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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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Academic Study of Religion: The Three Rs in Practice in the Curriculum

by

Margaret Hill, Ph.D., California Three Rs Project Lead

The good news is there has at last been a recognition of the importance of religion in the public school curriculum. The California History-Social Science Content Standards and Framework call for an extensive inclusion of the study of religion as it applies to history and culture in grades 3 through 12. This certainly enriches the study of history and makes it more accurate and relevant. The bad news is that teaching about religious ideas and beliefs in an academic manner is challenging. To understand the ways in which religion influences and in turn is influenced by society, culture, and politics requires educators to have a knowledge of the basic tenets, practices, and sacred texts of the world's major religious traditions. They also need an understanding of the diversity of beliefs and practices within traditions and the adaptations that religious people have made in their practice to match the changes in the societies in which they live. There is always more to learn.

A second challenge for study about religion in public schools is to make clear the distinction between teaching of religion (indoctrination or faith formation) and teaching about religion (academic treatment of religion). What most people, including most public-school teachers, know about religion is learned within their own faith tradition. Within that context, other religions are often viewed through the lens of faith in one's own tradition. The aim of devotional study of religion is faith formation; the goal of academic study about religion is religious literacy and cultural understanding.

It is through the media that most students develop their perspectives on religious traditions not their own. Though some of the documentaries about world religions created for groups such as PBS are outstanding, popular media sometimes ridicules religious people or practices. Lately, religion has even been equated with violence. Unless there is well thought out and consistent instruction about religious beliefs and practices, included where they fit naturally in the curriculum, these negative and inaccurate images will be all that our students learn about religion.

But what are the characteristics of a truly academic study of religious and non religious worldviews? First, the teacher is neutral in the treatment of ideas or events relating to those worldviews. One of the ways to achieve this is to avoid "we" "they" language. In today's pluralistic society most communities represent a huge range of worldviews and beliefs. Instead, use attributive language that honors that range, such as "Some Buddhists believe that....," "Some Protestants observe Sunday as....," or "Many humanists think that...." This added precision allows for the diversity within religious and non religious traditions.

Though no educator could have an understanding of all the possible nuances of belief and practice, it is important to use precise and academic language. One example came up in a recent conference that the Three Rs did on teaching about world religions. The term “Reformation” that is found in the 7th grade standards is really a Protestant term for the post Renaissance era. What its use does not take into account is that during and before the 16th century, the Western Christian or Catholic Church had been undergoing significant reform. Many religious studies scholars teach that there were really five reformations: the Catholic, the Lutheran, the Calvinist, the English, and the Radical Reformations. By simply adding an “s” to “reformation” students learn that there were many groups and ideas involved. Another term fraught with difficulty is “cult.” In academic usage, a “cult” is a system of religious worship, especially as expressed in ritual. In common usage “cult” has a negative connotation and is generally applied to a group by opponents. Designation as a “cult” may come about due to a novel belief system, idiosyncratic practices, perceived harmful effects on members, or because it is perceived to threaten the interests of mainstream culture. Educators must be aware of these distinctions, use precise, academic language, and explicitly teach it to students. This use of scholarly language will serve to make the topic of religion more neutral and open to analysis in the minds of students.

Another way to emphasize the academic nature of the study of religion is to historicize it. Place religious ideas and events in the context of other events and ideas of the time. Use academic rather than religious sources to do this. Material from an historian or religious studies scholar is likely to rely more on historiographic methodologies than writings from religious sources. Use primary documents to show the real words or ideas of religious leaders rather than an interpretation of them. Have students analyze them using the same methods they use for other sources, and teach them how to use respectful language such as “I think Calvin thought this because of what he said here...” Also, approach sacred text in a respectful but analytic manner. A new source that supports such a study of Biblical texts is **The Bible and Its Influence** by Cullen Shippe and Chuck Stetson.

Show the differences within belief traditions by showing how they adapt to change over time and how different cultures interpret religious dogma or scripture in various ways. A significant example of this is women’s dress in Islamic culture based on a principle of female modesty. Customs of the time, place, and social class of the woman influence what she might wear. Some options include hijab -- or modest, loose clothing and a scarf over the head and under the chin -- and burqa or burka, a more complete covering of the head, face and body. In some countries such as Jordan, it is a personal choice for Muslim women to dress modestly in public. In other cultures, such as Afghanistan, the tradition is for women to wear the burqa. The fact that now more young women are practicing hijab by wearing head coverings show the change of religious practice over time.

Another important element of an academic approach to religion is an emphasis on “learning about” rather than “practicing.” One of the ways that public school educators sometimes step over the line is in doing classroom simulations of religious practices such as meditation, the Seder, or the Hajj. A far better educational practice is to learn about religious practice through reading or film rather than simulation.

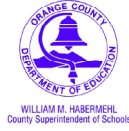
The most significant of the Three Rs principles in the academic study of religion is respect. Such study is a two-fold embodiment of respect in that it accurately and fairly teaches the role of religions in history and culture while simultaneously upholding the rights of all by not imposing any religious or non-religious beliefs on students.

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Learn more about the academic study of religion by participating in one of two California Three Rs Project summer institutes on Religion in American History. Each provides a \$450 stipend at the end of the weeklong summer portion and another \$250 at the end of the follow-up and evaluation. Southern California teachers should sign up for the institute in Rancho Cucamonga to be held June 25-29. Northern and Central California teachers should sign up for the institute in Stockton to be held July 16-20. In addition to the stipend and materials, schools providing a control class receive a \$300 stipend.

For online registration, go to <http://oms.sbcss.k12.ca.us/index.php>

For information, contact: Margaret Hill, (909) 537-5459 drpeghill@verizon.net



California Three Rs Project, CSU San Bernardino, San Joaquin COE,
 San Bernardino County SS, and Orange County DOE
invite
Grade 4-12 teachers, administrators, and curriculum specialists
to a Teaching American History Institute



Religion in American History

What to Teach and How to Teach It

Part I: July 16-20, 2007



- LOCATION:** San Joaquin County Office of Education
 Educational Service Center – Kingston Room
 2707 Transworld Drive, Stockton, CA 95206
- TIME:** 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
- STIPEND:** \$450 after summer session
 \$250 after follow-up meetings and assessments
- BONUS:** \$300 for school that provides a control group class
 for the project evaluation
- FOLLOW-UP:** 2 days TBA, sub costs paid
(Housing available for teachers traveling more than 1 hour)

TOPICS

Why the Study of Religious Influences on American History is so Important
 Early Foundations and Gradual Development of Religious Liberty
 Pre-Contact Native American Religious and Spiritual Life
 Influence of Religion on Euro-American and Native American Interactions
 Reformation in Europe and its Impact on America during the Age of Exploration
 Religion in the Early Colonial Period
 Two Lasting Visions of America that Emerged in Colonial America
 Catholic and Protestant Influences in America
 Declaration of Independence
 Great Awakening and the American Revolution
 Religion and Slavery

Diversity of religious belief and evolving principles of religious liberty have had a tremendous impact on America's story in the last 400 years. However, this is an area little taught in college courses on United States history. This one-week institute and follow-up activities will provide educators with content on the topics listed above, guidelines for the academic study of religion, and strategies to improve learning and civic participation of students. Become a leader in your school and district on issues of religious liberty and on the teaching about religion in a manner that is culturally sensitive and constitutionally permissible.

For information, contact: Margaret Hill, (909) 537-5459 drpeghill@verizon.net

Online Registration: <http://oms.sbcss.k12.ca.us/index.php>

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

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...

Dr. Margaret Hill, California 3Rs Project Lead, California State University San Bernardino, 5500 University Pkwy., FO 115, San Bernardino, CA 92407, (909) 357-5459, mhill@csusb.edu

For First Amendment religious liberty information, contact...

Dr. Charles C. Haynes, First Amendment Center Senior Scholar, First Amendment Center/Arlington 1101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22209 Tel: 703/528-0800 Fax: 703/284-3519 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, Chico, CA 95929-0740, (530) 898-4739, bgrelle@csuchico.edu

Sign up to receive the **Three Rs Bulletin** and program announcements electronically at peg_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us or access at http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score_lessons/3rs/pages/bulletin.html