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California Three Rs

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

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Teaching the Importance of Religion in the Modern Civil Rights Movement

By Jack Bareilles, Northern Humboldt Union HS District, CA 3Rs Planning Committee

I always loved teaching the Civil Rights Movement. It didn't matter if I was working at a Catholic elementary in Oakland or a public high school in Humboldt County—the topic grabbed the attention of my students and didn't let go. But until the summer of 2004 when I participated in a weeklong workshop in Alabama, and then a year later when I had the honor of hosting the late great Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth in Humboldt County, that the fundamental but often downplayed role of religion in the movement hit home.

With the exception of early movement leaders like A. Philip Randolph, the head of the Pullman Porters, lawyer and jurist Thurgood Marshall, and later more “radical” leaders like Malcolm X and members of SNCC and the Black Panthers, the bulk of the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to the late 1960s were ministers.

Think about how you teach the Movement and personalities of people like the Reverend MLK Jr., Reverend Joseph Lowery or Reverend Ralph Abernathy? Do you treat them like politicians and social movement leaders or religious leaders of a movement?

I focused on their accomplishments in the public sphere and neglected to emphasize the role religion and faith played. I know I did—and not because of any negative feelings toward religion—after all I chose to teach in a Catholic school!

The modern Civil Rights Movement had two facets—it was, if you wish, a war fought on two fronts: first, the legal and political front fought in the courts, legislatures and executive mansions and, second, the ground front, fought in the streets and jails of places like Selma and Birmingham. Like any ground war the Movement relied on foot soldiers to literally and figuratively march and protest for the cause. But who or what gave those brave men, women and children the courage to confront governments and organizations hell-bent on oppressing them? My experiences in Alabama and working with veterans of the movement all point to a powerful faith, nurtured in the Black Churches, as the source of much of that courage.

This isn't groundbreaking scholarship—anything but—but the questions remain:

* Do we as history teachers properly emphasize the central role of religion in the Modern Civil Rights Movement?

* Can we accurately teach the Movement without incorporating the role of religion?

I would argue the answer to both is “no.”

Stony the Road We Trod, Alabama and the Modern Civil Rights Movement

In 2004 I participated in a one-week NEH workshop Landmarks of American

History workshop in Alabama called *Stony the Road We Trod* which was organized by Martha Bouyer and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. The name was taken from a line in James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" also known as the Black National Anthem.

From the moment we arrived in Birmingham it became clear that this was not the Civil Rights Movement I had enthusiastically taught for years. It was something more...something richer and much more emotional. It was in the words of one of the participants, almost like a crusade.

In discussions with members of the Movement from across Alabama it became clear that that they took tremendous strength from their faith and that the church was at the center of the movement. This isn't surprising. The Black church was one of the few places where large groups of African Americans could meet without the permission of the white authorities. Furthermore, ministers of Black churches, unlike teachers or municipal employees for instance, could not be easily removed if they antagonized the powers-that-be. The churches also offered a ready-made support network for workers from organizations like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.

When Martha Bouyer helped organize a visit to Humboldt County by Reverend Shuttlesworth and two other foot soldiers the religiosity of the movement was made even more clear. Reverend Shuttlesworth spoke at my high school to the entire student body. He spoke of the Civil Rights Movement like an exhorter, sure his mission had been one from God. He answered questions and told stories of his experiences. His descriptions of the multiple bombings designed to kill him certainly held the students' attention. Reverend Shuttlesworth made clear in word and even in song that his faith is what allowed him to confront the brutal apartheid practiced in Birmingham.

What can and should we teach?

What should we teach to impress upon our students the critical role religion played in the Modern Civil Rights Movement? We can make sure to note that it wasn't a coincidence that the movement was led in great part by ministers.

We can explain to our students the central role of the church in southern African American communities—and as mentioned earlier explain how the Black Church was perhaps the only organization in the South that African Americans controlled.

We can point out the important role of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—which was created in 1957 and 58 to help coordinate efforts to end segregation. And, we can mention the lesser known Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR)—a civil rights organization formed in 1956 after the NAACP was legally banned in Alabama by the courts. Said Shuttlesworth, "They can outlaw an organization, but they cannot outlaw the movement of a people determined to be free." While the group's religious and civil rights values overlapped, the name -- with the cross as its symbol -- was strategically chosen. (<http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/iml04.soc.ush.civil.acmhr/>)

Church bombings and burnings were tragically frequent throughout the Movement. This wasn't coincidental. Even well-known documents from the Movement can be used to remind students of the role of religion and the Church. King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* is addressed to "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." It is in King's words, "[a] response to a published statement by eight fellow clergymen from Alabama. . . ."

Just as we teach the religious nature of the cathedrals of Medieval Europe or the temples of Angkor Wat, we need to make clear the role that religion and faith played in the Civil Rights Movement. We don't need to "Lift every voice and sing" as Reverend Shuttlesworth did at my school, but we can certainly play a few Movement songs.

Mr. Bareilles is the director of the Humboldt County Teaching American History Project.



San Joaquin COE, Orange CDOE, San Bernardino CSS, CSU San Bernardino, CRF, and the California 3Rs Project
Invite 4-12 H-SS Educators to

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

THE MODERN ERA - A TAH PROJECT

June 25-29, 2012

Online and face-to-face follow-up activities during the year TBA, with substitutes provided as needed

San Joaquin County Office of Education,
2707 Transworld Drive, Stockton, CA 95206

It is not surprising that religious liberty was considered one of the four fundamental freedoms in America during World War II when this Norman Rockwell painting was done. Why was the U.S. unique in the world in supporting religious liberty through its constitution when many other places, notably Nazi Germany, did not? How did faith communities, religious minorities, and the Enlightenment philosophies of the Founders guide the nation to support freedom of conscience, arguably America's first liberty? What roles have religious communities played in American political and social reform movements, American foreign policy, protection of minority rights, and freedom of expression? This largely ignored story is fundamental to teaching American 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 and enhance the quality of H-SS instruction. Special support and additional stipend consideration provided for teacher teams from the same school.

TIME: 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

STIPEND: \$500 after summer session

\$300 after follow-up meetings and assessments

TOPICS

Ideas of Religious Liberty at the Time of the Constitution; Religious Freedom in the Constitution – No Religious Test and the First Amendment; Religious Influences on Politics and Reforms in the 19th c.; Know Nothings and the Religious Side of Discrimination Against Irish and Chinese Immigrants; Utopian Societies, Manifest Destiny, and the Mormons; Religion and Modernity 1880s-1920s, the KKK, and the Scopes Trial; Religious Liberty on Trial and in Politics in the 1940s; Religion's Influence on the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement; Increasing Religious Pluralism since the Immigration Act of 1965; 20th c. Court Decisions and Their Influence on Understanding the First Amendment.

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----- **One Nation Institute - Modern** -----

Name: _____ School: _____ District: _____

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Email (required) _____ Grade level(s) _____

Mail or fax completed registration coupon to: CSU San Bernardino, Ed Leadership and Curriculum,
Attention - Margaret Hill, Director CA 3Rs Project and One Nation: Many Faiths Institute, 5500 University Parkway,
San Bernardino, CA 92407-2397 Fax (909) 537-7173 **DEADLINE: May 1, 2012 or until filled**

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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