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The Many and The One

NEH Institute

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Curriculum Project

Teaching Context

The students of Oakton High School in Vienna, Virginia would likely identify with the notion of The Many and the One in terms of religious and ethnic diversity amidst a unifying culture of academic and extracurricular success. Comprised of about 2,400 students, the student body is approximately sixty-three percent white, twenty percent Asian, seven percent Hispanic, five percent black, and five percent other. Our pass rates on standardized state tests far surpass the state average and also the average in Fairfax County Public Schools, our school district, which is located just outside of Washington, DC. For example, ninety-eight percent of our students pass the Virginia Standards of Learning Reading, Literature and Research Test. Sports teams, publications, and musical groups reap state and national honors as a matter of routine. While the faculty and administration of Oakton High School deserves respect for its contributions to student achievement through commitment to student-centeredness, innovation, and continuous improvement, much of the student body's success derives from educated and often affluent families who support this culture of excellence.

I teach English in a course entitled World Civilizations II, which is an interdisciplinary study of world literature and AP World History. Because my course pairs with an AP curriculum, I teach mostly motivated, bright, and curious students. While the majority of students are white Protestant Christians, my classroom includes students whose ancestors hail

from virtually every continent and every major religion around the world. This diversity proves integral to our vast and varied studies of empires, nations, religions, and literature because students have the immediate opportunity to collaborate with students who relate to the various cultures that we study, fostering a context in which to demonstrate respect for difference and to find grounds of similarity. My team teacher and I strive to facilitate critical thinking, character, and the inherent joy of learning in this context of diversity.

While my students are typically motivated to achieve and often have an interest in the humanities, many lack skills commensurate with their goals. It is, of course, my job and desire to teach them these skills; the content that I teach is primarily a means of doing so. Students learn to read closely through rigorous reading assignments and the practice of annotations; they learn to write analytically through research and literary analyses; and they learn to speak coherently and convincingly through collaborative work, presentations, and Socratic Seminars. While students must learn to demonstrate their knowledge on standardized tests, my team teacher and I implement varied forms of assessment to bolster their writing and speaking skills. Many students suffer from a lack of written and oral communication in this age of virtual communication. Many do not converse at any length with their parents or peers about issues that matter beyond daily routines. As an English teacher I am committed to instilling an appreciation for intelligent and provocative dialogue, both in writing and speech. Through teacher modeling and student practice, my students make great strides in these areas during their study of World Civilizations II. Thus, the content of my course matches well with the skills that I teach because students have frequent opportunities to read, write, and think about the complexities of world literature and history, including the study of world religions.

I have two goals related to the incorporation of religion in my classroom: to create a more cohesive and engaging study of religious literature, and to enrich the study of world literature with more overt recognition of religious contexts and themes, particularly as they pertain to economics, race, and conflict. Thus, the following discussion of curriculum includes both specific and broad application of ideas from the NEH Institute in three segments: Religious Literature, Religion in World Literature, and Race and Religion in World Civilizations.

Religious Literature

Students enter my classroom with very basic knowledge of the major world religions which they have gleaned from their ninth-grade study of ancient literature. They have learned the core beliefs and read excerpts from various scriptures. During the first quarter of our school year, my team teacher reviews religions in the context of their historical origins. My challenge is to accompany this review with a meaningful study of religious texts as literature that deepens students' knowledge. Through the use of a primary source textbook, I expose students to texts of Daoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We spend approximately two class periods on each of these religions, and we approach each text with an understanding of its historical context, literary genre, and rhetorical devices. We finish with an excerpted reading of *Journey to the West*, by Wu Cheng'en, a Chinese account of Xuanzang's pilgrimage to bring Buddhist scriptures from India to China.

Although this unit is inherently valuable in the richness of its content and its relevance to subsequent studies of literature, I have struggled to orchestrate a cohesive approach to these texts. This year, I will employ several lessons from the NEH Institute to advance student engagement and learning. I will begin by asking students the following questions: What are the

purposes of studying religions and religious literature? Is it legal to learn about and discuss religions in a public school? Once we have discussed students' initial reactions to these questions, I will read the Supreme Court decision on Abington Town District vs. Shemp of June 1963 in order to emphasize the necessity of religious study for the wholeness of education. I will then introduce students to the descriptive terminology of Albanese and Smart, namely that religions include myth, creed, code, cultus, and community. This framework will enable students to describe, compare, and contrast religions and religious texts in class discussions and in writing. At the end of the unit, students will compose an expository process analysis essay on a religious ritual in which they will describe the stages of a ritual and then relate the significance of the ritual to each aspect of the framework. I also intend to offer extra credit for students who would like to attend a religious ceremony and compose a short analysis of it according to its representation of myth, creed, code, cultus, and community, an idea suggested by Rachel Wheeler.

Religion in World Literature

The study of religion in world literature is certainly not confined to this unit on religious literature. Each major work that students read and analyze in this course relates to religion in some way. This year, my goal is to make the relevance of religion clear in each literary period and each major text. I also intend to connect each unit to the last with questions of transition. What follows is the basic order of literary study in World Civilizations II with guiding questions that will frame students' reading and class discussion. These questions will not be the only guiding questions for these units, of course, as we will study other issues of historical significance and many literary features.

Antigone

- Opening Questions— What is civilization? How and why do we label societies as civilized or barbaric?
- Transition Questions— Is Antigone religious? Is Creon religious? How do we define religion?

Religious Literature

- Opening Questions—What is the purpose of studying religious literature? Is it acceptable to study religions and religious literature in public school?
- Transition Question— What are the sources of religions conflict in world history?

The Merchant of Venice

- Opening Questions— How did Anti-Semitism in medieval and Renaissance Europe relate to economics? What is Shakespeare's perspective on religious discrimination?
- Transition Question—How does an increasingly humanistic Europe view religion when it appears to be a source of conflict?

Tartuffe and *Candide*

- Opening Question—How do Enlightenment thinkers view institutionalized religion?
- Transition Questions— Is religion the source of conflict in the world?

A Tale of Two Cities

- Opening Question— What happens when enlightened France dismantles organized religion?
- Transition Question— How does British Protestantism of the nineteenth century view and affect the expanding world?

Things Fall Apart

- Opening Questions— How do religion, politics, and economics interact in an age of imperialism and colonization? Compare and/or contrast the religion of the missionaries and the religion of the Igbo.
- Transition Question— How is the modern age apocalyptic? (Use Yeats' "The Second Coming" and discuss the modern sense of apocalypse.)

All Quiet on the Western Front

- Central Question— How does the individual establish identity in the modern age of warfare and religious fragmentation?
- Transition Question—How does the modern world manage religious fragmentation?

Cry, the Beloved Country

- Opening Questions— How does Paton portray religion in South Africa? Is religion a source of peace or conflict?
- Final Questions— What is *your* role in seeking justice? How does *your* religion affect your worldview?

I intend to use these guiding questions among others to begin and end each unit of literature to provide a sense of purpose and cohesion for students. They will respond in writing as they read each work of literature, and we will discuss as a class throughout each unit.

Race and Religion in World Civilizations

Sylvester Johnson's lecture entitled "Race and Religion in Antebellum America" emphasized that race is a social reality, not a scientific one. While his discussion of race and its connections to religion centered on the American experience, the notion of race as a religious

rationale for political and economic power certainly extends to many civilizations around the world. The prologue from Philips Schaff's *Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*, an excerpt that Johnson provided, will frame discussions of race and religion in my classroom, particularly in reference to *The Merchant of Venice*, *Candide*, *Things Fall Apart*, and *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Before students begin to read *The Merchant of Venice*, students investigate the development and impact of Christian Anti-Semitism in medieval Europe. I would like to add to this context by discussing the construct of race more overtly as it pertains to white Europeans' marginalization of Jews, blacks, and basically all other people groups. Reading Schaff's prologue will fit nicely in our discussion of Shylock's famous monologue on the humanity of Jews. I will frame our discussion with Johnson's leading assertion— that race has a history, but it is not in our bodies—and I will include his supporting details. We will also watch excerpts from the PBS documentary, *Race: The Power of Illusion*. This contextualization will illuminate the political and economic motivations for the persecution of Jews and the exploitation of other people groups, which we will discuss in later units.

We will revisit this discussion of race and religion when students read Voltaire's *Candide*, which satirizes the links among religion, politics, economics, and race. In addition, I will begin the study of *Things Fall Apart* with a reading and discussion of Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," which will address the same issues. Finally, our reading of *Cry, the Beloved Country* and our study of apartheid in South Africa will carry the issues of race and religion into the twentieth century. Thematically, this novel exalts the role of the individual in the pursuit of social justice, so my team teacher and I attempt to engage students more personally at this time of year. Thus, I would like students to consider the role of race in their contemporary world by reading a series about racial diversity in our school newspaper:

<http://www.oaktonoutlook.com/wordpress/?p=1399>. I will likely ask students to agree or disagree with various statements on race in the school newspaper and discuss in pairs and then as a class. I will also include a question of religion's role in race relations today. I will ask students to find current newspaper articles on the interaction of race and religion around the world and compose a paragraph of analysis. They will post their commentary and a link to their article on a Wiki hosted by blackboard.com, and they will read and respond to two other students' postings. Once they have completed the assignment, I will select two of their articles to discuss as a class and relate them to our reading of *Cry, the Beloved Country* and our discussions of race and religions throughout the year.

Conclusion

Although my course on world civilizations does not explicitly trace the history of American religion, my students will nevertheless benefit from the lectures, seminars, and informal discussions that I encountered at *The Many and the One: Religion, Pluralism and American History*. This experience has helped me to frame my curriculum in a more engaging and cohesive format in which students will explore the complex relationships among literature, history, and religion. Beyond my classroom I intend to share materials and ideas with my colleagues who teach American literature and U.S. history. In addition, the many connections to my own studies in American literature at the graduate level will undoubtedly inform the composition of my master's thesis next year.