein one begins with a question or problem and strives towards definitive and objective resolutions, our study of religion—like the study of literature, languages, and philosophy—aims at opening up conversations and dialogue, and providing the basic tools and frameworks for students to engage in critical self- and social-reflection.

How Important is Inter- and Intra-Religious Diversity?

One element of respect for diversity that has important bearing on language is acknowledgement and appreciation of intra-religious diversity. It is often relatively easy to identify differences separating traditions. This can serve the purpose of ‘othering’ a religion, such that it becomes what is different, alien, oppressed, or antiquated.

Another danger comes about through the levelling of religious tradition. In an effort to promote tolerance and equality, religions are portrayed in a homogenized manner. This is a common trend in popular depictions (and conversations), where religious differences are seen as minor variations upon universal questions or concerns. It is important not to gloss over these differences. What is needed is an approach that appreciates and respects both similarities and differences.

Likewise, it is important to recognize the internal diversity of a particular faith tradition. For example, Christianity may mean something different to a Seventh Day Adventist and a Roman Catholic. Further diversity may be evident within a particular branch of a religion. For instance, Catholicism may mean something very different to a rural Quebecer than it does to a Catholic living in urban Spain or New York.

These internal differences pose both challenges and opportunities within the classroom. On the one hand, recognizing internal diversity means being mindful not to speak of a tradition as monolithic or fixed in time. What might appear as core beliefs and practices could be internally contested and continually evolving. On the other hand, intra-religious diversity offers an immense variety of exciting opportunities for inquiry, as students pursue topics of particular interest. This necessitates actively making connections and creating personally relevant responses. Moreover, appreciation of diversity of one’s own tradition may naturally lead to the same in other traditions.

Which Religions Do We Explore?

Selection Criteria

Even with a working definition of religion in place, there remains the difficulty of selecting which religious traditions to include within the project. If the selection is too wide, it runs the risk of overwhelming both educators and students. If it is too narrow, the danger is in privileging certain traditions at the exclusion of others. Following the lead of existing initiatives, a balance may be struck by selecting the most widespread of the so-called world religions, while allowing educators to include additional traditions based upon community needs and classroom interests. The former are Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Additionally, it is important to counterbalance the theistic emphasis by including atheistic/humanistic perspectives. Educators are encouraged to use their experience and professional judgement in deciding whether additional traditions (including spiritual movements and indigenous practices) ought to be included. Courses can be constructed upon our model to study one tradition or several.

Some additional considerations in selecting religious perspectives or faith groups to study include

- **Student interest and choice:** Student interests and classroom composition are important in selecting the groups to study. Provide opportunities for students to have a voice in the selection of groups as well as in assignments.
- **Reflecting the local community:** It is important to know and consider the religious diversity of the local school and community in the selection process.
- **Addressing groups which may be or are likely to be stereotyped or discriminated against:** Equally important is to consider which religions or religious perspectives are not present in the school or community, especially those that may be likely to be stereotyped, misunderstood/incorrectly portrayed, or negatively portrayed.

Deciding which specific topics to centre studies upon is also difficult given the wide variety of potential choices. This is an area that is best decided upon in consultation, but at the least would include; historical connections/impact, practices (both public and private), central shared beliefs, and cultural/scientific contributions to world knowledge.

As with all Kindergarten to Grade 12 education, a balance is needed between depth and breadth in terms of curricular materials. It is impossible to do complete justice to the variety of religious traditions (both within and across traditions). Yet the same can be said of all subject areas. The primary impetus, then, is to develop familiarity rather than expertise.

How Do We Deal with Sensitive and/or Conflictual Ethical and Social Issues?

Teaching about the diversity of religious traditions and perspectives may itself be seen as a sensitive and conflictual issue. While this is not an ethics or religious issues course, it is important to recognize that students will raise sensitive or potentially controversial topics, including, but not limited to, the application of human rights codes or laws to religious entities and organizations, and the role and ordination of women or LGBT2SQ within a specific faith group or across different faith groups.

Many of these issues are not exclusively religious issues and often have broader social and political dimensions. Nevertheless, they often impact on religious practices and beliefs and add to the ongoing debate, development, and evolution of religious traditions.

Throughout history, there have been major conflicts of a social and political nature with religious, theological, and/or ethical dimensions in Canada and the world. These may be thought of as ‘hot topics’ or debates that have generated significant conflict and division within and across cultures and faith traditions, and continue to do so today. These have occurred within various faith groups, between different faith groups, and between faith groups and secular society.

Teaching Sensitive and Potentially Conflictual Topics in a Religious Diversity Course

The following guidelines are intended to help teachers deal with sensitive and/or conflictual issues in a positive and constructive manner.

- While the intent of this course is to provide a good foundation and awareness of diverse religious traditions and perspectives, students will not acquire a sufficiently incisive understanding of the religion or belief perspective which means that their understanding of the impact of religions and beliefs on people’s decision-making is often distorted. Taking this in consideration, such topics must then be explored in the context of, rather than divorced from, the religious and faith traditions presented in the classroom.
- Although debate and the exploration of hot topics or conflicts is important and should not be avoided, care must be taken to ensure that this does not distract from achieving the objectives of the course, which are to develop a foundational knowledge of religious diversity and a few specific religious traditions.

- As with any other subject or course it is important that educators be familiar with and utilize guidelines for dealing with controversial subjects or issues.
- The contexts and situations in which these conflicts occur (classroom, community, personal, and professional) will impact when, how, and to what extent educators may address the specific topics or issues.

General Guidelines for Dealing with Controversial Issues (taken from the Manitoba Social Studies Curriculum)

A fundamental aspect of learning and teaching—at all grade levels—is the consideration of controversial issues—issues that involve ethics, principles, beliefs, and values. Teachers should not avoid controversial issues. Diversity of perspectives, beliefs, and values; disagreement; and dissension are all part of living in a democratic society.

Furthermore, discussion and debate concerning ethical or existential questions serve to motivate students and make learning more personally meaningful.

The following guidelines will assist teachers in dealing with controversial issues in the classroom:

- approach all issues with sensitivity
- clearly define the issues
- establish a clear purpose for discussions
- establish parameters for discussions
- ensure that the issues do not become personalized or directed at individual students
- protect the interests of individual students by finding out in advance whether any student would be personally affected by the discussion
- exercise flexibility by permitting students to choose alternative assignments
- accept that there may not be a single “right answer” to a question or issue
- respect everyone’s right to voice opinions or perspectives
- help students clarify the distinction between informed opinion and bias
- help students seek sufficient and reliable information to support the various perspectives
- allow time to present all relevant perspectives fairly and to reflect upon their validity

Note: See the resources section for information and resources related to teaching about social and political topics, and religion.