Religious Diversity & Children’s Literature
STRATEGIES & RESOURCES

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CHAPTER 2

CONNECTING WORLD RELIGIONS AND CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

THE STORYTELLING TRADITION

Faith groups are bound together by their myths, legends, and shared history, with storytelling at the very heart of human and religious experience (Gangi, 2004). Storytelling has always been a way of conveying beliefs of the world’s religions through the oral tradition. The Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Abraham, and Nanak (Sikhism) were all storytellers. From the earliest times, indigenous peoples passed on their creation myths and explanations of natural phenomenon to the next generation. As more formalized religions evolved, legends, parables, and proverbs provided followers with an understanding of religious principles and metaphors for daily living. In modern times religious narratives offer a framework for faith, provide examples of ethical living, build awareness of human responsibilities, and connect followers with the sacred.

The term myth is often used in different ways. Kate Baestrup writes,

For anyone to get at truths that lie beyond fact, we must create myths. I don’t mean we have to tell lies. The story we tell can be wholly fictional or the story can be true. If it illustrates the organizing principles by which we
understand the world and live in it, the story is a myth in the scholarly sense. (Baestrup, 2007, p. 127)

Myths may explain aspects of nature or the worldview and ideals of a culture and are often believed to contain sacred truths. The word myth derives from the Greek word, myths, which means speech, thought, or story. While religious stories and myths are found in all major religions (and many smaller ones), we will address Native American spirituality, Buddhism, and Judaism in this chapter as examples of the storytelling tradition.

**STORYTELLING WITHIN NATIVE AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY**

Native American children's author Joseph Bruchac states:

More now than ever before, we need the gift of stories which instruct and delight, explain and sustain. Such stories lead us...to an understanding of who we are and what our place is in the natural world. They help us find respect for ourselves and respect for the earth. They lead us toward the rising sun each dawn, the story of the gift of life. (Bruchac, 1996, p. 81)

Native American storytellers believe that stories are dynamic and should be treated with respect as living things, not as cultural artifacts. In traditional Native American cultures, children were rarely punished for misbehavior; instead adults told stories to redirect and teach about proper behavior. "That's the purpose of storytelling: teaching people who they are so they can become all they are meant to be." (Bruchac, p. 75). According to Bruchac, the spirit of American Indian identity has survived most powerfully through stories.

Within Native American cultures, the sacred and the mundane are not separated. Stories can be prayers or methods of healing and should never be taken lightly; stories strengthen inner spirituality. The Cree language contains the word "achimoo-ka," which means "sacred stories that come from within." The Micmac people refer to the "great man inside," a spiritual being within each person's heart that provides guidance, if one pays attention (Bruchac, 1996).

**STORYTELLING WITHIN BUDDHISM**

Within the Buddhist tradition, the Jataka fables are possibly the oldest and largest collection of folk tales in the world (Conover, 2005). These stories are extant in Asian culture and blended with Buddhist teachings as the religion spread throughout southern Asia. Eventually the Jataka tales were accepted as Buddhist scripture, with the animal or human hero being viewed as "the Buddha in a former life, working his way towards enlightenment" (Conover, 2005, p. viii).

Though the Buddha did not write any of his teachings, his message was conveyed through conversation, discourse, and storytelling. After Buddha's death, monks and storytellers continued to tell his stories and eventually write them. Tales from the Theravada Buddhist tradition clarify Buddhism's wisdom and compassion for life and convey the concept of karma (originally a Hindu concept), or consequences of one's actions. Within the Mahayana tradition Zen sutras (sermons or lessons of The Buddha), stories, sayings, and other teachings have been preserved for over 1,000 years (Conover, 2005).

**STORYTELLING WITHIN JUDAISM**

Wherever Jews have lived throughout history, they have told stories to pass on their beliefs and traditions to their children. In the early years of Judaism, folk preachers known as maggidim recounted parables and tales in their messages. Both the Talmud (commentary on sacred scripture) and Midrash (interpretations of scripture written by rabbis) contain many stories.

Hasidism is a movement within Judaism that is rich in the storytelling tradition. The practice of storytelling is considered a mitzvah, a divine commandment (Buxbaum, 1994). Within Hasidism, stories are of utmost importance because they inspire people to "practice and fulfill the teaching of the Torah and the teaching of the rabbis (rabbis or religious leaders)" (p. 72).

Several Hebrew sayings confirm the importance of stories. One saying is, "The story of the deed is greater than the doer." This means that the stories may motivate others to act in a similar fashion. Another familiar saying is that "God loves stories." Some believe that when Jews are telling holy stories, God sits beside them and listens. Many Jews believe that God is a storyteller, as well, for he is said to have given the stories in the Torah directly to Moses. Within Judaism storytelling is seen as a sacred practice, bringing people closer to God.

The contemporary Hasidic storyteller Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach has said,

The difference between teaching and a story is that in the first we are asking to learn something we do not know. But in the story we are asking to be made holy, to be made new, like a child, like a tzedik (righteous person).
We are saying, "Please tell me! Let me know what I am." (personal communication, cited in Bushman, 1994, p. 73).

Through stories about one's own religion and other religions, students can learn about themselves and similarities between their own beliefs and the beliefs of others. They can learn that similar themes infuse the stories of people from around the world and throughout time. The concept of self-knowledge and the perennial battle of good and evil forces are conveyed in the writing of Newbery-award winner Madeleine L'Engle, whose novels are influenced by both science and Christianity. A tribute to L'Engle in the Journal of Children's Literature ("In Memoriam," 2007) includes the following quotation, "Why does anybody tell a story? It does indeed have something to do with faith—faith that the universe has meaning, that our little human lives are not irrelevant, that what we choose or say or do matters, matters cosmetically" (p. 78).

VALUE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

When children read and discuss religious stories and informational texts they begin to comprehend the multiplicity of faiths in our world. By reading books, viewing films, listening to music, watching dramatic presentations, and listening to storytellers, children can strengthen their understanding of their own convictions, as well as develop tolerance and appreciation for the beliefs of others. Books that address religious diversity can be found in all genres of children's literature, which are described below.

Children's literature is a familiar medium to teachers and provides an inviting way to teach about the important dimension of religious diversity. It is one medium through which students can acquire information about the multiplicity of faiths in our world and come to see similarities among faith groups. By reading books, viewing films, listening to music, watching dramatic presentations, and listening to storytellers, children and adolescents may strengthen their own convictions, as well as develop tolerance and appreciation for the beliefs of others.

GENRES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

High quality fiction and nonfiction books offer authentic ways to address faith traditions of the past and present. The books we review in this chapter are a sampling of child and adolescent literature teachers can use to develop content knowledge and open-mindedness toward religious diversity. Books were selected from reviews from Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, consultations with university librarians, the National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade Books for Young People, and recommendations from religious leaders and practitioners. Criteria for selecting books about faith diversity can be found in Tables 2.1 and 2.2.

We have organized the books by the traditional genres of children's literature to demonstrate the many areas in which teachers can address religion and faith. However, several of the books overlap the conventional genre definitions.

In the remainder of this chapter we will examine the major genres of children's literature: traditional literature, modern fantasy, modern realistic fiction, historical fiction, poetry, biography, and informational books. The description of each genre will begin with a definition of the genre, followed by examples of books within that that relate to various faith tra-

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<tr>
<th>Table 2.1. Evaluating Nonfiction Books About Religious Diversity</th>
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<td><strong>In seeking high quality informational books and biographies about religious diversity, teachers and families should consider the following suggestions:</strong></td>
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<td>1. Examine the text for stereotypes. Are there any &quot;loaded&quot; words, such as &quot;odd&quot; or &quot;unusual&quot; that hint of a prejudiced or condescending attitude?</td>
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<td>2. If the book covers many different religions is each covered fairly and honestly? Check the qualifications of the author. Is this person a member of the faith community about which he or she has written? If not, has the author done adequate research?</td>
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<td>3. Has the author included endnotes, time lines, a glossary, tables, maps, and references for adults and children?</td>
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<td>4. Did the author use current sources by experts in the field? Is the book organized in a clear way that children or adolescents can follow?</td>
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<td>5. Does the book authentically convey depth of content about the religion appropriate for the audience?</td>
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<td>6. Does the content have a positive and sensitive focus on values of the religion?</td>
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<td>7. Do illustrations and photographs honestly portray religious observances and practices?</td>
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<td>8. Are the illustrations free of stereotypes and do they clarify information in the text?</td>
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<td>9. Are there any craft activities that might be offensive to members of the religious group? For example, some older books on American Indians suggested that children make totem poles, a sacred symbol.</td>
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<td>10. Does the book encourage analytical thinking? For example, some informational books pose thought-provoking questions for discussion.</td>
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<td>11. Does the style and format of the book stimulate interest in the religious group?</td>
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Sources: Grace and Grace (2005) and Norton (2007).
Table 2.2. Criteria for Selecting Fictional Books on Religious Diversity

1. Are the characters portrayed as individuals rather than representatives of a particular religion?
2. Is the writing free of stereotypes and language that might be offensive to members of this religion?
3. Are factual or historical details accurate?
4. Is the religion accurately portrayed?
5. Are the conflicts or problems in the book authentic for the time period and the character?
6. Is the setting authentic to the religious group?
7. Are the illustrations authentic and free of stereotypes?
8. Is the format and content appropriate for the age group for which it is intended?
9. Does the book make a positive contribution toward learning about the religion being studied?


There are many surprises in Heather Forest's Wisdom Tales From Around the World (1996). The volume includes Taoist parables, Zen stories, tales from Ancient Greece, Mulla Nasrudin stories from the Muslim Sufi tradition, and tales from Christianity. The parables are pithy stories, often with animal characters, that have a clear, but sometimes surprising message at the end. One of the Christian stories was a biographical piece on John Newton, the slave ship captain who returned to his childhood Christian roots and penned the well-known hymn "Amazing Grace."

Virtually every early culture had its own story of how the earth was formed. In the Beginning: Creation Stories from around the World (Hamilton, 1988) is a stunning collection of 21 myths about gods and goddesses, plants and animals, and the first humans. Throughout time, these stories have provided people from sacred traditions with solace, inspiration, and answers to some of the eternal questions of human kind. The dramatic illustrations by Barry Moser and author comments following each myth enrich this comprehensive volume.

Stories of Catholic and Orthodox saints have inspired both adults and children for many centuries. In Lives and Legends of the Saints, Armstrong (1995) includes full-page reproductions of famous classical paintings to accompany engaging stories of the lives and heroic deeds attributed to the saints. For example, Armstrong describes Catherine of Alexandria, patron saint of philosophers, ministers, students, wheelewrights, millers, and young women. In an intriguing one-page story, the author illumines Catherine's steadfast Christianity that led to her torture and death. Armstrong explains the symbols in the art, which date from the Middle Ages and Renaissance. She also includes an index to artists and paintings at the end of the book, making it an excellent resource for art history lessons.

The rich cultural variety found in the folktales and sayings in Ayat Jani- lah: Beautiful Signs, by Sarah Conover and Freda Crane (2004), will help children and adults realize the diversity found in Islam. The authors, one of whom is Muslim, wrote their book in order to reach both the secular and Muslim world. Stories and wisdom from cultures as diverse as China, Pakistan, Turkey, West Africa and Indonesia provide humor, insight and cultural perspective. A quote from the Qur'an in the introduction captures the spirit of the book, "Of Allah's Signs, one is that He created you from dust, and lo, you become human beings ranging far and wide" (45-48). The book contains two types of stories: those from the Qur'an and those from the hadiths, words and actions of the Prophet Mohammad. Many of the stories begin with kon waa wakon, meaning "There was and there was not," a Muslim version of "Once upon a time." The stories are told with humor and insights that reveal beliefs and values underlying Islam.
The 32 fables in Kindness are often told from the perspective of the Buddha himself or from that of a Buddhist monk or nun. Stories from a variety of Asian countries are included in The Wisdom of the Crosses and Other Buddhist Tales (Chodzin & Kohn, 1997) and exemplify different aspects of Buddhist wisdom. "The Foolish Boy" is an example of Tibetan humor similar to Western "noodlehead tales." Other stories include gods and goddesses, demons, human and animal characters who illustrate the profound truths of Buddhism. The richly colored illustrations and borders created by Marie Cameron, portray Buddhist art from the country in which the story originated.

MODERN FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

Modern fantasy and science fiction books depict characters, setting and events that could not really happen in the physical world. Although there are few modern fantasy books that directly tell stories about religious beliefs, it is not unusual for books within this genre to have underlying religious themes. A classic example is the Narnia series by C. S. Lewis, who was a professor of medieval and renaissance literature at Cambridge and Oxford Universities. Born into Christianity, Lewis became an atheist during his teen years. His conversion to Christianity at age 31 strongly influenced his writing.

Madeleine L'Engle's characters often struggle with religious themes, such as the power of love and hatred. The Newbery Award book, A Wrinkle in Time (1976) and the four books that follow in the series are both science fantasy and religious allegory. Fundamental themes of faith are woven throughout the novels, which include quotations from the Bible, Dante, Pascal, and Shakespeare. L'Engle honors the mysteries in life and conflicts of the human condition we all face.

Phillip Pullman's popular "His Dark Materials" science fiction trilogy takes readers on a trip into a parallel universe filled with daemons, winged creatures, mammoth polar bears, and a substance called dust. The initial volume, The Golden Compass (1996) and its sequels present a parallel universe quite similar to our own in which complex characters grapple with universal questions. Some religious conservatives have criticized the series for negatively portraying organized religion. Other readers believe that Pullman portrays the beauty of the world and the value of life within a well-crafted fantasy. Middle school students who read this trilogy might begin to think critically about the authenticity of these claims and read the author's own words. There are several interview clips with Pullman on www.hellinet.com.

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, the first woman to be ordained a Reconstructionist rabbi, writes books for young children with inclusive religious themes. In God's Name (1994) is a celebration of the diverse ways people have of knowing and naming God. As the poetic story begins, the world has just been created, and every creature has a name, but no one knows the name of God. Boys and girls around the world suggest different names based on their perceptions and beliefs and in the end learn what God's name really is.

Julius Lester is another author who has embraced the topic of religion in his books for young readers. The son of a Methodist minister, Lester converted to Judaism as an adult. He was influenced early in his career by a creative writing teacher who believed that writing was a way of praying. Lester sees his writing as reaching out, not only to a child or adolescent audience, but also to the Divine (Lester, 1999a).

If in the presence of a book or a person, we feel ourselves ... confirmed as human beings, and we sense that life itself is being celebrated in this book or person, then we are in the presence of the Divine. (Lester, 1999a, p. 55).

Drawing on both African American and Jewish traditions that portray God as having a sense of humor, Lester created two religious fantasy books for children: What a Trudy Gool World (1996b) and When the Beginning Begun (1999c). The first is a picture book illustrated with Joe Cepeda's vibrant and humorous paintings. The story opens with a bald, dark-skinned God wearing a yellow robe and green bedroom slippers, admiring his new creation, a blue and brown earth populated with people and animals of many shapes and colors. But his side-kick, Shaniqua, the angel in charge of everybody's business, complains that the new world is too dull. After listening to her suggestions, God brightens the earth with a variety of creations—trees and bushes, flowers and music, vibrant colors and fluttering butterflies. When the Beginning Begun (Lester, 1999c), draws from the Jewish tradition of the midrash, narratives that inquire into or interpret biblical stories. In a sense the midrashim fill in what is missing, what people wonder about, in the biblical text. For example, Lester explains in his introduction, all the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) say that God is eternal, that he has always existed. In the short stories Lester has created in this collection, he plays with the idea of what God did before and during the creation.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Marc Gellman creates his own humorous twists on traditional Bible stories in Does God Have a Big Toe? (1989). In the short story with the same title as the book, a little girl asks her mother, father, and grandfather if God has a big toe. Each adult is preoccupied and sends her to someone else until her question reaches the king. The
king orders everyone in the country of Babel to build a tall tower up to God, so he can see if God has a big toe. Knowing what a waste of time and resources this is, God decides to solve the problem by giving people different languages so that they aren't able to communicate. In the end, the people who speak the same languages move away together and the little girl asks about God's belly button. These would be good stories for reading aloud and discussing the updated messages.

Sanskrit Dog (Manos, 2006), a story based on Buddhist principles, contains elements of both realism and fantasy. Dog begins his existence as a street animal that lives only for himself. After he dies, he returns as a mascot of a motorcycle gang. In each incarnation Dog has different responsibilities and characteristics. The more times he returns to life, the more loyal and giving he becomes, until he returns as a companion and teacher to a child who is blind. Once he has given the great gifts of love and compassion to another, he no longer returns to life on earth.

MODERN REALISTIC FICTION

Modern realistic fiction books are invented stories that could actually happen in the real world. They sometimes present dilemmas faced by child and adolescent characters as they grapple with religious convictions. For example, Amal, the teen protagonist in Does My Head Look Big in This? (Abdel-Fattah, 2007) is conflicted over the decision of whether or not to wear the hijab (head covering) to her private school in Australia. Students and teachers could discuss some of the stereotypical ideas held by the students in the book about Muslims and see if any of these notions changed as they came to know Amal.

Buddha Boy (Koja, 2003) is a story told from the point of view of Justin, a typical high school student, who somewhat reluctantly befriends a new student, Jinson. As their relationship develops, Justin learns of Jinson's student, Jinsen. As their relationship develops, Justin learns of Jinson's past and his conversion to Buddhism. Other students, uncomfortable and frightened by the differences of those who are different, torment Jinson who refuses to fight back. Both Does My Head Look Big in This and Buddha Boy are excellent novellas to stimulate discussion of preconceived ideas about belief systems and the treatment of students from minority religions.

Shouting! (Thomas, 2007) is a picture book for primary children illustrated with exuberant, yet featureless paintings by Annie Lee, that make the reader want to stand up and celebrate. The story is told from the point of view of a young African American girl going to church with her mother. As the preacher begins to wave and thunderously preach and the mother choir vigorously responds, some of the women rise from their seats and dance with the ghost (Holy Spirit). The girl's mother is among this the dance through, overcoming her arthritis pain to join other worshippers in the aisles, swaying and shouting "Hallelujah, Amen." At the end of the book, the illustrations show contemporary worshippers joining with African dancers, as they trace their steps back through time. This book could connect with a study of spiritual music and the evolution of dance.

HISTORICAL FICTION

Historical fiction books combine an accurate and convincing portrayal of a setting in the past with fictional characters. This genre facilitates children's understanding that history is more than a series of dates, names, and places; history is about the lives of real people. It can help children develop positive attitudes toward history and gain general understanding of different time periods (Norton, 2007). Sometimes realistic events and authentic minor characters are included in well-researched historical fiction. Occasionally historical fiction refers to the religious milieu during a certain era and the impact of various religious movements on individuals and on history.

Gideon's People (Meyer, 1996) is a fictional story for intermediate students set in the late nineteenth century near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Two adolescent boys learn about each other's religions when Isaac, the son of a Jewish peddler, is injured and stays with Gideon's old order Amish family for several weeks. Both boys experience conflicts about the strict rules of their respective faiths and their desire to fit in with their English (non-Amish) neighbors. The author describes the Amish Sunday service, the Friday evening Jewish Shabbat, dress codes of each group, differences in diet, and the custom of shunning among the Amish.

In Brother Juniper, Diane Gibfried (2006) tells the story of the most charitable friar living in the monastery with Father Francis in the hills of Assisi. Brother Juniper is so generous that when the other friars leave to preach, he gives away the chapel's gold chalice, the priest's vestments, the altar cloth, the stained glass windows, and even the doors and walls of the chapel. When the other brothers return, they find him naked in the hole of what was once their sanctuary (he gave away his robes, as well!). The tale ends with the town's people coming to a hilltop on Sunday morning to thank Brother Juniper for his kindness when they were in need. Readers see that it is people, not walls, windows and ornaments that make a church. Based on writings of St. Francis of Assisi, Gibfried and artist Melo So, create a charming tale of generosity, which contains elements of both history and legend.

These are numerous books about the role of Quakers in helping slaves escape through the Underground Railroad. One example is Henry's
Freedom Box (Levine, 2007) in which the main character is shipped north in a wooden crate with the help of Quaker abolitionists. *North by Night* (Ayers, 1998) illustrates how one woman made a decision based on her religious convictions to assist escaping slaves. These books could be used as part of a broader unit on slavery and the role of religion in the abolitionist movement.

**POETRY AND SONGS**

The artistic expression, rhythm and imagery of poetry and song lyrics can be a beautiful way to express spirituality. The Psalms from the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition are well-known examples. The artwork in *The Lord Is My Shepherd* (Wilson, 2005) proclaims the joy and comfort many people find in these verses. Striking colors and swirling abstract shapes provide a visual journey for young readers. In contrast, Tim Ludvig's illustrations for *Psalm Twenty-Three* (1993) show the meaning this poem might have for contemporary urban children. Living in a crowded city, the children find love, comfort, and encouragement from grandparents, teachers, and a school crossing guard. The words of the psalm appear to give them strength to surmount the negative forces in their environment.

*Hud Gahdo: A Passover Song* (Ciewast, 2005) is one of the best-known songs sung after the Passover Seder. The folk art paintings add to the lightheartedness and cumulative style of this chain folk song. In an afterward for adults, Rabbi Michael Strassfeld explains that the tale may be a metaphor for the history of the Jewish people. He believes that the song relates to the oppression of Jews and final liberation by God (an interpretation that may be controversial among contemporary Jews). Music and words in Arabic are provided at the end of the book.

Kadir Nelson's illustrations for *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands* (2005) suggest an immense, beautiful world, as a child might see it. The multiethnic family depicted in Nelson's paintings shows gratitude for the world and for each other by swimming in the ocean, fishing, and admiring the night sky. A delightful DVD accompanies the book.

*Ramadan Moon* (Robert, 2009), written in narrative verse, describes holiday preparations, prayers, and celebration of a modern Muslim family, told from a child's point of view. The delightful mixed media illustrations of Shirin Ali, show the changing phases of the moon that accompany the family through *The Month of Mercy (Ramadan)*.

A recent noteworthy publication, *On My Journey Now*, by Nikki Giovanni (2007), chronicles African American history through the music of spirituals, beginning with music brought across the Atlantic from Africa and continuing through the years of slavery, the Civil War, and on to today. Lyrics to some of the verses of the spirituals are included in the text and complete lyrics are included at the end of the book. Many of these spirituals and other hymns from the African American Christian tradition are included in *Gloria Pinkney's Music from Our Lord's Holy Heaven* (2005) and the accompanying compact disc.

**BIOGRAPHIES**

Biographies, autobiographies, and first person accounts are an especially valid way for students to learn about the lives and courageous acts of individuals, conflicts real people try to resolve, as well as history and culture. Biographies of religious leaders such as Gandhi, Thich Naht Hanh, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Elk, Mahalia Jackson, Billy Graham, Muhammad and the lives of the Sikh Gurus give children insight into the religious history and exemplars of spiritual commitment.

*Becoming Buddha: The Story of Siddhartha* (Stewart, 2005) is a stunning biography of Siddhartha Gautama. Illustrator Sally Rippen's bold paintings, fabric, and gold outlines are dramatic against a black background, enriching the text and providing the reader with appreciation for the life and teachings of this religious leader. The seamless story recounts the life of the Buddha from prophecies of his birth to his enlightenment and his early teaching.

*Gandhi*, written and illustrated by Demi (2001), concentrates on the spiritual and political leader's ethical decisions, his respectful defiance, and the "insatiable love of humankind that guided his life" (unpagd). Throughout the stages of Gandhi's life depicted in words and paintings, the reader sees growth in his religious convictions.

*Flora Geyer's Saladin: Muslim Warrior Who Defended His People* (2006) with its maps, replicas of Muslim art, and timeline, would be an excellent resource for learning about the Crusades. The book also provides a hero to be compared to many contemporary Muslim warriors.

*Dalai Lama* (Worth, 2004) includes a chapter on Tibet under Communist rule that could be a focus for understanding the continuing conflict between the Communist regime in China and the traditional Buddhist faith that led to the Dalai Lama's exile from his native Tibet. Both of these books might help students learn more about underlying causes of religious and political conflicts.

*Do Re Mi: If You Can Read Music, Thank Guido d'Arezzo* (Roth, 2006) begins by informing readers that if they had lived a thousand years ago and heard a song they wanted to learn to sing, they would have to listen very carefully and memorize it. Roth goes on to tell the story of "The Father of Music," first as a chorboy and later as a monk, struggling with
little encouragement to convey musical pitches in written form. He finally has his epiphany and what the world of music changed forever: Roth's charming collages of torn and cut paper and an array of musical scores provide a perfect complement to this inspiring story.

INFORMATIONAL BOOKS

Informational (nonfiction) books on faith traditions reviewed here contain documented facts in a format that is appealing to children and youth. Most contemporary informational books on religion contain photographs of holy sites, devotees engaging in religious practices or festivals, and artifacts used in worship. These images help young readers gain a visual concept of the religion and its followers. There is a trend among publishers to produce series of books on different world religions. Some books are general, whereas others focus on a specific aspect of religion, such as houses of worship or the way different religions commemorate life transitions.

A Faith Like Mine (Buller, 2005) is a large-format picture book that addresses the six major world religions. It also includes a section on traditional beliefs and a final chapter on "other faiths" that have smaller followings and may not be well-known. Each page contains several followings and may not be well-known. Each page contains several photographs of religious symbols, worshippers, or houses of worship. Small pictures or children accompany quotes from them about their beliefs and practices. Short segments of text and an abundance of photographs from around the world make this an appealing introductory book for many age groups.

The Usborne Encyclopedia of World Religions (Meredith & Hickman, 2005) has a similar format to A Faith Like Mine, but includes more text and is written for older readers. It is also a good resource for teachers and families. The authors address thirteen religions that are practiced today, as well as historical belief systems, such as those of Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Maps of the world's religions and a time chart that shows when various religions began and died out are also included. Internet links allow students to go on a virtual Hajj when reading the chapter on Islam or take a picture tour of a Korean Buddhist temple.

DK Publishing produces a series of Eyewitness Books that includes several volumes on world religions (Bowerk, 2006), Christianity (Kidnersley, Wilkinson, & Tambini, 2006). Islam (Wilkinson, 2005) and Judaism (Charng, 2002). Each double-page spread focuses on a topic about that religion. In the book on Islam the topics include Islamic culture, scholarship and teaching, and festivals and ceremonies. Following an introductory paragraph for each section, the remainder of the information is in the form of detailed captions accompanying photographs. The final pages in the book are a section called "interesting facts," a glossary, questions and answers, and a timeline. World Religions: The Great Faiths Explored (Bowerk, 2006), also published by DK, is a visually appealing book, covering 11 faith traditions.

Faith (Ammena, Nakasiss, & Pon, 2000) is a nearly wordless book that conveys its message through stunning photographs and succinct text describing the many ways in which children around the world express their faith. Each photograph is accompanied by a brief identification of the religious practice and location where it is occurring in the photo. Authors' notes, providing a longer description of the elements of faith, and a thorough glossary, provide useful information for teachers and students.

Author Anita Ganeri and illustrator Rachael Phillips have collaborated on six books in the series "Traditional Religious Tales" for Picture Window Books: Buddhist Stories (2006a), Christian Stories, Hindu Stories (2006b), Islamic Stories (2006d), Jewish Stories (2006b), and Sikh Stories (2006e). Each slim volume contains about eight illustrated stories, a glossary, index, and lists of print and online resources. Other helpful features are that children and adults can search by ISBN number on www.facthound.com to locate further age-appropriate informational on a particular religion and the "Did you know?" inserts, containing information and pictures that extend the story or religious concepts contained within it.

The World Religions series (Nardo, 2010a, 2010b; Raatma, 2010; Rosinsky, 2010a, 2010b), consisting of six books representing major organized religions around the world, is appropriate for upper elementary or middle school students. Each book follows the pattern of beginning with the story of a teen or young adult of the faith, followed by chapters that answer a particular question, such as, "What do Muslims believe?" and "What are the origins of Sikhism?" An appealing feature of this series, especially for older readers, is the "debate" boxes that pose questions that relate to the faith. For example, the book on Islam has a debate box on whether arranged marriage is a good idea.

The Holidays Around the World series (Helligman, 2005a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2005a, 2005b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e, 2007f; Otto, 2007, 2008, 2009), produced by National Geographic, includes 12 books on both religious and secular holidays. Evocative photographs and examples of global traditions make these informative books appealing to children and adults. The back matter includes cooking and craft activities, songs, a glossary, resources for further investigation and a note for adult or older readers. The religious holidays included in the series are Diwali, Christmas, Easter, Hanukkah, Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan, Eid al-Adha, and Chinese New Year.

Religion and Spirituality in America (Gay, 2006) is part of the "It Happened to Me" series for teens published by Scarecrow Press. The text is
interspersed with photographs and boxes, which include quotations from
teen found on religious websites. One example is an entry from a teen
who has lived much of her life in a religious commune; another insert
quotes nonreligious teens who have been harassed at their school. Chap-
ters address mixing religion and politics, rites of passage, lesser-known
beliefs, and a chapter on what agnostics and atheists believe.

The Cultures of the World series (Marshall Cavendish Benchmark,
n.d.) are a comprehensive set of books focusing on world geography, his-
tory, people, government, and religion. The religion sections are quite
comprehensive and (depending on the country) include information on
indigenous, as well as contemporary faiths. The books are generously
illustrated with colorful photographs.

In Every Tiny Grain of Sand: A Child’s Book of Prayers and Praise (Lind-
bergh, 2000) is a collection of prayers and inspirational sayings from
many different faith traditions. Four acclaimed artists use different styles
(acrylics, collages, watercolors) to illustrate children from various spiritual
traditions. The traditions represented include Native American, Jewish,
Muslim, Bahá’í, Buddhist, Hindu, African, and Celtic. Arranged in four
themes: “For the Earth,” “For the Night,” “For the Home,” and “For the
Day,” this book is appropriate for families and religious educators to use
to help children understand how they are both alike and different from
children from other faith traditions.

Many Ways: How Families Practice Their Beliefs and Religions (Rottner,
2006) features colorful and engaging photographs of very young children
from around the world worshipping with their families. Families in
churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship are depicted
to show how families are alike and different. At the end of the book
adults are given background information on each of the photographs to
help them answer questions.

TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR BOOKS ABOUT RELIGION

The books described in this chapter are exceptional resources for teach-
ing content about religious diversity. There are many approaches teachers
can employ to enhance comprehension, expand understanding of charac-
ter and perspective, and stimulate further reading and research.

Storytelling

Reading aloud and storytelling are logical choices for sharing tradi-
tional religious myths and legends that have been transmitted orally from
generation to generation within communities. When stories are told
rather than read, there is no barrier between the teller and the audience.
Listeners incorporate the voice and gestures of the storyteller with their
own imaginations to picture the events and characters in their minds.
Teachers can model storytelling techniques then teach students to tell
their own stories. An outstanding resource for helping children learn to
tell stories is Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the
Classroom (M. Hamilton & Weiss, 2005).

Creative Drama

Students might create a play based on one of the Buddhist stories in
Kindness (Conover, 2005) an Islamic story from Ayat Famili: Beautiful Signs
(Conover & Crane, 2004) or a Pagan tale, such as “The Rebirth of the
Sun” retold in Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions
(Sarkiewicz & Baker, 1998). They could also dramatize scenes from biog-
raphies of religious leaders who advocated nonviolent protests, such as
Gandhi’s Salt March to the Sea or a discussion between Martin Luther
King, Jr., and other religious leaders who supported the civil rights move-
ment.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers help students visualize the way a book is organized
and key facts they have learned about the religion. If a class is studying
several religions, students might glean facts about each and display them
on graphic organizers, such as spider webs, around the classroom. One
example might be a web showing houses of worship for different faith
communities. For examples of graphic organizers and ways to use them
see www.readwritethink.org.

For younger children, drawing scenes or helping construct a mural
can help them focus on details or sequence of a story. Character maps are
a helpful way for students to think about and record the feelings of a char-
ter and reasons he or she behaves in a certain way. Graphic responses to
literature can be appropriate for any fictional genre.

Upper elementary and middle school students could create graphic
organizers to compare and contrast creation myths from different cul-
tures. A good resource for this particular exercise is In the Beginning: Cre-
ation Stories from Around the World (V. Hamilton, 1988). Social studies
students might research the geography and culture in which folktales
originated.
KWL

Before reading an informational book about a religious group, students and their teacher could develop a KWL chart. In the “K” column, students list what they think they know about a certain religion. In the “W” column, write what they want to know, and when they have completed their study, write what they have learned in the “L” column. This approach can be used with individual students or a group. Teachers can apply the KWL approach with a single book or with a longer unit of study.

Writing

Creative modern fantasy books may inspire children to write their own imaginary myths or stories to explain natural phenomena such as lightning or volcanoes. Children’s writing and artwork can be published at websites such as www.kids-space.org, a safe, commercial-free website for publishing students’ stories and pictures from all over the world.

Writing point of view pieces can help students take the perspective of a religious leader from an historical or contemporary time. “I poems” can be written about oneself or students can write from the point of view of the subject of a biography they have read. For example, after reading a biography of Thich Naht Hanh, a student could determine his values, beliefs, interests, and hobbies and construct an “I poem” about him. (See www.readwritethink.org for “I poem” templates.)

Students could synthesize what they have learned about various religious groups by writing original poems based on their reading and research. Because poetry is meant to be heard, it is an excellent genre for choral reading, where groups of children read different lines. Students could practice choral reading and perform for another class at school.

Literature Circles

Literature circles could provide a forum for students to discuss books such as those described above in small groups of peers. To prepare for literature circle discussions students take notes on the book, make personal connections to the story, and sometimes do further research on some aspect of the book. Group meetings are characterized by open, natural conversations, honest, open-ended questions, and a spirit of playfulness and fun (Daniels, 2002). In reading books such as Does My Head Look Big in This? (Abdel-Fattah, 2007) and Buddha Boy (Koja, 2003) students might discuss the religious beliefs of the protagonists and how those beliefs influence their decisions. As students research related information about Buddhism, it might lead to a discussion about the current conflicts between China and Tibet involving Buddhist monks. Likewise, Does My Head Look Big in This? could be connected to news items in which school girls and teachers have been prevented from wearing the hijab (head covering). This discussion could also lead middle school students to debate the wearing of other religious symbols in public schools in the United States and other countries.

Visual Arts

Many teachers today share “author studies” with their students. This approach could be expanded to “illustrator studies,” where students learn about the lives of artists, as well as the media and styles they use. Illustrators’ websites frequently include video clips showing work in progress and demonstrations of techniques. Students can try their own hand at collage, photography, charcoal, scratchboard, or various types of paint.

Many informational books about religion focus on visual arts and music. Religious art is one of the finest and most revered art ever created. Christian painting, sculpture, and architecture dominated the art of Medieval Europe. The rich and varied culture of Islam is reflected in the architecture of mosques, decorated ceramic tiles, the beauty of their calligraphy, pottery and carpets; and detailed geometric, floral, and vegetative designs. One way for students to understand Buddhism is to study the symbolism in the different physical positions of the Buddha depicted in sculptures. Children’s literature that includes information on religious art can be a way for students to develop a deeper understanding of particular religions.

Biography boxes

Students might demonstrate their understanding of Gandhi’s life by creating a “biography box” (a decorated box or other container in which the student places objects that relate to the subject of a biography). A biography box for Gandhi might include a British flag to represent his years of schooling in London, salt to represent the salt marches, homespun doth to represent the right of Indians to spin their own cotton, a piece of fruit to symbolize vegetarianism, and rose petals, which were scattered after his death.
CONCLUSION

Because religion and spiritual traditions are so important in understanding past and present cultures around the world, it is essential for teachers to include the topic of faith traditions in their classrooms. Both the national guidelines and state curriculum standards for social studies include the teaching of religious and spiritual traditions under many topics (National Council for the Social Studies, 1998). These include families and communities around the world, holidays, current events, exploration and discovery, and colonial settlements. In addition, teachers need to validate the cultural differences, including the religious and spiritual beliefs, of the children and adolescents in their classroom. Teaching strategies that use children's literature to explore diverse cultures can also provide opportunities to open the window on the diversity of religions within the United States and the world. These strategies, in turn, will enable children and adolescents to reflect and think with greater depth and broader understanding about their own cultures and faith traditions.

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