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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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### Enhancing Civic Literacy by Learning to Talk About Religion

By Margaret Hill,

Director, CA 3Rs Project

Would an outsider bombarded by the public vitriol of the 24-hour news cycle recognize that in America freedom of belief and expression are cherished and protected natural rights for everyone? Though “religion related talk” is everywhere evident as groups vie with one another to control the public agenda, the 3Rs Principles of Rights, Responsibility and Respect, seem little in evidence. Does this mean that our society has lost the ability, and maybe even the will, to live up to its ideals?

Though people may know in their minds that in a pluralistic, democratic society, the public square will never fully reflect their own beliefs, our rights to freedom of expression allow them to push for it anyway. Many conclude that the suspicion and mistrust that has resulted from this long and vicious wrangling for dominance may be winning the day. The level of invective in the public square would likely decrease if there were more opportunities to practice respect and civility as tomorrow’s citizens matriculate through the educational system.

Popular society until now has not recognized the need for students to practice civil discourse involving religiously related topics. In fact, most of us learned as we grew up that religion and politics were subjects to be avoided if we wanted to maintain friendly relations with others. What we now see is that the divide in America has grown so wide that when we talk to others about what were earlier considered safe topics, the conversation now explodes into controversy. This is because that maxim doesn’t take into consideration that in the 21st century, the US is the most culturally diverse country in the world with, according to the Pew Forum on Religion in 2008, 80% counting themselves as religiously affiliated. Ubiquitous media access, that allows everyone to publish their views instantly on the web, Facebook or Twitter, demands that the role of faith in forming positions on civic issues cannot be ignored. What we thought were routine discourse issues such as the environment, health care, and school curriculum, etc., suddenly become hot topics because people’s civic views vary dramatically based considerably on their faith-based assumptions.

California’s educational leaders recognized more than 20 years ago that it could not ignore the influence of belief in society and included the role of religion in history. From studies of the Crusades to Civil Rights and much more, there is finally recognition that the influence of belief on social action has been dramatic. Social studies curriculum frameworks and textbooks now include more on religions and the relationship of religious beliefs to historical events and to civic issues. We need to do even more. Outside of the social studies classroom, religion is seldom mentioned though it’s influence on all aspects of society from diet to dress, gender roles to confidence in scientific authority are ever present.

We're not doing enough in schools to help prepare the next generation of citizens to participate effectively in the religiously and culturally diverse society in which they live. What can and should we do?

### **Learning How to Talk About Religion**

The reason people don't talk directly about religion is that it is often difficult. But the best place to learn how to have civil conversations that include religious views is still in schools and classrooms. Public schools are the one place in society charged with preparing the next generation of citizens who can communicate effectively with a diversity of peoples and cultures to meet economic, political, social, and security goals. Schools are also the place where children of all languages, cultures and beliefs come together.

In a recent article for Educational Leadership, Robert Kunzman provided a set of strategies for fostering what he calls civic multilingualism, or the ability to converse across differing ethical and religious perspectives. They sound very much like the 3Rs Project's principles and all educators will find them useful:

**1. Focus on respect instead of tolerance.**

As does 3Rs, Kunzman argues that respect is built from understanding and appreciation for why people of a particular religion believe and live the way they do. This understanding equips students to respectfully, and sensitively discuss issues that matter in the larger society, such as Muslim headscarves or Sikh turbans and kirpans. Tolerance, on the other hand, may be built totally on ignorance, leaving people incapable of resolving conflict with sensitivity and wisdom.

**2. Respect doesn't mean endorsement.**

In a free society, civic exchange naturally results in disagreement. Respecting another's position doesn't mean one has to agree with it. But respectful interchange allows each side to see that the other is reasonable as they posit positions within their religious and ethical frames of reference. Often the ability to acknowledge the reasonableness of the other's argument validates positions enough to allow people to live with their deepest differences.

**3. Reasonable doesn't mean right.**

Even when understanding of differing religious ideas is created in civic discourse, people may feel that competing arguments offer more valid positions in developing public policy. At the same time this understanding of how important a practice or idea is to particular set of religious adherents may lead knowledgeable policy makers to seek accommodation and exceptions for some.

**4. Religions are internally diverse.**

The vast number of people who identify with any major world religion results in a huge range and diversity among beliefs and practices. This may be based on sect, time in history, a dominant religion's influence on minority practice, nonreligious cultural norms, and personal interpretation. Recognizing this diversity may help educators who are not religious studies scholars understand that they will never be experts on all interpretations of a faith. But, more importantly may also circumvent stereotyping that can lead to egregious social justice problems such as the media conflation of Muslim and terrorist.

**5. Focus on the civic implications, not the beliefs themselves.**

Since the goal of public schools is to build civic competence, not to have students question their religious values, it is important to steer discussion toward the civic implications of religious beliefs. One way schools deal with civic implications of faith is through providing opportunity for open-ended discussion such as: Given the sacred commitment to uncut hair and turbans among many Sikhs and the US military's need for safety helmets and a sense "esprit de corps" through common appearance, is there common ground for accommodation that would allow Sikhs to serve their country in the armed services?

**6. Public and private mix but shouldn't match.**

The focus of public schools is on creating civic multilingualism, not pushing for a government that mirrors everyone's private belief. Students need to learn that, though citizens don't have to give up convictions of religious truth, no one gets to fully impose his or her version of that truth through the power of government on others in the public square.

## 7. Students should know their teachers' convictions – about respectful conversation.

Teachers must model respectful conversations and a commitment to reasonable disagreement as essential practices. Teachers and students alike need to approach controversy with questions, not answers. To do this, teachers need to ask themselves open-ended questions like: What are my biases in approaching this issue? What are the best arguments among competing points of view? How do competing views critique my position? How does this issue affect people with whom I profoundly disagree? Am I consulting a wide range of sources from varying perspectives?

### Face-to-Faith – A Bridge to Religious Divide

Other opportunities to practice civic multilingualism are also available. Through the efforts of Charles Haynes and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation some schools in California have been working on a way to bridge the religious divide and enhance student civic multilingualism. With First Amendment guidance from Charles Haynes, director of the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum, the Foundation is providing students meaningful opportunities to learn from one another across the globe about the role of faith and belief in public life. The Face to Faith Foundation offers no cost opportunity and support to middle and high schools to set up and monitor international video conferencing opportunities that allows California students to engage in respectful dialogue with students in other nations on issues related to the environment, setting policy on wealth, poverty and charity, or on topics related to artistic and other expression. Recently US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, participated in one of the conferences between a high school in Virginia and a school in the United Arab Emirates in Dubai.

“The United States is changing rapidly,” Sec. Duncan said during the exchange. “Young people need to embrace it - not be overwhelmed by diversity. There are two paths: tolerance or intolerance and we can look to young people to help lead us to tolerance. Face to Faith is an amazingly inspiring and powerful way to learn, and create more space for this important dialogue.”

This fall, the CA 3Rs Project will feature a Bulletin that explains the program more fully and will offer a pathway to participation by more schools in California. Between now and then preview the Faith to Face website and use the seven strategies above to create respectful dialogue and enrich classroom discussion about subjects that really matter in the world and to students themselves.

### Sources:

Beauchamp, Marcia. “Face to Faith: Teaching Global Citizenship.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 93.4 (2012): p24-27. Print.

“Face to Faith Program.” *Tony Blair Faith Foundation*. Copyright © 2011 The Tony Blair Faith Foundation.

May 2, 2012 <http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation/projects/facetofaith>

Haynes, Charles C. “To Bridge Religious Divide, Let Students Engage Students.” *Inside the First*

*Amendment, Religion Commentary*. February 10, 2012 First Amendment Center. April 27, 2012.

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### Reason vs. Rhetoric - Understanding American Muslims

June 28, 2012 from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Co-sponsored by the Religious Freedom Education Project

The Knight Conference Center, Newseum

555 Pennsylvania Ave., NW - Sixth street entrance

Washington, DC 20001

Four panels will be presented: Panel 1: Religious Freedom and American Muslims, Panel 2: American Muslims: Caricature vs. Reality, Panel 3: Sharia and Other Religious Laws, Panel 4: Mosques in America Find out more about registration and live streaming at <http://events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/event?llr=ibzhz8bab&oeidk=a07e5v5ufi1427d11e9&viewType=DESKTOP>

### **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. Download for free at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/FCGcomplete.pdf>. This book has guidelines on how to handle a wide range of issues related to religious liberty and public schools.

The ***Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum*** <http://www.religiousfreedomeducation.org/> is the new program at the First Amendment Center with a focus on religious liberty in public life. Dr. Charles Haynes is the director.

For California Three Rs program information, contact...

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For First Amendment religious liberty information, contact...

Dr. Charles C. Haynes, Senior Scholar, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 555 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington D.C. 20001 Tel: 202/292-6293 [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, 400 West First Street, Chico, CA 95929-0740,  
(530) 898-4739, [bgrelle@csuchico.edu](mailto:bgrelle@csuchico.edu)

Sign up to receive the Three Rs Bulletin and program announcements electronically at [mhill@csusb.edu](mailto:mhill@csusb.edu) or see <http://ca3rsproject.org/> for the CA3Rs Project Bulletin archive.

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