

Research as Inquiry, Social Justice, and the Particularist Challenges of Religious Traditions in an Age of Terror and Hate

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Religion & Information Literacy (Research as Inquiry)

- Religion is potentially important for any critical cultural study. Deepens inquiry.
- Religion maintains special place in American culture and politics, integral to understanding power structures and dynamics (Fowler 2014).
- 2000's – present: "Post-secular" era
 - Increasing recognition by philosopher Jürgen Habermas and others that religion has not made permanent retreat in wake of rationalism and modernization (Bahram 2013).
- Teaching "religious literacy" (basic facts) is not sufficient for understanding how religion shapes people's actions in the world (Lewis 2015).
 - Yet, many students' notions of religion have never been subjected to critical reflection (Medine, Penner, and Lehman 2015).

Religion & Social Justice

- Social justice concepts and imperatives are part of virtually all religions (Palmer and Burgess 2012).
- Religion is uniquely situated. According to Habermas, it functions as:
 - 1) historical-social institution
 - 2) worldview or "comprehensive doctrine"
 - 3) common "language"
 - 4) instrument for social/cultural criticism (Bahram 2013).
- Naming and deconstructing Christian privilege in U.S. can be a liberatory pedagogical act (Riswold 2015).
- Can be key part of social analysis.

Catholic Social Analysis

- Late 1970's – 1980's on: Catholic thinkers build on work of Freire 1970 (circle of praxis) and Segundo 1976 (hermeneutic circle).
- Social analysis = key component of pastoral circle/spiral "aimed at action on behalf of justice" with/by the Church (Holland and Henriot 1983, p. 30).



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Social Analysis: Guiding Questions for Current Issues*

Sociological

- Who is involved locally, regionally, nationally, and globally?
- Who are the actors, and what are their roles?
- What organizations are involved, directly or indirectly?
- How are the persons and groups connected (or not) in this situation?
- What are the important relationships in the history of this situation?
- Whose experience is necessary to hear? Whose perspective would add information?
- Whose expertise is needed to create positive change?
- What is *your* involvement? What role(s) do you play?

Economic

- Who benefits? Who is burdened? Who is responsible?
- What are the economic structures and dynamics involved?
- What economic systems are the various groups working with?
- What resources do the major actors have?
- How are resources being used to influence or affect this issue?
- What are the economic relationships (or potential relationships) in this area?
- What role has economics played in the history of this issue?
- What are *your* relationships in this area?

Political

- What is the role of politics in this issue and its history?
- How are politics being used to influence this issue, or how might politics be used?
- What political structures are active in this situation?
- Who has political power? What kind of political influence do the major actors have?
- What regulations or legislation (if any) concerns this issue?
- What lobbying groups are involved? With whom and on behalf of whom?
- What power dynamics are at play here?
- How are those dynamics related to one another? How are they related to *you*?

Cultural

- What is the role of culture in this issue and its history?
- Which cultures play a prominent role?
- What cultural "structures" are involved (traditions, rituals, practices, language, art, initiation rites, common beliefs or myths, etc.)?
- What cultural dynamics are at work?
- What cultural values are the various groups working with or influenced by?
- How does culture express meaning or values in this situation?
- How does culture frame the issues?
- What cultural values and practices influence *your* thinking and acting in relation to this issue?

Environmental

- How is the environment impacted?
- How does the environment impact this situation?
- How is the health of the Earth community (all living things) impacted?
- Who or what is flourishing? What is languishing or dying? What is burdened?
- What responsibility for the environment does each actor have or claim? How is that responsibility being fulfilled (or not)?
- What is the geography of this issue? (Where are the affected, or potentially affected areas?)
- What group(s), if any, are attentive to the environment's role or stake in this issue?
- Are the environmental connections or implications local, regional, national, global, or a combination?
- What is *your* involvement or role(s)? How might you or your group be impacted?

Religious

- What is the role of religion in this issue and its history?
- What religious beliefs or values are influential? Are there conflicting beliefs or values pertinent to this situation?
- What religious institutions or groups play a prominent role?
- What religious structures or dynamics are involved or active in this situation?
- What role do government regulations, legislation, or lobbyists for faith-based groups play?
- What religious or faith-based groups have power in this situation? What kind of power? How are they related?
- What are specific religious groups or pundits saying? What is their involvement?
- Is there a particular religious lens *you* bring to this issue (Christian, Buddhist, secular/humanist, etc.)?

*Adapted from Maria Cimperman, *Social Analysis for the 21st Century*, with foreword by Peter Henriot, SJ (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015).

Example Exercises/Assignments

See page 4 for primary text exercise.

See Project CORA for primary text and social analysis assignments:
www.projectcora.org/users/dzingsweet.

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Primary Text Exercise

Instructions: Read the following excerpt from a primary source, then answer the questions below.

“Our religion is knowledge, work, and good intent.
So let us learn good knowledge and let us have wisdom:
Let’s mend our ways, and
Let’s set our intentions straight, and
May God bless us with success.
God keep our religion pure for us, for that’s what holds us together, and set our lives straight in this life we live, and mend our ways to be ready for heaven to which we will eventually return.”

Questions: Look carefully at the passage for any clues to the following questions:

1. How would you summarize the passage in your own words?
2. What religious tradition(s) do you think it references? Explain your reasoning.
3. When do you think this was written? What do you think its social and cultural setting is? Why?
4. What kind of person do you think wrote it (profession, clergy person or layperson, education level, economic or social class, etc.)? Explain your reasoning.
5. What do you think the purpose of this text might be? Why do you think this?