

Lived Religion in the 8th Grade U.S. History Classroom

NEH Summer Institute “The Many and the One: Religion, Pluralism, and American History”
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Pedagogical Context:

These sources and materials are samples of lived religion that fit various themes, problems, and eras of U.S. history. They have been developed so that I can weave threads of everyday religious experience into existing curricular frameworks, providing students with a fuller view of the American historical landscape. These sources are not meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, and do not stand alone as a course or unit. Rather, these sources are attempts to create classroom options for teachers to give their students access to the real religious lives of people in different times and places in U.S. history, when added to an existing curricular framework in the U.S. history survey course. The sources will also be most effectively used within a consistent approach to primary documents, allowing students to contextualize, read, analyze, and discuss the documents in a manner that supports all learners. As always, continued updating, improvement, expansion, and revision of this material is welcome and necessary.

This particular set of lived religion sources was created for integration into my existing 8th grade U.S. history survey course. This course attempts to investigate large themes and eras in U.S. history with some attention to breadth and depth of knowledge, admitting that both cannot quite ever be satisfactorily balanced. Below are listed the overarching themes or categories into which the lived religion sources fit, with a brief comment on potential instructional value for each.

Civil War and Reconstruction

Nat Turner

Comment: Selected passages from Turner’s *Confessions*, with historical context and vocabulary support, can be a very compelling window into themes of slave revolt, increasing antebellum defenses of the slave system, and religion and violence. Carefully selected and adapted passages with vocabulary support are provided below.

Source: “The Confessions of Nat Turner” *Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1920*, University of North Carolina Digitization Project,
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>.

Selections:

- Passages from pages 7, 10, 11, and 12 in the UNC digitized text

Late 19th and early 20th Century Race Relations

Marcus Garvey

Comment: Garvey’s writings in the volume listed below are infused with religious themes, language, and theologies. Several selections could be helpful in getting a feel for

his lived religion, though various passages may work better than others depending on the context students are working in and what they know about Garvey's overall project. Many of his writings are relatively accessible. Some are more overtly Christian or theological than others.

Source: *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, or Africa for the Africans, Volumes I and II*. Compiled by Amy Jacques Garvey. Dover, MA: The Majority Press, 1986.

Selections: (all from Volume I)

- "Man Know Thyself" (p. 38-39)
- "God As A War Lord" and "The Image of God" (p. 43-44)
- "The Resurrection of the Negro" (p. 87-92)
- "Speech Delivered at Liberty Hall N.Y.C. During Second International Convention of Negroes August 1921" (p. 93-97)
- "Statement on Arrest January, 1922" (p. 98-100)

Richard Wright

Comment: Wright's memoir offers a compelling look at how his religious convictions and views adjusted and were shaped by experiences of racism, power conflicts, and family dynamics in the households in which he lived. Also to this can be added selections regarding his reflections on the time in which he grew up, an often overlooked period of race relations in survey courses of U.S. history. See below for a brief example and contextualization of Wright's writing on religion.

Source: Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1998.

Selections:

- Short selections about Wright's take on religion, specifically, his rejection of the religion of his youth and the authority figures in his life

World War II and the Holocaust

Father George Zabelka

Comment: This interview (Zabelka also has a speech and some other interview material available) provides a window into the deep tensions that exist for religious people in wartime. Zabelka's experience shows the pragmatic and patriotic nature of citizens' wartime involvement, and the regrets, reflections, and unresolvable lived tensions that come along with it.

Source: "Fr. George Zabelka: A Military Chaplain Repents" An Interview with Rev. Immanuel Charles McCarthy. PDF file of interview available from the Center for Christian Nonviolence at <http://www.centerforchristiannonviolence.org/other-resources/>.

Selection: Pieces of interview or interview in full could be used effectively, depending on classroom purposes

Jewish Veterans of World War II

Comment: Primary sources in video, audio, and text formats allowing students to explore the experiences of Jewish soldiers during WWII.

Source: Experiencing War: Stories from the Veteran's History Project, Jewish Veterans of World War II. The Library of Congress Veteran's History Project, <http://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/ex-war-jewishveterans.html>.

Selections: Many sources are available in many forms on the site, at the discretion and purpose of each classroom teacher.

Daisho Tana

Comment: Daisho Tana was a Buddhist priest incarcerated in the Japanese American internment camp system in New Mexico during World War II. His diaries should be an extremely interesting look into the lived religious experience of an American Buddhist under circumstances of affliction. This book is still forthcoming from the University of California Press. An article on the author and project is listed at the website below.

Source: *Camp Dharma: Japanese-American Buddhism and the World War Two Incarceration Experience*

See also: <http://ls.berkeley.edu/?q=node/505>

Civil Rights

Bayard Rustin

Comment: These first-hand accounts, essays by Rustin, provide excellent windows into the ways that Rustin lived out his Quaker religious tradition in the midst of war and societal inequity. Rustin's writings also provide a unique window on the nexus between race and sexuality in the historical progression of the civil rights movement. These essays are often provocative and electrifying.

Source: Carbado, Devon W., and Donald Weise, Eds. *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003.

Selections:

- "Letter to the Draft Board" (1943)
- "From Montgomery to Stonewall" (1986)
- "The New 'Niggers' Are Gays" (1986)
- "Black and Gay in the Civil Rights Movement: An Interview with Open Hands" (1987)

Fannie Lou Hamer

Comment: Though it offers little in the way of extended first-person accounts, this secondary source narrative of Hamer's faith is far-reaching and helpful in presenting how Hamer's religion was lived in the context of the civil rights movement. The selection is also broken down into smaller sections with headings, since the entire chapter may be too overwhelming for some ages of students.

Source: Marsh, Charles. *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Selections:

- "I'm on My Way, Praise God": Mrs. Hamer's Fight for Freedom"

Sam Bowers and Douglas Hudgins

Comment: These two selections tell the stories of how segregationists were also living out their religious convictions, or employing religious narratives and arguments in supporting their cause. When contrasted with the narratives on Hamer and others, it provides a nice contrast in how the same religious tradition can be on both sides of a very contentious social divide, and how religion can be used to both challenge existing structures and institutions and reinforce the status quo simultaneously – depending on who is employing the religion.

Source: Marsh, Charles. *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Selections:

- "High Priest of the Anti-Civil Rights Movement: The Calling of Sam Bowers"
- "Douglas Hudgins: Theologian of the Closed Society"

Cleveland Sellers

Comment: This essay in *God's Long Summer* provides an interesting contrast and comparison with the lived theologies of more evangelical Protestant Christians like Hamer. Sellers' journey is traced from his Protestant Christian upbringing to his adjustments toward Black Power and liberation as a sort of spirituality all its own, rejecting the integrationist tendencies of earlier preachers and movement leaders. There are some first-hand accounts from Sellers in the text, but much is narrative provided by Marsh, who is clearly unimpressed and critical of the direction Sellers took with the Black Power movement. Depending on the age and sophistication of students, selections from this reading might be more helpful than the full text. Primary text selections should be pulled from Sellers' autobiography, listed below.

Source: Marsh, Charles. *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Selection:

- "Cleveland Sellers and the River of No Return"

Additional Source: Sellers, Cleveland, with Robert Terrell. *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC*. Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1990.

James Baldwin

Comment: A compelling discussion of race and religion in U.S. society during the escalating agitation for civil rights. Baldwin's full text could be read by high school students with proper contextualization, and selections could be used for middle school students.

Source: Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: The Modern Library, 1995.

Selections:

- Full text of book, or selections for younger students

Melba Patillo Beals

Comment: Highly readable for middle school and high school students, though the length can be a factor if the book is being taught.

Source: Beals, Melba Pattillo. *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1994.

Selections:

- Full text of book

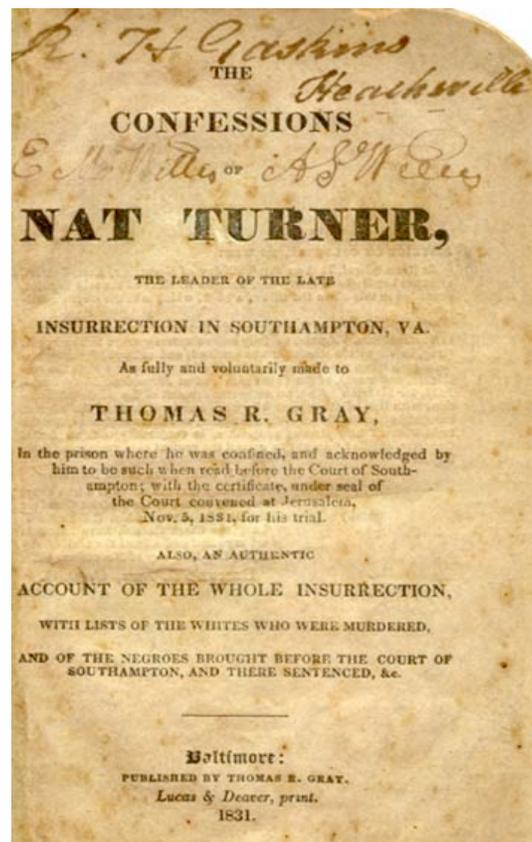
Background Sources on Lived Religion

Hall, David, Ed. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

McGuire, Meredith B. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

The Confessions of Nat Turner

As fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray



Historical Context: In the early hours of August 22, 1861, a slave rebellion broke out in Southampton County, Virginia. The rebellion was led by Nat Turner, a Black overseer who saw heavenly visions that inspired him to destroy slavery. The rebellion started when Turner and a few others, armed with farming tools, attacked Turner's home farm, the Joseph Travis residence, and killed the entire family while they slept. Over the next 24 hours, the group went from farm to farm and killed every White man, woman, and child they came upon. They also continued to gather weapons and recruits. Lasting little more than a day, 60 to 80 rebels ended up killing no more than 60 Whites. However, the insurrection spread fear among White slaveowners, causing increased brutality and hasty executions of Blacks suspected of being disloyal. Nat Turner was captured and arrested on October 30, 1831, and was imprisoned in Southampton County Jail. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* were the work of lawyer Thomas Gray, a White man, who visited Turner in prison on several occasions and published these writings. Historians debate how reliable *The Confessions* are, since it is difficult to tell when the text is from Gray and when it is from Turner.

Source: Adapted from the Introduction to *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, edited by Kenneth S. Greenberg and PBS' *Africans in America* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h500.html>).

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DIRECTIONS – Read and annotate the following selections from Nat Turner’s *Confessions*.

induced: caused or brought forth

insurrection: revolting against an established authority

indelible: lasting; cannot be removed

gallows: structure from which prisoners are hanged

“ SIR,--You have asked me to give a history of the motives which **induced** me to undertake the late **insurrection**, as you call it--To do so I must go back to the days of my infancy, and even before I was born. ... In my childhood a circumstance occurred which made an **indelible** impression on my mind, and laid the ground work of that enthusiasm, which has terminated so fatally to many, both white and black, and for which I am about to atone at the **gallows**. ... Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it had happened before I was I born--I stuck to my story, however, and related somethings which went, in her opinion, to confirm it--others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth.”...

[Turner goes on to describe his adult life as a slave. Turner ran away from his overseer and hid in the woods. However, Turner returned to the plantation on his own after the Spirit appeared to him and told him to go back. Turner describes how the other slaves thought he had no sense.]

intercourse: interaction with

... “And about this time I had a vision--and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened--the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams--and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it." I now withdrew myself as much as my situation would permit, from the **intercourse** of my fellow servants, for the avowed purpose of serving the Spirit more fully--and [the Spirit] appeared to me, and reminded me of the things it had already shown me, and that it would then reveal to me the knowledge of the elements, the revolution of the planets, the operation of tides, and changes of the seasons. ... and the Holy Ghost was with me, and said, "Behold me as I stand in the Heavens"--and I looked and saw the forms of men in different attitudes--and there were lights in the sky to which the children of darkness gave other names than what they really were--for they were the lights of the Saviour's hands, stretched forth from east to west, even as they were extended on the cross on Calvary for the redemption of sinners. And I wondered greatly at these miracles, and prayed to be informed of a certainty of the meaning thereof--and shortly afterwards, while laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were **dew** from heaven-- and I communicated it to many, both white and black, in the neighborhood--and I then found on the leaves in the woods **hieroglyphic** characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, **portrayed** in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens. And now the Holy Ghost had revealed itself to me, and made plain the miracles it had shown me--For as the blood of Christ had been shed on this earth, and had ascended to heaven for the salvation of sinners, and was now returning to earth again in the form of dew--and as the leaves on the trees bore the impression of the figures I had seen in the heavens, it was plain to me that the

dew: moisture droplets that form on plants overnight

hieroglyphic: picture-words, like the form of writing used by some ancient civilizations

portrayed: shown or represented

yoke: wooden bar used to attach two animals working together; a general term for any heavy or oppressive force

borne: carrying something that was difficult to deal with

commence: begin; start

*Saviour was about to lay down the **yoke** he had **borne** for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand....”*

*...”And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.... And by signs in the heavens [the Spirit] would make known to me when I should **commence** the great work--and until the first sign appeared, I should conceal it from the knowledge of men--And on the appearance of the sign, (the eclipse of the sun last February) I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons.... -It was intended by us to have begun the work of death on the 4th July last...”*

...”It was then observed that I must spill the first blood. On which, armed with a hatchet, and accompanied by Will, I entered my master's chamber, it being dark, I could not give a death blow, the hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife, it was his last word, Will laid him dead, with a blow of his axe, and Mrs. Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed. The murder of this family, five in number, was the work of a moment, not one of them awoke; there was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten, until we had left the house and gone some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it; ...”

Source: Selected and adapted from *Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1920*, University of North Carolina Digitization Project, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>

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Questions to Consider:

1. What made Turner realize he was a prophet?
2. What does Turner find on the corn, and what does he take it to mean?
3. What is Turner talking about when he talks of the “Serpent” and “the first shall be last”?
4. What did Turner think was the sign to begin the insurrection?
5. On what day was Turner planning to begin the “work of death?” Why might he choose that date?
6. What is your reaction to Turner’s account of the first killings?
7. What are the reasons behind Turner’s actions? How do his actions make sense to him and his religion?

Richard Wright: Thoughts on the Religion of His Youth

Historical Context:

Born in 1908 in Mississippi, Richard Wright was the son of a sharecropper and a schoolteacher. As a young boy Wright's father left the family, and several years later his mother became a paralytic and was unable to care for her children. Wright's family then moved to live with his grandparents, moving from Natchez to Jackson, Mississippi, to Elaine, Arkansas, then back to Jackson. Wright's grandparents were strictly religious Christians in the Seventh Day Adventist church. Because of this, Wright's grandmother kept many books out of the house and saw fiction writing as the work of the devil. In spite of this, he published his first short story in 1924. Wright grew dissatisfied with his grandparents restrictive rules and religion, eventually earning enough money to move to Memphis where he was a dishwasher and delivery boy. Attempting to escape the Jim Crow South, Wright moved to Chicago where he continued to write, work odd jobs, and where he joined a Communist Party organization. Wright eventually ended up in New York as a writer and editor. His three major works are *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940), and *Black Boy* (1945). Quoted below, *Black Boy* is Wright's memoir of growing up in the midst of racism and few opportunities in the segregated United States of the early 20th century. This specific passage shows Wright commenting on the fighting and disagreements in his grandparents home, and the irony he sees in their deep religious convictions.¹

Selection from *Black Boy*:

“There were more violent quarrels in our deeply religious home than in the home of a gangster, a burglar, or a prostitute, a fact which I used to hint gently to Granny and which did my cause no good. Granny bore the standard for God, but she was always fighting. The peace that passes understanding never dwelt with us. I, too, fought; but I fought because I felt I had to keep from being crushed, to fend off continuous attack. But Granny and Aunt Addie quarreled and fought not only with me, but with each other over minor points of religious doctrine, or over some imagined infraction of what they chose to call their moral code. Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn.”²

Questions to Consider:

1. What is Wright trying to do by comparing his “deeply religious home” with that of “a gangster, a burglar, or a prostitute?”
2. What irony does Wright describe here in his home?
3. What impression do you get from Wright on the religion of his youth?
4. According to Wright, what was the function of religion in his home?
5. What does he mean that “the naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn?”

¹ Adapted from *Modern American Poetry*, and online companion to *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, Oxford University, 2000. Edited by Cary Nelson.

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/r_wright/wright_life.htm.

² Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 135-136.