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# California Three Rs

## Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

*A Project of the California County Superintendents Educational  
Services Association and The First Amendment Center*

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### Learning About Religion and Beliefs in the Classroom Using Primary Sources

Margaret Hill, Ph.D., California Three Rs Project Lead

Teaching about religion in the public school classroom presents unique challenges. In order to avoid stepping over the line of government endorsement of religion, the approach must be academic, and any presentations must remain neutral and academic in focus. The line between learning about and practicing or simulating a practice of religion must be firmly guarded. Every effort must be made to be accurate and even handed.

Since inclusion of the study of religion is necessary for a sound education and is required by California's standards, do these First Amendment restraints leave teaching about religion to boring worksheet driven tasks? No indeed. History, after all, involves the retelling of events and decisions that people in the past debated passionately. The interpretations of the cause and meaning of these events and decisions are often also hotly debated today by historians. Using documents and primary sources related to religion and its influence is a great way to bring the influence of religion on society to life in the classroom and allow students to act as historians to determine what and why things happened as they did and what it means for today's world.

What do historians mean by primary sources? Primary sources may mean the government documents with which we are familiar such as the Constitution, Bill of Rights, Declaration of Independence, and Magna Carta, but they could also be letters, diaries, speeches, pieces of historical art or music, news articles, advertisements, etc. My work in the last several years putting together the curriculum materials about religion's influence on American history for the Religion in American History Institutes has shown me just how available primary materials have become. The options are endless for using primary sources to create interesting and thought-provoking lessons. What are the best ways to do so?

Using documents about religion and its influence allows teachers to introduce these ideas without taking large amounts of precious class time. As the sources are used teachers can challenge student thinking and hone their skills in perspective-taking, comparing, interpreting, evaluating, and synthesizing. The documents can add a dimension to a standard topic. For example, all eighth grade students in California study the Civil War, but how many have looked at the role of faith groups in supporting various sides of the slavery question or know how the U.S. Congress upheld the Constitution by overriding General Grant's order to expel Jews from Pederhah, Kentucky. Likewise, a single document might be used in a number of different places within the curriculum to enrich the discussion. For example, the memorial (petition) from New York nativists to Congress in 1837 asking the government to withhold voting rights from Irish immigrants, for fear that their allegiance to the Pope of their

Roman Catholic faith, could be used to engage students in a discussion of Article VI of the Constitution, the issue of immigration in historical perspective, the study of 19th c. nativists and the Know Nothings, the campaigns of Al Smith and John Kennedy, or the right of petition in the First Amendment. Discussion of religion in history or literature may engender controversy about what happened in the past and what it may have meant. Asking students to interpret and draw meaning from sources in order to reach their own conclusions from evidence and reasoned argument moves a controversy away from gut reactions and emotionalism.

One of the reasons primary sources are so effective is that they put a human face on history. Using them, teachers can set up lessons that allow students to become historians themselves as they analyze, interpret, and draw conclusions from the sources. Students find that they often draw different conclusions from the sources than their peers. Primary sources draw students into the issues, prompt them to ask questions, and push them to seek more information...all important skills in the Reading-Language Arts Standards and History-Social Science Thinking Skills. Students learn first hand that there is often more than one interpretation of sources that results in more than one interpretation of history.

When using primary sources in the classroom, the teacher's role shifts. Instead of being the dispensers of the ideas and interpretations of the history under study, the teacher becomes the context setter and provider of access strategies for the sources that the students examine themselves. To set the context, the teacher tells a story of what was taking place at the time the primary source was created. For example, in the late 1830s when the New Yorkers were petitioning Congress in the example above, the story of the Irish potato famine provides a gripping context. The sheer size of the Irish migration and its impact on the working class in America makes the story even more compelling. Added to this, the historical culture wars between the Catholics and the Protestants that led in some ways to the settlement of the American colonies makes the document jump off the page. Students see glaring parallels to today's immigration debates and are drawn personally into the issues of church-state relations underlying America's freedoms.

How do teachers find and select appropriate primary sources? The new textbooks almost always have a compendium of primary material but the internet is the gold mine. The SCORE History-Social Science website <http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/> has a huge selection of sources sorted and searchable by standard and topic of study. A quick review of book publishers will lead to an array of primary source readers and topic-based publications. In order for these to be successful in the classroom, however, teachers must select the part of the source to use. Something too long not only discourages many students but takes too much class time. A variety of perspectives from different sources on the same topic or event are especially valuable. Different types of sources, such as news articles, audio files, images, oral history or trial transcripts, letters, and diaries increase accessibility by a diversity of students. Teachers must also determine the key vocabulary to preteach and explain historical spelling and script differences before students tackle the primary material.

In teaching with primary sources, it is important to start with open-ended questions to focus student inquiry. Teachers could also provide a generalization against which the source can be compared or they could use a human interest angle to promote empathy. They can set up situations where the students reflect on and react to the source in writing or discussion. They can create opportunities for partners or small groups of students to engage with one another and develop their own questions or create hypotheses. In all cases students need to summarize, respond to questions, record their ideas and interpret sources in writing as well as orally.

The writing that students create as part of primary source analysis can be an important part of the assessment of their learning. Called document-based essays, this type of writing is a vital skill for college bound students and is now used in New York as part of the state assessments for all students beginning in the elementary grades. In California, it is useful training for the writing assessments in grades 4 and 7. After writing, students can be challenged to create a museum display, an editorial, a political cartoon, or analyze the validity of the perspective presented in the source. But the most important reason to use primary sources in the study of religion in history-social science classes is that it represents the best way to promote reasoned understanding around the sometimes controversial and sensitive issues that surround the study of faith and its impact on history.



California Three Rs Project, CSU San Bernardino, San Joaquin COE,  
San Bernardino CSS, and Orange County DOE

invite

Grade 4-12 teachers, administrators, and curriculum specialists to a  
Teaching American History Institute



# Religion in American History: What to Teach and How to Teach It

## Part II: June 16-20, 2008



**LOCATION:** San Joaquin County Office of Education  
Educational Service Center – Kingston Room (2<sup>nd</sup> floor)  
2707 Transworld Drive, Stockton, CA 95206

**TIME:** 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

**STIPEND:** \$500 after summer session;  
additional \$250 after follow-up meetings and assessments

**BONUS:** \$300 in resources for control group class  
for the project evaluation

**FOLLOW-UP:** 2 days TBA, sub costs paid  
(Housing available for teachers traveling more than 1 hour)

### TOPICS

Established Churches in Late 18<sup>th</sup> c. & Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom; Foundations for Religious Liberty in the Constitution – No Religious Test & First Amendment; Religious Influences on Politics and Reform in 19<sup>th</sup> c.; Anti-Catholic Activity and Know Nothings, Utopianism, Mormons; Religious Influences 1880s-1920s, KKK, Scopes Trial; Religious Liberty Re-emphasized in Flag Salute Case and FDR's Four Freedoms; Religion and Communism During the Cold War – Religion and Civil Rights Movement; Diversity of Religion in America after the Immigration Act of 1965; 20<sup>th</sup> c. Court Interpretations and Their Influence on Understanding the First Amendment; Current Issues Related to Religion and Public Education; Applying the Three Rs Civic Principles

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----- Religion in American History Institute -----

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

School Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

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Work Phone ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Cell/Home Phone: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Email (required) \_\_\_\_\_ Grade level(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Mail or fax completed registration coupon to: CSU San Bernardino, Ed Leadership and Curriculum,  
Attention - Margaret Hill, Director CA 3Rs Project and Religion in American History Institute,  
5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407-2397 Fax (909) 537-7173

**DEADLINE: June 1, 2008**

### **Common Ground Resources:**

***Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools*** by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas. First Amendment Center, 2007.

This book has guidelines on how to handle a wide range of issues related to religious liberty and public schools.

**First Amendment Center: Religious Liberty** [http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel\\_liberty/index.aspx](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/index.aspx)

This is an up-to-the-minute resource with current issues and court cases. A PDF version of ***Finding Common Ground*** is available here.

#### **For California Three Rs program information, contact...**

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#### **For First Amendment religious liberty information, contact...**

Dr. Charles C. Haynes, First Amendment Center Senior Scholar, First Amendment Center/Arlington  
1101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22209 Tel: 703/528-0800 Fax: 703/284-3519  
[chaynes@freedomforum.org](mailto:chaynes@freedomforum.org)

#### **For information on teaching about world religions, contact...**

Dr. Bruce Grelle, Director, Religion and Public Education Resource Center, Department of Religious  
Studies, California State University Chico, Chico, CA 95929-0740, (530) 898-4739,  
[bgrelle@csuchico.edu](mailto:bgrelle@csuchico.edu)

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