
Religious Literacy & Primary Sources

What is religious literacy and why is it important to be religiously literate?

“Religious Literacy” is the practice of identifying and understanding the complex (and sometimes contradictory) relationships between religion(s) and society. On one hand, religious literacy demands some knowledge of major religious traditions, including their doctrines, practices, mythologies, and key terms. However, given the reality that we can never know everything there is to know about the religions of the world, religious literacy can be better thought of as an ongoing commitment to understanding religion(s) as they shape and are shaped by their cultural and historical contexts.

No matter our personal feelings about religion, it is an inevitable reality of our world and a powerful force in influencing social norms and institutions. Thus, it is important to analyze religious narratives, practices, and communities in the contexts in which they are created, altered, and used by humans across time and place.

Why does religious literacy matter when working with primary sources?

As a reality of society and the lives of many individuals worldwide, religion can sometimes be a component of the personal, historical, and/or cultural circumstances that give context to a primary source. Therefore, the basic principles of religious literacy can help us to better engage, analyze, and make meaning of primary sources.

How do you engage primary sources while practicing religious literacy?

See the next page for examples of questions to ask when engaging a primary source with religious content!

* Disclaimer! Religion is a broad, sensitive, and emotional topic about which every one of us likely has our own story. This lesson does not aim to persuade or convince you of any religious beliefs, but rather to illuminate multiple ways that religion has held meaning in LGBTQ+ human rights struggles. Remember, you have full control over your own beliefs and values. Religious texts or claims by religious people only have as much power as you grant them. No one can force you to become religious or to believe in the things that they do.

	Literacy Questions	Religious Literacy Questions
Author	<p>Who wrote this document?</p> <p>What is their background?</p> <p>What might have been their motivations for writing it?</p> <p>How might personal experiences or biases have influenced it?</p>	<p>Does the author make any <u>religious claims</u> or <u>claims about religion</u>?</p> <p>Does the document allude to experiences that may have shaped the author's religious beliefs or worldview?</p>
Audience	<p>Who was the intended audience for this document? How do you know?</p> <p>Could there have been multiple audiences or motivations for writing this document?</p>	<p>Is there a "religious" message in this document?</p> <p>Is there a "secular" or non-religious message?</p> <p>Is the intended audience a religious congregation or a secular/non-religious audience? How might that change the way it is written?</p>
Historical Context	<p>When, where, and under what circumstances was this document created?</p> <p>How did those circumstances influence its creation?</p> <p>Is it a plausible, reliable, and/or verifiable source?</p>	<p>Can I suspend disbelief in order to find the meaning of or value in a religious claim that may not be historically verifiable?</p>
Close Reading	<p>How does the author of this document communicate their ideas and/or persuade their audience?</p> <p>What words, phrases, metaphors, images, or concepts does the author use to make their point?</p>	<p>Does the author use religious language, images, stories, or truth-claims to persuade their audiences?</p>