CHAPTER 18: RELIGION

Interactive Map  Religions of the World

Annotation: This color-coded world map indicates the majority religion (Christianity, Shinto, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or no religion) of each continent. Clicking on a continent brings up a window with the number of adherents of the major religions residing on that continent. Two questions are asked about the distribution of religions.

Learning Objective: To explore one's own religious beliefs in relation to the belief systems of the world's major religions.

Faculty Note: The exercise below engages students in an examination of their own religious beliefs in relation to the belief systems of the world's major religions. They take an on-line quiz about their beliefs, and receive a score on which their beliefs are compared to the belief systems of each of the world's major religions.

Activity: Have students click on the Interactive Map, "Religions of the World," and explore the distribution of religions around the world. Then have them go to "Select Smart.com Religion Selector" and take the on-line quiz http://www.selectsmart.com/RELIGION/new.html They will immediately receive a score (0-100) reflecting the degree to which their beliefs conform to the belief systems of 26 of the major religions. By clicking on the name of each religion, they can learn more about it. Lead a class discussion about students' beliefs in relation to beliefs of other religions.


Web Link  A Meditation on Mystical Union Using System Dynamics

Annotation: According to Arlen Wolpert, throughout history most religions have been generated by a single individual who has had a peak experience. Over the years and centuries those religions were then gradually conditioned and tamed by social forces, were compromised, and then degenerated into their present form that poorly represents the greatness of their originators. The "general theory of religion" focuses on the degenerative, not degenerative, aspect of religion by examining Wolpert's specific religious experience.

Learning Objective: To develop an understanding of the experiences that urge some people to adopt specific religious beliefs.

Faculty Note: Arlen Wolpert, the author of this article, identifies himself as an "independent scholar." He asserts that accepting any set of religious beliefs involves a metaphorical journey that consists of four predictable steps: a crisis period, a test by God, knowledge of God, and return to a life of faith.

Activity: Have students click on the web link, "A Meditation on Mystical Union Using System Dynamics," and read Arlen Wolpert's article. Have them write a paper in which they summarize the steps in the journey Wolpert describes. If your students are sufficiently mature in their religious beliefs, lead a discussion about whether Wolpert's description of the journey to a religious life conforms to their own experiences.
Sociology and the Internet  What Makes a Church Attractive to Its Members?

Annotation: The Willow Creek Community Church is an independent Christian church located in Barrington, Illinois, which weekly draws 16,000 to 17,000 worshippers to its several weekend services. The Church’s website offers information about the beliefs and organization of the church, as well as suggestions about how people can get involved in church activities.

Learning Objective: To understand the characteristics of some religious organizations that make them appealing to members and prospective members.

Faculty Note: Religion fulfills many important functions for individuals and society. So does membership in a religious organization. The exercise below is intended to help students understand why so many people join, and the characteristics of religious communities that are attractive to members.

Activity: Have students read Sociology and the Internet, "What Makes a Church Attractive to Its Members?" and then click on http://www.willownet.com, the website for Willow Creek Community Church. Ask them to browse the links on this website and read the description of the church, its beliefs, and its organization. Lead a discussion of students' emotional response to this material. Ask them whether they would be interested in joining this church (aside from the particular religious beliefs it espouses), what is so attractive about it, and why they think the church has so many active members.


Test Question: (Essay) What makes the Willow Creek Community Church so attractive to its members?

Answers might include: The church's large size makes it possible to offer over 100 "ministries" that cater to the special needs of smaller groups of members.

Video Activity (Premium Resources CD Rom)  Return to Religion

Annotation: Only one-quarter of Americans assert that religion plays an important part in their lives. Pastor McDonald of Grace Chapel in Lexington asserts that families are returning to religion because they need help. Churches that were once aloof refocused their efforts to help people in need. A married couple says they joined the church to get help with their marriage and child rearing. Other people join the church for help with other problems. Churches provide positive, adult role models for children involved in church-based scouting programs and after school childcare for other children. The video is followed by two questions about the needs that churches meet.

Learning Objective: To distinguish between the religious and secular functions met by religious organizations.

Faculty Note: People look to religious organizations to fulfill a variety of needs. Some of those needs can only be met by religion; others could be met by secular institutions. The exercise below will help students understand these different needs, and how religious organizations fulfill secular needs. This video clip is a part of the Premium Resources CD Rom provided to instructors upon request.

Activity: Have students view the video Returning to Religion, and make a list of the personal needs that church membership fulfills. Then have them analyze their lists of needs, identifying those needs that could be met by secular organizations. Lead a discussion of the reasons why religious organizations have come to fill essentially secular needs in our society.

Additional Resources: The Council for Secular Humanism http://www.secularhumanism.org/intro/index.htm provides an alternative to fulfilling some of the needs met by traditional religious beliefs and organizations.
Sociology and the Internet  Which Organizations Fit the Definition of Cults?

Annotation: Individuals and organizations apply widely different meanings to the word cult. There are positive, neutral, and negative characteristics of cults. A link is provided to a site that explores these definitions intensively and gives information about examples of the different types.

Learning Objective: Develop sensitivity to the continuum of coercion among religious groups.

Faculty Note: Students may have a tendency to divide religious groups into "good" and "bad"—designating the "bad," highly coercive, and destructive groups as "cults." This dichotomous classification does not conform to the reality that religious groups vary across a continuum of coercion. Most religious groups neither "brainwash" their members nor tolerate all spiritual beliefs by their members. The exercise below is designed to sensitize students to this continuum of coercion.

Activity: Have students read Sociology and the Internet, "Which Organizations Fit the Definition of Cults?" Then have them click on http://www.religioustolerance.org/cultmenu.htm, a website of Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, and read the "Overview" and "Suggestions." Next have them scroll down to and click on "Levels of Mind Control within Religious Groups." Ask students to write a brief paper summarizing the five levels of coercion among religious groups. Ask them to characterize the religious groups with which they are personally familiar within this classification scheme.


The Video Professor  The Apostle

Annotation: The Apostle is a movie about a Pentecostal minister who goes on the lam after committing a violent crime. He settles in a small southern town where he brings the word of Jesus to a flock of poor local residents isolated from the mainstream of society.

Learning Objective: To illustrate how religion can include both a sacred and secular component and the importance religion plays in the daily lives of many people.

Faculty Note: The Apostle was written, produced, and directed by Robert Duvall. The movie should be available from most movie houses, or may be available from the university library, or a local public library.

Activity: After viewing the film, have the students write an essay that examines the secular role religion played in the lives of the congregation. In addition, have them answer the following questions about the film: How did Duvall’s church fulfill the functionalist perspective of religion? Which type of religious group does his organization qualify for the most (cult, sect, church, ecclesia)?