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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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### Teaching about Religion in Public Schools

Adapted from Finding Common Ground by Margaret Hill

*Knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person, but it is also absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity. Knowledge of religious differences and the role of religion in the contemporary world can help promote understanding and alleviate prejudice. Since the purpose of the social studies is to provide students with a knowledge of the world that has been, the world that is, and the world of the future, studying about religions should be an essential part of the social studies curriculum. Omitting study about religions gives students the impression that religions have not been and are not now part of the human experience. Study about religions may be dealt with in special courses and units or wherever and whenever knowledge of the religious dimension of human history and culture is needed for a balanced and comprehensive understanding.*

from the "Position Statement and Guidelines of the  
National Council for the Social Studies"

Growing numbers of educators in California recognize that study about religion in social studies, literature, art and music is an essential part of a complete public school education. California Content Standards and Curriculum Frameworks have set guidelines for the inclusion of teaching about religion in the curriculum. As a result, textbooks are expanding discussions of religion's role in history and culture, and many new supplementary materials concerning religion in history, art, and literature are being developed.

In light of this trend, the question for teachers is no longer "Should I teach about religion?," but rather, "What should I teach, and how should I do it?" The California Three Rs Project provides the civic and academic framework for answering the questions of "what" and "how." The aim of the guidelines and suggestions that follow is to help classroom teachers meet the challenges of teaching about religion in ways that are constitutionally permissible and educationally sound, while remaining sensitive to the beliefs of students and parents in the school community.

### Why Study about Religion Is Important

Teaching about religion is important and necessary if public schools are to provide students with a complete education. Much of history, art, music, literature and contemporary life is unintelligible without an understanding of the major religious ideas and influences that have shaped history and culture throughout the world. Even teaching religious liberty, the civic foundation that sustains the United States as one nation of many faiths, requires teaching about the role of

religion in history and culture. A recent report by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development described the place of religion in the curriculum:

*The proper role of religion in the school is the study of religion for its educational value. The task is to teach about religions and their impact in history, literature, art, music, and morality. It seems natural that the art curriculum, for example, must pay attention to the impact of Christianity on the work of Michelangelo, just as a history class focusing on the colonization of America must pay attention to the religious upheaval in sixteenth-century Europe that fueled that colonization.*

### A Civic Framework for Teaching about Religion

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*

The religious-liberty clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution provide the civic framework for teaching about religion in the public schools. The U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted the First Amendment to mean that public schools may neither promote nor inhibit religious belief or non-belief. The public school curriculum may not, therefore, include religious indoctrination in any form (including hostility to religions or religion in general). Such teaching would constitute state sponsorship of religion and would violate the freedom of conscience protected by the First Amendment.

In the 1960s school-prayer cases (that prompted rulings against state-sponsored school prayer and devotional Bible-reading), the Supreme Court indicated that public school education may include teaching *about* religion. In *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), the Court stated:

*[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.*

All public school teachers must have a clear understanding of the crucial difference between the teaching of religion and teaching about religion. In 1988, a broad coalition of 17 religious and educational organizations published guidelines that distinguish between teaching about religion and religious indoctrination. The guidelines state <[http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel\\_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=teaching\\_about\\_religion](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=teaching_about_religion)>, in part:

- The school's approach to religion is *academic*, not *devotional*.
- The school strives for student awareness of religions, but does not press for student *acceptance* of any one religion.
- The school sponsors *study* about religion, not the *practice* of religion.
- The school *exposes* students to a diversity of religious views; it does not *impose* any particular view.
- The school *educates* about all religions; it does not *promote* or *denigrate* any religion.
- The school *informs* students about various beliefs; it does not seek to *conform* students to any particular belief.

The California Three Rs Project advises teachers to include the study of religions where they occur naturally and fit logically in the curriculum. The History-Social Science Content Standards provide clear guidance for social studies educators. Though religious beliefs have been a major reason for much of the art and literature produced in the world, teachers in these content areas do not receive as much guidance from state content standards. They would do well to ask themselves the following questions before doing a lesson or activity :

- \* What is the academic purpose of what I am teaching?
- \* Why did I select this example from the .... religious tradition?
- \* How should I provide the needed cultural and religious context for my students to fully understand this example or selection?

In order to clearly distinguish between “teaching about” and “practicing” religious rituals or sacred practices, it is important to select instructional methods carefully. No matter how useful simulation or role play are for student learning, their use in learning about things sacred or religious should be strictly avoided. These practices have the potential of blurring the line between “teaching” and “practicing” no matter how careful or well-intended the teacher. A film that shows a religious ritual allows students and teachers to remain outside observers of a religious practice. They do not have to compromise their own beliefs to learn about another’s. Teachers should never use the study of religious ideas, art, or cultural norms to advocate for or criticize a belief.

#### **What does a good teaching about religious beliefs, writing, or art look like?**

- \* **It is balanced and objective**
- \* **It puts the beliefs, writings, and art in historical and social context**
- \* **It describes but doesn’t advocate**
- \* **It covers different religious traditions in approximately the same depth**
- \* **It avoids “we” and “they” statements**
- \* **It uses attribution, such as:**
  - “Some protestant Christians believe that...”
  - “Many Buddhists practice...”
- \* **It avoids student role play of or participation in any sacred ceremony or activity**

It is also important for educators to realize that these guidelines for teaching about religion apply equally to guest speakers. Since people who represent a particular faith often have difficulty being neutral about a set of beliefs that matters deeply to them, religious-studies faculty from local colleges are often the best source for factual information about religious traditions.

These guidelines are offered as an effort to promote thoughtful discussion and policy development in schools and districts. Educators throughout California are working very hard to meet the demands of rigorous standards, high stakes assessment, and rapidly changing demographics. The California Three Rs principles of understanding the First Amendment **Rights** of students, taking the **Responsibility** to protect those rights, and setting a tone of **Respect** for differences in belief not only make the school a more welcoming place to be for students, parents and faculty, but educate by example about the underlying fundamentals of American democracy.

**Common Ground Resources:**

*Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas. First Amendment Center, 2001.

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

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