

RELIGIOUS ARTIFACTS IN THE RELIGION CLASSROOM

For several years religious education teachers have included the teaching of world religions as a part of the religious education curriculum. More recently Religion Studies courses have been developed for senior secondary students: these courses pay particular attention to the teaching of world religions. The resources used to enhance the teaching of world religions have mainly been books and videos. This article suggests that teachers at all levels within the school should consider including religious artifacts as part of their teaching resources. While the use of religious artifacts in the classroom is not a new concept, it is one which could be further developed to become useful teaching resources which stimulate great interest in learning about the religions of the world.

In this paper 'religious artifacts', a term which means something made by human beings, includes religious images such as statues, objects like prayer beads, items of clothing and greeting cards.

The first section of the paper suggests six reasons why teachers should include artifacts as part of their resource collection and the second section includes a list of basic items for each of the major world religions which could be found to begin a school's religious artifact collection.

Six Reasons To Use Religious Artifacts in the Classroom

The Real Thing

Because religious artifacts are 'real' students are able to touch or wear them and thereby engage in a way of learning which is different from reading something in a book or even seeing a picture of it. By using artifacts in the classroom students are not only able to see but they can touch, smell, feel (or even wear) objects people use in the course of practising their religion.

Interest Value

A well-presented display of religious artifacts is eye-catching and immediately arouses the interest of students. They will want to know what these objects are, how they are used, who uses it, why they are significant and where and when people use them.

Easy To Remember

Because of the three-dimensional nature of most artifacts and the fact that students can touch, smell, hear, see and even taste some of them, students are more likely to remember the learning experience.

Hands-on Experience

Many of us learn by doing and students are no different. Artifacts provide opportunities for students to become more actively involved in their learning: they can examine the object in a respectful way, feel its texture, weight and examine its colour carefully. By using artifacts in the classroom we are catering for the different and diverse learning needs of students.

Understanding Religion in General

Artifacts can also assist students to understand the nature of religious symbolism and by further researching the history and use of the object they may uncover something of its meaning for the believer. By interacting with artifacts, students may begin to realise the important role that artifacts and religious objects play in ritual and in particular the public and private devotions of believers.

Better Than Pictures, Photographs and Videos

Many religious artifacts can be explored from all angles; they can be held and carefully examined, pictures can only show one face of the object. Artifacts exist in the here and now. Students can explore all dimensions of an artifact, as well as seeing and hearing it. They can feel it, lift it up, smell it and taste it.

Guidelines for Teachers – Getting Started

When preparing to teach a particular world religion, teachers could create a list of the religious objects mentioned in texts. Record the name of the object, include a brief description of it or sketch it, find out what it is made of, where and when the object is used and research its history and its religious significance and function within the tradition. This information can then form the basis of student activity sheets designed to accompany artifact displays in the classroom. Set an example for students by handling the artifact with the reverence, respect and care which it is due, for example the Qur'an should never be left open on display, Muslims open the Qur'an only for prayer and study. Link the religious artifacts to the everyday life experiences of the religious community to which it belongs, demonstrating, where appropriate, how it is used and handled.

Students can be engaged in a variety of learning activities using artifacts. Artifacts can be used as: a focus for explanation, a basis for knowledge and comprehension questions, stimulus for short written response items or longer research essays; they can be used for problem solving and for focusing on

examples, ritual and observance, they can also be used for revision, analysis and evaluative questions – the possibilities are endless. In many instances use of religious artifacts enables students to make valuable links to other curriculum areas, particularly the arts. When using artifacts in the religion classroom, it is very easy to move from the explicit to the implicit when teaching.

Where Do I Get Them and What Do I Need?

Most religious artifacts are readily available from Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious suppliers, Buddhist Temples or in some cases a grocery store, for example, Hindu objects may be purchased at the local Indian grocery store. Students can also make their own artifacts from materials purchased at the local *Two Dollar* shop. A yarmulke, for example, can be made out of a circle of material and may be trimmed or decorated using fabric paint. Students can also create their own matzah cover out of a man's handkerchief and decorate it with the symbols of the Passover.

Listed below are some of the basic items which could begin your religious artifact collection.

Buddhism

- Statues and pictures of the Buddha
- Images of the Buddha which show different mudra (hand) positions
- Prayer beads
- Tibetan prayer wheel
- Tibetan prayer flags
- New Year cards
- Chinese calendar
- Greeting cards for the Bathing of the Buddha celebrations
- Translations of the Tipitaka or sacred writings

Hinduism

- Puja tray including incense, sandalwood, camphor, Kum-Kum and food offerings.
- Divali cards
- Images and statues of gods such as Vishnu, Rama, Krishna, Ganesha
- Copy of Bhagavad Gita (sacred writings)
- Mendhi patterns and Henna
- Greeting cards for festivals such as Holi or Ramnavami
- Hindu calendar

Judaism

- Tallit (Prayer Shawl)
- Yarmulke
- Mezuzah
- Sabbath and Havdalah Set
- Passover (Seder) plate
- Greeting cards for Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Weddings, Rosh Hashanah, Pesach
- Hebrew Scroll and Yad
- Menorah
- Hanukkiah
- Dreidel
- Jewish calendar

Christianity

- Bible
- Hymn books
- Icons and Holy pictures
- Greeting Cards e.g., Baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation,
- Baptismal and Confirmation certificates
- Palm from Palm Sunday
- Communion wafers and grape juice
- Rosary beads
- Crosses
- Chalice, thurible
- Calendar showing the seasons and colours of the Church's year

Islam

- English translation of the Qur'an
- Qur'an stand and cover
- Prayer beads
- Prayer timetable
- Prayer mat
- Compass which indicates the direction of Mecca
- Eid cards
- Prayer beads
- Male and female head coverings
- Sound recording of the call to prayer
- Muslim calendar

Conclusion

Using religious artifacts in the classroom brings the religious education classroom alive and is a practical and hands-on way to introduce students to the religions of the world.

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