



The California Three Rs Project

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

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BULLETIN

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Civil Conversation and Religion in Schools

Damon Huss
Director, California Three Rs Project

A few years ago, I conducted a deliberation on the subject of compulsory voting with a large group of students from various Southern California high schools as part of the Deliberation in a Democracy program. I did not expect religion to be an issue, but it became one nonetheless.

During the debriefing, one student raised her hand to speak. She told us that compulsory voting is not just a question of political rights. With her voice beginning to break, she told us, "It is against my family's religious beliefs to vote." I admired her willingness to share personal information that might perplex many or even make others uncomfortable, but that also brought up

an important issue about religious freedom that actually cut to the core of the day's discussion: What can the state compel?

The deliberation model we used that day involved structured academic controversy, a highly methodical way of getting students to discuss a controversial issue without resorting to emotion-based debate (at least, not right away). Students are assigned positions in answering a binary, yes-or-no question.

Another model, developed by Constitutional Rights Foundation and also by its partner organization in Chicago, is the civil conversation, based on similar principles of the structured

academic controversy. In both models of discussion, students use the same text to prepare discussion of a controversial subject. In civil conversation, students generally use a short article of several paragraphs. They read for content, re-read for deeper understanding, discuss areas of agreement and disagreement based on the textual evidence, and form questions. The model aligns

(See "Civil Conversation," Page 4)

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The California Three Rs Project co-sponsored by Constitutional Rights Foundation, California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, and the Religious Freedom Education Project at Newseum



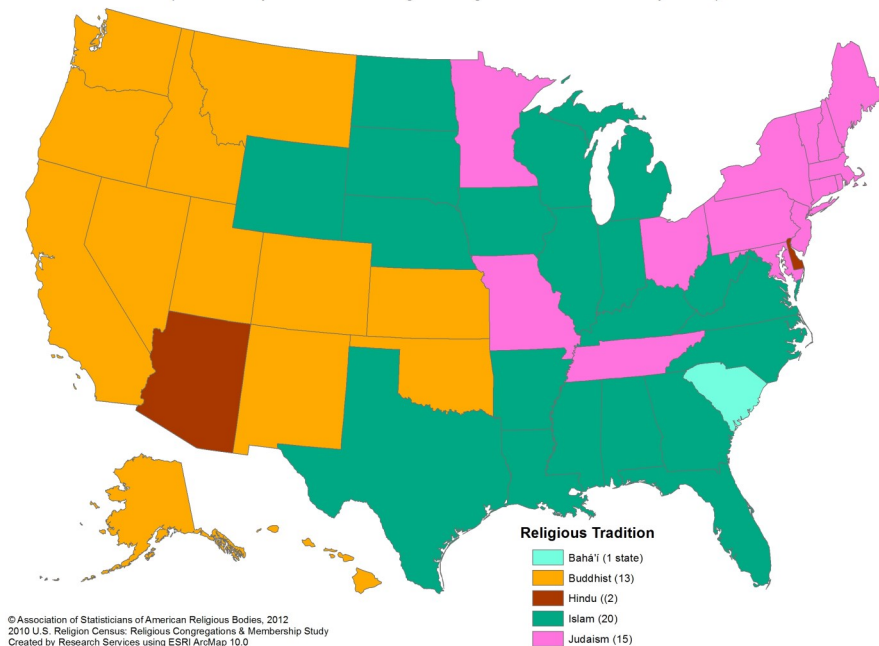
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM EDUCATION PROJECT
AT THE NEWSEUM

America's Second Largest Religions

Damon Huss
Director, California Three Rs Project

Judaism is the second largest religious group in 15 U.S. states. Islam is the second largest religious group in 20 U.S. states.

Second Largest Religious Tradition in Each State, 2010
(Christianity remains the largest religious tradition in every state)



Given that Christianity is the largest religion in every state of the United States, we might be given to wonder what the second largest religions are. The Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) has provided this information, based on data from the group's 2010 U.S. Religious Census. The results, and the above map, were completed in 2012 and highlighted earlier this year in *The Washington Post*.

ASARB has sponsored

this survey since 1990. Two-hundred and thirty-six religious groups participated in the 2010 census, which includes first-ever counts of Hindu and Buddhist congregations by tradition, as well as expanded coverage of Orthodox Christian Churches.

The results on the map above are fascinating. Consider that even though only 1.7 percent of Americans adhere to Judaism (according to Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life

Project), Judaism is the second largest religious group in 15 U.S. states. Only 0.6 percent of Americans adhere to Islam, yet Islam is the second largest religious group in 20 U.S. states.

ASARB's website (rcms2010.org) also includes county-by-county demographic maps for all 50 states. All maps are free for download and sharing, with appropriate attribution.

Questions to Ask When Planning Holiday Activities in Schools

Dr. Margaret Hill
Co-Director, California Three Rs Project

With the fall and winter holiday season underway, it is worthwhile to think about how the treatment of holidays in schools can maximize inclusivity, content knowledge, and mutual respect of all religious views.

Teachers and administrators should ask themselves the following questions as they plan holiday lessons and activities. The answers provided are intended as guidance, but not legal advice, within accepted parameters of the establishment clause of the First Amendment:

1. Do I have a distinctly secular educational purpose in mind? If so, what is it? Is it part of my curriculum?

It should not be the purpose of public schools to celebrate or observe religious holidays, but rather to

help students learn about them.

2. If I use holidays as an opportunity to teach about religion, am I balanced and fair in my approach?

For example, if you teach about Day of the Dead, consider also teaching about Ramadan, Diwali, or other holidays that usually occur roughly around the same time or season of the year.

3. Does the planned activity have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion? Does it ask students to perform or simulate religious rites or create sacred symbols?

Remember that the school's approach should be academic, not devotional. It is never appropriate for public schools to practice or appear to practice religion.

4. Is the instruction accomplished in such

a manner that information about the religious meaning of the holiday is aligned to California Content Standards and enriches student understanding of history and culture?

The History-Social Science Framework, approved by the California State Department of Education, already affords much discussion of religion in the context of the goal of cultural understanding (e.g., cultural literacy, geographic literacy, and historical literacy).

The above questions and answers are adapted from: Hill, Margaret. *Holidays in the Public Schools: Day of the Dead*. Los Angeles: California Three Rs Project, 2014.

CA3Rs

Publications

Holidays in the Public Schools

by

Dr. Margaret Hill

Diwali

Halloween

Day of the Dead

(information and resource guides for schools)

Available at

ca3rsproject.org

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS of interest to social studies educators across California are available if you subscribe for FREE to the listserv of Stacey Greer, Consultant for the Literacy, History & Arts Leadership Office Professional Learning Support Division in the California Department of Education. Send her an email at sgreer@cde.ca.gov to subscribe today!

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The California Three Rs Project (CA3Rs) is a program for finding common ground on issues related to religious liberty and the First Amendment in public schools. The CA3Rs' approach is based on the principles of American democracy and citizenship, reflected in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights and applied in a public school setting.

Since 1991, the CA3Rs has provided resources, professional development, and leadership training for teachers and education professionals in order to disseminate essential information about religious liberty and the history of religion in America.

Common Ground Resources

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

< <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/madison/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/FCGcomplete.pdf> >

Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum.

< <http://religiousfreedomeducation.org> >

Civil Conversation (cont'd)

itself nicely to close reading and use of informational text in the age of Common Core State Standards.

The goal is for students to gain understanding of controversial issues, arguments, and available evidence before finalizing a personal opinion. As one student recently surmised, reflecting on her participation in a project CRF developed based on the civil-conversation model, "I think it's important to be informed about what the

topic is.... We should all always be informed of both sides.... Consider both sides, and then form your opinion."

The model could be used in discussion of political or historical issues that may even imply questions of religious freedom and matters of conscience. Deliberating religious beliefs directly is not a good idea (e.g., Is [any religious doctrine] justified?). As I learned a few years ago, however, one cannot pre-

dict when religion will enter a seemingly non-religious conversation. In fact, it may even make the conversation richer. Of course, as long as students are not using a school as a vehicle for proselytism of any kind, their considerations of issues from their own religious or non-religious perspectives are appropriate to class discussion.

The lesson plan for civil conversation can be

found at the Educating About Immigration website at crfimmigrationed.org. The deliberation on compulsory voting can be found at the Deliberating in a Democracy in the Americas website at dda.deliberating.org.

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