On Common Ground: An Interfaith Tour of The Cathedral of St. John the Divine

Program Objectives
As part of one of the most ethnically diverse and culturally rich cities in the world, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine was established as a “house of prayer for all people.” This program focuses on the Christian tradition as well as other great religions of the world through the universal symbols and similarities that bind religions together and remind us of our common ground. Students will have the opportunity to:

❖ Discuss St. John the Divine as a reflection of the multi-religious community of New York City, and how the various cultures and faiths that have come to define the city in the last century have shaped the Cathedral, as well.
❖ Explore the Cathedral as a sacred space.
❖ Examine the symbolism of the Cathedral’s outstanding features, including the Great Rose Window and the Central Dome of the Crossing, and what those features might have in common with other traditions.
❖ Learn about the common themes and characteristics associated with religion in general.
❖ Explore the literal familial connection between the three major Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity).
❖ Discuss why understanding and constant awareness of the common ground our faiths and traditions share is so important.

Why “On Common Ground?”
St. John the Divine’s charter as “a house of prayer for all people” is more than an open invitation. It recognizes the challenge religion poses, especially in a city as diverse as New York. Religion has been a part of being human ever since human beings became self-aware. In its various incarnations, it has been the inspiration for some of the world’s greatest paintings, structures, and stories. It has been a source of comfort, enlightenment, and compassion for mankind through the ages. As is the case with anything so powerful and pervasive, faith traditions have a dark side. Religion has been manipulated to justify murder, war, hatred and genocide, often directed toward people of other faiths. Understanding is the key to eliminating such aggression and turmoil. And the best road to understanding is through awareness of the common ground upon which we all stand; the beliefs, the symbols, and the experiences we all share as a global religious community.

What are some common religious symbols?
Symbols can be discovered throughout the Cathedral, and even the building itself can be seen as a symbol. Not only do many religions share symbols, symbolism is also the most outstanding shared trait among religions. For example, the most important, ancient, and basic religious symbol is the circle. This is likely because the circle easily conveys many of the key features we find in religions. The idea of eternity (eternal life or the eternal greatness of the divine) is represented by the circle’s unending shape.

The circle also reflects certain truths about the cosmos and time. The Earth is a circle, and it travels around other circles in a circular pattern. Circular movement is the order of the universe, and it can be seen in the passage of time as the seasons change in a perpetual cycle of renewal: Winter-Spring-Summer-Fall.

How is the Cathedral of St. John the Divine like other religious structures?
SPACE: The space in St. John the Divine, like all large spaces, is symbolic as well as practical. It is significantly unlike other large New York City structures, such as Yankee Stadium or Madison Square Garden. Notice the difference when you sit in Yankee Stadium, it is obvious that all that space exists to be used, in order to sell as many seats as possible while facilitating the playing of baseball. While in St. John the Divine, you will see a lot of room for people to sit as well, but also notice a great deal of space where nobody sits, indeed space that is really not used for anything practical. Mankind has been building spaces like these for millennia. Think of the Great Pyramids. They were built not to fit as many people as possible, but as a symbol of man’s humility. Generations would toil to build a structure great enough to express their faith.

MATERIALS: St. John the Divine is built stone on stone—like the great medieval cathedrals of Europe and ancient temples of Greece, Rome, and the Indus Valley.
This means that every stone was carved and laid down individually, without the assistance of steel frames and modern shortcuts. In this case, the act of building itself is a form of religious expression and devotion. The choice of material also reflects the desire to create a building that will endure the test of time.

LOCATION: The site of St. John the Divine, Morningside Heights, is the second highest point on the island of Manhattan. In medieval Europe, the highest point in the city would usually be selected as the construction site for the cathedral. Obviously, this would allow the cathedral to act as beacon, since it would not only be elevated, but also likely the largest structure in the city. But the tradition of building a sacred structure on a hill did not come from medieval Christians. This tradition can be traced to ancient Mayan, Aztec, Greek, Roman, Hindu, and countless other religions. Elevation reflects a traditional and common religious motif: that a religious life should be thought of as a journey up a mountain and that enlightenment comes when one reaches the “top” of the mountain.

Curriculum Connections
❖ Divide your class into separate groups, assigning each one a religion to discuss. Ask each group to identify the historical origin of the religion (time and geography), the principle beliefs and perspectives of the religion, and some of the primary symbols. Ask them to give a brief presentation on the religion, focusing on these topics. As a class, discuss some of the similarities.
❖ Have students create an imaginary religion. What are the beliefs of their religion? Where did it come from? What kind of stories would their religion tell? What symbols would be used in their religion?
❖ Ask your class to investigate religion in their own city/town. How many different religions exist in this city/town? Why are there so many/few?
❖ Allow each student to pick a religion or denomination of their choice and speak to a priest/minister/rabbi/monk about their congregations and about what each congregation stands for. How have they contributed to/assimilated to their community?
❖ Have the class divide into groups and, using everyday materials (cardboard, pipe cleaners, etc.), create their own Pyramid of Kukulcan Chichen Itza, Mexico sacred space. Have them focus on ideas such as shape, decoration, and situation of the building. Who worships there? What does their artwork mean? What is symbolic about the building? What is functional or practical about it?

Other Suggested Visits
The Islamic Culture Center of New York, 1711 Third Ave., between East 96th and 97th streets (212) 722-5234.

The Eldridge Street Synagogue, 12 Eldridge Street, between Canal St. and Division St., New York, NY 10002, (212) 219-0888.

The New York Buddhist Church, 331-332 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10025, (212) 678-0305.

The Ganesh Temple, 45-57 Bowne St, Flushing NY, (718) 460-8484

References

PICTURE BOOKS


FOR STUDENTS
Smith, Huston. The World’s Religions and The Illustrated World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdoms and Traditions (Harper Collins, 1986). This title has two useful companion books:


Cooper, J.C. An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols (Thames and Hudson, 1987).


FOR TEACHERS
