



## **CONSIDERING RELIGION ABROAD: A QUICK GUIDE FOR ADVISORS**



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## ABOUT THE GUIDE AND AUTHORS

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This guide was produced by a subgroup of the 2019-2020 Religious Identity Task Force. The task force is a collection of global education and diversity professionals who provide critical guidance and support to Diversity Abroad initiatives. This Advising Guide is intended for global education professionals responsible for advising students interested in global education opportunities.

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# CONSIDERING RELIGION ABROAD:

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## A QUICK GUIDE FOR ADVISORS

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The diversity of students participating in global education opportunities has steadily increased over the past few years. Students who are religiously/spiritually diverse are among this rising group of students participating in global education. Religion and Spirituality is an important element in many of the societies in which students study abroad. This quick guide will provide insight for students and advisors who have questions as to how religion and spirituality may impact a global education experience.

### Why have a guide like this?

Study abroad programs have the goal of developing students' intercultural competence.

In the United States, we are socialized to believe religion is a taboo subject. However, faith traditions can be an important window into intercultural understanding. Study abroad practitioners should not be reluctant to talk about religion as an important lens for intercultural learning within the context of study abroad.

Faith can be an important dimension when exploring the host country culture and one's own identity. If we are not willing to engage students in these conversations, we are missing out on opportunities to help students develop important competencies that promote intercultural development and reflection of one's own identity.

### Questions to engage with:

1. As study abroad practitioners, how can we prepare ourselves to engage in conversations about religious identity and its impact on health, safety, and security abroad?
2. How do we help students overcome religion-centric health and safety challenges while abroad?
3. What resources are available for advising students of different religious identities on health, safety, and security issues abroad?

## **As study abroad practitioners, how can we prepare ourselves and our students to engage in conversations about religious identity and its impact on health, safety, and security abroad?**

### **Pre-acceptance**

- ◇ When you have your initial advising session with a student, consider having them fill out a questionnaire that include questions about faith such as:
  - » Are you religious? Do you identify with a particular faith? If so, have you given any thought to how this particular aspect of your identity will have salience while abroad?
  - » Will you practice your religion and/or spiritual beliefs while abroad? Have you considered contacting local faith groups?
  - » Regardless of your faith tradition, have you considered attending local services as a way to learn more about the local culture?
- ◇ Consider on-campus resources such as the spiritual life office or religious/spiritual student groups

### **Post-acceptance**

During your advising appointments, assign your student some homework such as looking over the U.S. Department of State website and finding out what is the main faith practiced in their host country, as well as these questions:

- ◇ Will I be part of the religious majority or minority abroad?
- ◇ Are there any laws regarding religion? Is there a separation between religion and government?
- ◇ How tolerant is the host country of other religions? What about atheists and agnostics?
- ◇ Is it safe for me to wear religious symbols or clothing?
- ◇ What are ways I can respect the religion in my host country and participate in cultural events, even if I don't practice that religion? (Taken from "Religious Diversity Abroad – Must-Ask Questions")

### **Pre-departure orientation**

- ◇ Consider having identity-based pre-departure workshops (e.g., <https://cge.tulane.edu/node/2481>)
- ◇ Add a section about faith to your pre-departure handbook (e.g., <https://www.northwestern.edu/abroad/student-experiences/identity-diversity/religion-spirituality.html>)
- ◇ Include the topic of faith in parent guides/resources

## How do we help students overcome religion-centric health and safety challenges while abroad?

Although topics related to health and safety in the context of religion and spiritual beliefs may never be all encompassing, it's important to make sure the student has planned for potential situations and help them consider their religious limitations abroad such as:

- ◇ Access to communities of faith
- ◇ Access to places of worship (regular and holidays)
- ◇ Majority/minority religious relations in country

While abroad, if a student feels they are being unfairly treated because of religious custom or practice, help them connect with the in-country staff/advisor. The advisor in the host country may already have a roadmap to fix this issue. Also remember to remind students of the following opportunities:

- ◇ Potential for increasing cross-cultural understanding by viewing their own religion from different perspective
- ◇ Potential impact of practicing their religion while abroad may be a significant milestone in the student's own religious journey

Remember, religion is an important aspect of culture. As such, students should:

- ◇ Respect local religions
- ◇ Know the local laws in regard to religion, especially as this relates to other aspects of a students' identity. Religion may influence a society's beliefs around gender or sexual orientation, and a study abroad student should be very clear about how this might influence their safety, sense of acceptance, or overall experience while abroad. Students should not be judgmental about the local religion; instead they should try to understand how faith influences their daily lives, why they worship as they do, why they believe as they do. Students do not have to accept the local religion but can gain a deeper understanding of the local culture while exploring their own relationship with faith.
- ◇ Be wise about how one discusses religion. Students may find that in the developed world, religion is not a prevalent influencer of contemporary culture in the local community, so students might gain more by discussing other topics. However, in the developing world, religion may be much more central to the host culture, so students should not be afraid to inquire about the local religion as long as it is done with respect.

- ◇ Encourage students to use the local religion as a way to understand the local community:
  - » Students can be encouraged to join one of the local faith communities. This may initiate friendships and be a catalyst for students to learn more about their own faith as they see it practiced in a new culture.
  - » Even for those who do not join a local faith community, encourage them to attend local worship services as these can provide insight into the local community.
  - » Encourage students to blend in as much as possible in the religious services by wearing appropriate attire, showing proper respect to icons, etc. If they do not know what is appropriate, encourage them to ask.
- ◇ In general, teach students that all of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they use for success in study abroad can be applied when navigating new religious communities or faith traditions:
  - » Be tolerant
  - » Withhold judgement
  - » Be curious
  - » Be respectful

(Taken from: "Talking Religion: Religious Diversity in Study Abroad Advising")

## What resources are available for advising students of different religious identities on health, safety, and security issues abroad?

- ◇ [Pluralism Project](#) – An ongoing research effort, the Pluralism Project studies and interprets religious diversity and interfaith relations in the United States
- ◇ [Pew Templeton Global Religious Futures Projects](#) – Explore the rapidly changing religious profile of the world through 2050
- ◇ [The Economist](#) – Review political and societal religious issues in your host country
- ◇ [Department of State – Religious Freedom Reports](#) – Updates on how each country is doing from a religious freedom perspective
- ◇ [Religious Diversity Abroad – Must Ask Questions](#)
- ◇ [Talking Religion: Religious Diversity in Study Abroad Advising](#)
- ◇ Contact your local (home country) interfaith groups

## Examples of Study Abroad Office and Provider Religious Identity Websites

- ◇ [Religion and Spirituality – Middlebury Schools Abroad](#)
- ◇ [Religious and Non-Religious Students Abroad](#) – George Washington University
- ◇ [Religion and Spirituality Abroad- Brown University](#)
- ◇ [Be International SDSU Study Abroad Blog- topic Religion & Spirituality](#)
- ◇ [Identity and Culture Resources](#) – Brandeis University
- ◇ [Religious Communities in Stockholm](#) – DIS Study Abroad
- ◇ [Diversity and Inclusion](#) – Semester at Sea

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