



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1994 Volume III: Understanding the Ancient Americas: Foundation, Flourishing, and Survival

Religion Through Language Arts & History

Curriculum Unit 94.03.01
by Joyce Bryant

This unit will be developed for seventh and eighth grade students. However, it is the instructor who will best determine its usage. This unit will focus on six great religions, although there are many in our present world. The following six are regarded as the most influential: Hinduism, Buddhism, the philosophies of the Chinese, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The similarities are many between some of them, as are the differences. All six have supplied answers to some of the great questions raised in all minds by the mystery of life. All of them help mankind bear their sorrows. They all guide us in ways to live, and give assurance in the presence of death. The Christian believes that Christianity has been the most effective of all, but all have brought answers to prayers, otherwise they would not be living religions.

All religions of today have roots in the past, but this unit will not present a history of man's religious evolution. Instead, it seeks to explore the principal religions which are alive today, molding our lives in all parts of the world trying to impress their image on our history. The unit deals with religion as a living element in today's culture. The questions raised are: what does man worship, how, and why?

Every great religion has noble teachings and lofty moral goals. Yet we find in each religion these high standards are often not the case in thought and deed, ie. practice, of most of its followers. For example, do most Christians really live up to the teachings of Jesus?

Another aspect of this questioning is the wide gap that can open between the original teachings of the religion's founder and what the faith has become after centuries of being practiced and interpreted by its scholars and followers. Over a period of time in every religion, there gradually grows a wide spread of variations. By "Judaism", does one mean the traditional faith of the Orthodox Jews, the modern beliefs of the actual congregations, or the teachings of the rabbi? In Christianity, it is impossible to speak of the Roman, the Eastern Orthodox, the Anglican and the hundreds of Protestant churches as one and the same.

Often, it has been suggested that the major faiths should recognize their basic unity and purpose, and thus the differences. Maybe they should come together, and merge in beliefs on which they can agree. But this call for a union of the faiths, seems to come most often from the Orient, where some great religious reformers try to state that religions are simply different paths to the same goal.

Certainly all the great religions can study and appreciate each other's spiritual values. However, we could not erase all differences, achieving overall unity, since it would be for each a betrayal of its fundamentals. It should be noted that one who calls for this kind of a union, usually suggests that all join around the essential

core of their faith.

In their religious goals men do not differ that much from one another, no matter where they live, nor when they lived. They all seek the favor of their gods. They long for religious protection against the dangers of life. They desire a spiritual community with their fellow mankind. They pray for courage in the hour of conflict, comfort in time of grief and guidance in their daily concerns. They want relief from the pangs of conscience, and most, but not all, hope for some kind of immortality. The ways by which followers pursue these common ends are much too diverse and varying to go into detail.

The lives of people everywhere, as well as the world, each and every day, are rapidly changing. Each great religion attempts to save its people from following the road of self-worship to the City of Destruction. All of them can accomplish this purpose to the extent that, one can heed the words of the prophet Micah, “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God.”

No simple definition can describe the numerous religions in the world. For many people, religion is an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, practices and worship that center on one supreme God or the Deity. For many others, religion involves a number of gods or deities. Some people have a religion in which no specific God or gods are worshipped. There are also people who practice their own religious beliefs in their own personal way, largely independent of organized religion. Almost all people who follow some form of religion believe that a divine power created the world and influences their lives. People practice religion for several reasons. Many people follow a religion because it is part of the heritage of their culture, tribe or family.

Religion gives many people a feeling of security because they believe that a divine power watches over them. The people often ask the power for help or protection. Numerous people follow a religion because it promises them salvation and either happiness or the chance to improve themselves in a life after death. For many people, religion brings a sense of individual fulfillment and gives meaning to life. Religion also provides answers to questions such as what is the purpose of life? What is the final destiny of a person? What is the difference between right and wrong? And what are one’s obligations to other people? And finally people follow a religion to enjoy a sense of kinship with their fellow believers.

The teachings of religions have shaped the lives of people since prehistoric times. Religion has been a supreme source of inspiration in the arts. Some of the most beautiful buildings in the world are houses of worship. Much of the world’s great music is religious. Religious stories have provided numerous subjects for paintings, sculptures, literature, dances, and motion pictures. Most of the major religions throughout history have shared the same chief characteristics and they are, belief in a deity or a power beyond the individual, a doctrine of salvation, a code of conduct, the use of sacred stories, and religious rituals and ceremonies.

The essential qualities of a religion are maintained and passed from generation to generation by religious leaders in authority. The most important religious source are the scriptures recorded in the Bibles. Other religious writings come from the writings of saints and other holy persons and decisions by religious councils and leaders. Three major philosophical views predominate regarding the existence of a deity, and they are Atheists which believe that no deity exists, Theists which believe in a deity or deities, and the Agnostics which say that the existence of a deity cannot be proved or disproved. Most of the major religions are theistic and they teach that deities govern or greatly influence the actions of human beings as well as events in nature. Religions that acknowledge only one true God are monotheistic and some examples are Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. A religion that has a number of deities is polytheistic. Some religions worship deities that are or were people or that are images of people. They also worship some deities that were once human beings and became gods or goddesses after death. Many people worship nature deities, those are deities that dwell in or

control various aspects of nature.

The major religions, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and the Philosophies of the Chinese teach a doctrine of salvation. They stress that salvation is the highest goal of the faithful and one that all followers should try to achieve and this can be done through a code of conduct. A code of conduct is nothing more than a set of moral teachings and values that all religions have in some form or another. It tells believers how to conduct their lives, how to act toward the deity and one another, and the golden rule it also stresses, which states, that believers should treat others as they would like to be treated.

For hundreds of years followers of religion have believed in sacred stories called myths. The religious leaders used different stories to dramatize the teachings of their faith. Originally, people told myths to describe how the sacred powers directly influence the world. Many stories described the creation of the world, others told how the human race or a particular people began and still others tried to explain the cause of natural occurrences, such as thunderstorms and changes in the seasons. Today there are scientific explanations for many of the subjects that dealt with sacred stories.

The organization of the world's major religions ranges from simple to complex. Many religions have spiritual leaders, often called the clergy. The leaders have the authority and responsibility to conduct religious services, advise or command believers, and to govern the religious organization at various levels. According to Encyclopedia Britanica the earliest recorded evidence of religious activity dates from approximately 60,000 B.C.. Anthropologists and historians of religion believe that some form of religion has been practiced since people first appeared on the earth about two million years ago.

Six of the great major religions practiced in the world today were either founded or developed their basic form between 600 B.C. and A.D. 600.

Man is a religious being and his religion has taken endless forms. His names for gods and goddesses are too numerous to count. The rituals through which he has sought protection or blessing vary from the horrible to the sublime. But wherever and however he lived, man has worshipped and has shown belief that we possess an immortal soul.

Hinduism

Hindu religion includes almost every stage of its people thinking about God. The Hindu supernatural world is vast and complex. It is swarming with gods resembling humans and animals, along with demons, heroes, ghosts and heavenly dancing girls. Hinduism developed gradually over thousands of years, and many cultures and religions helped shape it. Many sects (groups) arose within Hinduism, and each one developed its own philosophy and form of worship. Like most religions, Hinduism has basic beliefs about divinities, life after death, and personal conduct. Hinduism has no single book that serves as the source of its doctrines. But Hinduism has many sacred writings, all of which have contributed to its fundamental beliefs. The most important included the Vedas, the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabhrata, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Manu Smriti. The oldest Hindu scriptures are the Vedas. They were composed over a period of 1,000 years, beginning about 1000 B.C. This stage in the Hindu history is often called the Vedic period. During Vedic times, the believers worshipped a number of nature deities. At the end of the period, the doctrines of reincarnation and karma were adopted. By about 500 B.C. Hinduism was splitting into various schools of thought. Today, Hinduism includes a great number of schools and sects. Many of the sects were formed by saints or gurus. Each sect has its own philosophy and form of worship. But they all accept basic Hindu doctrines.

Hinduism is polytheistic. That is, Hindus worship many gods. Early Hindus worshipped gods that represented powers in nature, such as rain and the sun. Gradually, some Hindus came to believe that though divinities appear in separate forms, these forms are part of one universal spirit called Brahman. These Hindus believe that many divinities make up Brahman. The most important ones are Brahma, the creator of the universe; Vishnu, its preserver; and Shiva, its destroyer.

One of the most important Hindu divinities is Shiva's wife, who has several names. She is best known as Durga, Kali, Parvati, or Uma. As Parvati or Uma, she is the beloved goddess of motherhood. As Durga or Kali, she is the feared goddess of destruction. For many Hindus these contrasting natures of the goddess represent the way in which time and matter constantly move from birth to death and from creation to destruction. Many Hindus find great religious truths in this symbolism and worship the goddess as their most important divinity.

According to Hindu doctrine, animals as well as human beings have souls. Hindus worship some gods in the form of animals. Cows are sacred, but Hindu also revere monkeys, snakes, and other animals.

Islam

Islam, the youngest of people's great universal religions, is also in many ways the simplest and more clear cut. It honors a single, all powerful God, who chose to speak through the prophet Mohammed.

Islam is the religion of those who follow the prophet Mohammed. The name is an Arabic word that may be translated "submission," "surrender," or "commitment." In the religious movement initiated by Mohammed in Arabia in the 7th century A.D., the term "islam" describes the proper relationship between men and God. Mohammed called his fellow Arabs to submit, surrender, to the will of God, to commit themselves afresh each day and each moment to the service of the Divine intention. Followers of Islam are known as Muslims, that is "submitters" in God, those who commit themselves to Him.

Today Islam is no longer exclusively identified with Arabs. In mid-20th century, from a seventh to a sixth of mankind adheres in some degree to Islam. There are major groups not only in the traditional Arab lands, but in Africa, Turkey and Eastern Europe, in Russia, in Iran and Afghanistan, in Pakistan and India, in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, and in China. There are smaller groups in the Americas. A Muslim is one who submits and each true Muslim is therefore guided in everyday life by the word of God.

Buddhism

Buddhism is also one of the major religions of the world. It was founded in India about 500 B.C., or shortly afterward, by a teacher called Buddha. At various times, Buddhism has been a dominant religious, cultural, and social force in most of Asia. In each area, Buddhism has combined with elements of other religions such as Hinduism and Shinto. Today, Buddhism has about 300 million followers. Most live in Sri Lanka, the mainland nations of Southeast Asia, and Japan.

All Buddhists have faith in Buddha; his teachings; and the religious community he founded.

Buddha preached that existence was a continuing cycle of death and rebirth. Each person's position and wellbeing in life was determined by his or her behavior in previous lives. For example, good deeds may lead to rebirth as a wise and wealthy person or as a being in heaven. A person's evil deeds may lead to rebirth as a poor and sickly person or even in hell.

Buddha also taught that as long as individuals remain within the cycle of death and rebirth, they can never be

completely free from pain and suffering. Buddha said people could break out of the cycle by eliminating any attachment to worldly things-. By ridding themselves of such attachment, people would gain a kind of perfect peace and happiness. According to Buddha, those who are willing and able to follow the Middle Way and the Noble Eightfold will conquer their attachment to worldly things and thus achieve peace and happiness.

The Middle Way is a way of life that avoids both the uncontrolled satisfaction of human desires and the extreme forms of self-denial and self-torture.

The Noble Eightfold Path consists of (1) knowledge of the truth; (2) the intention to resist evil; (3) saying nothing to hurt others; (4) respecting life, morality, and property; (5) holding a job that does not injure others; (6) striving to free one's mind of evil; (7) controlling one's feelings and thoughts; and (8) practicing proper forms of concentration.

Christianity

Christianity is the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Most followers of Christianity, called Christians, are members of one of three major groups-Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox. These groups have different beliefs about Jesus and His teachings. But all Christians consider Jesus central to their religion. Most Christians believe that God sent Jesus into the world as the Saviour. Christianity teaches that Humanity can achieve salvation through Jesus.

Jesus lived in Judea, later called Palestine, a Middle Eastern land ruled by the Romans. The Romans crucified Jesus about A.D. 30. Jesus' followers were convinced that he rose from the dead, and they soon spread Christianity to major cities throughout the Roman Empire. Today, Christians make up the largest group in the world. Christianity has about one-half billion followers. It is the major religion in Europe, the Western Hemisphere, and Australia. Many Christians also live in Africa and Asia.

Christianity has had an enormous influence on Western civilization, especially on art, literature, and philosophy. The teachings of Christianity have had a lasting effect on the conduct of business, government, and social relations.

Christians believe that there is one God, and that he created the universe and continues to care for it. The belief in one God was first taught by the Jewish religion. Christianity teaches that God sent his son Jesus into the world as his chosen servant, called the Messiah, to help people fulfill their religious duties. Christianity also teaches that after Jesus' earthly life, Gods' presence remained on earth in form of the Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost. The belief that in one God there are three personsthe Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is known as the doctrine of the Trinity. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches and many Protestant churches accept this doctrine as the central teaching of Christianity.

Some Christians regard Jesus as a great but human teacher. However, most Christians view Jesus as God in carnate-that is, a divine who took on the human appearance and characteristics of a man. They believe that Jesus is the Savior who died to save humanity from sin. According to this view, Jesus' death made salvation and eternal life possible for others.

Christians gather in churches because they believe that God intended them to form special groups for worship. They also meet in churches to encourage one another to lead upright lives according to Gods' moral law.

Two practices important to Christian worship usually take place in churches. The practices are (1) baptism and

(2) the Eucharist, also called Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. The ceremony of baptism celebrates an individual's entrance into Christianity. The Eucharist represents the Last Supper, the final meal that Jesus shared with His disciples. Worshipers share bread and wine in the Eucharist as a sign of their unity with each other and with Jesus.

Christians see Jesus as continuous with the God of Judaism. A collection of Christian writings was added to the Jewish scriptures known as the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible. The Christian writings, called the New Testament, record the life and teachings of Jesus. They also describe the development of the early church and explain what faith in Jesus means. The Christian Bible includes both the Old and New Testaments. Some Christian groups also accept as part of the Bible a collection of writings called the Apocrypha.

Christianity originated in the ministry of Jesus. During his lifetime, Jesus preached the gospel, meaning good news, that God was coming to earth to be among his people in a special way. Jesus called this special way the Kingdom of God. He warned His listeners to repent their sinful ways to be ready for the approaching Kingdom of God. In urging repentance, Jesus gave His own interpretation of Jewish law to show how people could obey God and achieve righteousness. For a time, Jesus' teaching brought Him great popularity. Reports spread that he performed such miracles as healing the sick and bringing the dead back to life. Jesus' popularity caused the opposition from Jewish and Roman officials. The Romans charged him with treason for calling himself the King of the Jews, and they crucified him as a criminal.

The followers of Jesus did not accept his death as his end. They were certain that Jesus came back from the dead and that he later rose to heaven. Many stories circulated about Jesus' appearance among his disciples after his death. Reports of the resurrection convinced many people that Jesus was the Son of God. Some followers began to call Jesus the Messiah, the Savior of the Jewish people promised in the Old Testament. Followers of Jesus came to believe that they, too, could receive eternal life because of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus had chosen 12 men, known as the apostles, to preach the gospel after his death. About 50 days after the Crucifixion, the apostles and other followers of Jesus claimed that the Holy Spirit had entered them and given them the ability to speak foreign languages. This ability enabled them to spread Jesus' teachings to all lands. Christians date the beginning of the church to this event, which they celebrate as Pentecost.

The first Christians were Jews. Soon, many gentiles (non-Jews) converted to the new faith. Peter and the other apostles urged people to accept Jesus as the divine Christ who had conquered sin and death. Peter founded churches in Palestine and, according to Christian tradition, headed the church in Rome.

Paul, an early convert to Christianity, preached mainly to gentiles outside Palestine. Paul believed that human nature is basically sinful. For that reason, he felt that people are unable to repent and live according to God's law. Yet Paul believed that human nature can be changed through faith in Jesus as the Son of God and belief in his power to forgive sin. According to Paul, people can share in Jesus' life through baptism and the Eucharist. Paul's version of Christianity has survived in his epistles to the young Christian churches. The epistles form part of the New Testament.

At first, there were many kinds of Christian leaders, both men and women. No central authority regulated their activities. But by A.D. 100, churches began to distinguish between religious leaders, called the clergy, and the general membership. The most important leader in every large church was a bishop who supervised other clergy. Christians relied on Bishops to interpret Christian teachings and ensure correct belief.

Religion in China

Religion in China was discouraged for many years by the Communist government of China. However, it played an important part in traditional Chinese life. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were the major religions throughout most of China's history. The religious beliefs of many of the Chinese people included elements of all three religions. Chinese government is now more liberal toward religion than it has been since 1949.

Confucianism is based on the ideas of Confucius, a Chinese philosopher who was born about 550 B.C.. It stresses the importance of moral standards of a wellordered society in which parents rule their children, men rule women, and the educated rule the common people. In addition, Confucianism strongly emphasizes deep respect for one's ancestors and for the past.

Taoism is a native Chinese religion. It teaches that a person should withdraw from everyday life and live in harmony with nature. Taoism began during the 300's B.C. and is based largely on a book called the Tao Te Ching(The Classic Way and the Virtue). Taoism came to include many elements of Chinese folk religion and so became a religion with many protective Gods.

Buddhism reached China from India before A.D. 100 and became well established throughout the country during the 300's. Under the influence of Confucianism and Taoism, Chinese varieties of Buddhism developed. They taught strict moral standards and the ideas of rebirth and life after death. The Chinese Buddhists worshipped many gods and appealed to them for help in times of troubles.

The Chinese government has regarded religion as superstition. It encourages people to study science and political writings to solve their problems. The Communists have opposed Confucianism because it emphasizes the past and justifies inequality in society. The Communists have also turned Taoist and Buddhist temples into museums, schools, and meeting halls. Since the late 1970's, government attitudes toward religion have softened somewhat. The government now recognizes the value of such Confucian ideas as the importance of education and correct moral behavior. Also some temples have been returned to religious groups. But the government still tries to control religious organizations.

Muslims make up about two percent of Chinese population, mostly minority peoples in the northwest. The government permits them to follow their religion, but it does not encourage them to do so. Christian missionaries worked in China for many years before the Communists came to power. The Communists expelled foreign missionaries and closed most Christian churches. But since the late 1970's, the government has permitted many Christian churches to reopen. Today, about one percent of the people are Christians.

Judaism

Judaism is the religion of the world's approximately eighteen million Jews. It is one of the oldest major religions and was the first religion to teach the belief in one God. Judaism is the religion of one set of people, the Jews. The basic laws and teachings of Judaism come from the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah discusses the principal teachings and sacred writings of Judaism. It also tells about the chief branches of Judaism and the structure of organized Judaism. It also describes Jewish worship, celebrated holidays, and customs.

The most important teaching of Judaism is that there is one God or monotheism, who wants people to do what is just and merciful. Judaism teaches that a person serves God by studying the scriptures and practicing what they teach. The most fundamental of these teachings concern behavior toward other people. Judaism teaches that all people are created in the image of God and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Thus,

moral and ethical teachings play a more important role in Judaism than do teachings about God. This covenant with God is a special agreement that Jews believe God made with Abraham, the ancestor of the Jewish People. According to the Bible, God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants if they worshipped and remained faithful to God. God renewed this covenant with Abraham's son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob. Jacob was also called Israel, and so his descendants became known as the children of Israel or the Israelites. God later gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments and their laws through their leader Moses. These laws explained how the Israelites should live their lives and build their community.

The Jews are sometimes called the Chosen People, meaning that God chose them to carry out special duties and responsibilities. For example, the Jews established a just society and serve only God. Thus, the covenant assures the Jews of God's love and protection, but it also makes them especially accountable for their sins and shortcomings.

Traditionally, Jews believed that God would send a Messiah to save them. The Book of Isaiah describes the Messiah as a just ruler who will unite the Jewish People and lead them in God's way. The Messiah will correct wrongs and defeat the enemies of the people. Many Jews still expect a Messiah to come. But others speak instead of a Messianic kingdom. They believe a period of justice and peace will come through the cooperation of all people and the help of God.

Judaism has two major collections of sacred writings, the Bible and the Talmud. These works provide the basis for Judaism's belief and practices. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible make up the Torah, the most important of all Jewish scriptures. The Torah contains the basic laws of Judaism and describes the history of the Jews until the death of Moses in 1200's B.C.. According to Jewish tradition, Moses received and wrote down the word of God in the Torah, which is also called the First Five Books of Moses. Today, however, many scholars think the teachings of Moses were passed down by word of mouth for generations and were finally written down about 100 B. C. . In addition to the Torah, the Hebrew Bible contains books of history and moral teachings called the Prophets and 11 other books called the Writings.

Judaism has three major branches: (1) Orthodox Judaism, (2) Reform Judaism, and (3) Conservative Judaism. Each represents a wide range of beliefs and practices. Judaism has no one person at its head and no international body with authority over religious practices. Each local congregation chooses its own rabbi and manages its own affairs.

Again this is developed for 7th and 8th grade students and its goal as an objective is to help students with reading, comprehension skills, and provide them with a vast array of information from which to draw and increase their knowledge in areas foreign to them.

My goals and objectives are:

1. Students will improve in their reading skills.
2. Students will identify new vocabulary words from reading selections.
3. Students will develop and improve reading comprehension.
4. They will increase their ability to understand character's point of view.
5. Students will have a better ability to express themselves both orally and in writing.
6. Students will work together cooperatively in small groups in reading, writing reports and presentations.

Strategies

I have chosen a number of activities which explore the similarities and differences among people of different religious backgrounds.

Before reading, writing, and discussions about different religions, I will introduce the students to the six religions that they will be studying. With the introduction of the different religions, students personal experiences will become connected to those around them through education.

Lesson Plans

Writing Assignment

Plan a field trip to the center church on the green. At the parish house, there will be a slide show presentation, after which will be followed by a visit to the church.

Book Report

Divide the Class into groups of four

From the school library or the New Haven Public Library select books on one of the six great religions, and after reading the book write a report. Have the groups discuss their reports, and then conduct a class discussion.

Plan a field trip to the Yale Art Gallery. Discover how art played an important part and has a relevant relationship to religion.

As a project have the students do a geographical study of the major regions of the different religions, types of buildings used for worship, and customs observed in the individual houses of worship.

Bibliography & Suggested Reading List for Teachers

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Bibliography & Suggested Reading List for Students

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Floor plan of a temple

(figure available in print form)

Hindu Temple

(figure available in print form)

A Jewish Synagogue

(figure available in print form)

Islam—A place of worship in Mecca

(figure available in print form)

Hindu Temple of worship

(figure available in print form)

Christianity—A church one of the many types

(figure available in print form)

The Philosophies of the Chinese—A Pagoda near Peking

(figure available in print form)

Chinese construction of an altar for worship

(figure available in print form)

Sacrificial display without an altar

(figure available in print form)

Map—India: Center of Hinduism, Buddhism & Jainism

(figure available in print form)

Resource List

Field Trips

Yale Art Gallery

1111 Chapel St.

New Haven, CT 432-0600

Peabody Museum

170 Whitney Ave.

New Haven, CT 432-3775

Center Church on the Green

311 Temple St.

New Haven, CT 787-0121

British Art Museum

1080 Chapel St.

New Haven, CT 432-2800

Film—Popol Vuh

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