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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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### Religious Holidays in Public Schools

by Charles Haynes, Senior Scholar  
The First Amendment Center

At this time of year, educators often receive conflicting and confusing advice about how to treat religious holidays in the public schools. In an effort to help schools address this perennial "December dilemma," the California Three Rs Project offers the following advice drawn from *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* and consensus guidelines endorsed by a broad range of religious and educational organizations:

The key distinction for educators to keep in mind is between teaching *about* religious holidays, which is constitutionally permissible, and *celebrating* religious holidays, which is not. When planning activities related to religious holidays, school leaders and teachers should ask the following questions:

*Does this activity in any way promote or inhibit religion?*

- \* *How does this activity serve the academic goals of the course or educational mission of the school?*
- \* *Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider, not a full member of the school/classroom community by this activity?*
- \* *Does the teacher or school plan activities to teach about religious holidays at various times of the year or only in December?*
- \* *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?*

Teaching about religious holidays should focus on how and when they are celebrated, their origins, histories and generally agreed upon meanings. A fair and balanced curriculum will include study about a variety of religious and cultural traditions throughout the school year – not just in December. Teachers and administrators should remember that under the First Amendment they may not use the study about religious holidays as an opportunity to proselytize or otherwise inject personal religious beliefs into the discussion.

Here are additional points for educators to keep in mind:

- Schools may not sponsor religious practices but may teach *about* religion.
- Schools may teach about religious holidays if the purpose is to provide secular instruction about religious traditions, rather than to promote a particular religious tradition.
- The study of religion and holidays should be embedded in the study of different cultures and communities, history, arts, or literature.
- Teaching about religious ideas should be done through attribution (e.g., “many Buddhists believe that...”).
- Religious symbols may be used as temporary teaching aids, but not be displayed beyond the duration of the lesson or unit of study.
- Students may choose to create artwork or music with religious symbols but it should not be assigned.
- Sacred music may be sung or played as part of an academic study of music. School concerts that present a variety of selections may include religious music. Concerts should avoid programs dominated by religious music, especially when these coincide with a particular religious holiday.
- Art, literature, or music with religious themes may be used if it serves the academic goals of the school but not be used as a vehicle to promote religious belief.
- Students may be excused from discussions related to religion, but this should not be used as a rationale for school sponsorship of religious celebration.

Confusion also exists about how to treat the so-called “cultural Christmas” (e.g., Santa Claus, trees) in a public school. Although the courts may not view the cultural Christmas as “religious” for legal purposes, schools should remember that many non-Christian parents and students do see these expressions as religious in nature. At the same time, many Christians don’t view Santa and trees as appropriate ways to represent the real meaning of the Christian holiday. The best solution is for schools to focus on their educational role by teaching about Christmas and other religious holidays in ways that are accurate and academic. Schools should avoid promoting a cultural Christmas that may make many parents and students feel like outsiders in their own school.

Every public school would be well-advised to develop clear guidelines and policies for teaching about religious holidays based on the consensus guidelines discussed in *Finding Common Ground*. December may not be the best time to begin this process given the long history of tension about school programs in that month. Schools should involve a broad range of parents, community members, teachers and administrators in the work of crafting policies and guidelines. Once policies are adopted, schools must offer in-service opportunities for teachers to help them learn how to teach about religious holidays using resources appropriate for use in a public-school classroom.

*\*Finding Common Ground*, referred to in the previous article, is available on-line at

<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=3979>

See in *Finding Common Ground*, Chapter 8, "A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools," published by the First Amendment Center and endorsed by the American Association of School Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, Christian Educators Association International, Christian Legal Society, Council on Islamic Education, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Council of Churches in the U.S.A., National Council for the Social Studies, National Education Association, National PTA, National School Boards Association, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America.

#### **Other resources to support schools in developing policies related to religious holidays:**

A set of Frequently Asked Questions and a summary of case law are two useful elements of the First Amendment Center website at [http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel\\_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=religious\\_holidays](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=religious_holidays) Although many controversies have arisen over religious holidays in public schools, case law is limited. Though the Supreme Court has not ruled on many of the issues, this site offers useful information for developing school and district policies.

#### **Religious Holiday 2003**

##### **NOVEMBER**

- 1 All Saints' Day – Christian
- 2 All Souls' Day - Catholic Christian
- 12 Birth of Baha'u'llah - Baha'i
- 18 Quds Day – Islam
- 26 Day of Covenant - Baha'i
- Eid al Fitr - end of Ramadan - Islam
- 27 Thanksgiving – Christian/National
- 27 Ascension of Abdu'l Baha- Baha'i
- 30 Advent - First Sunday - Christian

##### **DECEMBER**

- 8 Bodhi Day (Rohatsu) - Buddhist
- Immaculate Conception of Blessed Virgin Mary - Catholic Christian
- 12 Feast day - Our Lady of Guadalupe - Catholic Christian
- 20-27 Hanukkah \* - Jewish
- 25 Christmas – Western Christian
- 26 - January 1  
Kwanzaa - Interfaith

*\* Begins at sundown the evening before*

The dates on the above calendar were selected from the Interfaith Calendar at <http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/> The entire Religious Holidays Calendar is available from the California Three Rs Project office. [peg\\_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us](mailto:peg_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us)

The **December Dilemma** [http://rims.k12.ca.us/score\\_lessons/dilemma/](http://rims.k12.ca.us/score_lessons/dilemma/) on SCORE H-SS offers teachers suggested resources for teaching about the religious holidays in a constitutionally permissible manner.

**Common Ground Resources:**

Do you want to know how to reduce tensions in your community and build mutual respect across some of the most divisive issues of our day? You'll want to read Fastback #515 published this fall by the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation. The article *Disarming Conflict Through Common Ground Thinking* was written by Wayne Jacobsen who is the President of BridgeBuilders and a successful mediator in cultural and religious conflicts. This publication will help you and your staff know how to reclaim a common ground that enlists the diverse segments of your community to work together for the good of public education. You can order copies of this Fastback at <http://www.pdkintl.org> The BridgeBuilders program will be the featured article in the Spring **Three Rs Bulletin**.

Sign up to receive the Three Rs Bulletin and program announcements electronically at [peg\\_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us](mailto:peg_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us)

**For program information, contact...**

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

John Ferguson, First Amendment Center, Vanderbilt University, 1207 18th Avenue So., Nashville, Tennessee 37212, (615) 727-1326, [jferguson@fac.org](mailto:jferguson@fac.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)