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.

Susan L. Douglass
for the Council on Islamic Education

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 is 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 of 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 Aviceanna and Averroes—have become confused in the public mind with symbols of ignorance.

---

**How Should We Teach About Religion?**

Encouraged by the new consensus, public schools are now beginning to include more teaching about religion in the curriculum. In the social studies especially, the question is no longer “Should I teach about religion?” but rather “How should I do it?”

The answer to the “how” question begins with a clear understanding of the crucial difference between the teaching of religion (religious education or indoctrination) and teaching about religion. “Religion in the Public School Curriculum,” the guidelines issued by 17 religious and education organizations, summarizes the distinction this way:

- The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional.
- The school strives for student awareness of religions, but does not press for student acceptance of any religion.
- The school sponsors study about religion, not the practice of religion.
- The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view.
- The school educates about all religions; it does not promote or denigrate religion.
- The school informs students about various beliefs; it does not seek to conform students to any particular belief.

---

**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 about 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 religions 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 governance. 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 administration and laws.

Training Teachers
Only well-constructed lessons and assessments can bring the aspirations of state mandates on teaching about religion 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 religion 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 structures 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


References


Susan L. Douglass is principal writer and researcher for the Council on Islamic Education, P.O. Box 20186, Fountain Valley, CA 92728; (714) 839-2929; info@cie.org; www.cie.org.