

1.1, Why Study Religion in High School?



The logo for the American Academy of Religion.

The Main Point

‘Religious illiteracy’ is dangerous. When people misunderstand religion, they act on that misinformation, and often it causes harm to themselves and to others. The solution, in part, is to develop *religious literacy*. In other words, the more you develop your critical thinking skills with regard to the subject of ‘religion’ the better equipped you’ll be to understand and interact with people, especially those who are different from yourself. And the more people our society has that can interact with people who are different from yourself in an informed and empathetic manner, the better our society will be.

What You’ll Learn

1. You’ll learn that religious illiteracy is widespread in the United States and why that is dangerous.
2. You’ll learn some of the reasons for becoming religiously literate, how that benefits you, and how it strengthens our society—especially in light of its pluralistic nature.

Key Vocabulary

- **The American Academy of Religion:** The AAR is ‘the largest scholarly

society dedicated to the academic study of religion, with more than 8,000 members around the world. The AAR's mission is to foster excellence in the academic study of religion and enhance the public understanding of religion.'

- **Episcopalianism:** Episcopalianism is a branch of Christianity. It's part of the Anglican Communion. Anglicanism is Christianity based out of and shaped by England. Anglicanism advocates for a 'middle way' between Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity, attempting to embrace the best of both without falling toward one side or the other.
- **Religious Studies:** Religious studies focus upon the study of religion with a focus on observing/defining what religion 'is' and how it manifests in a variety of traditions, some more well-known (e.g., Christianity; Buddhism) than others (e.g. Zoroastrianism; Shinto). Scholars engaged in religious studies try to avoid saying anything about what people 'ought' to believe or do and instead focus on explaining what it 'is' that they actually believe or do, especially in light of sociology, philosophy, and other academic disciplines.
- **Theology:** Theology, from two Greek words—*theos* meaning 'god' and *logos* meaning 'word'—is speech about divine things like god, gods, spirits, etc., and usually speech about these things done for the purpose of convincing others that they should see a god, the gods, spirits, etc., a certain way (e.g., 'God is love and I hope you recognize that God loves you.').
- **Devotion:** Devotion is when you are committed to someone. In the context of religious studies and theology, it has to do with devotion to a suprahuman being (e.g. a god; a spirit; ancestors).

1.1.1, AAR's Three Premises

The American Academy of Religion (or, [AAR](#), of which I'm a member) is 'the largest scholarly society dedicated to the academic study of religion, with more than 8,000 members around the world. The AAR's mission is to foster excellence in the academic study of religion and enhance the public understanding of religion.' In 2010, the AAR's Board of Directors approved '[**Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools**](#)'. While TMI Episcopal is a *private* school, I use these guidelines because as an Episcopalian school we want to make sure you have the best education possible and that education includes thinking about **religion** academically, as you would in a college or university setting. Also, as an Episcopalian institution, we want to pursue truth and truthfulness wherever it can be found,

meaning we want to represent religions other than Christianity (the religion of which Episcopalianism is but one version) with respect. We don't just want to *tolerate* other religious traditions but also we want to *celebrate* what religious diversity says about humanity.

That being said, as much as possible, from my perspective as your teacher, I'll try to avoid imparting too many value judgments to you (as regards the truthfulness of various religions claims, *not so much* what I hope from you *morally* and *ethically* speaking). If you find some aspect of the various manifestations of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Shinto, etc., inspiring, then I want you to feel free to explore why it has impacted you the way it has. Similarly, if you find some aspect of the various manifestations of these traditions troubling, then I want you to feel free to explore why it has impacted you the way it has.

In this class, I won't be promoting this or that religion. Nor will I be degrading this or that religion. What I'll be promoting is this: *religious literacy, self-understanding, and empathy*. In other words, I want you to learn about religion (the concept) and also about the various traditions we call 'religions'. I want you to learn about yourself, what you believe, and why you believe it. And I want you to learn about other humans, what they believe, and why they believe it, so that you can be an empathetic global citizen who tries to understand others—even those with which you disagree.

One part of the AAR's 'Guidelines' is their **Three Premises** for why religion should be taught to high school students. We'll explore all three momentarily. For now, I'll list them and then ask you to explain why you think they mean:

1. There exists a widespread illiteracy about religion in the U.S.

What do you understand this to mean?

2. One of the most troubling and urgent consequences of religious illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas.

What do you understand this to mean?

- 3. It is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from a non-devotional perspective in primary, middle, and secondary schools.**

What do you understand this to mean?

In this section, there were three questions that needed to be answered which means this section is worth a total of up to 3 points.

1.1.2, Widespread *Religious* Illiteracy

What's **illiteracy**? Illiteracy is the opposite of literacy. Literacy is when someone is able to learn by means of reading and writing. Therefore, illiteracy is when someone is unable to learn by means of reading and writing. Illiteracy can have several causes including genetic/neurobiological factors that make it difficult to learn, lack of resources (you cannot learn to read without something to read), lack of educational opportunities, or sometimes personal lack of motivation.

Someone can be literate in one sense and illiterate in another. For example, I'm literate in American English but illiterate in Russian. *Academically speaking*, you might be very literate in mathematics, or history, while being illiterate in *religion*. This doesn't make you a bad person. It means you haven't had a chance to learn about religion (until now).

As stated above, the American Academy of Religion recognizes, 'There exists a widespread illiteracy about religion in the U.S.'

This means there many people in the United States don't know a lot about religion. In other words, just as I need opportunities to learn to read, so I need opportunities to learn about religion, and few people have those opportunities. Some, for various reasons, struggle to understand religion even when some opportunities are provided.

This might be because of their worldview and ideologies. This might be because they lack the motivation to learn more.

For this reason, it's not surprising to meet people who hold to some common misunderstandings of religion. **Now, I need to clarify that the study of religion or *religious studies* isn't the same thing as *theology*.** Theology will make claims about what you 'ought' to think or believe: 'You must obey the commandments of the Torah.' 'You must place your faith in Jesus Christ to be saved from sin and hell.' 'You must study the Quran in order to know the will of God.' **It may be that a claim like one of these examples is true.** But that's not what we're studying in this class. **When someone engages in *religious studies* you are learning about what 'is' not necessarily how something 'ought' to be.**

Now, with that in mind, here are some examples of claims that inappropriate when doing the work of *religious studies* (adapted from the 'Guidelines') that I'd like us to interrogate:

1. **An atheist philosopher denounces Christianity saying, 'All Christians are anti-science since they value the Bible.'**

When doing the work of religious studies, what problem(s) might we find with this statement?

2. **Your neighbor is a Rabbi (a religious leader within Judaism), so any time you have a question about Judaism you ask her. You presume that whatever answer she gives represents what Judaism teaches.**

When doing the work of religious studies, what problem(s) might we find with this statement?

3. **You're told by a classmate that a class doesn't *really* teach religion unless it teaches you *how to pray*.**

When doing the work of religious studies, what problem(s) might we find with this statement?

4. Your cousin, a Buddhist, tells you, 'All Buddhist *everywhere* have *always* believed that one can attain enlightenment without giving up their normal day-to-day lives.'

When doing the work of religious studies, what problem(s) might we find with this statement?

5. You're told by a friend that religion has nothing to do with politics, economics, and culture because religion is special.

When doing the work of religious studies, what problem(s) might we find with this statement?

I hope this becomes apparent: if *religious studies* is an attempt to explain what 'is' then we must be honest about the world around us. Is it true that many Jews don't work from Friday at sunset until Saturday at sunset because they are observing *Sabbath*? Yes. Is it true that *all Jews* do this? No. Is it true that many Latter-day Saints (Mormons) don't drink alcohol or caffeinated drinks? Yes. Is it true that *all Latter-day Saints* don't drink alcohol or caffeinated drinks? No.

Are you allowed to have an opinion on what Jews or Mormons *should do*? Of course, you can have an opinion about anything. But when you make 'ought' statements you're no longer doing religious studies, you're doing something like theology. **In this class, we're doing religious studies.**

In this section, there were five questions to answer meaning it's worth a total of up to 5 points.

1.1.3, *Religious Illiteracy Fuels Prejudice and Antagonism*

Since so many in the United States know so little about religion, it's not uncommon for them to hold wrongheaded or misinformed beliefs about not only other religious traditions, but their own, and even about people who don't affiliate with any

established religion. **You might disagree with the beliefs of someone else but you *have to know* what they *really believe* before you can disagree fairly.** One of the values of religious studies is that it allows you to enter a ‘neutral’ space (so some extent: I’m not saying we become ‘objective’ or leave our values at the door, completely) where your only job is to learn *about* religion and religious traditions.

For as long as you’re in class, you’re free to take in as much information as possible. Then, when you leave class, you can restart your value-judgment system and determine how you feel about Jewish *kosher* practices, or the Roman Catholic belief in *transubstantiation*, or the argument made by some Muslims that women should wear a headcovering (*hijab*). **Hopefully, when you’re back out in the world, you’ll make these judgments from an informed perspective that is shaped by an empathetic understanding of ‘why’ others believe and practice what they believe and practice.** This way, even when you disagree, you’re not tempted to be mean-spirited or dismissive.

As stated above, the American Academy of Religion recognizes, ‘One of the most troubling and urgent consequences of religious illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas.’

I want us to learn about an example of how this has happened in our country in recent years. **In order to do this, we’ll watch a segment clip from [The Daily Show with Trevor Noah](#).** (For those who don’t know about The Daily Show, it’s a satirical news show, but one that tackles real, serious issues with humor.) **Let’s watch ‘Confused Islamophobes Target American Sikhs’ (5:34).** Once the segment is finished, **I’d like you to answer the following questions:**

1. Why do some people violently target Sikhs?

2. How is this an example of how religious illiteracy can be dangerous? (I can think of two ways: one having to do with Sikhs and one having to do with Muslims.)

My hope is that by becoming more religious literate you'll learn how to help protect people who are vulnerable to abuse because of their religion but also that you'll learn to reach out and embrace people who are different from you. And I hope you can see how being misinformed can fuel prejudice and hate.

That said, I can't show you people being ignorant of Sikhism without making sure you know *something* about the Sikhs, so let's watch Religion For Breakfast's '[What is Sikhism?](#)' (11:29). As we watch, **I'd like you to answer the following questions:**

1. Tell me about two key beliefs or practices of Sikhs that stood out to you (name the belief/practice with a short description):

- 1.
- 2.

2. Tell me two things about the development of Sikhism over the past five hundred years that stood out to you:

- 1.
- 2.

3. Tell me two things about how Sikhs are 'contributing members of their societies all over the world' that stood out to you:

- 1.
- 2.

Now, you have learned something about Sikhism/Sikhi. You may have a great admiration for this religion. You may be bothered by aspects of this religion. You have the right to those beliefs and feelings. **What is key is this: Your beliefs and feelings are informed by your knowledge of this religion, not just your first impression, or what other people have said, and now if you meet a Sikh you can better understand them, their beliefs, their practices, and their**

motivations.

In this section, there were eight questions to answer meaning it's worth a total of up to 8 points.

1.1.4, Religious Illiteracy Can Be Diminished

The final premise is one of my motivations for teaching this class. **As stated above, the American Academy of Religion recognizes, 'It is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from a non-devotional perspective in primary, middle, and secondary schools.'**

There are a couple of things I'd like us to ponder in relation to this statement:

- 1. What do they mean by a 'non-devotional' perspective?**
- 2. How does this class contribute to the diminishing of religious illiteracy?**

Let's start with the first thing: **What do they mean by a 'non-devotional' perspective?** Let's put it this way: at TMI Episcopal we have Chapel, daily. While chapel does intermix wisdom from various religious (and non-religious) traditions, it's a mixture of a community gathering *and* a Christian religious meeting. In Chapel, we hear passages read from the Christian Bible. We hear songs sung about the Christian god or themes related to Christianity. Usually, if a sermon is given, it centers on Christian beliefs and practices. This doesn't mean that it's completely irrelevant to students who aren't Christian. It does mean that it functions to impart values that align with the school's mission statement: 'TMI provides an exceptional education with values based on the teachings of Jesus Christ that challenge motivated students to develop their full potential in service and leadership.' This aim is directed at all students. The goal is to help students—Christian or not—to reach their 'full potential in service and leadership'. But it's definitely done through the paradigm of Christianity.

This is where the word 'devotional' comes into play. This word has to do with learning how to be 'devoted' to a god. In the case of Episcopalian Christians, the Trinitarian God. Again, as a pluralistic community, other religious traditions are

welcomed, and even in daily Chapel it's rare to hear someone *proselytize*, i.e. try to make people *become* Christians (especially since a large majority of students identify as Christian).

This class isn't *devotional*. It's not designed to teach you *what to believe* but instead to teach you *what people believe*. With this in mind, answer this question for me: Why do you think I teach this class from a *non-devotional* perspective?

Once you've answered this question, we'll discuss your answers, and I'll share my rationale.

I hope by now that it's clear why I'm convinced high school students *should learn* about religion by engaging in *religious studies*. If not, let me spell it out plainly:

1. **This class will make you a better global citizen, who understands the beliefs and practices of their neighbor better, and that understanding can go with you into the fields of business, politics, education, and so forth.**
2. **This class will help you learn to be respectful and empathetic toward those with whom you disagree, even on important matters related to gods, morals, life-after-death, etc.**
3. **This class will provide you with the tools necessary for evaluating the concept of 'religion' and what qualifies as a 'religion' (and what doesn't).**
4. **This class will introduce you to various religious traditions, just as you learned about Sikhism already.**

This class will contribute to the diminishing of religious illiteracy by providing you with religious literacy which you can use in-turn for personal and social good.

In this section, there was one question to answer meaning it's worth a total of up to 1 point.

Key Points for Review

1. The first premise for why we should study religion in a high school classroom is, 'There exists a widespread illiteracy about religion in the U.S.'
2. The second premise for why we should study religion in a high school classroom is, 'One of the most troubling and urgent consequences of religious illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas.'
3. The third premise for why we should study religion in a high school classroom is, 'It is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from a non-devotional perspective in primary, middle, and secondary schools.'