Welcome!

Religious Literacy Workshop

PLEASE ANSWER THE TWO QUESTIONS ON SIDE A OF THE FEEDBACK HANDOUT.

Religious Literacy Workshop: Developing Your Practical Toolkit for Talking about Religious Art with the Public

Minneapolis Institute of Art

March 30, 2023

Jeanne Halgren Kilde, Ph.D.

University of Minnesota

jkilde@umn.edu

Turning uncomfortable conversations into engaged, productive conversations

Can We Talk about Religion?

- ▶ Fear of saying something offensive or incorrect
- ▶ Discomfort with the intimacy of religion -- public/private contexts
- ▶ Fear of being the target for proselytizing
- ▶ Assumptions about religions as in competition
- ▶ "Nice to have a conversation about religion that wasn't a debate."

An Exercise

Think back to a conversation about religion you've had – here at the museum at work, out in the community…

How would you describe it?

A positive experience? Negative? Enlightening? Frustrating?

Have you had an unsettling experience talking about religion?

Write your thoughts on the colored card

Turn to a conversation partner sitting nearby and share your experience.

What similarities and differences are evident? What themes?

Why problems arise and missteps happen

- Our religious comfort zones can be narrow
- Lack of confidence in our knowledge
  - Gaps in knowledge
  - Misconceptions and unfounded assumptions
  - You can't ask about what you don't know – not knowing what questions to ask
- Predispositions (empathetic or not)
- Unknown space between the museum (you, the guide) and the religious community or religious identity of individuals
  - MIA's mission as a secular institution in a religiously plural society
  - As culture/society changes, so too do institutions
  - Institutional missteps – "eruptive public sphere"
- Contemporary socio-political contexts
  - Concerns about public favoritism, unequal treatment of different groups, appropriation

Our goals today

Start building (or honing) a toolkit of skills to turn potentially uncomfortable conversations into engaged and productive ones

Develop a stronger sense of religious diversity, both across traditions and within traditions

Shift from essentialist assumptions about religious beliefs to consider practices, experiences, and communities

Develop a stronger understanding of the complexities of religion that can help ground, contextualize, and expand conversations

Knowledge | Concepts | Language (meta-language)

Religious Literacy Definition

"The ability to discern and analyze the role of religion in personal, social, political, professional, and cultural life."

American Academy of Religion

Part I.
What Does Religion Look Like in the US? In Minnesota?
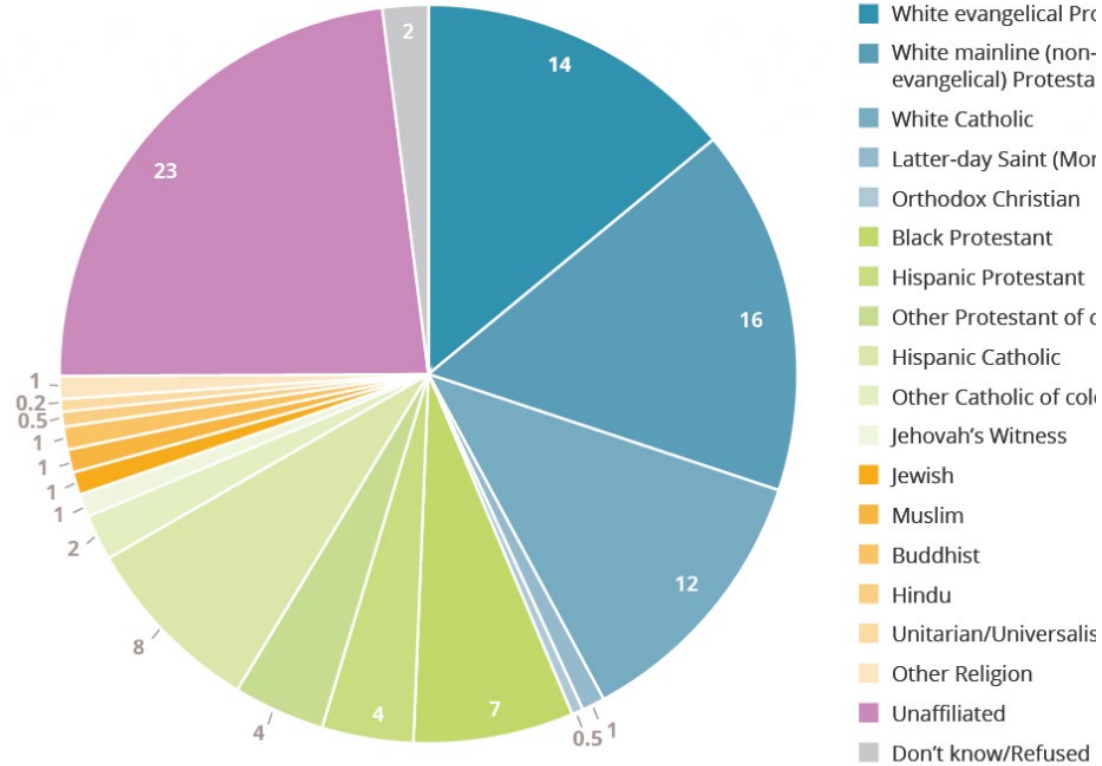
Pluralism

History of Religious Diversity in the US and Minnesota

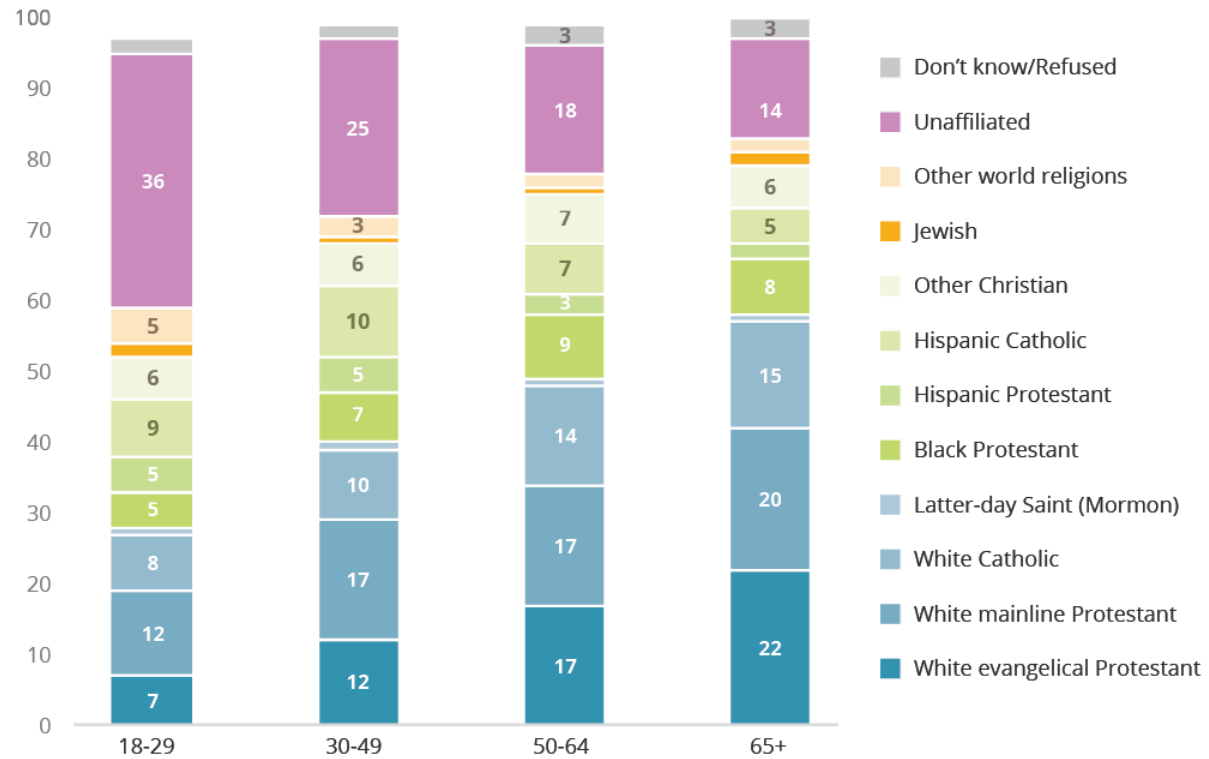Two handouts

FIGURE 1. The American Religious Landscape in 2020

Percent who identify as:

- White evangelical Pr[otestant]
- White mainline (non-evangelical) Protesta[nt]
- White Catholic
- Latter-day Saint (Mor[mon])
- Orthodox Christian
- Black Protestant
- Hispanic Protestant
- Other Protestant of c[olor]
- Hispanic Catholic
- Other Catholic of col[or]
- Jehovah's Witness
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Unitarian/Universalis[t]
- Other Religion
- Unaffiliated
- Don't know/Refused

Source: PRRI 2020 American Values Atlas.

FIGURE 4. A Generational Sea Change in Religious Affiliation

Percent who identify as:

Legend:
- Don't know/Refused
- Unaffiliated
- Other world religions
- Jewish
- Other Christian
- Hispanic Catholic
- Hispanic Protestant
- Black Protestant
- Latter-day Saint (Mormon)
- White Catholic
- White mainline Protestant
- White evangelical Protestant

18-29: White evangelical Protestant 7, White mainline Protestant 12, White Catholic 8, Hispanic Protestant 5, Black Protestant 5, Hispanic Catholic 9, Other Christian 6, Other world religions 5, Unaffiliated 36

30-49: White evangelical Protestant 12, White mainline Protestant 17, White Catholic 10, Black Protestant 7, Hispanic Catholic 5, Other Christian 10, Hispanic Protestant 6, Other world religions 3, Unaffiliated 25

50-64: White evangelical Protestant 17, White mainline Protestant 17, White Catholic 14, Latter-day Saint 9, Hispanic Protestant 3, Hispanic Catholic 7, Other Christian 7, Unaffiliated 18, Don't know/Refused 3

65+: White evangelical Protestant 22, White mainline Protestant 20, White Catholic 15, Black Protestant 8, Hispanic Catholic 5, Other Christian 6, Unaffiliated 14, Don't know/Refused 3

Source: PRRI 2020 American Values Atlas.

Conception of God

	Yes, believe in God or a universal spirit			Don't believe in God	Other/ Don't know	
	NET believe in God	Personal God	Impersonal force	Other/ Both			
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Total population	92	60	25	7	5	3	=100
Protestant	98	72	19	7	1	1	=100
Evangelical churches	*99*	*79*	*13*	*7*	*0*	*1*	*=100*
Mainline churches	*97*	*62*	*26*	*8*	*1*	*2*	*=100*
Hist. black churches	*99*	*71*	*19*	*8*	*0*	*1*	*=100*
Catholic	97	60	29	8	1	2	=100
Mormon	100	91	6	2	0	0	=100
Jehovah's Witness	98	82	11	5	0	2	=100
Orthodox	95	49	34	12	4	1	=100
Jewish	83	25	50	8	10	7	=100
Muslim	92	41	42	10	5	2	=100
Buddhist	75	20	45	10	19	6	=100
Hindu	92	31	53	7	5	3	=100
Unaffiliated	70	28	35	6	22	8	=100
Atheist	*21*	*6*	*12*	*3*	*73*	*6*	*=100*
Agnostic	*55*	*14*	*36*	*5*	*29*	*16*	*=100*
Secular unaffiliated	*66*	*20*	*40*	*7*	*24*	*10*	*=100*
Religious unaffiliated	*94*	*49*	*35*	*9*	*3*	*4*	*=100*

Question: Do you believe in God or a universal spirit? [IF YES, ASK]: Which comes closest to your view of God? God is a person with whom people can have a relationship or God is an impersonal force?

https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/06/01/chapter-1-religious-beliefs-and-practices/

Diversity within Traditions: Christianity Example

- Christianity alone has some 33,000 groups
  - 9000 Protestant denominations
  - 242 different types of Catholics
  - 168 different Anglican groups
  - 781 Eastern Orthodox groups
  - 22,000 independent groups
- What is "normative"?
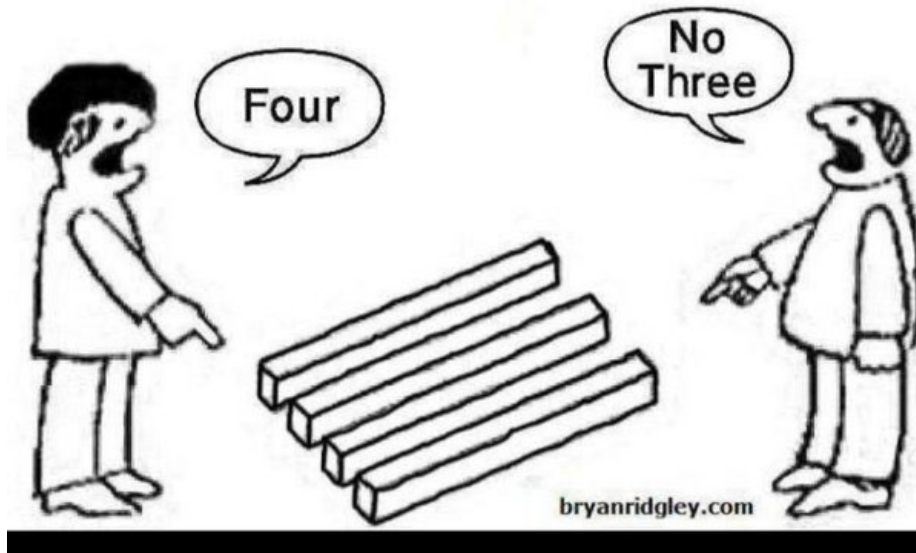 - Depends on who you ask
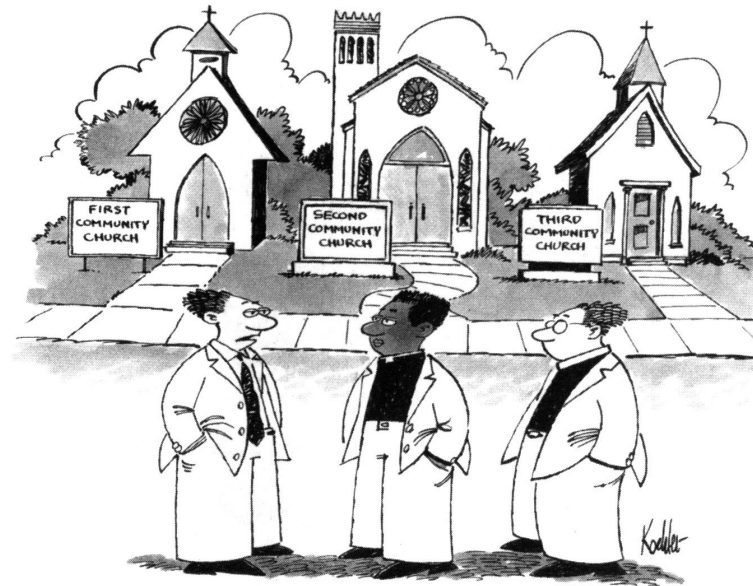
"Maybe we need to define 'community.'"
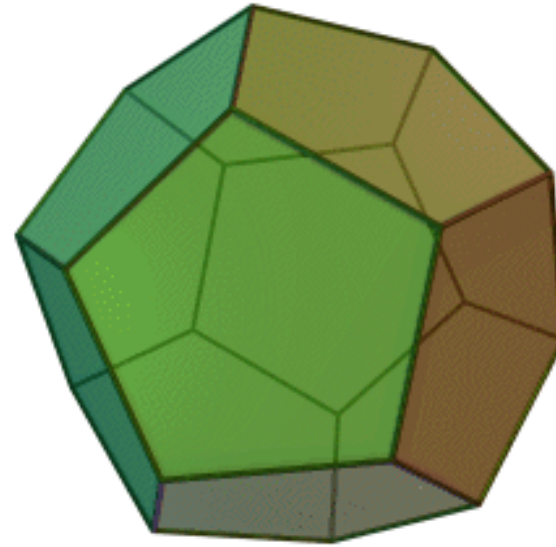
What's your model for any specific religious tradition?

Part II: Religious literacy toolkit

A. Situated Knowledge and Positionality

B. Domains of religion

C. Social Themes

D. Types of Engagements

A. All Knowledge is Situated

Religious Knowledge is a "Sighting from a Site"

- https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/programs/religious-literacy-education/videos-teaching

What is our own "site"? Our Positionality (or Social Location)….and Theirs?

- Emic (Insider)
  - 1st order – Immediate. Everyday practitioners, laity
  - 2nd order – Reflective. Trained leaders, clergy, theologians, authorities
- Etic (Outsider)
  - 3rd order – Academic, Theoretical. Students and scholars
- Zero-order. The Absolute ("behind" religion)
  - Emic: divine activity, cosmic processes
  - Etic: sociological, psychological, cultural, material, biological processes
- Fuzziness and Border Crossings

Perspectives

- Microscope
    - Individual
    - family
- Middle ground
    - Community
    - Museum
    - Classroom
- Telescope
    - Generalized tradition, universal,
    - national, international

Our responses come from our backgrounds

▶ Religion, gender, ethnicity, national/cultural, education, economic, socio-political, sexual orientation

▶ Sometimes re-training, re-adjusting is needed

▶ Aha! or Oops! moments
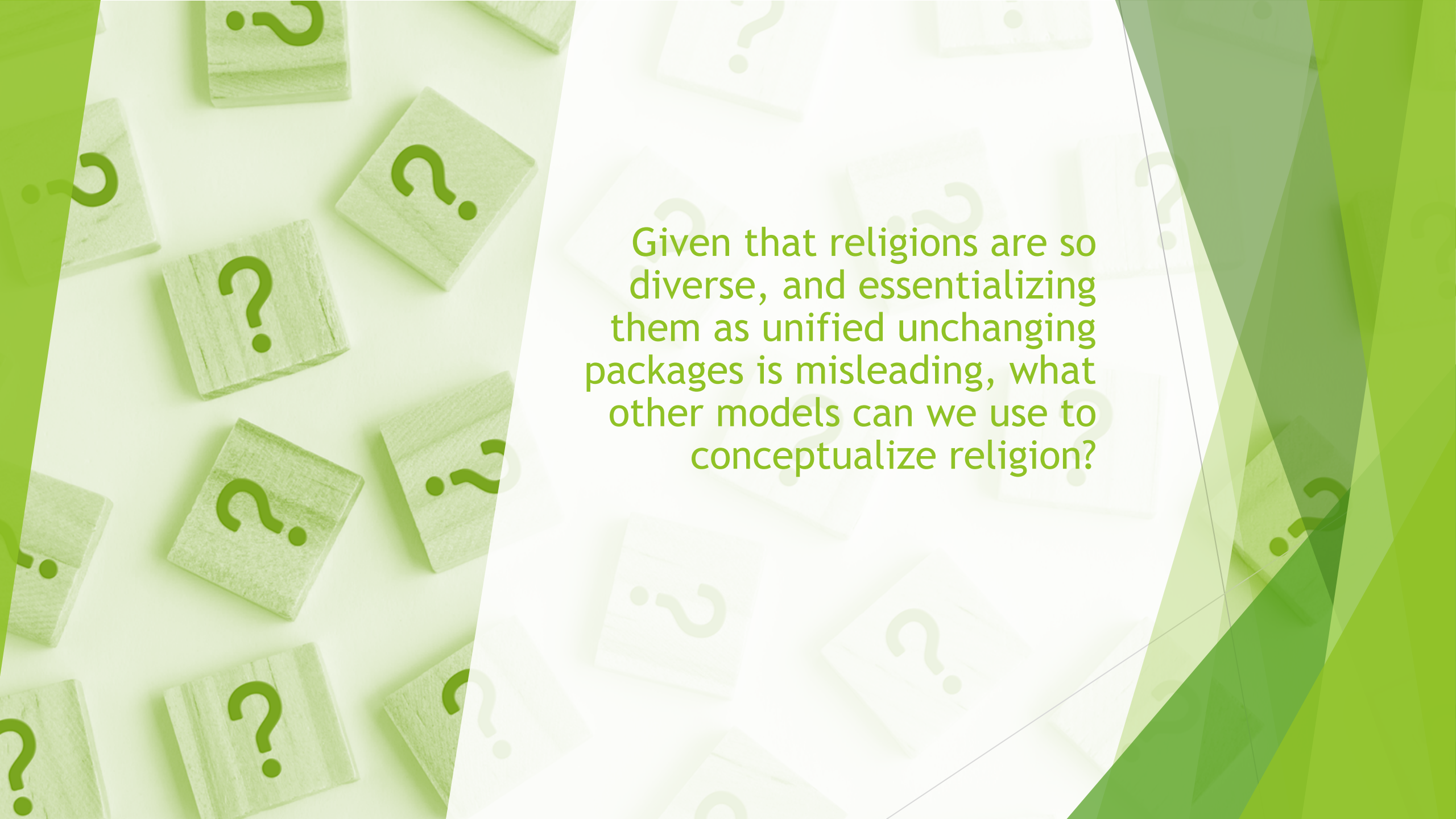
On-the-Spot, Situational Questions to Bear in Mind:

How is a knowledge claim or question situated?

What is the positionality of the interlocutor?

What is our own positionality with respect to the claim?

Is it a personal, community, or universal claim?

Given that religions are so diverse, and essentializing them as unified unchanging packages is misleading, what other models can we use to conceptualize religion?

B. The 4 Domains of Religion

- Ideas (Discourse)
- Practices
- Communities
- Authorities (Institutions)

IPCA (I pulled the cats around)

Ideas (discourse)

Claims

- "My religion says this...."
  - Universalist (telescope)
- "My priest said....."
  - Local, community (middle)
- "Those people believe that....."
  - Universalist (telescope)
- "Scriptures says ....."
  - Universalist (telescope)

Keep in mind

- Diversity of views and interpretations within traditions
- People are often fundamentalist about other people's religions
- Multiple lenses through which scripture is read and multiple purposes of scripture

Practices

Activities, Behaviors

- Use of material objects within religious settings
- Ritual practices, community practices, individual practices
- Behavioral obligations, moral codes

Keep in Mind

- MIA's mission and responsibilities
- Changing, shifting secularities
- Diversity in practices across religious groups

Communities

Communities

- Family
- Religious organizations
  - synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, gurdwaras, etc.
- Online and televised groups
- Other groups or organizations
  - work or school groups, social groups

Keep in Mind

- Tolerance and Dignity
- Politics of Representation
- Relative power relationships

Authorities

Appeals (overt or covert)

- Religious leaders
- Scripture
- Tradition
- Personal Experience

Keep in Mind

- Diversity of views and interpretations among religious leaders

On-the-Spot, Situational Questions to Bear in Mind:

What domain is this conversation about?

What is my relation to that domain? What is theirs?

What knowledges does that domain signal?

How are those knowledges situated?

Who/what "authorizes" the claim?

    (personal experience, text/scripture, religious authority)

Would another domain shed light on the question at hand?

C. Types of Engagements with Religions

- Comparison/contrast
  - Mine/theirs
- Defamiliarization (with one's own tradition)
  - May bring discomfort to insiders
  - Wow – I never thought of that
- Familiarization (with someone else's tradition)
  - Move toward empathy
  - Or the opposite
- Empathy

D. Social Themes Embedded in Religions

- Identity
  - Intersectionality (with different emphases in different contexts)
  - Racialization
- Gender
  - Constructions of gender as part of moral codes
  - Roles in communities, roles in authority
- Power
  - Personal, social, divine
  - Hegemonic contexts (Secularized Christianity in US)
  - Disempowerment
  - Appropriation
  - Acts of Recognition / Acts of Non-recognition

Religion and Polarization

- Religion as ideology, authorization
- Religion as a cultural resource
  - Available for deployment in a variety of circumstances
  - Available for deployment for a variety of reasons
- Religion as a component in culture wars
- Religion as a component in empire, colonization, oppression

On-the-Spot, Situational Questions to Bear in Mind:

Does the question at hand exhibit a specific engagement?

How does that engagement suggest positionality?

How do I want to position myself in this engagement?

How do power, gender, identity, or polarization have bearing on this conversation?

Given the internal diversity of thought and interpretation found in all religious traditions, what other positions might be taken by practitioners?

7th Inning Stretch

Part III
Summary and Suggestions

Our goals today

Start building (or honing) a toolkit of skills to turn potentially uncomfortable conversations into engaged and productive ones

Develop a stronger sense of religious diversity, both across traditions and within traditions

Shift from essentialist assumptions about religious beliefs to consider practices, experiences, and communities

Develop a stronger understanding of the complexities of religion that can help ground, contextualize, and expand conversations

Knowledge   Concepts   Language (meta-language)

Toolkit Concepts and Language

Situated knowledge and positionality
- Emic (insider, 1st or 2nd order), Etic (outsider, 3rd order)
- Zero order, Absolute
- Our own positionality, our conversation partner's positionality

Domains of religions
- Ideas, Practices, Communities, Authorities

Types of Engagements
- Comparison/contrast, (de)familiarization, empathy, polarization

Social Themes
- Identity, Gender, Power

Some Concluding Observations

- Context of secularized Christian practice
  - In higher education
  - In museums
  - Whether minority or majority religions, they are engaged with this context
    - Sometimes defined by it
    - Sometimes reshaping it
- Religions are emergent, contingent, internally diverse,
- Scripture is not static but always interpreted – an interpretations vary
- Religions are often more to do with what people <u>do</u> than what they <u>believe</u>
- Religious people engage with one another across traditions
- Identity is important, but process can be more important than product
  - Developmental rather than predetermines

On-the-Spot? Take a deep breath. . . .

- Focusing on "facts" is a slippery slope given the diversity of ideas and practices within traditions and communities

- Keep in mind that people are often motivated by practices and communities

- What positionalities are present? What situated knowledges?

- What domains of religion? Themes? Relationships?

- What path for engagement do you want to tread?

- Lean in – to learn how your interlocutor understands themselves within their tradition, within their community, within their practices, within authorities, and other power structure.

‣ Let's try it out

Exercise #2 : Back to your colored card

- What was your positionality in the example you wrote about and discussed at the beginning of this workshop?

- What situated knowledges were in play? What other positionalities?

- What domains were in play?

- What themes? Power? Gender? Identity?

- What relationships or types of engagement?

- Given the religious literacy tools presented today, what might you have done/said differently?

- Turn to your discussion partner and share.

Questions, Thoughts, Concerns, Blinding Flashes of Insight