



The California Three Rs Project

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

The December Dilemma: Religious Holidays in the Public Schools

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Every year, the month of December poses potential 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, both secular and religious alike. 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 in that same setting to practice or celebrate these beliefs in any 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 (or Chanukah) begins at sundown on December 2, 2018, and extends to sundown on December 10. December 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. Many 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.

Winter 2018-2019 Holidays		
Month	Day(s)	Holiday(s) or Tradition
November/December	Nov. 19– Nov. 20	Mawlid al-Nabi (Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad; celebrated by many Muslims, but the dates may vary)
	Dec. 1–24	Advent (Christian)
	Dec. 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rohatsu (Buddhist) • Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary (Catholic Christian)
	Dec. 12	Feast Day – Our Lady of Guadalupe (Catholic Christian)
	Dec. 15	Bill of Rights Day (All Americans – secular/civic)
	Dec. 16–24	Las Posadas Navidenas (Hispanic Christmas)
	Dec. 2–10	Hanukkah/Chanukah (Jewish)
	Dec. 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yule (Wiccan/Pagan and Christian) • Winter Solstice (Wiccan and nature religions)
	Dec. 23	HumanLight (Humanist, freethought)
	Dec. 25	Christmas (Western Christian)
	Dec. 26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zarathust No Diso (Zoroastrian) • Kwanzaa begins (African American cultural tradition)
	January	Jan. 1
Jan. 6		Nativity of Christ (Armenian Orthodox Christian)
Jan. 7		Feast of the Nativity (Julian calendar) (Eastern Orthodox Church)

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 on December 15. Beginning the season with activities around the Bill of Rights offers an opportunity 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. It will create a tone of respect that allows us to relate to issues expressed by students and families who are not in the majority.

As Charles Haynes, senior scholar at The First Amendment Center and director of the Religious Freedom Education Project 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 to 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 focus on the school's academic role for all students. In *Finding Common Ground* (2007), there is the chapter "Religious Holidays in the Public Schools," which has been endorsed by a wide range of religious and educational leaders. (Please see "Internet Resources" below for a link to download this source.) Here Dr. Haynes recommends 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 — 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, but have become so in many schools through efforts to achieve balance and fairness. This is especially true of Hanukkah.

INTERNET RESOURCES

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.

December Dilemma: What Should Schools Do About Christmas? (First Amendment Center)

<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/december-dilemma-what-should-schools-do-about-christmas>

This is a Charles Haynes' article on issues related to schools and the December holidays.

Finding Common Ground

<https://www.freedomforuminstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FCGcomplete.pdf>

This essential guide to teaching about religion in public schools written by Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas is a highly readable source for the principles underlying the California Three Rs Project and is available as a free download at the link above.

The 'December Dilemma': December Holiday Guidelines for Public Schools (Anti-Defamation League)

http://archive.adl.org/issue_education/december_dilemma_2004/default.html

This site has a clearly written description of religious holiday concerns and a set of suggestions for public schools to follow during the holiday season in December.

Interfaith Calendar

<http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/index.htm>

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

BILL OF RIGHTS DAY

Today Is Bill of Rights Day

<http://crfblog.org/?p=5111>

This post on CRF's blog offers links to several classroom activities and resources and a brief history of the commemoration.

James Madison and the Bill of Rights

<http://crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/archives>

This article and reproducible lesson from CRF's *Bill of Rights in Action* looks at how James Madison, the "father" of the U.S. Constitution, who initially opposed adding a bill of rights to the Constitution, also became the "father" of the Bill of Rights.

Celebrate Bill of Rights Day (Civics Renewal Network)

<http://civicsrenewalnetwork.org//featured/celebrating-bill-rights>

This website links to over 200 *free* classroom resources for teaching about the Bill of Rights as part of the Civics Renewal Network, an alliance of 26 nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations, including CRF, the Center for Civic Education, and the Newseum Institute.

Bill of Rights Day Proclamation (Proclamation 2524), November 27, 1941

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16046>

This site provides the text of President Roosevelt's statement when he proclaimed Bill of Rights Day in the United States in 1941.

BUDDHISM

Bodhi Day

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodhi_Day

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

Rohatsu (Bodhi Day)

<http://buddhism.about.com/od/buddhismglossaryr/g/Rohatsu.htm>

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

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Buddhism/2000/11/What-Is-Rohatsu.aspx>

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.

CHRISTIANITY

Las Posadas

http://www.chiff.com/home_life/holiday/christmas/posadas.htm

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.

The Virgin of Guadalupe Fiesta

<http://www.inside-mexico.com/guadalupe.htm>

This site describes the religious holiday honoring of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In Mexico, the faithful join together for the festivities on December 12, one of the most important dates on the Mexican calendar.

Interview With Friar Gilberto Cavazos-Gonzalez

<http://www.npr.org/2011/12/12/143579900/catholics-honor-virgin-of-guadalupe-for-feast-day>

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

Christmas Trees and More

<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/trees/index.cfm>

Here is a wealth of information about Christmas traditions of all kinds and Christmas trees in particular.

Colonial Christmas Customs

<http://www.history.org/Almanack/life/xmas/customs.cfm>

Here is a brief account of Christmas in Colonial Virginia.

History of Christmas

<http://www.history.com/topics/christmas>

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

HUMANIST and TRADITIONAL FOLK HOLIDAYS

HumanLight

<http://humanlight.njhn.org/wp/>

The HumanLight celebration focuses on a secular vision in which all people can identify with each other, behave with the highest moral standards, and work together toward a happy, just, and peaceful world. HumanLight was created by the New Jersey Humanist Network and was first celebrated in 2001. It is also promoted by the American Humanist Association.

HumanLight: December's Secular Holiday

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98627236>

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

Winter Solstice Celebrations

http://www.religioustolerance.org/winter_solstice.htm

Religious people worldwide observe many seasonal days of celebration during the month of December. Most are religious holy days, and are linked in some way to the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere.

Solstice — A Cause for Celebration Since Ancient Times

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/12/1220_021220_solstice.html

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.

How do atheists celebrate Christmas?

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/14/living/atheist-christmas-feat/index.html>

This article describes the ways in which non-theistic Americans celebrate Christmas with their families. Religious literacy scholar Stephen Prothero was interviewed for this article and discusses the religious and secular aspects of Christmas in American culture.

JUDAISM

Hanukkah's Light

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/?p=7597>

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

Hanukkah Traditions

http://hanukkah.123holiday.net/hanukkah_traditions.html

This site provides basic information on Hanukkah for young people including celebrations, traditions, food and drink.

Hanukkah

<http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/hanukkah>

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?*

<http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/12/21/learning-the-correct-way-to-spell-hanukkah-chanukah-or-hannukah/>

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

Chanukah on the Net

<http://www.holidays.net/chanukah/>

Read the story of the Maccabees and Chanukah, learn about the Menorah, and hear the music for “Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel” at this site.

KWANZAA

Kwanzaa

<http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/kwanzaa-history>

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

Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture

<http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/index.shtml>

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

ZOROASTRIANISM

Yalda: Zoroastrian Winter Solstice Celebration

<http://altreligion.about.com/od/holidaysfestivalsevents/p/Yalda.htm>

The Yalda holiday on December 21 in Zoroastrianism celebrates the winter solstice as a triumph of good over evil, when nights begin to shorten and the amount of daylight lengthens.

Zarathust No Diso

<http://altreligion.about.com/od/holidaysfestivalsevents/p/zarathust-no-diso.htm>

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

Zoroastrianism

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/>

This video is a segment of the documentary “Story of God.”

GENERAL

ReligiousTolerance.org

http://www.religioustolerance.org/main_day.htm

This page lists some of the main holy days of the eight largest faiths in the U.S.: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Baha’i World Faith, and Wicca. (Please note that the site contains advertisements which can be distracting.)

Bill of Rights

Constitution Day Resources

<http://ca3rsproject.org/pages/ConstitutionDayResources.html>

This page from the California Three Rs Project includes many lessons for elementary, middle, and high school grades on the fundamental freedoms of the First Amendment and much more.

Courts in the Classroom

<http://www.courtsed.org/courts-in-the-classroom/>

This Flash-animated site provides exciting, interactive lessons on subjects ranging from privacy, free expression, and censorship to the Fourth Amendment's protection against unlawful search and seizure. Courts in the Classroom is a project of Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Judicial Council of California.

The Establishment of Religion

<http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-22-2.html>

This issue of *Bill of Rights in Action* focuses on this vital clause in the First Amendment, including lessons on the *Scopes* trial, later evolution-related court cases, and, for world history teachers, the country of Turkey. Free lesson plans and activities always included.

Religious Tolerance

<http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-17-1.html>

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

Tinker v. Des Moines (1969): Student Speech, Symbolic Speech

http://www.streetlaw.org/en/landmark/cases/tinker_v_des_moines

This set of online background and teaching strategies from Street Law, Inc. address the question: What First Amendment rights to free speech do students have?

Bodhi Day

How To Celebrate Bodhi Day

<http://www.doityourself.com/stry/bodhi-day>

The December 8th 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

The Christmas Tree from TeacherLINK

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/christmas.html>

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

The Nutcracker – Story and Music

<http://themes.pppst.com/nutcracker.html>

Read the story, hear the music, and learn about the Russian holiday traditions

included in Tchaikovsky's ballet. (Ignore the ads to click on lesson materials.)

Gingerbread

<http://teachingheart.net/gingerbreadman.html>

This is a literature unit on gingerbread that may be used any time of the year.

A Christmas Carol

<http://novelinks.org/pmwiki.php?n=Novels.AChristmasCarol>

Here are reading strategies and activities to support Charles Dickens' famous Christmas story.

A Dickens of a Party

http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson238/dickens_WebQuest.html

This role-play lesson plan comes from readwritethink.org, a program of the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English. Students imagine they have been invited to a Victorian New Year's Day Party, honoring Ebenezer Scrooge, the protagonist of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

A Colonial Christmas in Williamsburg

<http://www.history.org/History/teaching/colxmas.cfm>

In 18th century Virginia, the feasting and celebration of the holiday season began on December 24 and ran through Twelfth Night on January 6.

Comparative Religions

December Days: Ten Activities to Celebrate a Month of Special Days!

http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson151.shtml

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

Hanukkah

Hanukkah lesson from TeacherLINK

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/HANUKKAH.HTML>

This lesson is a service of Utah State University's College of Education.

Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa lessons from TeacherLINK

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/kwanzaa2.html>

(Alternate link: <http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/kwanzaa.html>)

These links are a service of Utah State University's College of Education.

Winter Solstice

Celebrate Winter!

http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson094.shtml

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

It's Winter in the Northern Hemisphere

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/calendar-activities/winter-northern-hemisphere-20377.html>

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

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The material above is available at the California Three Rs Project [website](#). For further information, contact the California Three Rs Project:

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