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California Three Rs

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

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The Secular Side of the Coin

By Mynga Futrell, Ph.D.

www.teachingaboutreligion.org

American society and law grant us considerable personal liberty to think and to believe as we wish. This is the civic promise of religious freedom that the U.S. Constitution provides. The ideal of neutrality operates throughout our nation's governance systems, helping to ensure citizens' liberty of individual conscience. Public schools fall under these Constitutional guarantees. They must by law stay neutral with respect to America's striking religious diversity. This stricture holds, even though religions themselves will vary considerably in terms of their general cultural legitimacy.

Some religions are prevalent; others peculiar. No matter. Educators largely know that they may not privilege one religion over others, and they act accordingly. Teachers value fairness; they are able to be evenhanded, whatever religious traditions they encounter in their students' families.

In a similar fashion, schools are not to privilege religion generally over nonreligion. That neutrality pairing, though, is different in kind and scale. Our constitutional guarantee of religious freedom for "all faiths or none" presents an unmistakable chasm. A cultural gap rests right at the "or" in the phrase, and it's not an easy crevice for educators to bridge. The legal and social ideal may be neutrality, but the linguistic and cultural terrain on the two sides is simply not the same.

Citizens in a Tilted Civic Arena

Viewed from a civic perspective, America's "all faiths" segment is huge but not comprehensive of the citizenry. Not everybody has a religion. Nonreligious Americans are in the minority, although according to recent surveys, their numbers are substantial. Over twenty percent of adult Californians are not affiliated with any religion. Of course, many nonaffiliated persons carry a religious outlook.

However, in this nation, the notion of "having a faith" carries widespread cultural approbation. Popular and media considerations of citizens who "lack a faith" evidence more than a tinge of moral disapproval. Reproach is not always unstated. In some segments of society, censure may be loudly proclaimed. Teachers don't stand separate and apart from the broad cultural milieu that socially stigmatizes as "nonbelievers" those persons who happen to have a naturalistic worldview. Negative and narrow labeling of others, if prevalent, is seldom alleviated by our schooling.

The secular side of the nation's liberty of conscience coin is not familiar territory for a great many educators. Teachers who can easily and impartially navigate even the most nontraditional or unfamiliar of religious family backgrounds of a classroom of youngsters may be discomfited by secular points of view and end up ill at ease with parents or students who present a decidedly secularist stance. Although earnestly striving to be neutral, a teacher may feel as if she or he is walking on marbles. If disparate views are strongly held or stridently delivered, assuming a posture of defensiveness is possible. Unfortunately, the information that most teachers have available to them usually comes from the same popular sources that tilt in a "faiths" rather than a "neutrality" direction. Neutrality is the goal, and what teachers need most for

evenhandedness is solid information. Let's gloss a few helpful essentials.

Secular ABCs

Part of the problem is that there is massive confusion in how the word "secular" is employed. The term has at least three common meanings, and educators need to be aware of the variants. A teacher who is versed in the differences will be far more astute (and comfortable) in dealing with others' worldviews (secular and religious) than one who is not. Perhaps there is no more important communication preparation for teachers than becoming adept with the dissimilar usage, even to the point of continuously verbally clarifying which meaning is in play at any point in time.

Secular, Type A: This most generic usage fits everything from a highway to Macy's to a backyard barbeque. These are considered secular places and events lacking association with religion. This casual usage carries "default neutrality," since it holds sway wherever religion is just not at all a factor.

Secular, Type B: At a somewhat opposite pole is the use of the term secular in the sensitive realm of beliefs and values, where strongly held human worldviews come into play. That means this usage has a lot to do with religion because personal worldviews operate in the very same realm. Here the word takes on a departure from religion connotation. That is, worldviews can be considered either secular or religious.

A worldview is personal insight about reality and meaning, often termed a "life understanding." It consists of basic assumptions and images that provide a person with a more or less coherent, though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking about the world. Each of us has one; it's our own discernment, and it develops in part because we have sought some understanding of our own significance. People may reach their understanding through religion. Humanists, freethinkers, atheists, agnostics, brights, skeptics, and rationalists (there are many types of self-identities available) develop their worldviews from varied sources. These are the people for whom the "secular, type B" usage is apropos. The term alludes to the person's holding a naturalistic worldview, free of supernatural beliefs.

Whether a worldview derives from religion or from other sources, this nation's governance accords it equivalent civic status. All citizens have the same "liberty of conscience coin" to spend. They can spend it (think as they wish) within the framework of our nation's secular law (type C).

Secular, Type C: Here the term refers to a form of governance. Law flows from our secular (type C) U.S. Constitution where civic neutrality (level playing field) is maximized. Citizens, both religious and secular (type B) Americans, can be secularists (type C) when it comes to the civic arena of a pluralistic nation based on secular (type C) law. These secularists will favor neutrality as means to protect the rights of fellow citizens to enjoy the same freedoms they enjoy for themselves.

Countermanding the Faith/No Faith Gap

Facing a rapidly changing society as diverse as the United States, it is up to educators to build solid civic understanding that maintains our pluralistic nation as one where citizens in disparate cultural groups live and work together in harmony. It is the task of public education to help youngsters to bridge the linguistic and cultural gulf that separates religious from secular (type B) citizens. It is important to:

Recognize/emphasize that the U.S religious liberty pledge is to "liberty of conscience" for everyone

The First Amendment liberty of conscience guarantee is a basic and inalienable right founded on the inviolable dignity of the person. Rights guaranteed by the Constitution are for all citizens—all types and all stripes.

Clarify what is being protected on both sides of the coin

Respect due classmates is not for the content of the views that they hold, but for the right to hold those personal religious or secular (type B) beliefs in good conscience.

Go beyond stating the facts. Make them come alive with a school/classroom that is a microcosm for the school's secular (type C) "citizens."

A classroom teacher imparts an image to students of how America itself looks upon citizens' religious freedom. Citizens who have naturalistic worldviews are no more or less principled than their religious counterparts.

Elude the "tunnel vision" of religious neutrality by aiming for worldview neutrality.

Every student has a worldview, but not every student has a religion. Language matters, so with respect to the diversity of families and traditions, teachers can more readily stay neutral with an eye on individuals (citizens and their worldviews) than with a focus on categories (religions and labels).

* "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008 (<http://religions.pewforum.org/maps>)

The Religion in American History Institute, Constitutional Rights Foundation,
Orange County Department of Education, San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools,
San Joaquin County Office of Education, Center for Civic Education, California Three Rs Project,
and UC Irvine School of Social Sciences

invites

K-12 teachers, pre-service teachers, curriculum specialists, and school administrators
to a

Constitution Day Conference



Freedom of Conscience: Cornerstone of America's Constitutional Liberties

A special focus on the First Amendment

September 13, 2008 8:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Social Sciences Lecture Hall, Social Sciences Plaza, UC Irvine



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Erwin Chemerinsky, Dean, College of Law, UC Irvine

**Charles Haynes, Sr. Scholar, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center,
Washington DC**

Select from 24 small group sessions featuring standards-aligned lesson demonstrations and resources on First Amendment topics for elementary, middle, and high school presented by teacher leaders from the Teaching American History grant project and representatives from the Constitutional Rights Foundation, and the Center for Civic Education. Lessons and materials are appropriate for school Constitution Day programs and classroom use.

\$100 stipend provided to the first 100 teacher registrants who attend the full day & submit a written summary of the sessions and keynote presentations.

There is no fee, but pre-registration is required.

For questions, contact Dr. Peg Hill, (909) 537-5459 or via email dmpeghill@verizon.net

————— **Constitution Day Conference, September 13, 2008** —————

Name: _____ **Grade Level(s):** _____

School Name & Mailing Address: _____

City: _____ **Zip:** _____ **Phone:** () _____

Email (required): _____ **Fax:** () _____

Please fax the completed registration form to:

Deborah Granger, Coordinator, History-Social Sciences, Orange County Department of Education

Fax: (714) 662-7564 Phone: (714) 966-4447 Email: dgranger@ocde.us

DEADLINE: September 8, 2008

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, California State University San Bernardino, 5500 University Pkwy., FO 115, 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, 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, 400 West First Street, Chico, CA 95929-0740, (530) 898-4739, bgrelle@csuchico.edu

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