

Religion in numbers (Part 3)

Investigating the reasons behind the unequal distribution of religious believers across the world

INTRODUCTION

Remind the students that they are looking at the relevance of using statistics to investigate big questions about the demographics of religious belief.

This session is designed to get students to understand that the distribution of religious people across the world is anything but random. Instead it is based on the historical and cultural development of each of the faiths and the subsequent migrations of people across the world.

This is a potentially controversial lesson because students could leave with the impression that religions are 'made up' if they were 'invented' at different times and in different places. However, this is a great opportunity to really delve deeply into this sort of issue so feel confident in dealing with these sort of questions by simply stating that you are looking at the historical development of these faiths. The fact that these religions developed in the way they did is simply a matter of historical fact.

Higher ability students might be encouraged to seek out links between the faiths and investigate, for example, how Sikhism and Buddhism emerged out of Hindu traditions and how Christianity emerged from a Jewish context.

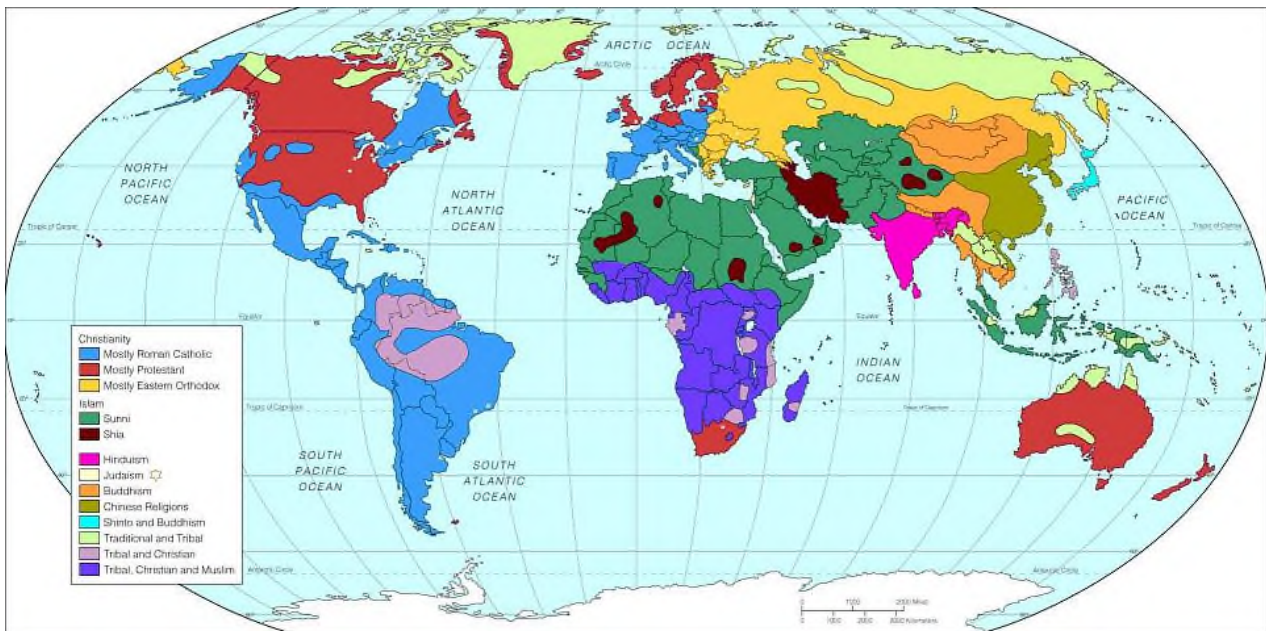
ACTIVITY

Begin the session by showing students the map below from: www.worldreligions.psu.edu/maps.htm

Then ask them for their responses to such questions as:

- *Are you surprised by the information on this map?*
- *How do you think the distribution of world religions ended up looking like this?*

If the students begin to identify some of the historical reasons for this distribution they deserve some significant praise!



ACTIVITY

Help the students to develop their understanding further by showing this video: www.mapsofwar.com/ind/history-of-religion.html

There is an almost unlimited amount you could chose to build on having watched this video. However, I would personally concentrate on some of the following issues:

1. The blank areas on this map are NOT areas where nobody lived. Instead, the people in these areas tended to be 'polytheists' or 'animists' (sometimes known as 'pagans') and thus believed in gods, goddesses, spirits and 'powers'. Many of these religions survive in various forms. It could be worth exploring why the makers of this map have not included 'pagans' at all in this video.
2. This video is brilliant for showing the relative ages of the religions. You could ask the students whether they are surprised that the oldest major religion which is still thriving in the modern world is Hinduism.
3. The video is called 'Maps of War' and shows quite well the dramatic military 'to and fro' between Christianity and Islam in the west and Islam and Hinduism in the East. What do the students think about this? Did they know the history of conflict between these religions? Does it contain any lessons for today's world? NOTE: This is obviously very controversial so make sure you have strong subject knowledge of this part of history before

attempting to delve too deeply into this area!

4. The map does a good job of showing how Christianity spread through the world through missionary work between the 17th and 20th Centuries. Did the students know about this? Did they know that the early European settlers attempted to convert local people across the Americas and in Australia? How do they feel about this?
5. The one thing the map doesn't do is show the effects of modern immigration into Europe from Africa and Asia and the subsequent introduction of what were previously eastern religions into western societies. It is worth explaining that nearly all non-Christians in western countries came here after World War 2 and that virtually all non-white people in Europe are descendents of these immigrants or immigrants themselves. It is worth stressing that most of this immigration was at the request of the British government who were looking for people to come to Britain to help it to rebuild after the war.
6. It is also worth pointing out that relatively few people from Asia have ever migrated to South America, though there are quite large populations of Hindus, for example, in Suriname and Guyana. Many were transported from India in the 19th and early 20th centuries by the British to act as skilled workers in the plantations.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this session it is worth asking the students what they think about what they have discovered and how it might have changed the way they look at the diversity of faiths in the world around them today.