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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: Easter and Passover**

When it comes to thinking about religious holidays in the schools, most educators focus on those that occur in December. However, the spring Jewish and Christian holidays of Passover and Easter can also lead to challenges of common practice, particularly in elementary classrooms. As these holidays near, it will help to review district and school policies related to the general issue of how to address holidays in public schools. The “Religious Holidays in the Public Schools” consensus guidelines in Chapter 8 of Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools were endorsed by a broad range of religious and educational organizations. They point out that 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?
- 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 in various cultures, the origins and histories of the holidays and their generally agreed upon meanings. A fair and balanced curriculum will include study about a variety of religious and cultural traditions throughout the school year, so the study of the origins and meaning of Easter and Passover would be simply a part of a broader coverage of world religions and their impact on society. 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 always seems to pop up around how to treat the so-called “cultural” side of religious holidays in a public school. In response to pressure from parents and communities to celebrate Easter and Passover as culturally important aspects of American society, teachers and administrators should remember that many non-Christian parents and students do see these cultural expressions as religious in nature. At the same time, many Christians don’t view colored eggs and bunnies as appropriate ways to represent the real meaning of the Christian holiday. Many Jewish parents find that distributing a matzo snack for students to eat during Passover is an equally inappropriate representation of their ancient traditions. The best solution is for schools to focus on their educational role by teaching about Passover and Easter and other religious holidays in ways that are accurate and academic.

The distinction of being “academic” is derived from both the sources used and the types of activities implemented in the classroom. One of the most common mistakes made is the use of simulated religious rituals. For example, having students participate in a class Seder is a simulation that crosses the line into “practice” of religion which is unconstitutional. However “learning about” the Seder and its meaning through film or children’s literature is not only constitutional but recommended. Other activities that are problematic in schools include mindless coloring pages of bunnies and eggs with Happy Easter emblazoned on them. Though eggs and chicks have come to symbolize the new life of spring, for some Christians the egg also is a symbol of the rock tomb out of which Christ emerged upon resurrection. Other Christians consider these symbols of Easter as pagan. Kids learn none of these distinctions when they are simply applying yellow crayon marks.

In the classroom use sources to teach about religion from secular publishers. These sources might include films, websites, nonfiction texts, art, and children’s literature. For example, a valuable source for teaching about Passover and Easter is the **History Channel** website. On the Passover page <http://www.history.com/content/passover> viewers learn about the festival of Passover, the Seder and how it is performed, plus the history of Moses and the Exodus commemorated by Passover. The Easter page <http://www.history.com/content/easter> discusses the history of Easter, the Christian story of resurrection, how the date for Easter is determined and differs in the Eastern and Western church traditions, and the pagan origins of some religious practices. **Religion Facts** <http://www.religionfacts.com> also has good pages on Easter and Passover. The book *Bible and It’s Influence* by Cullen Shippe and Chuck Stetson discusses how the Exodus story was important in African American history and how the “Death with Meaning” story of Jesus’ crucifixion influenced such literature as Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*.

Children’s literature is also an appropriate tool for learning about religious holidays, especially for younger children. In the beginning, stick with nonfiction books from mainstream publishers that have solid reviews from organizations such as the School Library Journal. Set up a local review committee of educators who have an understanding of the principles outlined in this article. These cautions, however, shouldn’t deter schools from the study of Passover and Easter in the classroom. It is certainly not improper to also include the study of other religious holidays observed in the spring such as Buddha’s birthday. Nor is it a problem to study seasons and the symbols of spring such as flowers, and baby animals. The point is that learning about the diversity of religious and non religious beliefs is important to the development of multicultural understanding and fundamental to appreciating how the First Amendment has helped Americans live peacefully with their deepest differences.



California Three Rs Project, CSU San Bernardino, San Joaquin COE,  
San Bernardino CSS, 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

**July 20-24, 2009**



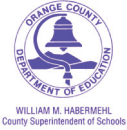
**LOCATION:** Orange County Department of Education  
Building D  
200 Kalmus Drive  
Costa Mesa, CA 92628

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

**STIPEND:** \$500 after summer session;  
additional \$250 after follow-up meetings and assessments

**BONUS:** \$300 in resources for 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

Established Churches in Late 18<sup>th</sup> c. & Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom; Foundations for Religious Liberty in the Constitution – No Religious Test & First Amendment; Religious Influences on Politics and Reform in 19<sup>th</sup> c.; Anti-Catholic Activity and Know Nothings, Utopianism, Mormons; Religious Influences 1880s-1920s, KKK, Scopes Trial; Religious Liberty Re-emphasized in Flag Salute Case and FDR's Four Freedoms; Religion and Communism During the Cold War – Religion and Civil Rights Movement; Diversity of Religion in America after the Immigration Act of 1965; 20<sup>th</sup> c. Court Interpretations and Their Influence on Understanding the First Amendment; Current Issues Related to Religion and Public Education;  
Applying the Three Rs Civic Principles

**CONTACT:** Margaret Hill, (909) 537-5459 [drpeghill@verizon.net](mailto:drpeghill@verizon.net)

**Religion in American History Institute**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

School Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

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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 CA 3Rs Project and Religion in American History Institute,  
5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407-2397 Fax (909) 537-7173 DEADLINE: July 6, 2009*

### **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](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](mailto:mhill@csusb.edu)

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

Dr. Charles C. Haynes, Senior Scholar, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 555 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington D.C. 20001 Tel: 202/292-6293 [chaynes@freedomforum.org](mailto: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](mailto:bgrelle@csuchico.edu)

Sign up to receive the **Three Rs Bulletin** and program announcements electronically at [mhill@csusb.edu](mailto:mhill@csusb.edu). or see [http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score\\_lessons/3rs/index.html](http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score_lessons/3rs/index.html)

Dr. Peg Hill, Director  
California 3Rs Project  
Dept. of Educational Leadership & Curriculum  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, CA 92407