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of religion, or
prohibiting the
free exercise
thereof; or
abridging the*

The Academic
Study of
Religion Across
the Curriculum

**A TEACHING
FRAMEWORK
& LEARNING
INDICATORS**



**RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM
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NEWSEUM INSTITUTE

*freedom of speech, or of the
press; or the right of the people
peaceably to assemble, and to
petition the Government for a
redress of grievances.*



Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

—THE FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

RELIGIOUS STUDIES COMPANION DOCUMENT FOR THE C3 FRAMEWORK

*Approved by
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Commitments and Context

In 2014, the National Council for the Social Studies reaffirmed its longstanding position that study about religions should be an essential part of the social studies curriculum in ways that are constitutionally and academically sound. The NCSS emphasized that knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is necessary for effective and engaged citizenship in an interconnected and diverse nation and world. It recommended that state departments of education work to ensure inclusion of study about religions, including the role of religion in history and society, in all social studies programs. Teachers teaching such courses should have appropriate professional training in the academic study of religion in order to facilitate meaningful, constitutional classroom dialogue grounded in content knowledge. The NCSS affirmed that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provides the civic framework for achieving these goals.



In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state-sponsored devotional practices are unconstitutional in public schools. At the same time, the Court made clear that the study of religion—as distinguished from religious indoctrination—is an important part of a “complete education.” Justice Tom Clark wrote for the Court: “[I]t might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religions or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.”² Building upon the Supreme Court’s guidance, the NCSS joined with sixteen leading educational, religious, and civil liberties groups in 1988 to reaffirm that the study of religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world.³

Over the next two decades, the NCSS and its affiliates contributed to the development of state social studies standards that included the study of religion.⁴ In 2000, twenty-one national organizations joined with the NCSS and the U.S. Department of Education to disseminate a document to every public school about the constitutionality of religion in public schools, which stated:

The school’s approach to religion is *academic*, not *devotional*; the school strives for student *awareness* of religions, but does not press for student *acceptance* of any religion; the school sponsors *study* about religion, not the *practice* of religion; the school may *expose* students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view; the school *educates* about all religions; it does not *promote* or *denigrate* any religion; the school *informs* the students about religious beliefs, it does not seek to *conform* students to any particular belief.⁵

In 2010, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) published *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* to emphasize the importance of using a religious studies approach to teach about religion. The NCSS affirmed the AAR guidelines in 2014, emphasizing that “schools have a civic and educational responsibility to include robust study about religions in the social studies curriculum.” This appendix equips state departments of education and school districts with student learning indicators and a framework for studying religion in ways that are constitutionally sound and consistent with the AAR’s high academic standards.

1. Introduction to the Disciplinary Concepts and Skills of Religious Studies

Religious studies analyzes the impact of religion on the structure and culture of societies, examining both historical and contemporary perspectives in order to understand how religious beliefs, practices, and communities are created, maintained, and transformed over time. Through a non-devotional approach, students gain the ability to understand religions as diverse and dynamic, to explain how religions change over time, and to analyze how culture affects religion and religion affects culture. Student inquiry into complex issues—including the dynamic relationships within a religion, between religions, and between religion and secularism—provides a unique environment to learn how to recognize and evaluate assumptions without undermining personal religious identity, to navigate diverse and shifting cultural values, to engage respectfully with diverse neighbors, and to resist common misunderstandings that have negative real-world consequences. These skills are invaluable in a society whose increasingly multicultural schools, workplaces, and local, national, and international public spheres all need informed, critical, and engaged citizens.



The study of religion from an academic, non-devotional perspective in primary, middle, and secondary school is critical for decreasing religious illiteracy and the bigotry and prejudice it fuels. The AAR has defined religious literacy as “[t]he ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions and expressions *as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts*; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.”⁶

2. Religious Studies Premises and Methods of Inquiry

Religious studies scholars articulate four basic assertions about religions and the study of religion that serve to counter problematic assumptions while creating a useful method for inquiry. First, there is a difference between the devotional study of religion to encourage religious commitment and the nonsectarian study that seeks to understand religion without promoting or discouraging adherence to it. This premise affirms the credibility of particular religious assertions without equating them with absolute truths about the traditions themselves. Second, religions are internally diverse and not uniform as is commonly represented. Scholars recognize that religious communities are living entities that function in different social/political contexts. Third, religions evolve and change through time and are not static or fixed. Religious expressions and beliefs must be studied in social and historical context as they are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by adherents. Fourth, religious influences are embedded in cultures and not separable from other forms of human expression.

College, Career, and Civic ready students:

- Explain and analyze the distinction between a devotional assertion of religious beliefs and behaviors and the academic study of diverse devotional assertions from a nonsectarian perspective in specific social and historical contexts.
- Describe and analyze examples of how religions are internally diverse at both macro levels (sects and divisions within traditions) and micro levels (differences within specific religious communities).
- Describe and analyze examples of how religions evolve and change over time in response to differing social, historical, and political contexts.
- Describe and analyze examples of how religions are embedded in all aspects of culture and cannot only be isolated to the “private” sphere.

3. Applications of Religious Studies Premises: Belief, Behavior, and Belonging

Religious studies scholars investigate how individuals and communities construct their religious identities. Describing religious identity requires recognition of the historical, political, geographic, and economic factors that shape the beliefs people hold, the behaviors they exhibit, and their membership within multiple intersecting communities. Beliefs, behaviors, and the experiences of belonging to communities—including but not restricted to religious communities—shape and are shaped by one another. Beliefs and values include theological, doctrinal, scriptural, and ethical evaluative claims about daily life as much as those about a transcendent reality or experiences of the divine. Behaviors



include practices associated with rites, rituals, and life both inside and outside of strictly religious settings. Experiences of belonging include membership in religious communities and other social communities with intersecting racial, national, ethnic, familial, gender, class, and other identities.

College, Career, and Civic ready students:

- 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.
- Identify how internal diversity is evident in beliefs, behaviors, and experiences of belonging to various communities.
- Analyze how beliefs, behaviors, and experiences of belonging to communities change over time.
- Interpret how beliefs, behaviors, and experiences of belonging to various communities affect and are affected by other social, political, and cultural forces.
- Give examples of how beliefs, behaviors, and community experiences shape and are shaped by one another in particular social and historical contexts.

4. Critical Inquiry: Representation, Sources, and Evidence

Inquiry from a religious studies perspective does not evaluate the theological or devotional question of what is “right” or “true” for a tradition or individual. Instead,

religious studies scholars utilize primary and secondary sources to analyze how religious values, interpretations, and expressions both shape and are shaped by individuals and communities. Teacher-guided critical inquiry will explore how and why some religious individuals and communities gain social and political prominence and influence while others become socially and politically marginalized. Religious studies scholars identify conscious and unconscious assumptions about religious identity and its influence on beliefs, behaviors, and communities of belonging in private and public life.

College, Career, and Civic ready students:

- Identify assumptions about the definition of religion and the proper role of religion in private and public life.
- Describe which expressions of orthodoxy (“right” believing) and orthopraxy (“right” behaving) are socially and politically prominent or marginalized in specific contexts.
- Identify which religious individuals, communities, and institutions are represented in public discourse, and explain how some are obscured.
- Collect and analyze the meaning and significance of primary and secondary religious sources in their particular social, historical, and political context, including statements of theology and doctrine, sacred texts, depictions of rites and rituals, biographies, histories, ethnography, art and architecture, and demographic data.
- Evaluate how diverse religious sources articulate the relationship between a religion and its social and historical context.



5. Brief Overview of the Connections between Religious Studies and the English Language Arts/Literacy Common Core Standards

CONNECTIONS WITH THE COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS (CCR) ANCHOR STANDARDS

Looking through a religious studies lens, students develop and use a wide range of skills that are central to the Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards. Utilizing the methodologies, academic frameworks, and practices that form the field of religious studies provides students with the knowledge and skills they need to think critically about the historical and contemporary world. Religious studies as an interdisciplinary academic field requires students to develop the skills necessary to describe, interpret, compare, explain, and examine the beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and institutions associated with religions. Taking a religious studies approach allows students to critically examine both primary and secondary source material to determine central ideas or themes across or within religions. Students analyze how source materials address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge, recognize patterns, or compare ideas. By studying religion, students come to understand how religions are internally diverse, dynamic and changing, and embedded in specific cultural and historical contexts. They then use this understanding to develop compelling questions, engage in research, formulate evidence-based claims, consider how to communicate conclusions to an audience, and consider possibilities for appropriate civic action. The study of religion, when integrated into the study of civics, economics, geogra-

phy, and history, helps students hone the skills outlined in the Anchor Standards in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. As such, religious studies supports students' successful entry into the world of work or post-secondary education.

6. C3 Framework Disciplinary Inquiry Matrix: Religious Studies

In Appendix A, the Disciplinary Inquiry Matrix articulates how each of the four Dimensions of the C3 Framework build upon one another through the use of a content-specific example: *How bad was the Great Recession?* The Disciplinary Inquiry Matrix describes what *experts* think and do. It is a four-part target example to which students should aspire. The matrix develops through the construction of disciplinary compelling and supporting questions (Dimension 1); the data sources, key concepts, and key strategies specific to each discipline (Dimension 2); the development of evidence-based claims (Dimension 3); and the means of expression (Dimension 4). In the table, the Great Recession is examined through the disciplinary lens of religious studies. The examples in the boxes are illustrative rather than exhaustive.



Diminsion 1

WAYS OF KNOWING

RELIGIOUS STUDIES RELIGIOUS
STUDIES SCHOLARS SAY...

POSSIBLE
DISCIPLINARY
COMPELLING
AND SUPPORTING
QUESTIONS

How did the Great Recession affect religious life in the United States and the world? How do religious beliefs and values shape a person's understanding of, and response to, the Great Recession? How does an individual's worldview affect the way in which economic conditions are experienced? In what ways do religious institutions and individuals respond to the effects of the Great Recession? To what extent did the Great Recession impact religious beliefs and practices? How did different religious communities interact with one another—and with non-religious communities—in responding to the Great Recession?

Diminsion 2

WAYS OF KNOWING

RELIGIOUS STUDIES RELIGIOUS
STUDIES SCHOLARS SAY...

DATA
SOURCES
NEEDED
TO ADDRESS
QUESTIONS

Statistics, surveys, and other types of sources that depict attendance figures for religious institutions, charitable giving and community actions to address the adverse economic effects of the Great Recession, inter-religious or intra-religious initiatives to support individuals and communities in need, and interviews and media articles about perceived causes of the Great Recession. Newsletters, religious community bulletins, sermons, newspaper and magazine articles, or television news broadcasts that occurred before, during, and after the Great Recession. Ethnographies of various religious communities before, during, and after the Great Recession.

KEY CONCEPTS
AND CONCEPTUAL
UNDERSTAND-
INGS NEEDED
TO ADDRESS
QUESTIONS
(*non-exclusive
questions*)

Theories (including historical, literary, psychological, sociological, and philosophical approaches) of religion and cultural contexts; cultural, social, political, geographic, economic, and psychological influences on religious identity and institutions; intersections between religious beliefs, behaviors, and belonging; understanding religions as dynamic, diverse, and influenced by and influencing a complex set of cultural factors.



Diminsion 2

WAYS OF KNOWING

RELIGIOUS STUDIES RELIGIOUS
STUDIES SCHOLARS SAY...

KEY STRATEGIES
AND SKILLS
NEEDED TO AD-
DRESS
QUESTIONS
*(non-exclusive
examples)*

Reading and interpreting statistics, critical thinking, and applying religious studies frameworks to issues faced by local communities to encourage civic engagement and protection of rights associated with religious freedom. Analysis of the religious sources and evidence used by the media. Consulting multiple accounts of a single event to corroborate evidence.

Diminsion 3

WAYS OF KNOWING

RELIGIOUS STUDIES RELIGIOUS
STUDIES SCHOLARS SAY...

EVIDENCE-BASED
CLAIMS

Analyses of source material (statistical, narrative, visual, auditory, digital, primary, and secondary) using the disciplinary framework and methods of religious studies should form the basis for substantiating and justifying claims.

Diminsion 4

WAYS OF KNOWING

RELIGIOUS STUDIES RELIGIOUS
STUDIES SCHOLARS SAY...

FORMS OF
COMMUNICATION
AND ACTION
(illustrative examples)

Books and scholarly articles in peer-reviewed journals; newspaper and online op-ed pieces for either a targeted community or general readership; appearances on television and/or radio; websites and/or webinars; policy statements and reports for government bodies; research briefs; professional presentations to colleagues or major trade associations.



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Endnotes

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[2] *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

[3] “Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers” was first published in 1988 and disseminated widely by NCSS and other sponsoring organizations. Downloadable at www.religiousfreedomcenter.org.

[4] Susan L. Douglass, *Teaching about Religion in National and State Standards* (Nashville, Tenn.: Council on Islamic Education and First Amendment Center, 2000). Downloadable at www.religiousfreedomcenter.org.

[5] Based on guidelines originally developed by James V. Panoch and published in 1974 by the Public Education Religion Studies Center at Wright State University. The complete text of “A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools” may be found at www.religiousfreedomcenter.org. For all consensus guidelines on religion in public schools, see: Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools* (Nashville, Tenn.: First Amendment Center, 2007).

[6] AAR Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States (Atlanta: AAR, 2010) p. 4. <https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Publications/epublications/AARK-12CurriculumGuidelines.pdf>.



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