

saint mary's press

Teaching About *Other Religions*

Jonathan Yu-Phelps

Ideas and Strategies for Use in the Catholic High School



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Dedication

So many people have played important roles in my life, bringing me to the point where I am able to write this book. Laura Cassidy and Joe Hastings have been wonderful friends since graduate school and have affirmed me in my vocation as a religion teacher and campus minister. Dobie Moser has constantly encouraged me to share my experiences as a teacher. His confidence in me was instrumental in my decision to pursue this project. I am grateful to Barbara Rogers, Kathleen Scully Hodges, John Reine, and Maryanne Mignone for giving me the opportunity to work at Newton Country Day School of the Sacred Heart. They have challenged me to grow as a teacher and a campus minister in ways I could never have expected. I especially appreciate their support of the courses I teach. My faculty colleagues have inspired me by their dedication to their disciplines and to their students. No one could ask for a finer colleague and collaborator than Bill Hulseman. Many of the ideas in this book were born from our work together.

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I am especially honored that my students have trusted me enough to share their hopes, questions, and experiences of interreligious encounters. They are the reason I continue to hope for a better world.

Finally, I am grateful to Anne-Marie, who helped me discover my vocation for teaching and has been a constant source of affirmation for all my work. Without you none of this would be.

*With gratitude and humility,
this book is dedicated to those who teach religion
in Catholic high schools.*



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Introduction

The Critical Importance of Educating Catholics About World Religions

You likely picked up this book because you believe that teaching students about world religions is important. You may want to learn more about other religions yourself and also how to present them to your students. Generally, Catholic high school religion teachers do not learn to teach about other religions. This book is a step toward bridging that gap in training. It offers an approach to teaching other religions in the classroom and to fostering an atmosphere of respect and celebration of other religions in the school community.

When we teach students about other religions, we prepare them for a diverse world, give them the skills to become mature Catholic adults, and promote global peace.

Why Is Teaching About Other Religions Critical in This Day and Age?

Today's students will graduate into a society of religious diversity but not religious literacy. Religious literacy is the extent to which a person understands various religions and their roles in human society and is able to talk about them intelligently. In the United States, people seem to know less and less about even their own faith traditions. People cannot learn about neighbors near or far from brief references to them in the media. Well-prepared teachers in Catholic high schools have a special opportunity to increase their students' religious literacy by the time they graduate.

The World Our Students Enter Today

The United States is an increasingly diverse society in its religious beliefs. This diversity is only going to grow in the coming decades. Muslims from

North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia are living in the United States. Animists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Taoists from Asia and Africa are joining them. Islamic minarets, Hindu mandirs, and Buddhist statues appear more and more frequently with Christian churches and Jewish synagogues in the religious architectural landscape. Whenever people turn on the radio, television, or computer, they see images and hear statements from around the world. Messages in foreign languages are translated into English. Even if discussions about religion are in our own language, however, we may not understand their nuances and subtleties. Sound bites cannot begin to portray other religions.

Students will have many interreligious encounters in the future. The high school students of today are much more likely to have a Buddhist roommate in college, a Muslim next-door neighbor, or a Hindu employer than were previous generations. They must not only learn how to work and live in a global society but must also develop a heart that reveres the sacred in all people.

Students often bring questions about other traditions to religion class, even if it is not a world religions class. These questions may arise from watching the news or popular television programs. As a small example, *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* have made humorous references to reincarnation in Buddhism and Hinduism. Apu, the convenience store clerk in *The Simpsons*, may be the only Hindu some students have ever “met.”

Popular programs can spark genuine curiosity about people of other religions. Media producers, however, are not always concerned with how accurately they portray faith traditions. Too often, they are portrayed in an unfairly positive or negative way that distorts the view of a religion and its followers. Young people deserve a more comprehensive encounter with other faith traditions.

Degrees of Religious Literacy

Just as learning about one’s own religion is challenging, gaining an accurate understanding of a neighbor’s religion may be demanding.

Understanding Religious References and Terms

One indicator of religious literacy is being able to understand a religious reference or use a religious term and then be able to see how the term

could be applied to other, nonreligious situations. For example, *Christmas*, in its religious context, refers to a Christian holy day that celebrates the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ. It can also hold the meaning, at least in English-speaking American culture, of a time of great joy. It may also be used to describe a time, perhaps unexpected, of receiving an abundance of gifts, as in the expression “Christmas came early this year.” A third use may be in the sarcastic suggestion of an occurrence sometime in the distance future: “What are you waiting for, Christmas?”

Understanding Religious Symbols and Vocabularies

Another indicator of religious literacy is to be able to effectively use the symbols and vocabularies of religions in conversation. The following example highlights a few such challenges. Some non-Hindu Americans have become aware of the Hindu celebration of **Divali**, or festival of lights. They may have seen neighbors preparing for the feast, or their children may have attended school with a Hindu child. Divali is often inaccurately called the “Hindu Christmas.” This term does not give a sense of what the holiday is actually celebrating. Additionally, it reinforces a presumption on the part of Westerners, regardless of their personal level of belief, that Christianity is a norm against which other religions should be measured.

Comparing and Contrasting Religions

As one achieves greater religious literacy, one is able to step outside of one’s own tradition and get a privileged glimpse of the way people of another faith see, experience, and understand their religious tradition. Such empathy enables one to make helpful comparisons and contrasts between two or more traditions.

A person with this degree of religious literacy might make the following observations about Divali: It is an important Hindu holiday, in some ways just as important to Hindus as Christmas is to Christians. It also has some secular aspects, just as Christmas does in the United States, particularly its use of bright, joyful lights. Some Hindus may have difficulty explaining the meaning of the holiday to non-Hindus because the two groups do not share a common point of reference.

A religion teacher in a Catholic high school can play a crucial role in promoting a high degree of religious literacy in students if she or he is well informed.

Catholic Adults Should Be Prepared for Interreligious Dialogue

The Catholic Church, in its conciliar document *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, encourages Catholics to study other religions. Section 2 of the document refers to responsible Catholics with these words:

Through dialogue and collaboration with followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.

This declaration has inspired decades of theological reflection and interreligious cooperation by Catholics with followers of other religions. Catholic organizations, scholars, ministers, and educators have been engaged in the task of interreligious dialogue since the release of the document. Catholics have begun to develop a systematic theological approach to understanding other religions and discussing their significance for Catholics.

Why Is a Catholic School an Ideal Place for Interreligious Dialogue?

Most official interreligious dialogue takes place at the university or hierarchical level. At the high school level, teachers can empower students to engage in any interreligious opportunities they encounter and prepare them to think “interreligiously” as they look at the world.

Educational Opportunity

Catholic schools value the study and practice of religion. Because students are required to take religion classes, teachers have a captive audience and, therefore, a unique opportunity to address the goals of interreligious collaboration. This educational opportunity helps young people to become well prepared for the world they will live in.

Respectful Atmosphere

The respectful atmosphere toward religion in our schools makes them ideal places for learning about world religions. Catholic parents and students choose Catholic high schools in part because they want the benefits of additional religious formation. In my experience, parents of students from other religious traditions have found Catholic schools to be more respectful of their children's beliefs than other private or public schools. In fact, parents have stated that their children's faith is affirmed by the Catholic community in our schools. Faculty members from other religious traditions also feel comfortable in supporting the mission of a Catholic school because the school respects and values religious commitment inside and outside the Catholic Church.

Honored Religious Traditions

A school that goes beyond toleration and respect for religious traditions to honoring them allows young people to learn about other religions in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*:

The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this sacred synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to "maintain good fellowship among the nations" (1 Peter 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all men, so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven. (No. 5)

We should give special attention to the historically negative attitudes of Christians toward Jewish people. The work of the Second Vatican Council and the writing of *Nostra Aetate* was a specific response to the horrors that Catholic leaders witnessed during the Shoah, or Holocaust. The Catholic Church has strongly condemned any form of discrimination, especially anti-Semitism, as being contrary to the Gospel. In order to sustain a better relationship with people who profess Judaism, we need the courage and integrity to explore with our students the causes and false justifications for this bias in Christians and people of other faiths.

Teaching Other Religions in Light of Our Catholic Faith

We educate our students about world religions within a larger Catholic religious education curriculum. The religious education we provide, therefore, must be faithful, honest, and intellectually stimulating. We must also take into account that some of our students may be followers of faiths other than Catholicism.

Faithful

We teach about other religions, but we also come from a Roman Catholic perspective. In order for education about other religions to be faithful, we must witness to the deep convictions about Jesus Christ held by the Catholic Church. This faithfulness implies a certain courage that is not deterred by difficult or challenging questions that may arise in the course of studying other faiths.

Honest

In addition to being witnesses to the grace we have encountered through the Catholic Church, we must also explore and present knowledge. At times, we must honestly present the great failures of Christians and the Catholic Church in the past to live up to the demands of the Gospel. In addition, when we present Church teaching, we must present it in its entirety, which means including convictions unpopular with our students and areas of theology that are still developing.

Intellectually Stimulating

We cannot allow our students to be satisfied with facile answers to complex questions. As we would in other courses, we must expect thoughtful responses from our students. In addition, we must hold ourselves to high standards in the quality of the material we present.

Because we encourage our students to pose challenging questions to educators, adults teaching religious education must be prepared to adequately respond to them. Our responses need to be informed not only by Catholic theological reflection but also by an objective, academic understanding of other religions.

Inclusive

Non-Catholic students have the same expectations placed on them for success in the religion classroom so our presentations must not exclude them. These students can learn from our Catholic students and then share their own Christian or non-Christian faith.

Study That Is Clarifying, Not Confusing

Students enjoy learning about other religions and often find the comparative approach an interesting way to learn about their own religious tradition. Looking at their own faith in light of similarities with and differences from other faiths enables students to raise more complex questions, ones they had not thought to formulate prior to learning about other religions.

Students often gain a richer perspective on the Christian monotheistic tradition, for example, through study of Judaism and Islam. When students see how Muslims or Jews emphasize an aspect of prayer or morality differently than Christians, they have a chance to reflect on their own commitment to the One God.

We also need to consider the young people in our classrooms who have many questions about the religions around them. As religious educator Thomas Groome wrote in *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*: “As subjects, our students have the right to speak their own word and to name their own reality. As teachers, we have a right to speak our own word, but also an obligation to hear theirs” (pp. 263–264). Taking time for the spiritual questions of these young people is not taking time away from any course material or agenda. We must remember that it is our overall purpose to provide guidance while the students learn about the plurality of religions in the world.

Working Toward World Peace

Catholic schools that take seriously the responsibility of preparing leaders needed by our communities, our nation, and our world have to provide an adequate understanding of the many religions that exist today and discuss interreligious efforts for peacemaking.

To cooperate with people across religious boundaries, a person must have a respectful and informed approach toward the “religious other,” that

is, one who is different or distinct by matter of religion. With their common beliefs in the Creator who wills a just world, Christians, Jews, and Muslims have a religious basis for partnership in working toward peace and justice. However, we find that the world is becoming increasingly polarized along religious-political lines. Quite often, believers in these three traditions are struggling for power and dominance instead of seeking inner and outer peace together. Although there are real political and economic differences between cultural groups, and those differences will not magically disappear, removing prejudice and misinformation about people of other religions is a step toward mutual understanding and peace building.

We can encourage students to develop a spirituality that respects difference as evidence of a mighty, imaginative Creator. The Vatican II document *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* denounces “every type of discrimination . . . as contrary to God’s intent” (no. 29). To be faithful to this Gospel-inspired vision, we must teach our young people that the Church witnesses against oppression and persecution. A well-prepared religion teacher is in a unique position to help students move beyond prejudice and foster respect and cooperation between religious communities.

Catholic social teaching calls for Catholics to become peacemakers. There are many examples of heroic Catholic women and men confronting unjust uses of power. Students need to see models of faith who speak eloquently for the nonviolent resolution of conflicts.

It is critical for those who wish to understand the world today and work for its future transformation to be educated about the religions of the world.

An Overview of This Book

I base this book on several beliefs. I believe in the potential of Catholic high schools to educate students effectively. I believe in the ideals of the Second Vatican Council, especially in the area of interreligious dialogue. I rely on my own positive and exciting experiences of teaching religion in Catholic schools. Administrators, campus ministers, and all faculty, especially those in the religion classroom, can find roles for themselves in this book. The following outline shows how we will proceed.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 provides a short introduction to Catholic teaching and theological reflection on the plurality of religions, using Church documents, writings of contemporary Catholic theologians, and passages from the Scriptures.

Chapters 2 Through 5

Chapters 2 through 5 provide guidance for classroom teaching and also offer an approach to fostering an atmosphere of respect and celebration within the school community. These chapters cover four of the world's major religions: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Although other religious traditions are certainly worthy of serious study, these four religions were chosen because of their global influence and the importance of their relationship to Catholicism, either through a shared history or a commitment to dialogue.

Appendix

Chapters 2 through 5 cannot present all the information you will need about the four world religions to effectively teach them. Therefore, the appendix contains a list of resources for further study as well as resources you can share with your students.

The approach of this book can be applied to other religions with some individual research and planning on your part.

An Overview of My Approach

The basic teaching approach in chapters 2 through 5 has three steps. These steps are not mutually exclusive; a single activity may apply to two or even all three of the steps. However, the steps can be a logical way to develop and organize a curriculum.

Step 1: Learning

We start with what our students already know about a particular religious tradition. We then help them gain a broad overview of it and explore some aspects of it in detail. We begin each learning step by exploring the meaning and use of key terms of the religion. I give suggestions for how to present some basic aspects of a religion's historical origins. Where appropriate, we discuss the geographic spread of a religion and how it has influenced and been influenced by culture and politics. We have a dual focus on what adherents of the religion say about their beliefs and what scholars observe about them. There is far too much information about even one tradition to be covered in a high school course. Choices have to be made about content. In making choices, consider this question: What information will enable students to have an adequate understanding of this religious tradition?

Step 1 has suggestions for avoiding misrepresentation of the religion so that information is fair and accurate, and also for addressing common misperceptions about the religion.

Brainstorming Technique for Starting the Learning Process

Brainstorming is one activity that can be adapted to begin the study of a religion. Write the name of the religion or followers of the religion on the board (for example, "Islam" or "Muslims," or both). Ask students to call out words (for example, events, people, places) they associate with the religion. Write the words on the board around the name of the religion. Every word spoken goes on the board, even if it would ordinarily be inappropriate (for example, a derogatory term or a prejudicial remark).

This list has three uses. First, the teacher can address inappropriate terms. Ask why these terms are associated with the religion and discuss their propriety. Decide how the class will refer to the religion respectfully in the future. This activity gives students some guidelines for discussing religion. It also helps the teacher to know what information and misinformation students have.

Second, ask students about the sources of their information. Do they know about Hinduism from visiting India? Do they know about Islam from reading the Qur'an? How often do they just repeat what someone else has

said about a religion? Are their sources reliable? Critiquing sources of information is important and should continue throughout the course. The teacher should use information from well-researched, reputable sources and give believers of the religions studied an opportunity to speak for themselves in some context.

Finally, everyone in the class should understand the terms on the board. If someone does not know what latkes are and how they are related to Judaism, the student who has mentioned latkes should explain. This process reveals who might have some experiences with, and knowledge about, religions other than Christianity that the teacher can draw on during class. From this activity, I have learned which student has a Jewish parent, Hindu sister-in-law, or Buddhist boyfriend, and which lives near a mosque.

Step 2: Comparing

Using what students have learned about beliefs and practices in the first step, we can move on to compare one religion with another. For our purposes, Catholicism or more broadly held Christian perspectives will be used most often in these comparisons. For Catholic students, their own religion will be the obvious starting point of comparison. Students of other faiths may wish to make comparisons with their own traditions, but they are likely to be familiar with Catholicism from attending a Catholic school. For a course that explores several religious traditions, the scope of comparison should increase over time. Once students have finished a chapter on one religion, they can use the information in subsequent chapters when comparing other religions.

Comparison does not mean evaluation. Judging one religion to be better than another is not the goal of this educational strategy. It is appropriate for a person to prefer his or her own religion. On the other hand, it is common for adolescents to find fault with the tradition being handed on to them by adults and to see only the good and reasonable in other traditions. Teachers need to be alert to both of these tendencies and help students become more aware of how each person's biases may obscure his or her perception. Students can grow in academic objectivity as they recognize the values and emphases of a particular religious tradition. The objective in comparing two religions is to find what they have in common and what their differences are. The comparison activities will focus on beliefs and practices of religions.

One especially interesting strategy is to compare religions that have common historical sources or influences, such as the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) or the Indic religions (Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism). This activity helps students see how common religious ideas (monotheism among Abrahamic religions, spiritual liberation among Indic religions) can develop and be expressed differently.

Step 3: Empathizing

To the extent possible, invite students to step into the shoes of the religious other. Empathy grows out of efforts to understand how another person thinks and feels, in this case, about religion and the matters to which it pertains. Scripture passages, art, videos, and music can introduce students to some of the same media that believers use to learn about and practice a religion. The following questions can be used during the empathy step of the process:

- How might someone with these beliefs see the world?
- How might participation in these practices make one feel?
- How do the experiences of this religious community affect the thinking of its members?

Films are helpful in this regard. I have shown some films in class and have assigned others for viewing after class or during free periods. From a short list of films (see “Additional Resources About Judaism” in the appendix), students can choose one to view outside of class and then write a 1- or 2-page essay about what the film contributed to their knowledge of a religion. If you feel strongly that an R-rated movie has material that is valuable for your students, select the relevant sections of the movie, leaving out the R-rated material if possible. Obtain parental permission to show these selections.

Empathizing is essential for genuine participation in dialogue and cooperative work both in class and later on, in the adult world. Empathy is the one trait most likely to transform a student’s character and worldview so that she or he may become a leader capable of engaging in interreligious dialogue on formal and informal occasions.

Now It Is Up to You

Promoting interreligious dialogue is an enormous task involving the whole Church, not just religion teachers in Catholic high schools. We play a small part in the overall education of our students. We are responsible for meeting our students where they are, assessing their need for knowledge, and helping them grow into mature adults able to live meaningful lives. Our ability to help them progress in religious literacy is a contribution to the future harmony of our world.