



The California Three Rs Project

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

The December Dilemma 2022: Religious Holidays in Public Schools

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Every year the month of December has the potential for being a time of conflict in today's culturally diverse schools. Unless we make a strong effort to remind all educators, students, and parents that public schools belong to all members of the community equally, competing ideas about the appropriateness of holiday celebration can become the basis for tension in the school environment.

December holidays are always a challenge, and educators often receive contradictory and confusing advice about how to treat religious holidays in the public schools. The last decades of exploding diversity **have** challenged California's public schools to deal creatively and sensitively with student populations representing many faiths and beliefs, secular and religious. Global political issues related to faith have only exacerbated the problem. Fortunately, our civic agreement in America, found in the Constitution and especially the Bill of Rights, binds us to the promise to protect the right of each person's freedom of conscience.

During a time of the year when major religious holidays are celebrated, it is important to remember that not everyone shares the beliefs of the majority. On the other hand, everyone does have the same right to believe or not to believe. To deal with this pluralism effectively and with the least harm, it is essential for public school leaders, parents, and students to remember that the primary purpose of public schools is academic. It is appropriate in the public-school setting to learn about religious beliefs and practices, but it is not right to practice these beliefs or celebrate them in any devotional manner.

A Brief Guide to the Holidays

It is best to remember that December is not only the month for the Western Christian holiday of Christmas, but it is also a time for several significant non-Christian holidays as well:

- This year, the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah (Chanukah) begins on December 18 and extends to December 26.
- December 8 also sees many Mahayana Buddhists celebrate the enlightenment of Buddha.
- Religious and secular people alike observe the winter solstice and Yule holidays on December 21.
- Some humanists observe HumanLight on December 23.
- December 26 is commemorated as the anniversary of the death of the prophet Zarathustra, founder of the ancient Persian Zoroastrian religion, which now has an active presence in California.
- The month ends with the week-long Kwanzaa holiday, the African American cultural celebration of African heritage.
- Many Eastern Orthodox Christians, using the Julian calendar, observe Christmas (Nativity Day) on January 7, though **some** American Orthodox worshippers celebrate using the western Gregorian calendar on December 25.

Sensitivity to First Amendment rights may be difficult to garner on a school campus because for many the December "Christmas Season" is not religious but cultural. This happy time of decorated trees, parties, gifts, and special food treats is sentimentally connected to people's perception of their childhood and to

American folk tradition. In fact, some of these practices have been declared “secular” by the courts, so people have become used to the presence of decorated trees in city parks and libraries. To reach out to important minority populations, some educational leaders classify ethnic religious celebrations as simply “cultural,” such as Las Posadas, which re-enacts the biblical story of Mary and Joseph and, therefore, has inaccurately been seen as appropriate to reproduce in schools.

The result is that many students, teachers, parents, and staff who are not Christian find the overwhelming presence of artifacts and activities of Christmas in public schools an abridgement of their full participation in the educational community of which they are a rightful part. While the intention in the school may not have been to veer into the realm of establishment of religion, legal challenges by estranged communities too often result from the frustration of not feeling respected.

The Bill of Rights: A Cause for Celebration

A great way to deal with this December angst is to begin the season in public schools with a focus on one of the month’s holidays often ignored: Bill of Rights Day. It was established to commemorate the adoption of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution on December 15, 1791. Therefore, December 15 is commonly recognized as Bill of Rights Day.

Beginning the season in December with activities around the Bill of Rights offers an opportunity for students to reflect on the civic values of rights, responsibility, and respect (the three Rs) that all Americans share as citizens, no matter their religious or secular beliefs. In the “Internet Resources and Lesson Plans” section below, you will find links to educational classroom activities for elementary, middle, and high school to teach about and commemorate the Bill of Rights. These activities will create a tone of respect that allows us to relate to issues expressed by students and families who are not in the majority.

Three Questions for December Holiday Planning

As Charles Haynes, senior fellow for religious freedom at the Freedom Forum and founder of the Religious Freedom Center has argued, building a school culture of respect encourages us to ask, “What educational decisions are the most fair and allow all of our students and families feel that this is their school?” For example, some symbols of a “secular” Christmas are legal in schools, but they may make some students feel that their culture has been pushed aside.

A most appropriate course of action is to reinforce the school’s academic focus. In their book *Finding Common Ground*, Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas included the chapter “Religious Holidays in the Public Schools,” which has been endorsed by a wide range of religious and educational leaders. Here, Haynes and Thomas recommend that before planning December holiday concerts or other activities in a public school, choral directors, teachers, and administrators should ask themselves three simple questions:

1. *Do we have a clear educational purpose?* Under the First Amendment, learning about religious holidays is an appropriate educational goal — devotionally celebrating or observing religious holidays is not.
2. *Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider by the concert, lesson, or activity?* Most parents and students are fine with learning about religious traditions — as long as the school’s approach is academic, not devotional. It is never appropriate for public schools to proselytize.
3. *Is our overall curriculum balanced and fair?* December shouldn’t be the only time sacred music pops up in the curriculum. Students should learn about religious music from various world traditions at other times of the year.

The California Three Rs Project suggests that school leaders and teachers plan any holiday-related activity with these questions in mind. It is also important to note that some traditionally emphasized December holidays are not major celebrations in the religious traditions of which they are a part. They have become so in many schools through efforts to achieve balance and fairness. This is true of Hanukkah, for example.

December 2022 and January 2023 Holidays		
Dates	Holiday	Tradition
Dec. 1–24	Advent	Christian
Dec. 8	Bodhi Day or Rohatsu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mahayana Buddhist (Zen and Pure Land) • Rohatsu (Japan)
Dec. 8	Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary	Christian – Roman Catholic
Dec. 12	Feast Day – Our Lady of Guadalupe	Roman Catholic (Latin America)
Dec. 15	Bill of Rights Day	Secular – all Americans
Dec. 16 – 24	Las Posadas Navidenas	Cultural (Hispanic)
Dec. 18 – 24	Hanukkah (Chanukah)	Jewish
Dec. 21	Yule	Cultural (Northern Europe), often in conjunction with Christmas
Dec. 21	Winter Solstice	Various: earth-based religions, Neo-pagan, Wiccan, and secular
Dec. 23	HumanLight	Humanist
Dec. 25	Christmas	Christian (Western churches)
Dec. 26	Zarathust No Diso	Zoroastrian
Dec. 26 – Jan. 1	Kwanzaa	Cultural (African American)
Jan. 7	Nativity Day	Christian (Eastern Orthodox, Armenian)

INTERNET RESOURCES AND LESSON PLANS

Using the academic role of schools as the guide, the following websites may be of value for teachers in helping students to understand their world and the beliefs and cultures of their neighbors. Each is hyperlinked below.

GENERAL

Resources:

[Freedom of Religion](#)

(Freedom Forum Institute)

The above link has a long list of resources related to religion and public life, including public schools.

[The December Dilemma: Teaching About Religious Holidays](#)

[The 'December Dilemma': December Holiday Guidelines for Public Schools](#)

(Anti-Defamation League)

These articles describe the elements of religious freedom as understood in the First Amendment.

[Religious Holidays & Public Schools – Consensus Guidelines](#)

(Freedom Forum Institute)

These guidelines are created by concerned representatives of particular religious groups, public school representatives and legal specialists of the First Amendment.

[Public School Holiday Celebrations: Christmas-centric or Multicultural?](#)

(*Public School Review*)

This article argues that as public schools in the U.S. continue to increase in their racial, ethnic, economic, and religious diversity, some districts need to rethink their holiday celebrations in a manner that is inclusive and respectful of all people.

[Interfaith Calendar 2022](#)

This calendar describes and lists the dates for major religious holidays for religions throughout the world.

Lesson:

[December Days: Ten Activities to Celebrate a Month of Special Days!](#) (EducationWorld)

Learn about Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and even more.

BILL OF RIGHTS DAY

Resources:

[Bill of Rights Day \(December 15\) Proclamation 2524 on August 21, 1941](#)

View FDR's Proclamation 2524 and why he thought a Bill of Rights Day on December 15 was worthwhile.

[Bill of Rights \(1791\)](#)

(The Bill of Rights Institute)

This source provides historical context and printable and pdf facsimile versions of this 1791 document.

Lessons:

[Celebrate Bill of Rights Day](#)

(Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF))

This web page contains links to free lessons for elementary, middle, and high school classes on the history and provisions of the U.S. Bill of Rights.

[James Madison and the Bill of Rights](#)

(CRF's *Bill of Rights in Action*/California Three Rs Project)

In this lesson, students learn about different versions of the First Amendment that were debated at the Constitutional Convention and, in a simulation activity, determine which version they would want in the Bill of Rights.

[The Establishment of Religion](#)

(CRF's *Bill of Rights in Action*)

This issue of focuses on this vital clause in the First Amendment. Free lesson plans and activities always included and no registration necessary.

[Religious Tolerance](#)

(CRF's *Bill of Rights in Action*)

This issue of discusses prayer in schools, the history of the Mormon faith, and Martin Luther and the Reformation with free lesson plans and activities.

[Free Exercise Clause](#)

(Freedom Forum)

What does the First Amendment right to freedom of religion mean?

[Our Constitution: The Bill of Rights](#) (Grades 10–12)

[Our Constitution: The Bill of Rights](#) (Grades 4-6)

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History)

The units linked above enable students to understand, summarize, and analyze the Bill of Rights, with supplementary videos by scholars such as Jack Rakove and Larry Kramer.

[You've Got Rights!](#)

[Do I Have a Right? Extension Pack](#)

(iCivics)

These two overview lessons explore the elements of constitutional rights.

BUDDHISM

Resources:

[Bodhi Day](#)

(Wikipedia)

Bodhi Day is the Buddhist holiday that commemorates the day that the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, experienced enlightenment.

[Rohatsu](#)

(Learn Religions)

Rohatsu is Japanese for “eighth day of the twelfth month.” December 8 has come to be the day Japanese Buddhists observe the enlightenment of the [historical Buddha](#).

[Rohatsu](#)

(Beliefnet)

Rohatsu (the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month) is a time when Zen Buddhists commemorate the Buddha’s enlightenment. It begins on the first of December and ends on Rohatsu Day itself, the 8th of December.

Lesson:

[How to Celebrate Bodhi Day](#)

(DoltYourself.com)

The December 8 celebration of Bodhi Day marks the day in 596 B.C.E. that the Buddha attained enlightenment after a long period of meditation under the Bodhi Tree.

CHRISTIANITY

Resources:

[Las Posadas](#)

(Britannica)

Celebrated from December 16-24, the nine-day Las Posadas celebration includes a candle-lit procession of children and parents reenacting Mary and Joseph’s journey through Bethlehem.

[Virgin of Guadalupe Feast Day](#)

(National Public Radio)

This podcast gives background to the “Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe” with Friar Cavazos-Gonzalez of the Catholic Theological Union.

[History of Christmas in America – Colonial Period](#)

(History Channel)

This site provides information and video segments about the history of Christmas traditions, the evolution of Santa Claus, and the Christmas tree tradition.

[History of Christmas – Historical Overview](#)

(History Channel)

This article does a survey of how Christmas was developed in the Roman Era of world history and later adapted to other cultures. It details how religious interpretations evolved in Europe and later in America.

Lessons:

[Using Textual Clues to Understand A Christmas Carol](#)

(National Endowment for the Humanities)

This list of ideas that are elements of A Christmas Carol can guide a teacher for discussion and writing activities.

[The Nutcracker Study Guide](#)

(Garden City Ballet)

This guide provides a brief history of The Nutcracker ballet, synopses of Acts I and II of its story, a biographical sketch of composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and language arts and social studies lessons designed for elementary grades.

[Gingerbread Phonics](#)

(National Council of Teachers of English)

This standards-aligned lesson for grades K-2 uses familiar words from *The Gingerbread Man* story to help teach early readers.

[Surprising Origins of Modern-Day Christmas Traditions](#)

(Education World)

This lesson traces the history of the Christmas tree and its uses at various times and places in the world.

HUMANIST and TRADITIONAL FOLK HOLIDAYS

Resources:

[7 Winter Solstice Celebrations From Around the World](#)

(Britannica)

The winter solstice has been celebrated since ancient times by people all over the globe. This article presents brief entries that highlight celebrations from China, Peru, Scandinavia, Antarctica, the Hopi indigenous people of Arizona, ancient Rome, and ancient Persia.

[Solstice — A Cause for Celebration Since Ancient Times](#)

(History.com)

This article describes how people have celebrated the solstice since ancient times and have observed it with many different cultural and religious traditions. Some of them survive to the present day.

[HumanLight: December's Secular Holiday](#)

(National Public Radio)

This brief NPR webcast discusses the secular holiday of HumanLight that was started by humanists in 2001.

Lessons:

[It's Winter in the Northern Hemisphere](#)

(National Council of Teachers of English)

December 21, the winter solstice, is considered the first official day of winter. This web site has winter-related activities for elementary students.

[Celebrate Winter!](#)

(Education World)

Students can explore a variety of websites and do activities that provide information about the Winter Solstice.

JUDAISM

Resources:

[Hanukkah's Light](#)

(Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly)

This site has video and lesson material about Hanukkah and its meaning. Free registration required.

[Hanukkah](#)

(History Channel)

This site offers several short video segments providing information on the history and traditions of Hanukkah.

[Is There A Right Way to Spell Hanukkah? Chanukah? Hannukah?](#)

(TIME NewsFeed)

This short article with a lighthearted touch presents the reasons for different acceptable spellings.

[When Is Hanukkah 2022?](#)

(The Forward)

The above-linked article explains why the dates of Hanukkah change from year to year on the Gregorian calendar but stay the same on the Hebrew calendar.

Lesson:

[Five Hanukkah Lesson Plans for Teachers](#)

(Education World)

On this website teachers can access an entire unit on Hannukah with introductory activities, suggested books, movies, websites, and more.

KWANZAA

Resources:

[Kwanzaa](#)

(History Channel)

This site has video segments and text describing the history and traditions of Kwanzaa.

[Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture](#)

(African American Cultural Center)

This official site outlines the history, values, and the idea behind Kwanzaa. It also profiles Dr. Maulana Karenga, the originator of Kwanzaa.

[How to celebrate Kwanzaa and our African roots](#)

(TheGrio)

Kwanzaa is a celebration of African American and Pan-African culture, community, and history.

Technically, it can be celebrated all year-round. Kwanzaa originated as a way to unify and uplift the Black community following the week-long civil unrest of the 1965 [Watts Rebellion](#) in Los Angeles.

Lesson:

[Kwanzaa, the African-American Celebration of Ancestry](#)

(Teacher Vision)

Teach children about Kwanzaa with the activities outlined in this printable. They will learn about the traditions of this African-American holiday, which celebrates African ancestry (free registration for access).

ZOROASTRIANISM

Resources:

[Shab-e Yalda: The Zoroastrian Winter Solstice](#)

(World Zoroastrian Organisation)

Shab-e Yalda (Shab-e Chelleh) is a Persian (Iranian) celebration of the *winter solstice*. It is held on December 21. The Yalda holiday in Zoroastrianism celebrates the winter solstice as a triumph of good over evil, when nights begin to shorten and the amount of daylight lengthens.

[Zaratosht No Diso](#)

(Wikipedia)

This brief entry in Wikipedia describes how the death of the Prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster) is commemorated each year on December 26 by followers of the Zoroastrian religion.

[Zoroastrianism](#)

(History Channel)

This article discusses what is known about the early history of the Zoroastrian religion in the regions now known as Iran, India and Afghanistan.

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