



ISTOCK/JULIARSTUDIO

How does understanding religion help us understand the world?

Supporting Questions

1. What is religion?
2. What is a religious belief?
3. What religious behaviors are important inside and outside religious settings?
4. How can religion create a sense of belonging?

6-8 Religious Identity

How does understanding religion help us understand the world?	
Standards and Content	C3 Framework: D2. Rel.5.9-12: Explain how religious identities shape and are shaped by the beliefs people hold, the behaviors they exhibit and the ways people experience membership in intersecting communities.
Staging the Compelling Question	Ask students, “What comes to mind when I say the word ‘religion?’” Display students’ answers.

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	Supporting Question 4
What is religion?	What is a religious belief?	What religious behaviors are important inside and outside religious settings?	How can religion create a sense of belonging?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
List characteristics of religion and construct a written response to: “To be religious means _____.”	Construct a chart of five religious traditions and list some of the beliefs found in each.	List religious behaviors (e.g. daily practices, habits, rites and/or rituals) that are important inside and outside religious settings.	Write a paragraph about how religion or religious beliefs can create a sense of belonging.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<p>Source A: Definitions of religion</p> <p>Source B: “A good working definition of religion” — Lumen Learning</p> <p>Source C: True/false statements on defining religion — Religious Freedom Center</p>	<p>Source A: Overview of different religions — The Pluralism Project (Harvard University)</p>	<p>Source A: Descriptions of religious experiences — The Pluralism Project (Harvard University)</p>	<p>Source A: Video of a historic church celebrating its 200th anniversary — <i>The Washington Informer</i></p> <p>Source B: Interviews with members of Oregon’s Jewish community — PBS</p> <p>Source C: Video news report about Buddhist nuns in Nepal — CNN</p>

Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT: Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that evaluates how understanding religion helps us understand the world by using specific claims and relevant evidence from sources.
	EXTENSION: Engage in a class discussion on how belief, behavior and belonging are related to one another.
Taking Informed Action	<p>UNDERSTAND: Investigate stereotypes about people who belong to a certain religious or non-religious group.</p> <p>ASSESS: List some of the challenges people face because of these stereotypes.</p> <p>ACT: Come up with a way to challenge one of these stereotypes (e.g., interview someone from another religious tradition, invite a guest speaker, etc.).</p>

Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of religious identity and some of the ways religious belief, behavior and belonging influence the world. Religion impacts culture, politics and world events, yet the average U.S. adult struggles to answer basic facts about world religions other than Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2019). By better understanding religion, students can better understand the world and increase their ability to comprehend views and motivations that may differ from their religious or non-religious traditions.

By completing this inquiry, students will examine:

- Different definitions for religion;
- Religious beliefs and behaviors from varied religious traditions;
- Ways that religion can create a sense of belonging and community;
- Possible stereotypes about individuals who belong to a religious or non-religious group.

This inquiry highlights the following additional standards:

- C3 Framework: D2. Rel.5.9-12: Explain how religious identities shape and are shaped by the beliefs people hold, the behaviors they exhibit and the ways people experience membership in intersecting communities.
- Georgia State Standards:
 SS6G10b Identify the major religions in Europe: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
 SS6H1b Describe the influence of the Spanish and the Portuguese on the language and religions of Latin America.
 SS7G4a Explain the differences between an ethnic group and a religious group.
 SS7G4b Describe the diversity of religions within African ethnic groups.
 SS7H2c Describe how land and religion plays a role in continuing conflicts in the Middle East (i.e. the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the division between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Kurdish nationalism)
 SS7G8a Explain the differences between an ethnic group and a religious group.
 SS7G8b Describe the diversity of religions within Southwest Asian (Middle Eastern) ethnic groups (e.g., Arabs, Persians and Kurds).
 SS7G8c Compare and contrast the prominent religions in Southwest Asia (Middle East): Judaism, Islam and Christianity.
 SS7G12a Explain the differences between an ethnic group and a religious group.
 SS7G12b Compare and contrast the belief systems originating in Southern and Eastern Asia: Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism and Confucianism.

Reference

Pew Research Center. (2019, July 23). *What Americans know about religion*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/what-americans-know-about-religion/>

Note: This inquiry is expected to take four 50-minute class periods. The inquiry timeframe could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (e.g., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, featured sources, writing). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiry to meet the needs and interests of their students.

Structure of the Inquiry

This inquiry is divided into four supporting questions that unpack the larger compelling question, “How does understanding religion help us understand the world?” Each supporting question is addressed through the use of featured sources and a performance task to assess understanding. The questions are created to enable students to construct an argument addressing the compelling question by the end of the inquiry. This inquiry concludes with students taking informed action by investigating and acting on the related issue of religious stereotypes.

Staging the Compelling Question

The inquiry can be introduced by teachers asking students, “What comes to mind when I say the word ‘religion?’” By displaying some of the answers, students’ prior knowledge can be incorporated to introduce the topic of religion. Student responses can be highlighted, and perhaps questioned, as the teacher transitions to the first supporting question, “What is religion?”

Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question — “What is religion?” — addresses ways to define the broad concept of religion.

The first formative performative task asks students to list characteristics of religion and construct a written response to: “To be religious means _____.”

Teachers may choose to use the following procedure:

- Have students write a response to: “To be religious means_____.”
- Share different definitions of religion. (Featured Source A)
- Introduce “a good working definition of religion” and have students review the list. (Featured Source B)
- Read and review true/false statements on religion. (Featured Source C)
- Have students repeat the initial task and write another response to: “To be religious means_____.”
- Discuss how students’ answers changed after engaging with the sources.

The following sources were selected to support this question:

Featured Source A includes different definitions of religion. The first definition is from dictionary.com and the second definition is from britannica.com.

religion [ri-lij-uh n] [SHOW IPA](#)

[SEE SYNONYMS FOR religion ON THESAURUS.COM](#)

noun

- 1 a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.
- 2 a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects:
the Christian religion; the Buddhist religion.
- 3 the body of persons adhering to a particular set of beliefs and practices:
a world council of religions.
- 4 the life or state of a monk, nun, etc.:
to enter religion.
- 5 the practice of [religious](#) beliefs; ritual observance of faith.
- 6 something one believes in and follows devotedly; a point or matter of ethics or conscience:
to make a religion of fighting prejudice.

[SEE MORE](#)

Dictionary.com. (n.d.). Religion. In *Dictionary.com dictionary*. Retrieved May 28, 2020, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/religion?s=t>

Religion, human beings' relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of especial reverence. It is also commonly regarded as consisting of the way people deal with ultimate concerns about their lives and their fate after **death**. In many traditions, this relation and these concerns are expressed in terms of one's relationship with or attitude toward gods or spirits; in more **humanistic** or **naturalistic** forms of religion, they are expressed in terms of one's relationship with or attitudes toward the broader human **community** or the natural world. In many religions, texts are deemed to have scriptural status, and people are esteemed to be invested with spiritual or **moral** authority. Believers and worshippers participate in and are often enjoined to perform devotional or contemplative practices such as **prayer**, **meditation**, or particular **rituals**. **Worship**, moral conduct, right **belief**, and participation in religious institutions are among the **constituent** elements of the religious life.

Encyclopedia Britannica. (2020). In *Britannica.com encyclopedia*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion>

Featured Source B is “a good working definition of religion” from Lumen Learning that addresses the challenges of a definition that includes all religions. The criteria provided allows for a definition of religion that is “broad enough,” yet addresses common characteristics found in religions. The website also includes supplemental text and resources, such as audio explaining some of these challenges. Teachers may choose to adapt this list and text as needed.

A GOOD WORKING DEFINITION OF RELIGION . . .

1. **Is broad enough** to include all religions:

- It should not define religion in a way that leaves out some manifestations of religion
- Nor should it leave out any specific religion

For example: If we say that religion means “belief in God” (having in mind God as Jews and Christians think about God), we will leave out those people who worship many deities (a general word meaning gods or goddesses) and those who worship none at all. This description also focuses on belief and excludes other important dimensions of religion (e.g. practices, rituals, moral values, etc).

2. **Must be sufficiently specific** (not too broad nor too vague) so as to distinguish religion from other similar things, such as a non-religious philosophy of life or a deeply held and passionate commitment to a social or political cause

3. Should be **sufficiently comprehensive** so as to include the various aspects or dimensions of any religion

4. Consider both the **substance** as well as **function(s)** of religion (what religion *is* and what it *does* for us)

5. Needs to be as **free of prejudice or bias** as we can make it

1. Descriptions that state what “true” or “genuine” religion is often fall into the trap of imposing one person's or group's bias on the description of religion generally.

2. Avoid being a negative critique of religion. **For example**, Freud's statement that “Religion is an infantile dependency, a neurosis” or Karl Marx's statement that “religion is the opium of the people and the sigh of the oppressed” do not describe what religion is so much as explain it as a psychological or sociological phenomena (**reductionism**). These definitions also discredit religion, casting it in a negative light. Avoid offering a theory of religion (e.g. explaining the origin or purpose of religion, such as Freud and Marx do) rather than describing it objectively.

Lumen Learning. (n.d.). *Reading: How to define religion*. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/zelirel100/chapter/reading-defining-religion-2/>

C3 TEACHERS

Featured Source C is a series of true/false statements from a lesson from the Religious Freedom Center. These statements can be used to address common misunderstandings regarding what “being religious” means.

2. Carefully read the statements below. Then circle TRUE or FALSE and explain your answer. There is no one right answer.

Statement	Circle Your Opinion	Explain Your Thinking
To be religious is to believe in a god or gods.	TRUE / FALSE	
To be religious is to believe in a system of rewards and punishments (e.g. heaven and hell).	TRUE / FALSE	
To be religious is to have a sacred text (e.g. the Quran, Bible, Guru Granth Sahib, etc.).	TRUE / FALSE	
To be religious is to behave according to your faith.	TRUE / FALSE	

Religious Freedom Center: Freedom Forum Institute. (n.d.). *Study religion like a sleuth.*

Supporting Question 2

The second supporting question — “What is a religious belief?” — has students examine beliefs found in different religious traditions. Students learn about five different religions by focusing on their belief systems. For the formative performance task, students construct a chart of five religious traditions and list some of the beliefs associated with each. See **Appendix A** for a handout that teachers could use for this performance task.

Teachers may choose to use the following procedure:

- Distribute the handout from Appendix A and provide a definition for “belief.”

The teacher could use the definition by the Religious Freedom Center that describes belief as “a set of convictions or questions that shape how a person understands his or her place in the world, and in some cases, relationship to the divine.” (Religious Freedom Center: Freedom Forum Institute. (n.d.). *Study religion like a sleuth.*)

The teacher could also ask students to consider how religious beliefs are related to other kinds of beliefs (such as ethical, social and political beliefs). As students explore religious beliefs, they can be encouraged to examine the relationships between religion and these other types of beliefs.

- Have students visit the different web pages for each religion on The Pluralism Project website and complete the handout. (Source A)

The following source was selected to support this question:

Featured Source A is information on different religions from The Pluralism Project (Harvard University). Students go to <https://pluralism.org/religions> and select the religion they are investigating from the pull-down menu. For example, students could go to Religions>Hinduism>Introduction to Hinduism and then select topics. To learn about beliefs associated with Hinduism, they could then select “Many Gods and One,” “Dharma: The Social Order,” or “Abodes of God: Temple and Image.” Students would then repeat this for the other religions on the handout. Teachers may choose to examine this information *with* their students, highlighting certain beliefs and instructing students what to include on the handout. Text could also be adapted, highlighted and/or edited to accommodate different reading levels.

Harvard University. (n.d.). *Religions: An introduction to world’s religious traditions through the lens of America.* The Pluralism Project. <https://pluralism.org/religions>

Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question — “What religious behaviors are important inside and outside religious settings?” —examines how religious behaviors influence individuals and communities. The formative performance task asks students to list religious behaviors (e.g. daily practices, habits, rites and/or rituals) associated with different religions. See **Appendix B** for a handout that teachers could use for this formative task.

Teachers may choose to use the following procedure:

- Provide students with the handout (Appendix B);
- Divide students into five groups and assign a religion to each group;
- Have each group go to The Pluralism Project website and learn about some behaviors found in that tradition. For example, the group studying Hinduism would go to <https://pluralism.org/religions> and then select Hinduism>The Hindu Experience> and select different topics. For example, students may select “Home Altar” and learn about the use of altars as places to gather, pray, meditate and remember. Students then list some of the behaviors on the handout.
- When the students have completed this task, have each group share with the class. One student from each group can summarize the religious behaviors they learned about. Students from the other groups fill in the handout as they listen. After each group has shared, the teacher may choose to highlight the similarities and differences found between the groups.
- If time allows, the teacher could also incorporate the supplemental source included below — a video by PBS explaining why many religions have headwear. This video talks about connections and differences between faiths, as well as how religious traditions and practices change over time.

The following source was selected to support this question:

Featured Source A is information on different religious experiences from The Pluralism Project (Harvard University). Students go to <https://pluralism.org/religions> and select the religion they are investigating from the pull-down menu. They then select the section on “experience.”

Harvard University. (n.d.). *Religions: An introduction to world’s religious traditions through the lens of America*. The Pluralism Project. <https://pluralism.org/religions>

A Supplemental Source is a PBS video that addresses the use of religious headwear in different religious traditions. PBS. (2018, November 26). *Why do so many religions have headwear?* <https://www.pbs.org/video/why-do-so-many-religions-have-headwear-xawkvj/>

Supporting Question 4

The fourth supporting question — “How can religion create a sense of belonging?” — examines communities of belonging found within religious traditions. The formative performance task asks students to write a paragraph about how religion or religious beliefs can create a sense of belonging. Teachers may choose to use the following procedure:

- Explain to students that they will watch a series of videos on different religious communities. Instruct them to take notes on the ways people describe *why* they are a part of their religious communities and *what* that means for them. They will use these notes to help them complete the formative performance writing task;
- Watch the video about Mount Zion’s 200th anniversary (Source A);
- Watch the video, “What does it mean to be Jewish?” (Source B);
- Watch the video on the Buddhist nun community. (Source C). If teachers have time, they may choose to incorporate the supplemental sources before transitioning to the writing task;
- Instruct students to use their notes to help write a paragraph on how religion can create a sense of belonging for people.

The following sources were selected to support this question:

Featured Source A is a video about a historic Black church in Washington, D.C., celebrating its 200th anniversary. The video features members of the church sharing what it means to be a part of that religious community and a part of the church’s legacy.

Harris, H. R. (2016, October 5). *Historic Black church celebrates 200th anniversary*. The Washington Informer. <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/historic-black-church-celebrates-200th-anniversary-mt-zion-umc-founded-in-1816-by-slaves-freedmen/>

Featured Source B is a video that interviews people in Oregon’s Jewish community about what it means to be Jewish.

PBS. (2016, January 25). *What does it mean to be Jewish?* <https://www.pbs.org/video/oregon-experience-what-does-it-mean-be-jewish/>

Featured Source C is a video about Buddhist nuns in Nepal who use martial arts and meditation as a part of their religious practice; they work together to serve the community and advocate for equality for women.

LaMotte, S. (2019, December 21). *Kung Fu nuns in Nepal boost their health in the fight for women’s rights*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/20/health/kung-fu-nuns-wellness/index.html>

Supplemental Source A is a podcast about religious communities who offer sanctuary for people at risk of deportation.

Emanuel, G. (2017, March 14). *Religious communities continue the long tradition of offering sanctuary*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/14/519307698/religious-communities-continue-the-long-tradition-of-offering-sanctuary>

Supplemental Source B is a video about seven churches in South Carolina working together to implement a holiday giving program.

Dys, A. (2019, December 24). *“Feels like Christmas in here”: Rock Hill churches unite for holiday giving*. The Herald. <https://www.heraldonline.com/news/local/article238687518.html>

Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have investigated ways to define religion and various beliefs and behaviors found within different religious traditions. They have also examined how religions can create a sense of belonging for individuals and communities. Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to answer the compelling question, “How does understanding religion help us understand the world?” It is important to note that students’ answers could take a variety of forms, including a detailed outline, poster or essay. Students’ arguments will likely vary, but could include any of the following:

- If we do not learn about religious beliefs, it would be hard to understand how people make sense of the world. People turn to religion to answer some of life’s biggest questions;
- It helps us to understand the relationship between behavior and beliefs. The ways people act and the beliefs that they hold are often related. Some people make decisions and act in certain ways because of their religious beliefs and sometimes behavior can shape someone’s beliefs;
- People engage in religious practices and behaviors that affect what they do on a daily basis. If we don’t understand religion, we can’t understand day-to-day practices like prayer, meditation and attending places of worship;
- It helps us understand different communities and why people often need to belong and participate with others who share common convictions. Religious groups can be very involved in communities and it helps to understand why they act in certain ways;
- Learning about religion helps me to better understand people who are different than me.

To **extend** their arguments, teachers may have students engage in a discussion on how belief, behavior and belonging are connected. How do belief, behavior and belonging influence each other?

Students also have the opportunity to **take informed action** by investigating stereotypes often associated with certain religious and non-religious groups. This allows students to *understand* how stereotypes can be harmful, *assess* challenges people face because of these stereotypes and *act* to challenge these stereotypes. Students may decide to interview someone from a certain religious tradition, invite a guest speaker to class or conduct research on how stereotypes affect specific religious or non-religious individuals and communities.

Appendix A

Religion	What are some beliefs found in this religion?
Hinduism	
Judaism	
Buddhism	
Christianity	
Islam	

Appendix B

Religion	List some of the daily practices, habits, rites and/or rituals
Hinduism	
Judaism	
Buddhism	
Christianity	
Islam	