Teaching About RELIGION

In its inclusion of religion in state and national standards, the United States serves as a positive model for the world. Putting this vision into practice, however, will require better teacher training and more thoughtful curriculum planning.

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In today's climate of accountability and standards, many people seem to view schooling as just a prelude to working life, a means to prepare students to become effective workers and secure a prosperous national and individual future. What role could teaching about religion play in such an environment? Amid the competing skills and information that we expect students to master, where does knowledge of the human spiritual heritage fit in?

We could justify teaching about religion on purely practical grounds. For example, future employers and employees may be able to manage companies or market products more effectively if they know the cultural preferences, habits, and taboos of diverse groups of consumers and workers. We could even
recommend teaching about religious beliefs as an urgent security issue, to help us size up foes and assess their strengths and weaknesses, their potential to be a threat or an ally. But both of these arguments view the human spiritual experience through a distorted, narrow lens and are not likely to achieve even their own limited goals.

More appropriately, we can view the study of organized religions in the wider context of human spiritual experience. Such experience is not confined to rigid categories; it belongs to the inner life of each individual and manifests itself not only in religion, but also in artistic, scientific, and literary expression.

Moreover, knowing about the beliefs and practices of people who share this world is vital to the future. In the United States, where people of many nations, faiths, and ethnicities live together, all of us as citizens have the responsibility to learn about one another so that we can unite in positive social conduct. We accept civic education as a way to reinforce the practice of equity and religious freedom enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, but these principles are hollow if the people who inhabit this land do not know one another. More broadly, learning about the history, cultures, and belief systems of peoples who share the globe engenders respect and understanding. To join in positive action, students must learn both to appreciate cultural differences, and to understand that all people share common values.

The Good News: Religion in State Standards
Educators in the United States have already taken significant strides toward achieving these goals. During the past two decades, the practice and means of teaching about religion have become matters of consensus, according to our
The emerging consensus on teaching about religion creates a new opportunity to transcend the trivial and exotic in favor of meaningful understandings and universal principles.

study, conducted by the Council on Islamic Education and copublished by the First Amendment Center (Douglass, 2000). The study looked for direct and indirect references to religion in national and state standards documents to ascertain what, when, and how much they include on teaching about religion. It tracked the grade levels and courses in which religion is taught.

We found that coverage of religion resides mainly in social studies standards, with additional coverage in language, literature, and fine arts standards. Most state standards incorporate religion in primary-level studies of communities, in elementary and secondary U.S. history and world history, in world cultures, and in geography. The standards commonly specify that students should know about the role of religion in U.S. history and contemporary life, and that students should be able to describe major world religious traditions and their role in history and culture. Civics standards often include religious influences in law and civic values, highlighting the role of religious freedoms.

The study results demonstrate that a national consensus has emerged on how schools can teach about religions in constitutionally appropriate ways. Nearly all the state standards frame the study of religions in language that conforms to the guidelines for balance, neutrality, and fairness developed by the First Amendment Center (Haynes & Thomas, 2001). Collectively, the seven major national social studies standards and curriculum models (developed by such national curriculum organizations as the National Council for History Education, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the National Council on Economic Education) and the state standards mandate learning about the origins, basic beliefs, and practices of each faith and the historical context in which it arose, spread, and flourished. The standards also emphasize the ideas, institutions, and traditions of religious thought that grew out of each faith and the societies that each faith influenced. Although some state standards mention only one time period early in the history of the faith group, many states cite the role of religion and its changing impact on society through the contemporary era. Individual state requirements include many creative and challenging items, such as mandates to study the theological and philosophical ideas of religious movements; to learn how religions have affected economic, environmental, and technological decisions; and to understand the role religions have played in the history of science and the arts.

In its standards for teaching about religion, the U.S. education system shines as a beacon of civility and tolerance to the world. One of the most profound sources of unrest in the world is the failure of education systems in many countries to bypass narrow ethnic and national interests and teach about differing belief systems and shared common values. In contrast, the U.S. education model accommodates teachers and students belonging to many communities and faiths. Going beyond wary, silent tolerance, the guidelines and mandates in current state and national standards allow parents to
send children into classrooms where they learn about their own faiths and those of their fellow citizens in an academically and constitutionally sound framework.

When Curriculum Falls Short
Although teaching about religion is required in nearly every state, this does not ensure that it will be well taught. An effective curricular vehicle must carry the content.

The experiences of Council on Islamic Education reviewers in teacher training, textbook review, and standards development have exposed us to several faulty models for teaching about religion that fall short of the guidelines. The most common faulty approach is to provide a thumbnail sketch of each world faith that creates more stereotypes than useful understandings. Another flawed method limits historical coverage to a period thousands of years ago, leaving the impression that religions are quaint artifacts of bygone eras. For example, many state mandates end their coverage of Hinduism with ancient India, Buddhism with Asoka, and Judaism with the time of Jesus.

Such inadequate teaching about religion may encourage students to apply rudimentary knowledge of others’ beliefs to understanding contemporary non-Western societies. If students haven’t learned about change in religious thought and practice over time, they may imagine that nothing in other cultures has changed for centuries and assume that they can apply the ancient or medieval stencil to understanding complex contemporary societies. This faulty approach would fail to help them understand the student sitting at the next desk, the neighbor, the future colleague, or the world at large.

Distorted learning can also result from inadequate focus on religious institutions. As an example, some institutions from Islamic tradition recently in the news are the madrassa and the ulama (religious schools and scholars), but they have been covered in such a simplistic way that they are becoming mere caricatures. The result can be paradoxical. Shorn of their historical and cultural context, two proud symbols of learning—the madrassa, which gave birth to colleges and universities, and the ulama, a class of Muslim scholars that brought forth such universal geniuses as philosophers and physicians Aviceena and Averroes—have become confused in the public mind with symbols of ignorance.

Implementing the Standards
How then can schools teach about religion in ways that achieve the aims of the state and national standards? Guidelines developed by the First Amendment Center, the product of several decades of development and dissemination, prescribe a neutral tone that leaves choices about belief to the student and the family. Teaching about religion should neither promote nor denigrate the ideals of any faith.

Effective practice in teaching about religion, according to the guidelines, depends on presenting religious figures objectively and authentically in the context of the sacred narratives told through the ages. Students learn, for example, not only that Moses and Abraham were leaders, but also that people believe that God gave these leaders wisdom. They learn that Jesus’s followers called him Christ, and that to his followers Muhammad was not just an Arab merchant but a great prophet.

Effective practice in teaching about religion includes use of accurate terminology from within each faith, and presents its beliefs and rituals as expressions of the value system of the faith and its cultural institutions. The five pillars of Islam, for example, can be viewed as mere rituals, but in fact they are acts of worship with many dimensions. Teaching about the spiritual and worldly, individual and communal dimensions is a key to appreciating both unity and diversity in Muslim societies over the 14 centuries of its history.

Setting Religion in a Meaningful Context
The emerging consensus on teaching about religion creates a new opportu-
One faulty approach provides a thumbnail sketch of each world
faith with its major figures, scriptures, beliefs, rituals, and origins;
this may create more stereotypes than useful understandings.

Teaching Religion—or, for that
matter, any complex aspect of
“knowing other cultures”—schools
must provide time and a sound
academic framework for building
courses. Structuring the world history
curriculum around a chronological
framework based on eras is the
soundest available model because reli-
gions and other topics are covered
continuously throughout the course.

Then, planners need to be creative in
embedding the study of religions where
appropriate. In civics, teaching about
religion illuminates the ideals on which
people base their systems of govern-
nance. In geography and cultural
studies, learning how people all over
the world have articulated their beliefs
enhances understanding of common
values and alternative ways of meeting
needs and solving problems. The study
of religious tolerance and intolerance in
history—validation and acceptance of
those unlike ourselves or rejection and
demonization—brings to the surface the
most vital elements of civil society,
beyond sterile descriptions of admin-
istration and laws.

Training Teachers
Only well-constructed lessons and
assessments can bring the aspirations of
state mandates on teaching about reli-
gion to life. Although teaching about
religion is not a new subject in the
curriculum, teacher training lags far
behind. Both preservice and inservice
training are urgently needed to increase
teachers’ knowledge and comfort level.

The key to better teaching about reli-
gion is raising the level of scholarship in
curriculum and instructional resources
available to the K–12 classroom. The
effort requires collaboration among
scholars of religion, educators, and
members of the faith communities to
realize the potential in the new struc-
tures for teaching world history and
geography in multidisciplinary, skill-
based courses at the appropriate grade
levels. Never before has there been such
a precise set of parameters for
undertaking this important civic
and academic endeavor.

Additional Resources on
Teaching About Religion

Religion & American Education: Rethinking a
NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Religion in American Public Life. A.Y. al-Hibri, J.B.
Norton.

Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum.
VA: ASCD.

Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public
Fountain Valley, CA: Council on Islamic Education.

Teaching About Religion in Public Schools.
N. Piediscalzi and W.E. Collie (Eds.). (1977). Niles, IL:
Argus Communications.

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about religion in national and
state social studies standards.
Nashville, TN: Council on Islamic
Education and First Amendment
Center.

Finding common ground: A
guide to religious liberty in
public schools. Nashville, TN: First
Amendment Center.

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