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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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Practical Ideas for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Schools

Margaret Hill, Director, CA Three Rs Project

Educational leaders would never think of having a science teacher teach even a general science class without having taken a course or two in biology. But in history, language arts, or the visual and performing arts, they expect educators to teach about religion's role in society, literature, and cultural expression without ever having a course in religious studies. In today's pluralistic society it has become of critical importance for all educators to have accurate academic knowledge of world religions, so as to comprehend and convey the religious dimensions of human experience without promoting religion or a particular religious perspective in the classroom. The remedy, of course, is for educators to take at least one religious studies class as part of their teacher preparation, and for inservice teachers to take graduate course work and/or professional development on the topic.

Many religious studies scholars in California have worked with the California 3Rs Project to address the need for building the knowledge base of classroom teachers through professional development programs on world religions. Now, the American Academy of Religions (AAR) has published an invaluable document entitled "Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States" that provides additional support to schools. Some of the very best minds in the field collaborated under the leadership of Diane L. Moore at Harvard Divinity School to develop this document. Two members of the California Three Rs Project leadership team: Dr Bruce Grelle, Director of the Religion and Public Education Resource Center at California State University, Chico; and D. Keith Naylor, Chair, Department of Religious Studies at Occidental College participated. Available at the American Academy of Religion website <http://www.aarweb.org/Publications/> the Guidelines document is a must have for every public school educator.

Several recent surveys have shown that there is widespread illiteracy about religion in the U.S. and that the distinction between the study of religion and religious devotional expression is rarely understood. In California's history-social science curriculum, religion is a major focus in 6th and 7th grades with an emphasis on the origins and early spread of religions. From that point forward the standards assume that students (and teachers) understand how these religions evolved and influenced society. This failure to see religions as changing in the context of cultural and historical development leads to teaching about religious traditions and expressions as internally uniform and static as opposed to the diverse and evolving systems they really are. As a result, students of a particular tradition may not even recognize the relationship between their devotional practice and what is described in their sixth grade textbooks as the same religion.

Overview study usually fails to explore the internal diversity in religious belief

and practice within traditions. When they are explored in isolation, teachers are less likely to analyze belief systems as social and cultural phenomena that have had strong influence on human affairs throughout history and in turn are influenced by historical events. This also makes it easy for educators to say that beliefs must remain a private matter, not worthy of much classroom attention. The resulting dearth of knowledge further fuels prejudice and antagonism, making peaceful coexistence and cooperative social and political efforts less and less likely even as America's religious pluralism grows. The only remedy for ignorance is education.

The AAR lays out how this is best done. The Guidelines identify three places in classrooms where knowledge about multiple religious traditions is essential for educators: the historical and contemporary relevance of religion for understanding society; the religious themes in art and literature; and in addressing questions from students as they try to make meaning from history and literature based on their own religious experience and knowledge.

American Academy of Religion scholars identify four approaches to the academic study of religion, each with strengths and drawbacks. These are the historical, the literary, the traditions-based, and the culture studies approaches. The Guidelines find little wrong in the historical approach if it is developed throughout the curriculum. Too often in the California curriculum, however, world religions are a focus only in the pre-modern era of 6th and 7th grade ancient and medieval history. The literary approach addresses how religion influences culture. For example, a story with a religious theme may demonstrate how individuals experience faith in unique ways; alternately, an examination of sacred text can show how it influences many genre of writing within the culture. Though both of these approaches to the study of religion in context are valuable, the major weakness is the vast knowledge that they require of educators who have not had coursework in world religions. This lack of knowledge is the reason many educators say they have avoided addressing religion in their classrooms even when they know that infusing this content would not only build understanding of belief systems but would make the study of history and literature richer and more comprehensible.

A traditions-based approach is often found in classrooms or textbooks that include a comparative religion component. In this method, religious systems are divided into categories that apply to many traditions, such as origins, basic beliefs, texts, rituals, holidays, etc. However, sometimes this approach emphasizes topics not universally relevant, categorizes so much that diversity within traditions is glossed over, or oversimplifies the similarities among traditions. To address these concerns the cultural studies approach is often used in the religious studies classroom or in area studies and multicultural programs. This approach has the advantage of demonstrating how belief is embedded in culture, part of its fabric, and not comprehensible in isolation. It points out that cultural embedding often leads to some traditions having greater power in societies if they are practiced by an elite group or by a majority population, both significant in understanding society both historically and contemporaneously.

The Guidelines are an exceptionally valuable document because they are so practical. Educators can evaluate their own instructional practice based on the strengths and weaknesses of the typical approaches described above. Three premises are offered about religions whose inclusion can be used as measures of instructional quality: religions are internally diverse; religions are dynamic; and religions are embedded in culture. For each of these premises the Guidelines provide examples of instructional practice for various grade levels in history-social science and English-language arts classrooms. This section is followed by frequently asked classroom questions and how teachers can best address them taking the premises into account.

Though religious studies is not a required course in K-12, the actions and ideas of religion are embedded across the curriculum and they are important in the lives of our students. Increasing educator understanding of the content and the constitutional framework for teaching about religion and its influence will enhance student learning and build interfaith understanding so needed in today's pluralistic society. The American Academy of Religion "Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States" are a valuable tool for achieving this.

San Joaquin COE, Orange CDOE, San Bernardino CSS, CSU San Bernardino, Constitutional Rights Foundation, and the California 3Rs Project
Invite 4-12 Educators to

One Nation: Many Faiths – How Ideas of Religious Liberty Shaped America

THE EARLY PERIOD - A TAH PROJECT

June 20-24, 2011

Online and face-to-face follow-up activities during the year TBA
San Joaquin County Office of Education – Educational Service Center
2707 Transworld Drive, Stockton, CA 95206



To Native peoples, the land, religion, and life were one; their daily activities and environments were imbued with spirituality. When European settlers came to America with a more formal view of religion they also brought the memory of more than a hundred years of religious war that had followed the Reformation. These people struggled to find a way to live according to the dictates of their beliefs by establishing religious freedom for themselves. But as diversity grew, petitioning and protest for rights followed. The concept of religious liberty for all emerged through experiments in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. These models of freedom and the philosophical revolution called the Enlightenment created a unique relationship between politics and religion in America that is still present today.

Institute participants will explore how religious minorities and the Enlightenment thinkers among the Founders guided the nation to support freedom of conscience. They will examine the roles that religious communities played in political and social reform from early treaties with Indian peoples, 18th c. anti-slavery efforts, the Virginia Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, to the American Revolution itself. This largely ignored story is fundamental to teaching America history and must be done in a balanced, academic manner. All participants receive books and resources, scholar sessions, lesson materials, and instructional strategy demonstrations designed to address the needs of all students to enhance H-SS instruction. Special support and additional stipend consideration is provided for teacher teams from the same school. Substitute costs are reimbursed for institute sessions as needed.

TIME: 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
STIPEND: \$500 after summer session
\$250 after follow-up meetings and assessments
BONUS: \$300 in resources for the project evaluation
CONTACT: Margaret Hill, (909) 537-5459 mhill@csusb.edu

----- **One Nation Institute - Stockton** -----

Name: _____ School: _____ District: _____

School Mailing Address: _____ City: _____ Zip: _____

Home Mailing Address: _____ City: _____ Zip: _____

Work Phone () _____ Cell/Home Phone:() _____ Fax:() _____

Email (required) _____ Grade level(s) _____

Mail or fax completed registration coupon to: CSU San Bernardino, Ed Leadership and Curriculum, Attention - Margaret Hill, Director One Nation: Many Faiths Institute, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407-2397

*Fax (909) 537-7173 **DEADLINE: May 15, 2011***

Common Ground Resources:

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

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, Department of Educational Leadership & Curriculum, California State University San Bernardino, 5500 University Pkwy., San Bernardino, CA 92407
(909) 537-5459, mhill@csusb.edu

For First Amendment religious liberty information, contact...

Dr. Charles C. Haynes, Senior Scholar, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 555 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington D.C. 20001 Tel: 202/292-6293 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, 400 West First Street, Chico, CA 95929-0740,
(530) 898-4739, bgrelle@csuchico.edu

Sign up to receive the **Three Rs Bulletin** and program announcements electronically at mhill@csusb.edu or see <http://ca3rsproject.org/> for the CA3Rs Project Bulletin archive.

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