

Christian Leadership in a Multifaith World Curriculum Designed by Interfaith America & CCCU

Module 2 – Religious Literacy

Activity 1– Introduction to Religious Literacy

Overview

In this activity students will be introduced to the concept of religious literacy. Students will learn why it is essential, as Christians, to develop an understanding of other religious beliefs and practices. Students will also come to understand that religious literacy doesn't necessarily mean mastering content, but rather learning to ask the right questions and find good answers.

Learning Outcomes

Students who successfully complete this activity will:

- Distinguish the difference between religious literacy and religious knowledge
- Consider how the 3 virtues (*appreciative knowledge, narrative imagination, reflective commitment*) can help a Christian to develop their religious literacy
- Identify useful questions and approaches for how to enhance religious literacy

External Materials

- [An Unexpected Friendship](#) (10 minutes): This video focuses on the friendship between Interfaith America's Hannah Minks (Roman Catholic) and Usra Ghazi (Muslim).

Activity Content

While related, religious literacy is different than completing a scholarly study of religion. Understanding the theology and history of religions is a worthwhile pursuit, but what is more useful for daily life in a diverse world is shifting the focus to *learning how religious others live out their lives*, as opposed to focusing solely on religious beliefs. This makes room for mutually beneficial relationships to be established - as we listen and learn from others' stories, we hope that they, too, will be eager and willing to hear our own.

A foundational concept in the Judeo-Christian tradition is the belief in the Imago Dei - the idea that all human beings are made in the image of God, and thus, reflect aspects and characteristics of God back into the world. This is how we ultimately learn about others - by recognizing and celebrating their humanity. Here we return to the three virtues that can assist Christians as they encounter and develop interfaith relationships: *appreciative knowledge, narrative imagination, and reflective commitment*. While each can be distinguished as a different lens through which to see the world and approach content, all three are interrelated and can help Christians to confidently but humbly engage religious differences.

Above all else, religious literacy requires one to be humble and be willing to be a listener first. This means being willing to recognize one's own flaws and limitations, recognize the need to learn from others, and demonstrate a present willingness to change our perspectives. We need

to learn from others what they value and ultimately, what they need. This equips Christians to be true neighbors - making life healthier and safer for those whom we are called to care for.

Finally, religious literacy can best be obtained through engagement with peers, co-workers, students, patients, roommates, etc... In short, normal, everyday people! Communication Studies scholar Kenneth Danielson contends, "It is not the expertise of a person that gives them status or privilege, rather it is the quality of their narrative that matters." *Appreciative knowledge* helps us intentionally listen to others' stories for what we can learn. Using our *narrative imagination* allows us to foster greater empathy for religious others, and empathy is at the heart of religious literacy. Once we have learned about "you," we can determine how we can be more welcoming to you through our words and actions. When we meaningfully engage in these ways, a relationship begins to develop and trust is established. Ultimately, by learning more about someone else's beliefs and practices, we are inspired to reflect back on our own. Through *reflective commitment* we engage in thoughtful self-reflection and grow deeper in our own understanding of our commitments and beliefs.

Student Assignment Options

1. How Do We Acquire Religious Literacy?
 - a. Imagine that you have a co-worker of a different faith who has little exposure to Christianity. They learn that you are a Christian and want to learn about Christianity by watching and interacting with you over the course of one day. Do you find this exciting? Intimidating? Revisit your definition of *appreciative knowledge* and then reflect on and answer the following questions:
 - i. What would you want others to know about you? What questions would you want them to ask you to get at this knowledge?
 - ii. Would they learn more from you by watching you for a day or having a conversation with you over coffee?
 - iii. Would you be willing to share with your co-worker something with which you struggle? What would that teach them about you? What about a triumph or a success?
 - iv. At the end of the day, do you think your co-worker would have learned more about Christian theology or about how you put your faith into practice? Which do you think is more important for them to know? Remember, you just get this one day!
2. Case Study Reflection: Identify and Imagine
 - a. Revisit your definition of *narrative imagination* and then read the following story:

A Muslim colleague often speaks about a moment when his youngest son grappled with his faith in his public elementary school classroom. His son had been eating lunch in the school cafeteria and mistakenly ate a dish that included pork, which is prohibited by Muslim dietary laws. When his son realized what he had done, he was very distraught and worried that he had betrayed his faith and was no longer a good Muslim. His teacher, who was Christian, learned what had happened and comforted the boy by acknowledging his distress but reminding him that in Muslim tradition if you eat pork unknowingly, you are not held responsible. Because of her knowledge of this facet of Islam, she was able to support her student and offer him the compassion and assurance he needed in that moment. You can imagine how grateful our Muslim colleague was for this Christian teacher's religious literacy!

3. Imagine that you are starting your first year as a classroom teacher in a diverse public school. As you look through the list of students who will be in your class this year, you notice many names that make clear your students likely come from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. While you don't know for certain, you recognize that you will likely have a variety of religions represented in your classroom. While you learned quite a bit about the cultural and ethnic diversities in your community, you realize religious diversity was not really something that was addressed in your training.

- a. **Identify** two ways in which your plans for the year could include acquiring *appreciative knowledge* of your students from diverse religious backgrounds. How can you get to know more about their backgrounds and beliefs?
- b. **Identify** and describe two ways you can make your classroom a more welcoming space both physically but also academically (For example, what could you learn that would influence how you decorate your classroom, which holidays you acknowledge or celebrate, and which books you assign or have available on your shelves?)
- c. **Imagine** that you are one of your students. How might a student feel if they see aspects of their religious tradition represented in the classroom? How might a student feel if they saw no acknowledgement of their identity in your classroom?
- d. **Imagine** that you are one of your students. What will a student learn about others if their teacher values religious literacy? What may be challenging for your students about encountering religious diversity? What may be valuable for your students?

1. Two Faiths, One Friendship

- Revisit your definition of *reflective commitment*. (If you need a reminder, go to 1.2 "Virtues for Engaging Religious Diversity as a Christian.") Now, watch the short video (10 minutes), [An Unexpected Friendship](#) and jot down responses to the following questions.
 - Describe what initially drew Usra and Hannah together as 'kindred spirits.' What did they hold in common?
 - Where did they encounter tension? What do you think was helpful for Hannah in hearing Usra's experience with life in Washington D.C. immediately following the election of 2016?
 - How did Usra respond to hearing Hannah share her political perspective?
 - Where did you see facets of *reflective commitment* at work in Usra and Hannah's story? How did Hannah and Usra both model humility? Bravery? How did their relationship with one another cause both to challenge their assumptions/stereotypes of others who believe differently than they do?
 - Usra concludes by observing, "I think there is a lot of value in having people challenge what you think, who you are, and ask you really important questions about your values." Do you agree or disagree?

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- *Explore:* Interfaith America's [Interfaith Literacy Toolkit](#) offers information and resources about different worldviews (including atheism, Baha'i, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and paganism). With a focus on engagement and connection, these examples offer a great start for anyone interested in learning more about commonly misunderstood traditions and perspectives.
- *Watch:* If you enjoyed Hannah and Usra's conversation in 'An Unexpected Friendship,' see also Interfaith America's ["What's up with... not talking about religion?"](#) (4 minutes). It not only ventures to go where polite conversation is not supposed to go... but also offers a peek into what several people from different religious backgrounds wish you knew about their faith tradition.
- *Explore:* Interfaith America's resource, [Student Interfaith Literacy](#) explores how to bring religious literacy to your campus community.
- *Read:* Daniel S. Brown (ed.), *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue: Living within the Abrahamic Traditions*. Lexington Books, 2013. Many texts on interfaith dialogue focus on theological, political, or sociological inquiry. This text presumes interfaith dialogue is best when conceived as an organic process, and it is written from a relational approach, focusing on approaches that are more effective for lay audiences than religious experts.
- *Read:* Steven Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't*. Harper One, 2008. In this important book, Prothero discusses civic and practical needs for increasing our religious literacy in America. He takes the approach that religious literacy should be a fluid process, built in ongoing conversations, rather than attempting to acquire a fixed body of knowledge.