

Lesson 1:

Religious vs. Devotional Study of Religious Texts

It is impossible to study history without encountering religion, not as a simple by-product of human culture, but as a major factor in shaping behavior and influencing the trajectory of major events. World History is anemic and often incomprehensible without the study of the major world religions, and the academic content standards in History/Social Sciences in many states require it. However, the teacher *and* the students (and their parents) must be clear that “teaching religion” and “teaching *about* religion” are two very different things.

The PowerPoint presentation used in this lesson¹ makes clear the distinctions between devotional study and academic study of religious texts. It is best used at the beginning of the year, and referred back to as needed.

Objectives:

- Students will understand that the way in which they study religion in school is very different from the way they might learn about their own particular religion at home, in places of worship or in religious school.
- Students will be able to articulate some of the key differences between academic and devotional study of religious texts.

Materials: The PowerPoint presentation that accompanies this lesson. (Outline attached.)

Vocabulary:	devotional	sacred
	confessional	sectarian
	premise	divine/divinely
	experiential	accessible
	practitioners	neutral
	attribution	

Procedure:

1. Explain to students that while studying history, they will also be learning about different religions and their influence on past events. Before beginning that study, it is important to understand what it means to learn *about* religion in an academic context.
2. Have students draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. Label one column “Religious” and the other “Academic.” Starting with slide 3, they should write down two to three key words or phrases from each slide in the corresponding column.
3. Show the PowerPoint presentation, clarifying vocabulary as needed. Note: The last two slides are intended for use in presentations to teachers and other adults. They can be used with students

¹ The PowerPoint presentation was developed by Professor Rebecca Moore, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at San Diego State University

at the teacher's discretion, explaining that they describe the approach your students should expect from you.

4. Pair students and have them quickly share with each other what they have written in each column. Using two or more of the words/phrases they have recorded, they should construct a single sentence that contrasts one aspect of the academic and devotional study of religion.

5. Have students share their sentences. Alternatively, have them post their sentences on a classroom or electronic bulletin board.

For PowerPoint Preview, see next page.

[For power point presentation, click here](#)

Academic vs Devotional Study of Religious Texts

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There is a difference between the academic or scholarly study of religion and sacred texts (Religious Studies)...



...and the devotional study of religion and sacred texts (confessional, sectarian)



What is the difference between religious studies and devotional studies?

They start from different premises
They ask different questions
They use different vocabulary

Different Premises : Religious Studies

Religion and its texts are products of culture
Religion can be investigated like any other subject e.g. nature, history, psychology
Religion can be understood comparatively by outsiders and non-believers
Religious texts have human authors whose motives and historical contexts can be studied

Different Premises : Devotional Study

Religion is divinely given
Religious texts have human authors who have been divinely inspired and cannot be questioned
Religious texts are understood through experiential knowing, not necessarily accessible to outsiders
Religion can only truly be understood by its practitioners

Different Questions : Religious Studies
(especially about sacred texts)

- What is the historical context?
- Who wrote the text and why?
- Which text is oldest, most accurate?
- How did original readers understand the text?
- Who tends to participate in the religion?
- What are its beliefs and practices?

Different Questions : Devotional Study

- What does my religion say about the divine plan for my life?
- What does it say about my destiny?
- What does it say about how should I live?
- What does my religion say I should believe?
- How do I know if my beliefs are true?

Different Vocabulary : Religious Studies

- Scholars use neutral language
- They use descriptive language
- They use a technical language
- They avoid "we-they" language
- They provide attribution to scholarly sources and primary texts

Different Vocabulary : Devotional Study

- Believers use confessional language
- They speak in the first-person
- They discuss religion as insiders
- They provide attribution to a sacred authority
- They tend not to question the text or its interpretation

Religious Studies teaches what people believe

Devotional study teaches what people should believe (or what the faith teaches)



Four principles of Religious Studies

1. De-familiarize : use scholarly and neutral language
2. Historicize : put subject into its historical context
3. Analyze : compare similarities and differences between texts
4. Exemplify : Model behavior that indicates critical thinking skills



Remember!

While teaching about religion presents unique challenges it's best to treat it like other academic subjects, modeling appropriate behavior and attitudes