

Introducing World Religions

Student Discussion Questions

Chapter 1 Approaching religious traditions

1. If you were making a list of "world religions" which traditions would you include? What would be your criteria for choosing religions to go on the list?
2. What are several connotations of the terms "world religions" and "world's religions"? Which do you prefer? Why?
3. Identify some religious symbols you see every day in your culture. Discuss the message they convey. Is it positive? Negative? Might different people interpret the message in different ways? Why?

Chapter 2 Expressive traditions of Oceania, America and Africa

(This chapter has discussion questions to cover the issue of colonialism as well as the ten elements of performance. The entire class might discuss the first question. Beyond that, a division of the class into smaller groups for the remainder might be practical. Students can discuss one question in each group, and then summarize their insights for the class.)

1. In what ways might colonization by a foreign power affect an indigenous people? What are some examples from chapter 2 that show the impact of colonialism on self-image, religious practices, or worldview?
2. Think about "lived time." How does gardening among the Boyowans (Trobriand Islanders) make time meaningful? Do you see how gardening might be considered a religious activity? If so, what would make it religious?
3. Think about "lived place." How does the concept of the Dreaming (*Altjeringa*) affect the Australian aboriginal people's sense of where they live? What are some examples of "lived places" in your experience that have been made meaningful through stories?
4. Think about "lived objects." How might getting a tattoo affect a person's sense of his or her body? What goes into choice of a tattoo? How might the Maori people's identity have been affected by the fact that Christian missionaries forbade them to practice ta moko in New Zealand?
5. Think about the expressive function of "donation." In what ways does the Lakota Sun Dance involve "giving"? What is the purpose of the physical sacrifice made by initiated

Native American Sun Dancers? Does their "donation" have a spiritual value? Why do you think so, or think not?

6. Think about the expressive function of "restoration." What acts are included in the Native American Navajo healing rituals? How is the sandpainting supposed to restore a person to good health? Can you think of another case where healing is done in a similar manner? If so, explain. If not, say what seems to be unique in the Diné (Navajo) healing ritual.

7. Think about the expressive function of "enactment." Do you think that the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs could be considered as a kratophany? (Recall the definition of kratophany as a manifestation of great power whose sacredness has yet to be determined or understood.) Typically in religions, people tend to re-enact sacred events. In what way does the Mexican machismo or identification with La Chingada function as a re-enactment?

8. Think about the expressive function of "symbolization." What do you learn about religious symbols from the example of the activities of Candomblé practitioners in Brazil? On the basis of how the orishas are represented in Candomblé, how would you define a religious symbol?

9. Think about the expressive function of "transformation." In what ways do you think Malidoma Somé may have been changed by his experience of initiation among the Dagara people of West Africa? Have you had any experience of transformation that you might consider initiatory? If so, how did that experience transform your outlook on life? In any case, what kind of experience of transformation would you like to have?

10. Think about the expressive function of "accession." What are the kinds of divination practiced among the Fon people of West Africa? How do their divination practices give access to what they consider as divine? Does this "accession" come through seeing, hearing, or some other means?

11. Think about the expressive function of "transmission." What kind of cultural information, values, or attitudes have been transmitted through the story of Sundiata among the native people of Mali? Think of some other instances where cultural information, values, or attitudes are passed along through stories.

Chapter 3 Zoroastrian tradition

1. How do Mazdeans (Zoroastrians) understand the relationship between fire, light, and Truth? Can you think of other cases in the history of religions where fire or light and Truth are associated in ritual or philosophy?

2. What is the role of free will and Good Thought in the Mazdean (Zoroastrian) tradition? How does the Mazdean understanding of thinking good thoughts compare with your own views?

3. What are some key features of the sacred biography of Zarathushtra? What similarities and differences do you find between his story and other stories of religious founders or culture heroes? How would you account for these similarities and differences?