Critical Reflection Assignments to Understand Religious and Spiritual Diversity

Nathan R. Todd

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Assignment 1: Self-Reflection on Religion and Spirituality

Assignment 2: Interview Reflection: “Seeking to Understand” Across Religious Difference

Assignment 3: Experiencing Religious Setting Reflection
Self-Reflection on Religion and Spirituality

The topic of religion and spirituality is very personal. Whether one identifies as religious/spiritual or not, one has likely interfaced with religion through personal experiences, family, peers, school, the media, or in other aspects of life.

The purpose of this self-reflection is to do just that, to reflect on how religion and spirituality have intersected (or not) with your own life. It is up to you what you choose to share and you will not be graded on the content of your reflection, just that you follow the spirit of the assignment, complete it with clarity, and stay within the two-page limit.

Do note that the goal is not to provide a summary of your religious belief system. Rather, it is a place to self-identify and to then step back to reflect on what has shaped this identification and how this identification shapes your life. Of course share what you would like; you will not be downgraded for what you share. This note is just to add clarify to the spirit of the assignment.

I will not share your responses with others, but this will help me have a better sense of the various perspectives represented in the class.

To help get you started, several suggested questions are given as a jumping-off point for reflection. You do not have space to examine all of the questions, so reflect on what is meaningful to you. Also feel free to self-reflect on other related questions.

- How, if at all, would you identify yourself religiously, spiritually?
- What, if at all, has shaped your religious/spiritual journey over time? Peers? Family? Life events? Issues in society?
- Are you the same religious/spiritual person you were one year ago? Five years ago? What if anything has prompted change?
- How does this identification (or not) shape your life? Friendships and other relationships within and apart from you religious identification? How you spend your time?
- What you like and don’t like about identifying in the way you do, or being a member (or not) of your religious groups/identification.
- What, if anything, is difficult about identifying in the way that you do?
- How, if at all, do you see your religious identification/spirituality changing in the future?

Directions:
- Responses should be no more than two typed double-spaced pages in standard 12-point font with standard one-inch margins.
- Title the reflection “YOUR NAME Self-Reflection,” centered on the first line, and then start the reflection. This helps me quickly know whose paper I am reading.
Interview Reflection: “Seeking to Understand” Across Religious Difference

Please read the entire assignment carefully!

The purpose of this assignment is to seek to understand someone else’s religious/spiritual perspective. To do so, you will need to interview someone who is religiously/spiritually different from yourself. The main goal is to hear about their experience, to seek to understand their perspective. This assignment may be slightly uncomfortable for some, whereas others will feel very natural in carrying forth this assignment. My hope is that you will learn something new about who you are trying to understand as well as yourself as you engage in the process.

In short, the assignment is to conduct an interview with someone who is not taking this class, and to try to understand their perspective. The assignment is to engage the person in a conversation where your only purpose is to “seek to understand.” What does it mean to seek to understand? Seeking to understand is simply the process of trying to understand someone else’s perspective. The goal is not to change or challenge the other person, but to understand a different perspective. Usually this involves asking questions (e.g., tell me more?, help me to understand?, what do you mean?, how else has this impacted your life?) with the only goal being to understand their perspective. This is not to engage someone in debate, or to give your perspective or opinion, it is simply to listen to someone who is different from you and to do your best to understand their perspective.

For this assignment you will need to identify someone who is religiously different from yourself. Religious difference can take many forms. In general, I hope you talk to someone who would identify rather differently from yourself. For example, if you are agnostic perhaps interview someone who actively participates in a religious faith, if you are Catholic interview a Protestant (or vice-versa), if Christian than someone of a different faith (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.), if a conservative Christian than a liberal Christian (or vice-versa) or someone from a different faith. It is up to you and follow your interests, but please do view this as an opportunity to learn something about a different religious perspective.

Please be careful and sensitive as you approach people and to not assume they are a different religion from you based on racial and ethnic characteristics, the presence of religious clothing, or other stereotypes. Here are a few tips for how to find someone:

- Maybe you already have a friend who you are interested in talking to. Say something like, “I am in a class on the psychology of religion and we have an assignment to interview someone who comes from a different religious perspective than our own. I tend to identify as ________. I may be wrong, but I think you might have a different perspective. Do you think you might be a good person for me to interview? If not, do you know anyone else?

- Another strategy is to ask someone you are interested in interviewing if they know someone who might be willing and able to be interviewed. So after a similar “I am in a class . . . and I tend to identify” lead in you might just ask, “Do you know anyone who might be willing and able to sit and talk with me about
their perspective.” If the person themself is comfortable they may volunteer, or give you ideas of others.

- There are campus organizations of different religious faiths. You might contact that organization, explain the assignment, and ask if they have any recommendations of someone who might be willing to sit down with you. Again, be clear about what you are doing and why you are doing it.
- Some people may say no, that is totally okay!

Remember that religion and spirituality are very personal topics, so please be extra considerate when asking people to share. If you sense someone does not want to talk to you, thank them for considering and let them know you can talk to someone else.

Let people know it might take about an hour (though shorter is fine). Also work with the person to identify a time and location that is comfortable for both of you.

How to start the conversation:
- Once you actually are sitting down with someone, it helps to frame the conversation. You might say something like:
- “Thank you for sitting down with me to share about your religious perspective. As you know this is for a class I am taking on religion and psychology. The goal is for me to just listen to your perspective in an effort to better understand. You are welcome to talk about whatever you would like, though it might be nice to hear about (insert maybe 3-4 ideas from questions you may want to ask). You also can skip questions or not talk about certain things if you don’t want to. I thought maybe I could start by hearing more about how you identify yourself religiously and spirituality . . . . how did you come to identify in this way . . . . how does this matter in your life . . . etc."

Ideas of what to ask: Have an initial set of questions BEFORE the interview
- You may use some similar questions from the self-reflection on religion and spirituality that you completed. I will not repeat these questions here, but look back at the bullet-pointed list for ideas.
- If they have faced discrimination, prejudice, or have ever felt unsafe because of their religious or spiritual identification
- What the most important parts of their faith are in their everyday life
- What they wished people understood about their faith, what people tend to misunderstand
- Ask what they feel is important to share to help you better understand their faith and how it impacts their life.

Some people may want to share about specific beliefs from their religion, which likely are fascinating. If possible, also ask people about how their religion matters on a day-to-day basis. Thus it is not just understanding their beliefs, but how religion matters to them and shapes their life (or not).
Although you will likely guide the conversation by asking questions, let people know they do not have to answer any question they do not want to. If you notice the person is uncomfortable than consider switching topics or let them know you can talk about something else. Let the person guide the conversation... your goal is to just listen!

**Prompts to Keep the Conversation Going:**
- Tell me more
- What has that been like for you?
- Help me to understand what you mean.
- I didn’t quite understand that, would you mind saying that again?
- Tell me a story about that...
- Can you give me an example?

**Prompts to Close the Conversation on a Positive Note:**
- Thanks for your time and willingness to share, I appreciate it and learned something new.
- Wow, I had never thought of it like that before, thanks for helping me to understand your perspective better.
- I really hadn’t thought about ____________ (insert something new you learned), thanks for opening my eyes to that.

Recognize that the other person is doing you a favor: Treat them with the up-most respect, and no matter how the interview goes tell them THANK YOU at the end.

**What to Include in Your Reflection:**

Follow the directions below to write a short reflection on the interview. Do NOT include the other person’s name. Here are a few ideas of what to reflect on:

- What were a few things you learned about their perspective? What surprised you?
- How do you view the person or their religious perspective differently?
- What was the experience like for you? Were there times you felt excited, uncomfortable, nervous, etc.?
- What, if anything, did you learn about yourself?

**Directions:**
- Responses should be no more than two typed double-spaced pages in standard 12-point font with standard one-inch margins.
- Title the reflection “YOUR NAME Interview Reflection,” centered on the first line, and then start the reflection.
Experiencing Religious Setting Reflection

The purpose of this assignment is to experience a different religious setting by attending and to reflect on your experience. It is not to spy or to judge, but to see how others in world practice their religion and to then reflect on this experience. By a different setting I just mean a setting that you have not participated in before and that is different in some way from your own religious perspective. This could be a different religious denomination than your own, a different religious tradition, attending an atheist or agnostic group, really whatever you are interested in.

A religious setting may be a local congregation/mosque/temple/parish, or a student organization that holds some type of public meeting. There are actually [over 1,000] student organizations at [insert school name], many of which are religious in nature (you can search the organizations here: [insert link]).

Before attending, please make sure that the service or event is open to the public and that it would be appropriate for you to attend. For example, if you plan to attend the [here I had information about the local Mosque. The Mosque had a visitor's webpage that gave information about when to visit and how to be culturally respectful during the visit. Inserting some explicit resources may be helpful to encourage students to not disrupt the spaces they may like to attend]. This does not imply that you need to attend [the Mosque], but is just an example of doing background work to ensure the utmost respect for any place you visit.

If you are considering attending a setting that you are unfamiliar with, I strongly encourage you to talk to someone of that faith or in that setting to make sure it is a public space where visitors would be welcome. As noted throughout this description, our top priority is respecting any religious setting that is entered and a little background work can help to ensure that your presence would be welcomed and not a disruption. In fact, if you plan to attend a setting that is markedly different you may try to attend with a friend of that faith or with someone who can serve as a cultural broker to make sure you are respectful of that space.

Entering into the religious or sacred space of others can be uncomfortable and needs to be done with care and respect. As much as possible, try to be authentic about why you are there and do your best to respect the spaces you are in. It may be wise to ask ahead of time if there are rituals you should or should not partake in (e.g., it may or may not be appropriate to take communion depending on the setting and your own background, to engage in certain types of religious prayers or rituals, etc.); and of course any actual participation is totally up to you. It is up to you, but be guided by prioritizing respect of the spaces you enter and being authentic about why you are there.

Regarding authenticity, if people ask why you are there I would encourage you to be transparent and to note that you are attending for a class assignment to better understand different religious perspectives and the different ways people practice their faith. Similar to the interview assignment where the goal was to seek to understand, the goal is to understand the diversity of ways in which people may practice and pursue their religion.
and spirituality. You are not there to judge or evaluate, but just to see and then reflect. Thus, if people are curious why you are there you may communicate this type of intention, that you just hope to learn more about another perspective. If for any reason you feel like people may not want you there or that your presence is disrupting their space, please do graciously excuse yourself. Remember that because this is for a class assignment that you represent the [insert name of University] and that the utmost respect is needed. If people would like more information about why you are there you are welcome to give my name and email. If for some reason you feel it is best to leave which results in you needing an extension on the assignment, I will grant it (though please do the assignment well before the due date). I do not foresee this being a problem, but just wanted to note the possibility and to note that my top priority is on being respectful of the setting. Overall, use common sense and put yourselves in the shoes of the setting you may be attending to think how you would perceive someone like you visiting.

Finally, if you want to opt out of this assignment for any reason just let me know and we can find an alternative assignment. In addition to respecting the settings you attend I also want to respect your own perspectives. You do not need to give me a rationale, but do let me know at least one week ahead of the due date so that we can find another assignment. Also, if you have questions about any part of this assignment please ask.

**What to Include in Your Reflection:**

There are many dimensions to religious settings. There may be music, sermons/religious messages, different leaders, people interacting in different ways, prayer, meditation, lighting candles, other rituals, etc. In your reflection focus on some of these observations about the setting itself and/or some of the practices you observed. What surprised you? What was different/similar to what you expected? What was the process like of being in a different type of religious space? How did you feel? Did you participate or not in certain aspects of the setting and how was that process for you personally? How do you view the religious setting differently now than before attending? Reflecting on these types of questions is the spirit of the assignment. It is not about judging or evaluating the setting, but noting what was interesting to you and how it may have changed your perspective.

**Directions:**

- Responses should be no more than two typed double-spaced pages in standard 12-point font with standard one-inch margins.
- Title the reflection “YOUR NAME Religious Settings Reflection,” centered on the first line, and then start the reflection.