

# BRIDGING THE GREAT DIVIDE: INTEGRATING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING INTO THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

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## Introduction

As the religio-spiritual landscape expands and fluctuates, many contemporary manifestations of religious identities are unable to be captured through textbooks and institutional analysis. By integrating academic disciplinary practices with 'on-the-ground' lived experiences, more nuanced understandings of the function –as well as the essence– of religious expression may emerge: I argue that experiential learning is up for the task.

In this project I discuss the benefits of integrating experiential learning into University of Victoria's Religion, Culture, and Society Program; the importance of studying lived religion; and the significance of exposing religious studies students to the academic adoption of embodied knowledge. I am conducting this project in hopes of bridging 'the great divide' between the academic study of religion and the people who embody religious practice in their own way, shape, or form. On a local scale, I suggest that the University of Victoria's Multifaith Centre– and its wide range of programs– be drawn upon for such experiential learning activities.



## Lived Religion

Defining what religion is comes with many challenges. Scholars often focus on matters attesting to the supposed essence of religious belief, or the function that religion plays in society. Many seek to objectively answer questions like what Muslims *believe*, or what Buddhist practitioners *do*, a trend that finds its way into public discourse, media channels, and popular culture.

Engaging with religion in this way has perpetuated discourse that essentializes the nature of deeply complex social systems, body politics, food systems, spiritual practices, and other-than-human cosmologies into dangerously generalized, monolithic categories.

## Experiential Methods

Experiential learning is a pedagogical practice combining

- information from primary and secondary sources;
- insights from personal experience;
- and engagement with critical reflection.

This interplay of understanding is known as **"reconstructed knowledge"** in that it draws on material learned cognitively, as well as material experienced through the senses.

"The goal is to teach religion responsibly within the academy; using methodologies that fit in an academic setting, while at the same time teaching religious authentically; and give a taste of the effect of practice through time." **Oldstone-Moore, p.110.**

## Analogous Activities

Dr. Beverley McGuire suggests that secular, accessible, and participatory practices –such as stillness, mindfulness meditation, singing, and social media fasts– that mimic some aspect of religious practice, can, and should be employed in the academic study of religion. These practices are proposed as "analogous activities," in that they are "analogous but not identical to religious practice"

"Analogous activities are designed to simulate Confucian concern for how one relates to others, Daoist emphasis on the value of stillness, Hindu ascetic notions of self-discipline (social media fast) Sikh appreciation of daily devotion, Jain attention to non-harming, and Buddhist approaches to training the mind."

**McGuire, 2019, p.118.**

## The Multifaith Centre



Figure 1.1. Retrieved from the Uvic Multifaith website. <https://www.uvic.ca/campus/multifaith-centre/index.php>

The Multifaith center is home to twelve different faith communities and a team of Anglican, Baha'i, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Christian Science, Hindu, Jewish, Lutheran, Muslim, Presbyterian, Unitarian and United representatives.

An average week at the Multifaith may include the following programs:

Friday Prayers (Jumuaah), Women's Halaqa (Islamic Lecture), Yoga for 2SLGBTQIA+ and Allies, Meditation (as well as Zen meditation), Chants and Kirtan, and Inclusive Christians: Around the Table Campus Communion, just to name a few.



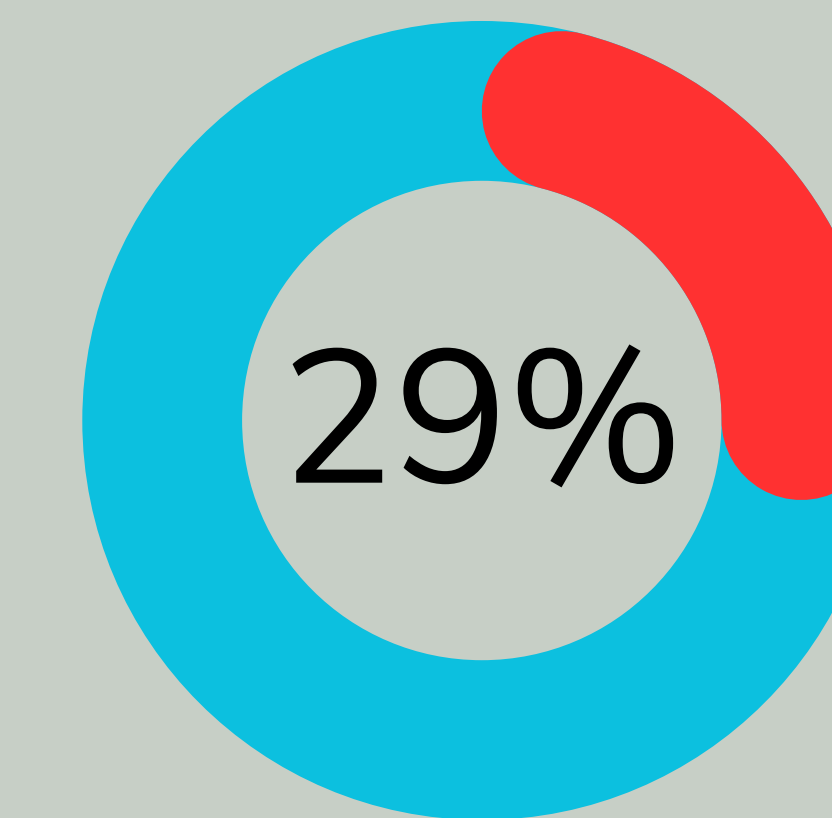
Figure 1.2. The Multifaith Centre. Photographed by Ash Nesbitt-Bottoms, 2024.

If experiential learning methodologies were to be employed in the University of Victoria's Religion, Culture, and Society Program, **I argue that the Multifaith Centre can act as a potential home base for RCS students.** The Centre is a uniquely diverse, syncretic representation of how lived religion evolves, unfolds, and is performed 'on the ground.' It is in these types of spaces that we encounter forms of religion and spirituality that often defy textbook description.

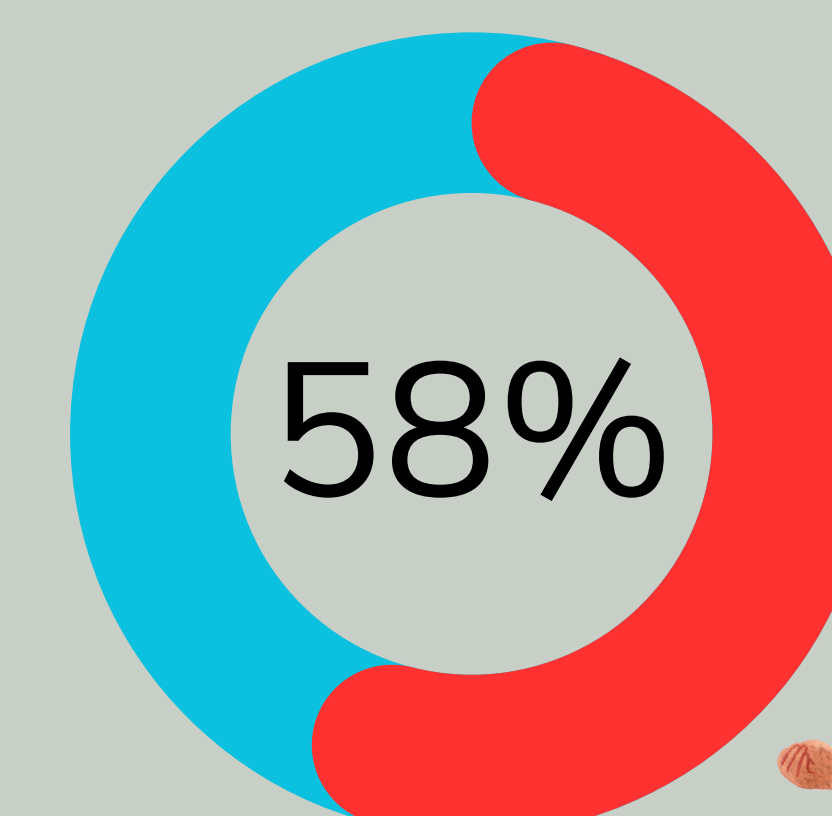
There is a common Western presupposition that religion is characterized by a belief in God or gods (i.e., orthodoxy). This assumption inadvertently disregards a number of traditions that do not consider belief to be a core value of their religiosity, but rather centralize religious practice (i.e., orthopraxy).

By engaging in experiential methodologies, students are able to interrogate Eurocentric misconceptions prioritizing orthodoxy over orthopraxy as the supreme element of religious orientation, resulting in a much better grasp of how prominent and diverse religious practices are within people's lives. **McGuire, 2019, p.124.**

In the pre-test, 29% of students recognized practice as central to religion, while 80% reported belief.



In the post-test, after participating in analogous activities, 58% of students recognized practice as central to religion.



-McGuire, 2019, p.124.

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

## Conclusion

This project has argued for the integration of experiential learning into the University of Victoria's Religion, Culture, and Society Program by utilizing resources provided by the Multifaith Centre. By cultivating a more personalized approach to the study of religion, students can examine religion in specific social contexts; understand that religious categories are not monolithic; appreciate religious practice and embodiment as being just as central as belief; and gain greater insight in learning how to interpret the ever-evolving religio-spiritual landscape.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Andrew Wender, Dr. Rachel Brown, Rev. Ruth Dantzer, Dr. Paul Bramadat, Melanie Hibi, and my aunt, Peg Oneil, for the support, expertise, and encouragement in conducting this project.

## Dethroning Secularity from the Ivory tower

Especially following the European Enlightenment, modern thought stimulated the West's fascination– and obsession– with rationality, science, objectivity, and empiricism, thereby refuting claims made by individuals if their ideas did not align with secular thought. Although the division of church and state prohibited religious influence from dominating the public sector –as Christianity had done for so many centuries– the development of a secular society simultaneously smothered ways of knowing that did not align with Euro-centric, colonially entrenched, scientifically 'objective' knowledge systems. We must interrogate what types of knowledge are prioritized in the academy, and for whose benefit.

"Secularism isn't just about favoring the State over the Church; historically, it's also been about favoring Christianity over other belief systems like Islam, paganism, and magic, labeling them as 'irrational' or 'demonic.'" **Blencowe, 2021, p.395.**

This critique is notably recognized through the subjugation of Indigenous ways of knowing; "no branch of learning was left untouched by the colonial experience," and "one of the primary tools of colonialism was the education system." **Cote-Meek, 2014**

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