



The California Three Rs Project

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

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Religious literacy and religious bullying in California and Canada: A teacher-researcher's experience

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Like many new teachers in North American pluralistic communities, I live in a multi-religious community of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists, among others. Nonetheless, I was unprepared to address religious issues in my grade 6–8 Greater Toronto Area (GTA) public school classrooms in Toronto, Canada.

Within my first six months, religion arose in discussions more than I expected. I also witnessed two bullying incidents rooted in religious misconceptions. In one instance, an Arab student verbally abused a South Asian peer with cultural slurs based on cultural and religious differences he saw between himself and the victim. In another inci-

dent, some classmates bullied one female student because she identified with a different Muslim sect than they did, and placed a different emphasis on reading the Koran at home.

Surprisingly, my colleagues, regardless of their years of teaching experience, the grade they taught, their location in GTA, or their own religious affiliations, echoed my feeling of unpreparedness in teaching multi-religious students. They were familiar with Canadian student and human rights but were uncomfortable with religious issues. They were also unclear on the degree of religious accommodation that might be necessary for specific activities, such as viewing paintings of unclothed

women in an art class.

I soon realized that I needed a deeper understanding of religion and religious issues in order to foster an inclusive classroom. This task proved difficult on top of the regular demands of teaching. To expedite my learning, I began my master's research on the role of informal religious

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM EDUCATION PROJECT
AT THE NEWSEUM

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Religious bullying (cont'd)

discussion in GTA public schools. By interviewing teachers across the city (two Christians, an atheist, one Sikh, and one Jewish teacher), I found unanimous agreement on the need for informal religious discussion in schools.

Simultaneously, my research revealed the existence of religious conflict and bullying, which led me to focus on understanding religious bullying, finding existing religious-literacy teaching practices to share with teachers, and exploring potential connections between religious literacy and bullying. This also led me directly to Modesto, Calif., and to the Canadian province of Quebec, which host North America's only two mandatory religious-literacy programs in district public schools. Modesto interests me in particular, as it established the first of the two mandatory programs, and its program was initiated with full community support. (Lester, 2013.) In Quebec, I am conducting research in the city of Montreal, since it is the most religiously diverse city in the province.

As I continue my research, I have

learned a lot about the value and challenges of religious literacy. In an effort to support other teachers and students, the remainder of this article highlights notable and practical resources I have found, with full citations listed under References, below.

To emphasize the relevance of religious literacy in North America, let me first explain the phenomenon of religious bullying and present its relevance in California. Mirroring Charles Haynes' article from the January 2014 *California Three Rs Bulletin*, I have found that any bullying, including religious bullying, causes emotional, mental, or physical harm to individuals, with detrimental effects on both individuals and society. (Kirman, 2004; PREVNet; stopbullying.gov.) Bullying transcends peer groups, communities, and countries, and as such is a significant international public health issue that warrants attention.

The issue appears particularly troubling for certain groups in North America. In California,

for example, a recent study by the Sikh Coalition reveals that turbaned Sikh children are bullied at greater than double the national rate. The same study shows that across four states, the city of Fresno, Calif., had the second highest rate of bullying of Sikh children, where 54.5 percent of Sikh youth experienced bullying or harassment, and 13 percent reported almost daily bullying. Unfortunately, 51 percent of bullied Sikh youth also felt a lack of adequate support or response from school officials. Perhaps, like me, many California teachers feel unprepared as well.

In her article "Because I Had a Turban," drawn from her personal experiences and academic research, Professor of Education Khyati Joshi describes five suggestions for educators as steps toward change, which I find relevant to both the Canadian and Californian context:

1. Know your own students. There are many religions in the world. Start with your students' religions.

2. Learn our ABCDs. We are not theologians,

but we can at least learn the:

a. Architecture: Know the house(s) of worship, like *mandir* (Hindu), *masjid* or *mosque* (Muslim), and *gurdwara* (Sikh).

b. Books: Know the name(s) of the religion's holy text(s).

c. Cities: Know the name(s) and location(s) of the religion's holiest cities, like Amritsar (Sikhism), Mecca and Medina (Islam), and Varanasi/Benares (Hinduism).

d. Days: Know the names and meanings of the religion's major holidays, like Diwali and Holi (Hinduism), Ramadan and Eid ul' Fitr (Islam), and Vaisaki (Sikhism).

3. Recognize religion as part of students' social identities.

Understand how religion is especially salient for some students and how their family's religion may be important even to students who don't see themselves as "religious."

4. Avoid the urge to "Christianize" religions and holidays. *E.g.*, saying "Ramadan is like Lent" or "Janmastami is like Christmas."

5. Include religion in our curricula whenever appropriate. Discuss how different religions

approach the concept at hand.

To promote this change, Stanford education professor Eammon Callan offers a guiding conception of empathy toward appreciating differences and recognizing others' First Amendment rights through mutual respect:

For if I am to weigh your claims as a matter of fairness rather than a rhetorically camouflaged expression of sheer selfishness, I must provisionally suspend the thought that you are simply wrong and enter imaginatively into the moral perspective you occupy. (Callan, 1997, p. 26.)

To date, I have learned that addressing religious bullying and instilling mutual respect among multi-religious students is crucial in teaching citizenship and social responsibility. In North America's pluralistic society, we must educate our students on rights, how to respect them, and how to act responsibly to protect them and one another. We cannot dismiss students' differences, which silences the uniqueness in their identities and the struggles they face. Of course, teachers face struggles, too. By understanding religious bullying and religious-literacy teaching practices, we can address these struggles and support students and teachers for the betterment of our classrooms and societies, today and tomorrow.

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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.

For over a decade, the CA3Rs has provided online 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. Print. <<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/madison/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/FCGcomplete.pdf>>

Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum.
 <<http://religiousfreedomeducation.org>>

The Establishment Clause and Graduations Done in Churches

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In May, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its opinion in the case of *Town of Greece v. Galloway*. The court held that ceremonial sectarian prayers to open local or state legislative sessions are not, in themselves, unconstitutional. Last year, the court put on hold the Wisconsin-based case of *Elmbrook School District v. Doe* until *Town of Greece* could be decided. *Elmbrook* involved a public high school's use of a non-denominational Chris-

tian church auditorium for graduation ceremonies. The issue was whether the public high school graduation at a place adorned with religious symbols violates the establishment clause. The en banc panel (or entire panel of judges) for the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals held that the Elmbrook School District had violated the First Amendment by allowing the graduation in a church auditorium.

In June of this year,

however, the Supreme Court decided to deny the school district's petition for certiorari (its formal request that the court hear the case). The Seventh Circuit's judgment, therefore, still stands. Justice Scalia wrote a dissent to the court's denial of certiorari, citing *Town of Greece* to argue that a graduation in a church is not an establishment of religion.

Graduation ceremonies will surely not be the last of many school-based establishment-

clause issues finding their way into federal courts now primed with *Town of Greece* as precedent. A school board's policy committee in South Carolina has already cited the case in order to revitalize non-sectarian prayers in school-board meetings. Other simmering issues, from "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance to religious-based anti-discrimination laws for schools, are likely to gain high profiles in the near future.