

Religion in the American South

Overview

This lesson explores some of the key religions (Native American Religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) that make up the diverse landscape of the American South and how different traditions have carved out distinctly Southern identities. It pays particular attention to the ways in which religious practitioners have navigated colonialism and racism while finding innovative ways to preserve, practice, and innovate within their specific traditions.

Grades

Middle & High School

Essential Questions

- What are some key elements that comprise religion?
- Who was Omar Ibn Said, and what is the significance of his life story?
- What are some traditions that have played a foundational role in the diverse religious landscape of the American South?
- How did African American Christianity emerge out of slavery?

Materials

- Accompanying Power Point, available in the [Database of K-12 Resources](https://k12database.unc.edu/files/2020/08/Religion-in-the-American-SouthPPT_compressed.pdf) (in PDF format) at https://k12database.unc.edu/files/2020/08/Religion-in-the-American-SouthPPT_compressed.pdf
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu
- Large pieces of paper, sharpies, masking tape (for optional closing activity)
- OPTIONAL: See “Exploring Religions of Asian Indians,” a lesson in the Remarkable Journey curriculum available [here](#), to guide students in learning about Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and more.

Duration

60-90 minutes

Procedure

What is Religion? [20 minutes]

1. As a warm up, project [SLIDE 2] of the accompanying PPT and ask students to talk to a partner and try to define “religion” together. After 2-3 minutes, ask students to write their definition on a Post It Note and stick it on the board. Next go over their definitions together, grouping together Post Its that are similar, explaining that because religion is such a complex concept, there are many important elements of it and it is incredibly diverse in meaning. Using their definitions as a jumping-off point, lead students to further fill in elements that they didn’t include in their definitions. Be sure to steer them towards expansive definitions, reminding them that a religion doesn’t have to hit all of these categories. Elements of religion can include:
 - Belief in divine or supernatural beings (e.g., God, Allah, saints, etc.)
 - Ceremonies/Ritual Practices (e.g. prayer, meditation, rites of passage, song, dance...)
 - Holidays/Traditions
 - Sacred/Ceremonial Objects (e.g., a cross, rosary beads, alter, clothing, etc.)

- Sacred Texts (If students bring this up, point out that some traditions, including many indigenous religions, choose to use oral traditions instead of written)
 - Sacred places (Holy sites, places of worship)
 - Communities (insider/outsider designations, and specific norms around gender, family structure, and religious leadership)
 - Expected etiquette/behaviors, customs, and agreements
 - Financial elements (i.e., tithing, donating time or money to those less fortunate, etc.)
2. Throughout the lesson, leave this list up on the board and keep adding to it. This will help to model for students that there is not a one-size-fits all definition of religion. When students bring up their own religious practices during this brainstorm, affirm them without making it seem like it's the "right" answer. E.g. "Thank you for sharing about how important prayer is for your family. Does anyone have a different experience, where ritual practices like sharing holiday meals together feels more important?"
 3. Explain to students that the South has always been a religiously diverse region. Tell them that they will spend the rest of the class talking about some of the religious traditions that have played a key role in making the American South what it is today. (Point out that given the diversity of the South, it's not possible to highlight all of the religious at play, but at the very least, students should gain an understanding of just how diverse, varied and rich this aspect of the South is.) Tell them that they are going to hear about a number of creative combinations and innovations as a result of cultural encounters between groups in the South. Let them know that the story of religion in the South is also a story of many interlocking fights to claim equal rights to practice religion freely.

Religious Traditions of the South (50 minutes)

Native American Religions (10 minutes)

4. Project [SLIDE 3] and explain to students that any narrative about religion in the South needs to begin before colonists arrived, with the religious traditions of the people indigenous to North America. Native American religions were typically woven through daily life and fused with culture. In the South, they often traced the passage of the seasons, were passed on by oral tradition, and were practiced through communal rituals like singing, dancing, and feasting. Although there were hundreds of distinct and diverse indigenous religions in the United States before colonists arrived, one common thread among many of these religions was a deep connection to the land, community, and sense of kinship with other living creatures.
5. Ask students what aspects of colonialism they think would have disrupted these religious practices. (Possible answers include: land theft, disrupting family structure, banning Native languages, policing of gatherings).
6. If students haven't mentioned it, explain that white missionaries in the South also actively sought to convert Native Americans to Christianity, and tell them that eventually, many Native American communities actually converted to Christianity. Because they were often excluded from white churches, though, Native Americans around the South founded a number of Indian-only churches that often served as defacto community centers, schools, and critical meeting places. Explain that both in the past and today, many Native American Christians don't see Christianity as being mutually exclusive with their ancestral religious practices, and have worked to keep their traditional religious practices alive.
7. [SLIDE 4] Tell students that you are about to watch a short clip of a Lumbee group in North Carolina, the Women of the Sacred River Drum Society. Ask them to play close attention to the religious elements of their traditions these women are keeping alive. Play the video (from 4:12 – 6:38) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=ocnAuLuLrMQ> . Tell students to watch for any religious

elements they see being practiced/addressed in this clip. After the film, have students share. Possible answers include:

- The cultivation of community (e.g. through mutual support for an abused tribal woman)
- Cultivation of a connection with ancestors through regalia
- Oral and artistic re-telling of sacred origin stories through beadwork
- Affirming a connection to the land through the mention of corn, beans, and squash as a gift

8. Ask students to look at the regalia they see on the upper left side of the slide, which is worn during Lumbee powwows, and ask if anyone recognizes the religious symbol on the regalia. It is the Virgin of Guadalupe, a Catholic icon that originated in Mexico. Explain that this is an example of flexibility and creative combination within religious practice, one that demonstrates how Native American religion can provide a space for practitioners to negotiate their complex Southern identities.
9. Next, tell students they are going to watch an additional brief clip about the contemporary Coharie community in North Carolina, which consists of four main settlements: Holly Grove, New Bethel, Shiloh, and Antioch. Within these Coharie settlements are a number of Indian churches. The churches are the center of Coharie activities. It is through the churches that families interact, the Elders are honored, and the social rules enforced. The Coharies' sense of themselves is manifested most clearly through their religious activities. Play the 3 minute video [Voices of the River](#) and afterwards allow students to reflect on the role of spirituality in the Coharie community.

Islam (10 minutes)

10. [SLIDE 5] Tell the students they are now going to switch gears and learn about an example of another religious tradition that has been a part of the American South for hundreds of years: Islam. Tell them that they are going to hear the story of an early Muslim American who was enslaved and taken from West Africa to the Carolinas. Ask them, as they listen, to think carefully about the ways in which he preserved his religion even under the harsh conditions of slavery. Play the video (from :25 - 3:45) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBQelGvwkhE>. Tell students to listen for how Omar Ibn Said was able to keep his religion alive.
11. After the video, ask the students to reflect on what they learned, and the ways Said maintained his religious identity. They may mention that he preserved his language (Arabic) and scripture (even though he didn't have a Qur'an, he smuggled quotes from the Qur'an into his autobiography). Ask them what parts of his religion we might not see in the written record. (We don't know whether he observed ritual practices like prayer and fasting, and the extent to which he connected with other Muslim enslaved people.) Tell them historians remain unsure of how to interpret his conversion to Christianity; some think he may have converted in name only in order to strategically gain the trust of slaveholders. Remind students that up to 20% of enslaved people may have been Muslim, so Omar Ibn Said was just one example of many working to preserve traces of Islamic practice even under the conditions of slavery.
12. [SLIDE 6] Tell students that Islam still has a strong presence in the American South today. There are large African American Muslim communities for whom Islam is a way of connecting to an ancestral past. Some Black Muslims talk about conversion to Islam as "*reversion*" because they are simply returning to a religion that was stolen from them. There are also many Southerners whose families immigrated from the Middle East and from Southeast Asia and who have brought diverse Islamic traditions with them. In spite of an increase in Islamophobia in the wake of 9/11, a new generation is standing up against discrimination and proudly claiming their identities as Muslim Southerners.

Judaism (10 minutes)

13. [SLIDE 7] Tell students that like Islam, Judaism has been present since the colonial era in the American South. One of the earliest synagogues in the United States, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, was founded in 1749 in Charleston, SC by Portuguese and Spanish Jews. However, Jews still faced intense discrimination.

Across the country, they were routinely banned from holding public office, discriminated against in housing and employment, and barred from white spaces like clubs and restaurants. In the 20th century, they were also targeted by the KKK, and faced mob violence like lynchings.

14. Ask students to look at the picture of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, and to reflect on what it looks like. (Just like a church!) Tell them that during the 1800s, Jewish communities around the U.S. began to take divergent responses to the challenges of navigating their unique Jewish-American identities. Some chose to lean into the rituals of their ancestors, and to maintain a sharp dividing line between insiders and outsiders, Jews and Gentiles – these are the groups we now know as Orthodox. Others chose to preserve Jewish values while stepping away from some of the strict ritual regulations and cultural markers (like speaking Yiddish) that they associated with the old world. These groups came to be known as “Reform” Jews. Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, though an old institution, was one of the leaders in the Reform movement.
15. [SLIDE 8]. Tell students that in spite of the long history of Anti-Semitism in the south, Jewish communities have found ways to embrace their identity as Southerners while also maintaining a strong sense of Jewishness. Draw your students’ attention to the advertisement for the “Kosher BBQ” Festival, and ask if anyone knows what “kosher” means. (If not, tell them that “kosher” refers to food that has been prepared according to specific ritual regulations, and some – though not all – Jews choose to observe these rules. One of the key rules of kosher is that pork is forbidden.) Now draw students’ attention to the image of the mobile Synagogue on the right – “Circuit Riding Rabbi” - and explain that this bus was a creative way to make small, rural Jewish populations around the South feel tied into a broader Jewish community. Rabbis would take turns bringing the bus to rural communities to meet with local Jews who did not have a home synagogue in their area. Explain that traditions like this Kosher Barbeque Contest and the mobile Synagogue show that stories of religious change are rarely quite as simple as “assimilating” or “not assimilating” – religious traditions are always changing, and religious communities are always finding creative ways to fit into broader culture while maintaining a distinct history, culture, and sense of peoplehood.

Christianity (10 minutes)

16. [SLIDE 9] Explain to students that Christianity has been the majority religion in the South since colonial times, and that there are many different versions of Christianity that have taken root around the region. Ask students to brainstorm aloud any Christian denominations or sects that they can think of. They may come up with groups like: Catholic; Anglican; AME; Methodist; Presbyterian; Quaker; Unitarian; Seventh Day Adventist, Anglican; Jehovah’s Witness; Pentecostal; Holiness; Lutheran; Baptist; *Southern Baptist*; *Primitive Baptist*; *Freewill Baptist*, and so on. Explain to them that some of this diversity comes from patterns of immigration of Europe. British immigrants brought Anglicanism, French and Spanish brought Catholicism, Scots-Irish often brought Presbyterianism with them, and so on. Remind students that this pattern continues today with Christian immigrants bringing their own specific traditions to the South. Tell them that there are also a number of new Christian groups that were founded in the United States, and in the South specifically.
17. Explain to students that one key reason that so many different flavors of Christianity emerged in the South was because of a pattern of revivals. The Second Great Awakening, a wave of nationwide religious fervor in the early 1800s, first began in Kentucky and Tennessee and swept through the South. During the Awakening, “circuit riders” – ministers on horseback – would ride through the countryside to preach to rural communities. (Ask students if anyone remembers where the phrase “Circuit Rider” came up earlier in today’s lesson. It was in the “Circuit Riding Rabbis” – that was an example of a Jewish community playing with dominant Christian models!) Circuit Riders would also hold massive camp meetings. These meetings, which lasted days on end, usually included fiery sermons, emotional worship, and calls for repentance and conversion. During an era where white male leaders dominated most Christian spaces, these camp meetings also provided a unique space where both women and African-Americans were welcomed. The

egalitarianism of Second Great Awakening made it fuel the fire of a number of reform movements, including abolitionism.

18. [SLIDE 10] Ask students if they see elements of this revival culture still today. Tell them that we can see many Southern Christian leaders of the 20th century, like Billy Graham, using a revival strategy. We can also see televangelists and preachers in megachurches cultivating the mood of revival.
19. Tell students that the decades leading up to the Civil War were a time of particularly intense Christian “sectarianism.” Ask them if anyone knows what that word means. If not, explain that it means there were many religious splinter groups, or “sects,” that were in sharp disagreement with one another. Ask them what issues they think may have divided Christians in the years leading up to the Civil War. Unsurprisingly, it was exactly what was dividing the whole country: slavery. Both pro- and anti-slavery Christians used the Bible to support their side. Three major denominations - the Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Methodists – were so divided that they split in half over the issue.
20. [SLIDE 11] Tell students that some of the loudest voices who called pro-slavery Christians to task for their hypocrisy were Black leaders like Fredrick Douglass. Ask a student to read this quote on the slide aloud: “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.” Allow students to respond to the quote. Discuss how Douglass’s quote sums up how contentious the issue of slavery was for Christians at the time of the Civil War. Southerners were not arguing for or against Christianity; the vast majority of them considered themselves “Christian.” Instead, they were grappling with a reckoning about what really counted as Christianity, and who got to be a part of it.

African-American Christianity (15 minutes)

21. Tell students that although Christianity is an incredibly broad concept and that there are many multi-ethnic churches in the South today, there is a very distinct trajectory in Southern history for Black Christianity. Remind them that during the colonial and antebellum periods, many slaveholders pushed Christianity on enslaved people. Sometimes, enslaved people would be required to attend church with their slaveowners. Other times, church services were held on plantations under the oversight of the slave-owner. However, southern whites disagreed about how much access to Christianity enslaved people should have, and many slaveholders worried about the consequences of giving enslaved people full access to religious education and religious freedom.
22. [SLIDE 12] Ask students to partner up, and to brainstorm reasons why slaveholders might not want to let enslaved people worship freely, and have full access to the Bible and to religious education. After 3 minutes, ask them to return and share their thoughts with the class. Possible answers include:
 - Teaching enslaved people to read the Bible was giving them literacy, and therefore power.
 - It would give enslaved people tools to argue against Biblical defenses of slavery
 - It would give enslaved people the space to organize rebellion or revolution. (If students raise this point, tell them that in fact two major uprisings *were* led by leaders in black churches. Denmark Vessey was inspired by the biblical story of the Israelites being led out of slavery by Moses as he planned a rebellion in Charleston in 1822. Nat Turner, who led an 1831 uprising in Virginia, was a preacher who drew on apocalyptic biblical imagery to recruit participants.)
 - It would give enslaved people a formal space to bond as communities.
23. Tell students that enslaved people refused to simply accept the version of Christianity that was given to them by slave-owners, or the limitations placed on their freedom of religion. Instead, they developed the practice of meeting under cover of darkness to sing, pray, and worship in what they called “hush harbors.” As a part of this practice of subversive Christianity, enslaved people also sang spirituals, in which they drew on imagery from the Bible to sing about themes of deliverance and freedom. Under slavery, Christianity offered a way for enslaved people to maintain strong community ties, build hope, and dream of freedom.

It was also a way for them to preserve elements of traditional West African religion; they were able to incorporate practices like singing, dancing, and emotionally expressive and egalitarian worship that were drawn from West African traditions.

24. Tell students that you are going to have them watch a short scene from *12 Years a Slave*, which tells the story of Solomon Northup, a free black man who was living in the North when he was kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana. Tell them that the scene they are about to watch shows a graveside funeral service being held for an enslaved man who died of exhaustion in the fields. Ask them to watch carefully, and to think about what the act of singing a spiritual does for this group of enslaved people. Show the whole clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oFcFzJT7Tw> and then invite any of them who want to share their thoughts with the class about what the power of the spiritual is in this scene to do so. Possible responses might reflect on how singing together ties the community together, or how this provides a chance to voice intense emotions of grief and anger.
25. Talk with students about the lyrics to this song – “Roll, Jordan, roll.” In the Bible, God’s chosen people had to cross the river Jordan to reach the land that God had promised them. Many Christian songs use the idea of crossing the river Jordan as a metaphor for going to heaven after death. But in the context of this spiritual, the Jordan has another meaning: it also represents rivers like the Ohio and the Mississippi that could be crossed over to freedom on the other side. Spirituals like this gave enslaved people an opportunity to share coded messages that would not be understood by slave-masters.
26. [SLIDE 13] Tell students that some African American communities today reject Christianity as the religion of the colonizer. But for many others, Christianity has continued to be a source of community, empowerment, and connection to the past. Draw students’ attention to the photographs on the left of this slide. They show a river baptism and a church that has been in use since the era of slavery. For many African American Christians, symbols like this offer a sense of continuity with their ancestors. Black churches also played a key role in the Civil Rights movement, which was led by ministers like Martin Luther King Jr. and drew much of its support from churches. The focus within black churches on the fight for social justice continues today under leaders like the Reverend William Barber.
27. Play the brief video [Uninhibited Praise](#), which highlights the music and passion of NC State University’s student gospel choir. The choir, through its soulful interpretation of gospel music, moves audiences spiritually and creates community across racial, cultural, and economic boundaries. Tell students to listen for the role of music in the spirituality of the students featured and afterwards discuss.
28. [SLIDE 15] Tell students that there are many, many more religions active in the American South that you don’t have time to cover in this class session. There are Buddhist, Hindu, and Bahai communities rooted in Asian traditions. There are vibrant centers of Catholic life. There are Afro-Cuban religions like Voodoo and Santeria that draw some elements from Catholicism and some from West African religion. There are Pentacostal groups that handle snakes and speak in tongues. The religions of the region are constantly adapting, innovating, and responding to one another. And there are also those who proudly claim their right as Southerners to opt out of religion entirely; atheism has always had a strong place in the region’s culture.

Optional Closing Assignment (15-25 minutes)

29. Tell students that they are going to map out religious sites around your town. Put them in groups of 5, and give them each a big sheet of paper. Ask them to map out the town (or their local community) and to draw in all of the religious places. (Instruct them not to get hung up on it being geographically accurate).
30. If they ask what counts as a religious site, bounce the question back to them. Encourage them to be as expansive as possible. Places of worship and cemeteries are a good starting point. Students might also consider places that hold significance for individual families like old home-sites, or the sites of special

rituals like weddings. They might even consider places that simply spiritually resonate with them, like the beach or a specific tree.

- 31.** After 10-15 minutes, have the groups tape their maps up on the board; they will likely be quite different from one another. Ask them to talk about the experience of making these maps. Affirm that even within their small groups, everyone brought a different religious landscape to the exercise; the sites that might have been obvious to some of them were invisible to others. This exercise should show them that the diversity of religious experiences in the South is quite literally hidden right under their noses.
- 32.** If you have time, ask students to reflect on how they have each formulated their own mental religious landscapes of their towns. Students might discuss what they visually see within their daily routines; what places they have been brought to by friends or family; or what places their family or friends have told them about. Affirm that the stories we are told shape our understanding of the religious landscape of the South.