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Common Ground: Religion, Community, and Problem Solving for the Global Era

Sample Lesson

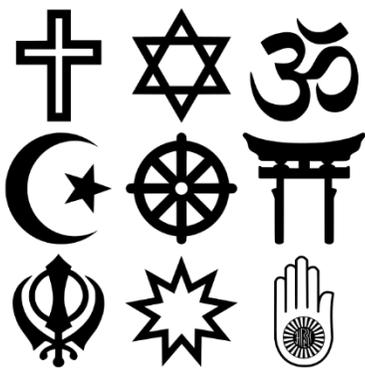
Welcome

Our society is a global one, and it is likely that each of us will live, work, and play among many kinds of people in our lifetime. By understanding the beliefs, cultures, and traditions of many different religions, we become better equipped to connect effectively with all kinds of people. Religion shapes individuals. Individuals form groups, and groups shape the world. Gaining a solid knowledge of religion will give us a deeper understanding of how historical eras and events were shaped by the beliefs of those who lived through them.

In this course, you will learn about history, culture, philosophy, art, and much more. Learning leads to some sort of increase in the person doing it:

- an increase of knowledge contained in the mind.
- an increase of skills that enable the learner to do more than they* could do before.
- an increase in understanding that allows the learner to connect ideas and experiences together.

This course strives to increase your abilities in all three, using a project-based approach combined with a variety of shorter assignments.



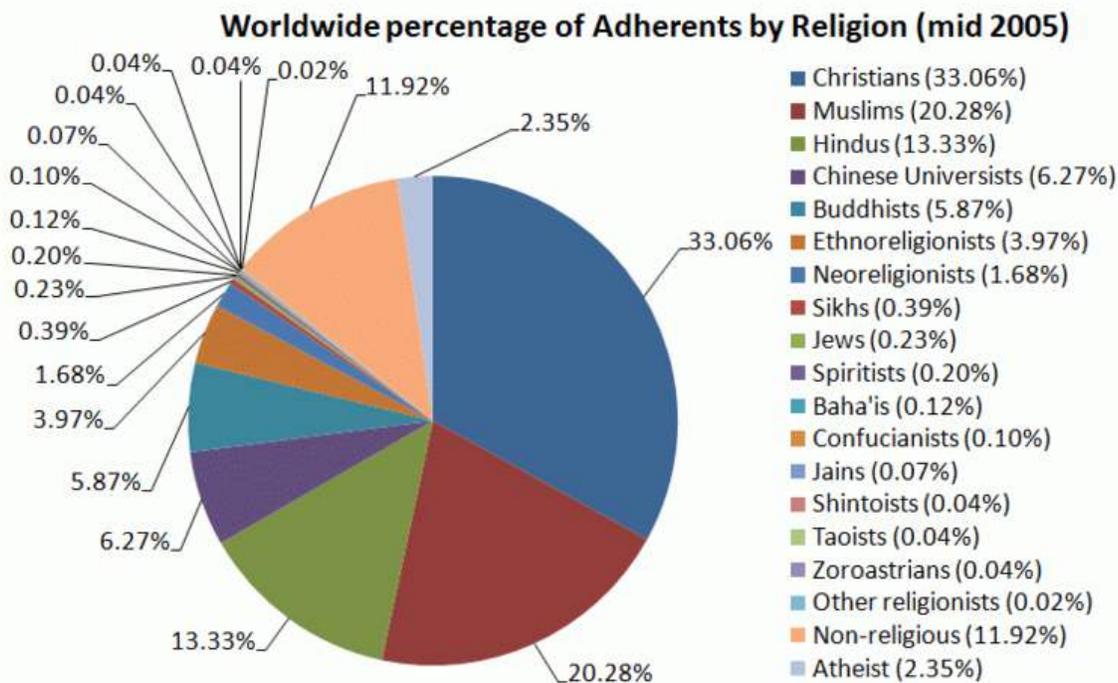
We learn best by actively using the information that we gather, so this course will focus on projects that require you to apply your knowledge, skills, and understanding in a practical way. You will be developing a semester-long project that revolves around this question: “How can people with diverse beliefs build community together?” Your task will be to design a Religious Life Center for a college or university. This is a big project, and you will be carefully guided step-by-step along the way. In doing this project, you will apply the knowledge of religion that you gain in each lesson as you create a foundation for building a community.

Above, religious symbols from nine major world religions. (Image credit: Rursus)

In your second semester-long project, you will create a Religions Family Tree that demonstrates how each religion came to be: when, where, and out of which prior culture it arose. At the end of

the semester, you will have a reference document that you can use in future courses, when traveling, reading novels, watching films, or in other ways to help you orient yourself to the influence or religious movements.

Take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with how this course site is organized. Read all the information in the Introduction sections before you begin working on your first lesson (Week 1). If you have any questions, please contact your Oak Meadow teacher, who is eager to help you get the most out of this course.



Source: Encyclopedia Britannica (Image credit: Kupos)

*Note: In this course, you'll find the gender-neutral pronoun they used instead of he/she.

Course Expectations

This course requires quite a bit of research. In addition to the course textbook, you will be locating relevant sources for additional information. You are encouraged to use a variety of resources, and to carefully evaluate each source to make sure it is valid, up-to-date, and appropriate to the task. You have full choice in deciding where to get your research materials, as long as the source is reliable.



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In the study of religions, it is essential to use primary sources from within each tradition, such as sacred texts and art, as well as blogs and even (and especially) children's picture books. You are also encouraged to speak with members of a faith about their beliefs and activities. It is important to listen while people speak of their faith, rather than simply observing from outside as if their culture were a specimen in a jar. If possible, visit houses of worship as well (speak with your teacher if you want advice on doing this politely).

When conducting interviews, avoid asking questions that require simple yes-or-no answers. Instead, practice nondirective questioning that will elicit more information. Open-ended questions will usually be freer from influence by the interviewer's biases or other interests. Examples of such questions include the following:

- “Tell me about your religion.”
- “What are your religious beliefs?”
- “What religious practices do you observe?”
- “What's important for people outside your faith to know about it?”

Remember, though, that there is diversity within every religion, and so no one source, book, visit, or experience is emblematic of how an entire religion always works. Always think of religion in the plural: instead of Judaism, think of Judaisms; instead of Sikhism, consider Sikhisms. No two individuals practice their religion in the same way. Use multiple sources and be prepared to learn more, as religion is a huge topic and one semester is enough only for a little taste.

Weekly Assignments

Each week, you will be working on four types of assignments:

- **Background Assignments** are intended to guide you in your research as you immerse yourself in each religion's worldview. Background assignments are not expected to be polished work; instead, think of them as research notes or a journal where you collect information.
- In **Religions Family Tree** assignments, you will put your research findings in context by creating a graphic, timeline, map, or other infographic that show how religions relate, connect, branch off from one another, and converge. Just like a genealogical family tree, your Religions Family Tree will show how different faiths are connected.

Religious Life Center (RLC) assignments are the main focus of the course and will require most of your time, attention, and energy. These assignments are divided into two sections: Accommodation and Community.

- **Accommodation** assignments involve making sure that the practical needs of members of each religion are met. Each religion is structured differently and daily practices surrounding food, clothing, worship times, and other mandates vary. Your job is to learn as much as you can so you



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can fit together members of each group into one community space, as you might fit together the pieces of a puzzle.

- **Community** assignments keep you thinking about connections among the people who will live in your Religious Life Center in order to help you design a space where everyone is valued.

You will find details about each of the main long-term projects in Project Descriptions (found in the Introduction section).

Managing Your Time

Each week you will work on your two semester-long projects: the Religious Life Center and the Religions Family Tree. Most of your time will be spent developing plans for your Religious Life Center. As you gather more knowledge and gain a clearer understanding of world religions, you will add to this primary project, making revisions of previous material as necessary. Rethinking your ideas and expanding the scope of your work is a natural part of the learning process. Ideally, your plans for your Religious Life Center will evolve to make room for new information you acquire. Your two semester-long projects will be growing and changing throughout the course, and you will have plenty of time to bring them into final polished forms.

You will find two Project Check-In lessons in this course (Week 7 and Week 12), which are designed to allow you to focus exclusively on how the pieces of your RLC fit together and on polishing up areas that you feel need adjustment or improvement. These lessons will be graded mainly on progress and engagement. Your teacher will be evaluating your investment of time and energy in the project, as well as your skills in problem solving and time management. These project check-in lessons also give you and your teacher a chance to discuss next steps. This course is also designed to be a collaboration between teacher and student, and even between students if they wish to work together on parts of it, so plan time to bring others into the project, if you wish. If you find yourself struggling to keep up with the weekly workload, or feeling overwhelmed by the work, please reach out to your teacher. There are always other options for engagement, as this is an immense topic to explore.

Submitting Your Work

This course site, along with the Google course doc that your teacher shared with you, will give you information on what to submit to your teacher and when to share your work. In general, you will be sharing your work at the end of each weekly lesson.

Sometimes you will have a choice of how you present your thoughts or findings. This course focuses on the quality and depth of your thinking and your ability to communicate those thoughts. For assignment where a format has not been explicitly stated, providing journal reflections, diagrams, essays, voice recordings, or creative art with an explanatory statement are all



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acceptable ways to present your work. The important thing is to express your thinking clearly and fully.

The medium or format you use to present your finished Religious Life Center project is also up to you. In the past, students have created diagrams, models, websites, an RLC proposal to an imaginary university, and fictional stories revolving around RLC life. With your Oak Meadow teacher, you can discuss your final project ideas as the course unfolds.

Project Description: Religions Family Tree

All religions arise, in part, from other religions, as far back as we can discover. Sometimes they split off from one another on purpose because a leader or group has a new idea and forms a new religious movement. At other times, geographical separations that block the exchange of ideas cause one group to develop ideas in one way, and others in another way. Sometimes one group conquers another and outlaws their religion, but even in these cases, the ideas of the conquered group's religions tend to start to seep through into the religion of the new rulers, coloring it. Sometimes a religion simply ebbs away when a civilization falls, again leaving a residue behind to be taken up by the movements that come after. If you have studied mythology, you have probably read the stories of many ancient religions that no longer exist, and you may have noticed some themes similar to those still important in today's religions, such as great floods or gods born to moral families. These are examples of the way ideas tie together through time.

Religions are made of complex systems of ideas, and ideas rely on communication. They can only be spread via contact between individuals and groups, which is highly dependent on two factors: space and time. In pre-literate societies, individuals needed to be able to speak to one another to share ideas, and ideas often changed through frequent repetition. This is why many different versions of myths, songs, and even names exist, changing subtly with each retelling. Person-to-person communication also limits the spread of ideas to groups who are in regular physical contact with one another, or have strong systems to organize the spread of information. As a general rule, the greater the distance a verbally-transmitted idea travels in space or time, the more it will change. The invention of writing changed forever how humans handled ideas. Suddenly they could capture a thought, carry it unchanged across great distances, and preserve it across many centuries. One reason so many religions have sacred texts is that these ancient works provide a link to the far distant past from which the religion emerged.

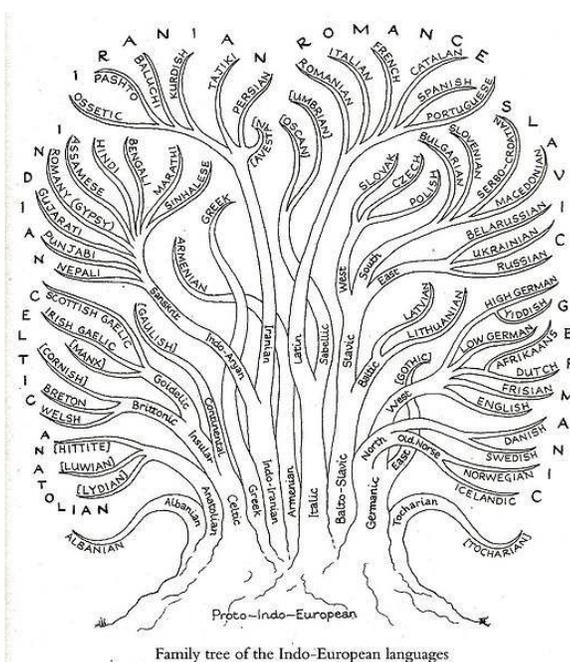
Whether written or spoken, however, once in the mindset of a society, ideas very seldom leave: they merely change form. Have you ever knocked on wood to prevent something someone said from coming true, or thrown a penny into a wishing well? What about worn a Halloween costume or lit candles in the darker months? These are all deeply ancient traditions that have emerged over and over again in changing forms throughout human history. These traditions followed different pathways, based on the geography of the land, the migrations of people and ideas across it, and the

loss and recovery of ancient texts, but they all share common ancient roots. Though often merely fun today, some of these traditions once involved deeply sacred religious ritual.

In this course we will focus exclusively on religions still active today, but as you will see, many of them are tied together in unexpected ways. Just as a human family tree shows ancestors and descendants, religions share a family tree, and those close together geographically are inevitably related in some way. Understanding these relationships can make the information that you will be studying this semester easier to remember and organize, and is an important part of the study of religion overall.

As you progress through this course, you will create an annotated Religions Family Tree, adding each new religion you learn about each week. You may organize this information any way that you like and are encouraged to make it beautiful and be creative. Your Religions Family Tree should include the following:

- Where and when each religion began
- What existing religions it arose from
- How it originated (newly inspired leader, split from existing tradition, mix of traditions exposed to one another, etc.)



Above, a tree graphic is used to display how languages grouped, branched, and connected to one another. (Image credit: EnriBrahimaj)



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Your "tree" can be as simple or elaborate as you like, but treat it as a tool you are building for yourself to use again after you leave this course, and create accordingly. For instance, you might create a digital map with links between religions, or create a detailed timeline that branches off, or a work of art that highlights the connections between different religious practices. Discuss your ideas with your teacher if you would like some guidance.

Annotate your Religions Family Tree with knowledge that you bring to this topic from other courses. For example, if you have studied the Romans, you might know that the year that Christianity is said to have begun (around the year 30 C.E.) was at the height of the Roman Empire. If you have studied the Silk Road, it may not surprise you to find that Buddhism eventually traveled from India to China to Japan, despite the stunning distance and rough terrain. Studies in American history may have told you that several Christian empires conquered lands held by nations practicing what we now call Indigenous religions. These annotations can be visual, written, even audio.

Project Description: Religious Life Center (RLC)

Religion has inspired great works of art, changed the face of nations, literally remodeled the landscape, played a role in great atrocities, and offered hope to those victimized by atrocities. Religion can be beautiful and powerful, and endlessly fascinating. Our increasingly global society provides more opportunities for encounters across religions than ever before. Each of us can expect to meet, study with, work with, and befriend members of many different faith backgrounds throughout our lifetimes. Finding ways to live and work together that fully honor everyone at once is a challenge that will be your main focus of this project-based course.

Students, faculty, and staff come to universities from all over the world and every faith tradition. Just as schools offer nonacademic support for student health, housing, and community needs, many also maintain a Center for Religious Life to meet students' spiritual needs. Such centers are sometimes also available to faculty and staff and their families, as well as members of the wider community.

This semester you will be in charge of designing a Religious Life Center (RLC) for an imaginary university. Your goal will be to meet the needs of students of diverse faiths to ensure they can continue to practice their religion in a safe, celebrated, and practical way.

Your RLC design **MUST** include the following:

- A **physical space** designed for each faith's needs for rituals, gatherings, and celebrations. How are religious services carried out in each faith? How is leadership structured in this religion, and who will need access to the space? What requirements might they have? The space must feel welcoming to all (not showing favoritism for one faith over another) and comply with religious requirements and restrictions for space use (such as dietary and purity laws.) You may not put



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each denomination in a separate room. Assume the building you start with contains two large spaces, five small ones, assorted office spaces, ample storage, and an outside area the size of a large suburban lawn. How will you organize these resources to work for everyone?

- A **calendar** including all major holidays celebrated by members of the community and a plan for how the RLC will support these student celebrations.
- Specific **sacred objects** and books should be available. What texts and objects would your center need, or need to have access to? Note, also, if these objects have specific handling or storage requirements.
- **Imagery** such as logos, murals, hanging pictures, etc., should be taken into consideration. What symbolic imagery might your center use to represent its inclusive mission? What imagery must you avoid?



Each week, you will complete Accommodation and Community assignments for this project, which will help you explore the needs related to the physical space, calendar, religious leadership, sacred objects, imagery, and more.

Image credit: StockSnap)

- **Accommodation assignments** will guide you through the many practical aspects of setting up a public space for varied religious use. You will learn to answer questions such as the following: What can you serve in a dining hall that all members of your diverse community can eat? How can you design spaces to make sure that everyone has access to the type of space they need for religious worship or study? How can you schedule these spaces to be sure students will have the right space at the time that they need it? These are practical puzzles that you may already have encountered, (such as what does one do about serving birthday cake at a party that falls during Passover, Lent, or Ramadan?) and certainly will encounter at many points in your life, among your friends, classmates, coworkers, and community members.
- **Community assignments** focus on the people within the space. With so many individuals using a community space, it's vital to address all of the feelings and connections between people and groups. You may respond to these assignments in any format you like (or create new and different questions of your own to pursue). Writing journal reflections is an excellent way to address these assignments. Another option is to explore the topics through fiction and storytelling, which can help remind you of the humanity of the individuals involved in the RLC. Remember, what is normal or typical for you, or for a dominant culture, is not going to be



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normal for every culture. These assignments will help you gain a greater awareness of the needs of your diverse community.

Your final project should include at least one specific, well-developed example of each of the following:

- **Multi-faith programming:** What all-school events might you use to bring people of diverse faiths and no faith together on common issues? How would you design these events to be effective for all? Choose one or more issues common to students – stress, relationships, peace or social justice – and design faith-friendly programming to address these.
- **Awareness of world issues:** Incorporate an alertness about, and sensitivity to, highly charged world issues, such as the Israeli/Palestinian conflict or Tibet, and to historical events such as colonialism and genocide. How will the center make safe space for these issues to be discussed?
- **Prevention and response to prejudice:** Acts of religious prejudice, especially Islamophobia, have been on the rise since 9/11. Being in the minority at a large institution creates power dynamics to navigate, and affiliations with groups on opposite sides of historical oppression can complicate peer relationships. Students balancing multiple identities (such as religion and gender expression) navigate further complexities. Friction can also arise surrounding seemingly secular issues, such as gay marriage, bioethics, or politics in which one group may feel threatened by the religious beliefs of another, while those following that religion may feel equally singled out for having those beliefs. Though these struggles are often valuable parts of the learning experience, they can also take destructive forms. How can you equip your students to prevent destructive social situations or transform them into healthy growth? How will your organization support students and address accidental or overt acts of discrimination between peers or in college policies?
- **Life cycle events:** Remember that a college community contains students of many ages (some with families), faculty and staff and their families, and often the surrounding town community as well. How might your center celebrate the birth of a baby? The wedding of two students? The death of an elderly community member? The coming of age of a child? How will it assist in the conversion process of students joining a new religion? What other rights of passage might it celebrate? How will your center respond to national or international causes for joy, mourning, or prayer?

Each lesson will guide you through all of these aspects of your Religious Life Center, and your teacher will give you feedback on your work that will help you further in refining your ideas, designing your RLC, and sharing your comprehensive final project.

Week 3: Judaism

Abrahamic religions trace their origins back to Abraham, a man living in the ancient Middle East who is said to have talked to his god. Judaism is the oldest of the Abrahamic religions. Just as all religions arose from earlier traditions, Judaism arose from ancient traditions practiced by the nomadic tribes of the Middle East. These traditions were largely polytheistic, meaning they had many gods (from the Greek *polu*, meaning many, and *theos*, meaning god). Judaism differed from these religions in that it was monotheistic, or followed only one god.

For several centuries the Jews, also a nomadic tribe, existed among the many other religions of their region. In the sacred Jewish text, the Torah (also known as the Old Testament to Christians), there are many references to other groups (such as the Canaanites, Ammonites, and Shechemites) as well as many commandments forbidding the worship of idols. This indicates that these groups were in regular contact and that idol worship was a common religious tradition. Eventually Jews became an established, though small, world civilization, focusing their religious practices in a central temple in Jerusalem, much as ancient Greeks did with their temples. This is referred to as Temple Judaism and is no longer practiced today.

As time went on, other religions faded away while the Jews remained in spite of conquests by such



larger empires as the Babylonians and the Romans, who eventually drove Jews into exile, spreading them to many lands. There, despite being a highly place-based religion, Judaism continued in lands as disparate as Russia, Spain, Syria, and Ethiopia. The Jews kept their beliefs, traditions, and language, using Hebrew for scholarship and worship, and speaking Yiddish or Ladino in their communities, languages that combined Hebrew with the local languages.

Two men pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, a place considered very holy to members of the Jewish faith. (Image credit: Max Pixel)

As a land-based tradition without a land, however, the Jews faced two main difficulties: how to continue to practice a temple-based religion with a temple that had been destroyed, and how to survive the persecution of those already living in the lands they had come to. This time in Jewish history is called the Rabbinic Era because focus shifted from the temple in Jerusalem, which had been the center of Jewish life, to the study of texts with the aid of rabbis, or teachers. This is the form of Judaism still practiced today.



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Background Assignments

Research Jewish cosmology and practices. What are their beliefs regarding the universe, creation, birth and death, rites of passage, and daily life? There are four sects of Judaism practicing today: Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform. Be sure to note the differences between them. Present your findings as notes, an essay, story, journal entry, or other written form.

Remember, you are taking notes to assist your development of a Religious Life Center. Your notes should be in a form that is useful to you.

Religions Family Tree

Plot the four sects of Judaism onto your family tree of religions. Remember to include:

- Where and when it began
- What existing religions it arose from
- How it originated

You may want to include religious objects, images, and symbols on your tree.

Religious Life Center: Accommodation

Using the checklist in the description of the RLC project, begin planning ways to accommodate Jewish students of all four major modern sects at your Religious Life Center. Address each of the topics you used for the indigenous religion. Keep all your notes organized in a way that makes them easy to use and refer to.

Religious Life Center: Community

History in general, and the 20th century in particular, has not been kind to Jews. They were regularly persecuted throughout Europe starting as far back as the medieval era, finally facing genocide as part of Hitler's rise to power in World War II. Genocide is the attempt to completely exterminate a group of people and is something that several cultural groups have faced during their history. What impact do you imagine this has on those who survive a genocide, and on their descendants? How might it affect faith and identity? How will you discuss genocide and religious persecution within your RLC? How will you support those descendants or survivors who may come to your school as students? How will you honor a religion for itself rather than as a casualty of history, often associated with genocide?



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Record your ideas in journal, story, or note form (or any way that lets you reflect on and explore these issues).

Share Your Work

When you have completed this lesson, please share the following with your teacher (add your work to the Google course doc and notify your teacher that Week 3 is ready to review):



- Background assignment notes on Judaism
- Notes and/or visuals for Religions Family Tree
- Plans for how your RLC might serve members of a Jewish religion
- Ideas for addressing issues of religious persecution and ensuring past events do not overshadow modern faith practices

As always, if you have any questions, please let your teacher know.

A scroll of the Torah, the Jewish holy text (Image credit: Lawrie Cate)

Week 6: Bahá'í

Founded in 1844 and the most recent manifestation of the Abrahamic lineage is Bahá'í, which arose in reaction to the strife between the three other Abrahamic faiths. The religion's goal was to unite the world by bringing together people of all faiths in peace and harmony. This would bring about a new age, free from prejudice.

Bahá'ís believe that all the prophets from faith traditions around the world preached of the same God, and that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. Because all are seen as equal, Baha'is have no clergy; instead, they join together egalitarian communities that are welcoming to everyone.



Bahá'ís respect all religions and welcome collaboration and conversation among people of all backgrounds in the interest of unity and world peace. Primary principles of this faith are service to others and the betterment of the self or inner character. An individual's spiritual and intellectual growth is intricately connected to global transformation.

Gardens at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel show the star symbol that is an emblem of the faith. (Image credit: Tomhab)

Background Assignments

Research the origins and cosmology of the Bahá'í faith, paying special attention to where it falls on your tree in relation to other religions. Describe the cultural and geographic circumstances that had to be in place for Baha'I to come into existence and spread. Why is its country of origin significant? What can the tenets of the religion tell you about the major issues prevalent at the time of its inception? Refer back to the past four lessons for ideas, in addition to your research.

Religions Family Tree

Add Bahá'í to your tree and include:

- Where and when it began
- What existing religions it arose from
- How it originated

You may want to include religious objects, images, and symbols on your tree.



Gathering of Bahá'í followers in Brazil
(Image credit: Comunidade Bahá'í do Brasil)

Religious Life Center: Accommodation

Consider ways to accommodate Bahá'í students at your religious life center. Remember that because Bahá'í is a relatively small sect, they are likely to be in the minority and plan accordingly, drawing on your ideas for supporting minority students.

Religious Life Center: Community

The Bahá'í faith emphasizes the unity of all things. In an interfaith religious life center, unity between participants—community—is essential. How will your RLC build community among students of many different faiths?

Share Your Work

When you have completed this lesson, please share the following with your teacher:

- Background assignment notes
- Notes and/or visuals for Religions Family Tree
- Plans for how your RLC might serve members of a Bahá'í religion
- Ideas for providing support for minority students

If you have any questions, let your teacher know.