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# Guidelines

**for Teaching About Religion**

*in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*

*Produced by*

**The AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force**  
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## *Executive Summary*

The United States Department of Education requires states to develop content standards and academic assessments for each subject taught in public schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12). State departments of education are guided in this task by national educational associations that have crafted their own standards and guidelines using the collective wisdom of scholars and educators in each subject. Though religion is not a separate, required subject in public K-12 schools, religion is embedded in curriculum standards across disciplines, especially in social studies and English, and there are a growing number of elective courses that focus on religious themes or topics explicitly.

Because 1) the study of religion is already present in public schools, 2) there are no content and skill guidelines for educators about religion itself that are constructed by religious studies scholars, and 3) educators and school boards are often confused about how to teach about religion in constitutionally sound and intellectually responsible ways, the American Academy of Religion (the world's largest association of religion scholars) has published these Guidelines as a resource for educators and interested citizens.

Three premises inform this project: illiteracy regarding religion 1) is widespread, 2) fuels prejudice and antagonism, and 3) can be diminished by teaching about religion in public schools using a non-devotional, academic perspective, called religious studies.

There are important differences between this approach and a faith-based approach to teaching and learning about religion. These Guidelines support the former, constitutionally sound approach for teaching about religion in public schools—encouraging student *awareness* of religions, but *not acceptance* of a particular religion; *studying* about religion, but *not practicing* religion; *exposing* students to a diversity of religious views, but *not imposing* any particular view; and *educating* students about all religions, but *not promoting or denigrating* religion.<sup>1</sup>

In teaching about religion, public school teachers draw on the following methodological approaches: historical, literary, traditions based, and cultural studies. Regardless of the approach(es) used, however, teaching about religion needs to convey three central premises of academic learning about religion: religions are internally diverse; religions are dynamic; and religions are embedded in culture.

Given that few educators have taken religious studies courses, the AAR encourages using these Guidelines in substantial teacher pre-service and professional training that imparts content, pedagogy, and academically and constitutionally sound approaches for teaching about religion in K-12 public schools.

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# Introduction

The United States Department of Education requires states to develop content standards and academic assessments for each discipline taught in public schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12). State departments of education are guided in this task by national educational associations that have crafted their own standards and guidelines representing the collective wisdom of scholars and educators in each relevant educational field. For example, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) comprises elementary, secondary and college level teachers and other educational personnel who work in the broad areas that encompass the social studies: history, geography, economics, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and law. Similarly, the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) is made up of teachers and supervisors of English programs in elementary, middle, and secondary schools, faculty in college and university English departments, teacher educators, local and state agency English specialists, and professionals in related fields. There are similar organizations formed for the sciences, the arts, physical education, English as a second language, and technology, among others. The primary aims of these associations are to promote responsible education about their fields and to provide leadership, support, and service to their educators.

Though religious studies is not a required subject in public K-12 schools, religion is embedded in curriculum standards across disciplines, and it is especially prominent in social studies and English at the state and national association levels. Given the rising interest in the study of religion due to national and global affairs, there are also a growing number of elective courses offered in schools that focus on religious themes or topics explicitly, such as “The Bible as Literature” and “Introduction to World Religions.” Given that 1) the study of religion is already present in public schools, 2) there are no content and skill guidelines for educators about religion itself that are constructed by religious studies scholars, and 3) educators and school boards are often confused about how to teach about religion in constitutionally sound and intellectually responsible ways, there is a strong consensus that a set of guidelines for teaching about religion is needed.<sup>2</sup>

## *The American Academy of Religion*

There is not a similar national educational association like the NCSS or NCTE that focuses on religious studies per se,<sup>3</sup> but the American Academy of Religion (AAR) is the professional organization best suited to construct scholarly guidelines for teaching about religion in K-12 schools. It is the world’s largest association of scholars who research or teach topics related to religion. There are some 10,000 members comprised largely of faculty at colleges, universities, and theological schools in North America with a growing number from institutions of higher education in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

The AAR has been involved in addressing issues related to teaching about religion in public schools since the 1970s. These efforts have included producing publications in the 1970s and early 1980s addressing the legal, curricular, moral, and pedagogical dimensions of teaching about religion in public K-12 schools;<sup>4</sup> helping to establish a number of programs and resource centers at various universities throughout the U.S.;<sup>5</sup> and identifying opportunities for religious studies faculty at colleges to help educate K-12 teachers about religion. Given the absence of authoritative standards penned by religious studies scholars for teaching about religion in K-12 schools, in 2007 the AAR decided to develop a set of standards and guidelines as a resource for educators, parents and school boards, who are faced with an increasingly complex array of challenges regarding how to teach about religion responsibly in public school contexts. The AAR’s Religion in the Schools Task Force guided this initiative.<sup>6</sup>

## *Overview of Guidelines*

Part One addresses why it is important to teach about religion, and Part Two outlines ways to teach about religion in constitutionally sound ways. Part Three is an overview of approaches to teaching about religion and includes grade-specific examples based on both the *Standards for Social Studies*<sup>7</sup> (produced by the National Council for the Social Studies) and *Standards for the English Language Arts*<sup>8</sup> (produced by the National Council for Teachers of English). Given that 1) religion is already present throughout both of these documents and 2) these standards are highly influential in the creation of state and local curricula frameworks, it is appropriate to utilize them to construct guidelines for religious studies. Finally, Part Four makes recommendations for teacher educators regarding skill and content competencies required for teachers to have sufficient knowledge to teach about religion responsibly.



# Part 1

## *Why Teach About Religion?*<sup>9</sup>

Three fundamental premises inform this project. First, there exists a widespread illiteracy about religion in the U.S.; second, there are several consequences that stem from this illiteracy, including the ways that it fuels prejudice and antagonism, thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas; and third, it is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from an academic, non-devotional perspective in primary, middle, and secondary schools.

Religious illiteracy is defined in this document as a lack of understanding about the following:

- the basic tenets of the world's religious traditions and other religious expressions not categorized by tradition;
- the diversity of expressions and beliefs within traditions and representations; and
- the profound role that religion plays in human social, cultural, and political life historically and today.

Conversely, religious literacy is defined in the following way: the ability to discern and analyze the intersections of religion with social, political, and cultural life. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess:

- a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions and religious expressions as they arose out of and continue to shape and be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and

- the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.<sup>10</sup>

These definitions assume that religion is a social/cultural phenomenon that is embedded in human political, social and cultural life. They also assume that religion shapes and is shaped by the social/historical contexts out of which particular religious expressions and influences emerge. Finally, these definitions assume that there is a difference between devotional beliefs and practices and the study of religion from an academic, secular frame of reference. In this context, secular means a constitutionally defined approach to the teaching of religion that neither privileges nor rejects any particular religious tradition or expression.

One way to characterize this distinction is to recognize the difference between religious education that promotes a particular faith perspective (often but not exclusively associated with religious communities or schools) and learning about religion through a religious studies framework that is non-devotional, inclusive, and comparative in both form and function. Faith-based explorations are intended to promote a particular theological worldview and to encourage practitioners to articulate values and adopt practices that are consonant with that set of beliefs. A religious studies approach to teaching about religion is intended to introduce students to the vast array of faith-based expressions that exist within and between traditions with the aim of deepening understanding about religious diversity and the roles that religion plays in political, economic, and cultural life across time. Both approaches are legitimate ways to think about religion that can serve complementary but distinctive ends. It is important to note, however, that the non-devotional religious studies approach

is the constitutionally appropriate one to employ for teaching about religion in public schools. These *Guidelines* represent a religious studies perspective.

***Premise Number One: There exists a widespread illiteracy about religion in the U.S.***

The following are examples of some of the ways that religious illiteracy manifests itself among a diverse array of U.S. citizens:

1. Religious traditions and expressions are often represented inaccurately by those outside of and within religious traditions and communities.
2. Religious leaders and believers of a given religious tradition or expression are assumed to be the best sources of information about the tradition or expression and are often looked to formally or informally as “experts.”<sup>11</sup>
3. The distinction between the study of religion and religious devotional expression is rarely understood.
4. Religious traditions and expressions are often represented as internally uniform and static as opposed to diverse and evolving.
5. In some contexts, religion is interpreted as a “private” affair distinct from the secular “public” sphere of political, economic, and cultural life.

These common manifestations of religious illiteracy are widespread and should not be interpreted as evidence of a lack of intellectual capability or awareness on the part of those who harbor these and similar assumptions. Given that the main sources of information about religion come from training in or about one’s own religious tradition (or none) and the media, it should come as no surprise that these and other forms of religious illiteracy are prevalent. Appropriately, individuals who are raised in or convert to a certain faith tradition or expression will learn about that tradition or expression within their faith communities or through devotionally based forms of education in the schools aimed at promoting a particular religious worldview and values that are

consonant with it. Individuals who are not religious also learn particular worldviews and associated values from family and/or community members. In relationship to religion, these values are often a-religious or anti-religious. The other main source of information about religion is the media where coverage about religion is often inaccurate or focused on “newsworthy” events that present a distorted view of the role of religion in contemporary life.<sup>12</sup> Neither source (one’s own faith tradition/worldview and the media) expose individuals to a comprehensive study of religion because they

1. do not knowledgeably and even-handedly represent the diversity within a given tradition or expression, and
2. do not explore and analyze religion as a social/cultural phenomenon.<sup>13</sup>

Such an understanding requires a non-devotional, academic approach to the study of religion and although there are some schools that offer instruction representing this approach in primary, middle, and secondary education, relatively few citizens have the opportunity to engage in this type of inquiry.

***Premise Number Two: One of the most troubling and urgent consequences of religious illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism, thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas.***<sup>14</sup>

Religious illiteracy is certainly not the sole or even primary cause of the heartbreaking violence that dominates local and global news stories. It is, however, often a contributing factor in fostering a climate whereby certain forms of bigotry and misrepresentation can emerge unchallenged and thus serve as one form of justification for violence and marginalization. Many others share this concern as evidenced by a consultation focusing on this topic in 2006 that was sponsored by the United Nations,<sup>15</sup> and numerous initiatives in Europe.<sup>16</sup> One example of the negative consequences of religious illiteracy is that it has contributed to Christian forms of anti-Semitism. Another example in countries where Muslims are in the

minority is the widespread association of Islam with terrorism and the consequent justification of individual hate crimes against those perceived to be Muslim. A third example is the antagonisms that are fueled between different expressions of the same tradition (e.g. between Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians and between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims). A fourth and final example is when some dismiss religion altogether as obsolete, irrational, or inherently oppressive, thereby offending the dignity and sensibilities of people of faith everywhere. Enhancing literacy about religion can foster better understanding among people of different faiths and worldviews. Such knowledge can enrich civic dimensions of education and better prepare students for participation in democratic processes in our multi-religious nation.

***Premise Number Three: It is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from a non-devotional perspective in primary, middle, and secondary schools.***

Training in religious literacy provides citizens with the tools to better understand religion as a complex and sophisticated social/cultural phenomenon and individual religious traditions or expressions themselves as internally diverse and constantly evolving as opposed to uniform, absolute, and ahistorical. Learning about religion as a social/cultural phenomenon also helps people recognize, understand, and critically analyze how religion has been and will continue to be used to inspire and sometimes justify the full range of human agency from the heinous to the heroic. Finally, those trained in religious studies learn to question the accuracy of absolutist claims such as “Islam is a religion of peace” or “Judaism and Islam are incompatible” or “All religions are fundamentally the same,” thereby helping to deepen discourse about religion in the public sphere. Learning about religion is no guarantee that religious bigotry and chauvinism will cease, but it will make it more difficult for such bigotry and chauvinism to be unwittingly reproduced and promoted.

As was noted in the introduction, religion is already deeply embedded in curricula across the K-12 spectrum. Our aim is to help equip educators with the tools to teach about religion in intellectually responsible, constitutionally sound, and educationally meaningful ways. The following section focuses on the legal issues related to teaching about religion and Part Three will offer examples of how to integrate the study of religion into existing curricula and department structures.



# Part 2

## Religion, Education and the Constitution

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*<sup>17</sup>

There were two important and related Supreme Court rulings in the 1960s that were pivotal in defining the role of religion in public education. In *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) it was decided that government should not sponsor prayers in public schools. In *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) the Supreme Court ruled that the government should not sponsor Bible reading for devotional purposes and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools. While many hailed these rulings as a strong endorsement of the separation of church and state and thus an affirmation of pluralism, others felt that they signaled the demise of a common moral foundation that served to unite all Americans amidst our diversity. These same tensions persist today, and many trace the roots of contemporary conflicts regarding religion in the public sphere to these rulings.<sup>18</sup>

Though the heart of these decisions addressed what was not permissible in public education, there was an important affirmation in *Abington v. Schempp* regarding what *was* allowed in the intersection of religion and the schools. As Justice Thomas C. Clark wrote:

It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.<sup>19</sup>

This important articulation has often been overlooked in the history of how the separation of church and state in the schools has been interpreted. Though there has been a slight shift over the past decade, most Americans since the 1960s believe that the separation of church and state that is affirmed in the rulings cited above meant that religion in all forms was banned. As Justice Clark's comments above clearly indicate, this is not at all the case. Indeed, some have argued that it may be a violation of the First Amendment when the study of religion is *not* included in public school curricula. Though it is clear that teaching about religion is acceptable, how to do so in a constitutionally sound and intellectually responsibly manner is a more complex undertaking.

### Guidelines for Teaching About Religion

In 1974, religious studies scholar James V. Panoch developed a set of guidelines for distinguishing between teaching religion in a way that promotes a particular faith and teaching about religion from a religious studies perspective.<sup>20</sup> A version of these guidelines was adopted by the First Amendment Center and is featured prominently in several of its publications, including one entitled *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*.<sup>21</sup>

- ❑ 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.<sup>22</sup>

These guidelines appropriately assume the distinction between teaching *about* religion from a non-devotional, academic perspective versus teaching religion through a devotional lens. As such, they provide a useful thumbnail sketch to guide educators in the public school context. Indeed, they have been very helpful in alerting teachers and administrators to the fact that there is a distinction between a secular and devotional approach. As noted above, one of the manifestations of widespread religious illiteracy is the equation of religious studies with devotional practice.

It is important to note here that teaching about religion from a non-devotional, religious studies approach is not without controversy. For example, teaching about religion gives credibility to religion itself as a valid field of inquiry and assumes the legitimacy of multiple religious perspectives. Some who believe that their convictions represent an exclusive truth may find these assumptions challenging. Many other citizens recognize the value of increasing literacy about religion and believe that the public schools are the appropriate venue for this type of learning to occur. *The AAR Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools* represent this latter perspective and are based on the assumption that public schools are appropriately governed by secular laws and values that support the inclusion of the non-devotional study of religion from an academic perspective across the curriculum. The next section will focus on how to achieve this inclusion by outlining different approaches to the study of religion (historical, literary, tradition based, and cultural studies) and offering grade-specific examples of how to integrate theory with practice.

# Part 3

## *How to Teach About Religion*

### ***Introduction***

This chapter provides an overview of various approaches for how religion gets taught in schools along with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses associated with these methods. Discussion about religion presents unique challenges to classroom teachers, and this section presents ways for educators to introduce religion as a topic as well as ways they can help students develop a more nuanced understanding of religion beyond stereotyped or simplistic representations. In order to ground these ideas in practice, we have provided some snapshots of classroom practices across disciplines and grade levels as examples of what is possible.<sup>23</sup> This chapter ends with answers to frequently asked questions posed by students about religion.

### **APPROACHES TO TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION**

Teachers are expected to teach about religion in a variety of ways in their classrooms. The three most common occur when

1. the curriculum demands coverage of the historical origins of religious traditions or their contemporary relevance;
2. the novels or stories they teach have explicit religious themes or allusions; and
3. their students raise questions based on their own experiences and knowledge.

How teachers respond to these expectations differs greatly, and the choice of approaches used by teachers is influenced by their subject area, their training, and their own personal views. Three approaches to religion commonly taught in public schools are the historical, literary, and traditions-based methods.

A fourth method, a cultural studies approach, incorporates dimensions of all these approaches and is promoted by religious studies and education scholars. These four approaches are outlined below and analyzed regarding their strengths and weaknesses for classroom use.

### ***The Historical Approach***

This approach is very commonly used in social studies classes where religion occurs within courses or lessons focused on history. The strengths of the historical approach are clear: the origins of a religion and its development are presented in historical context with the political and cultural influences represented as central to understanding how that religion emerged, gained followers, and spread. Religions do not evolve in a vacuum, and looking at the historical circumstances that shaped the development of a tradition or worldview can help students see that religions are complex webs of practices and values with a variety of expressions rather than monolithic, fully formed sets of ideas and beliefs. There is no inherent weakness in this approach, but in practice teachers report<sup>24</sup> that they lack the knowledge base in religious studies required to address the historical complexities of religion adequately. Furthermore, religions are often only explored in their pre-modern contexts in ways that can leave students with the impression that 1) religion became (and continues to be) obsolete in the modern era; or 2) that religious beliefs formed and then solidified into unchanging systems. Students rarely learn how religions continually evolve and change beyond the eighteenth century, nor are they given the necessary tools to knowledgeably consider and evaluate the roles religions play in modern cultures.

### ***The Literary Approach***

This is common in English language arts classes in which students read religious texts themselves or novels, stories, and poetry with religious themes and/or imagery. Using this approach, teachers help students gain an appreciation of the way that religion infuses all aspects of culture by seeing how religious allusion and metaphor can become a common language that is shared by a people. Looking at a particular story where religious expression is a theme helps students see the very specific ways that individuals experience their religion and helps to reinforce the idea that generalizations about religion are often flawed. When the focus is on religious texts themselves, students learn to appreciate their literary value and how religious texts influence literary styles. Similar to the historical approach, there is no inherent weakness in the literary method itself. The challenge is that most educators lack the training in religious studies that is required to provide the appropriate information about religion relevant to the texts that are studied. In the absence of such training, teachers often rely on their own devotional experiences of a tradition or reference other devotional interpretations as adequate sources of information. This often leads to partial or otherwise problematic interpretations as well as a limitation on the types of texts assigned. Teachers will understandably shy away from texts representing or informed by traditions or expressions that are unfamiliar.

### ***The Traditions-Based Approach***

This approach is often represented in world history textbooks, used in electives or stand-alone courses in higher grades, or used as the basis for comparative religion studies in lower grades. The focus is often on certain categories that apply to many religious traditions, such as beliefs, texts, rituals, origins, and holidays, or on essential questions that religions address related to the purpose of life, how one should live, and various interpretations of identity. This approach can help students see common themes in religious traditions and can provide a useful framework for understanding the varieties of religious expression. In looking at religious art or rituals, students can gain an appreciation for the ways all religions shape and are shaped by the culture around them. The main weaknesses of this approach

are that 1) it often fails to adequately represent the internal diversity of religious traditions; and 2) it can exaggerate the commonalities among traditions. Additionally, the categories for comparison are themselves often shaped by particular religious assumptions (e.g. by including categories such as “founder” and “sacred text”) that are not universally relevant and which therefore promote a biased and limited framework for analysis.

### ***The Cultural Studies Approach***

This approach is often used by those trained in religious studies programs and is well suited for area studies classes or classes that incorporate a multicultural lens of analysis. It serves as a tool to build upon and enhance the other three approaches in its emphasis on recognizing the ways that religion is embedded in culture and cannot be understood in isolation from its particular social/historical expressions. Additionally, this approach includes a consideration of social power and the ways that race, class, and gender (among other factors) provide important categories of analysis when investigating differing religious expressions and their cultural/political influences. Finally, a cultural studies approach recognizes that teachers and students (along with the authors and artists being studied) are interpreters of meaning and that conscious and unconscious assumptions about religion profoundly shape the ways that individuals express what they know and interpret what they learn about religion. The strengths of the cultural studies approach are that 1) it helps students recognize that religion is a part of the fabric of human experience and that in order to understand it one must consider religious beliefs and practices as they shape and are shaped by all elements of culture; 2) it provides tools to understand how some religious beliefs and expressions become culturally and politically prominent, while others become culturally and politically marginalized; and 3) it provides tools to recognize and analyze the interpretive dimensions of all knowledge claims. The main challenges related to this approach are that 1) it requires training in religious studies; and 2) it requires teachers to slow down and cover less content with more depth.



## A NOTE ABOUT TEXTBOOKS

Most social studies teachers rely on textbooks as the main source of information for their students, and the strengths and weaknesses of this primary resource type are well known. Textbook authors are burdened by the need to cover vast amounts of material in ways that are easily accessible, and thus they are forced to simplify complex topics. This is especially pronounced in regard to coverage of religion. Most textbook authors employ a combination of the historical and traditions-based approaches in their coverage of religion, the latter typified by the ubiquitous chart in world history textbooks depicting several of the world's religious traditions outlined and compared by categories.<sup>25</sup> Minimally, teachers are encouraged to supplement such charts with culturally diverse and historically situated examples of religious practices that will help challenge the static and ahistorical depiction of religion that this common resource promotes.

## A NOTE ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY AND RELIGION

Media literacy is a growing field in critical education studies and with good reason. Children of all ages are bombarded with media images and information from a variety of sources, and their ability to analyze and evaluate the credibility of information received is an important dimension of critical thinking in the modern age. As noted in Part One of these guidelines, the media is one of the two main sources for information about religion that citizens receive, so media literacy is especially relevant to efforts aimed at strengthening literacy about religion generally. Though a more detailed exploration goes beyond the scope of this project, we encourage educators to 1) explicitly address with their students the problems associated with relying on the media for information about religion and its role in human affairs; and 2) refrain from utilizing popular sites such as Wikipedia and YouTube as sole authoritative sources of information about religion.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

As outlined in Part One, the distinction between the study of religion and religious devotional expression is rarely understood by those who have never been exposed to religious studies. Making this distinction clear to students before embarking on any lessons that relate to religion will

1. help them realize that learning about religion is a legal and appropriate undertaking for public schools, and
2. help them realize that the aim of teaching about religion is to better understand the religious dimensions of human experience, not to promote religion or a particular religious perspective.

Articulating the distinction between religious studies and a devotional approach to religion at the outset of a lesson or unit will clarify educational goals and minimize confusion and anxiety.

## INITIAL STEPS

Teaching about religion in public schools brings with it particular challenges that teachers seldom face when addressing other subject areas. Students in a physics course rarely come to class with a sense that they have particular insights that will be relevant and helpful to a class discussion of vectors, but when the subject is religion, students can feel that their own personal experiences give them special knowledge and authority. Often students will have strongly held ideas about the positive or negative role of religion in the world, ideas about religious and non-religious people, and ideas about particular faiths. Teachers also may feel that their own background in a particular religious tradition prepares them sufficiently to teach that tradition, or may have views about religion and its relevance in their classroom that shape how they teach religious topics. Thus one of the first challenges for teachers and students alike is to examine what assumptions they harbor about religion generally and religious traditions in particular.



Having students explore their assumptions is an essential first step in helping them look at religion clearly. Students can reflect in writing about some key words or concepts like religion, belief, or any tradition (such as Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism). Brainstorming quickly can help students identify their most basic associations, those rooted in long experience and snap judgment. It is important to be explicit with students about why an examination of their assumptions is a critical first step in their learning. By explaining how biases and assumptions can act as a filter on new knowledge, they gain an important tool that they can return to again and again throughout their explorations about religion specifically and other topics more generally. In addition, by reflecting on their own preconceived ideas about religion, students can also think about how their ideas may stereotype and misjudge the beliefs and practices of others, including that of their own peers in the classroom or school.

Talking about religion can touch the depth of someone's identity, causing some discussions to feel like an attack, especially when based on misinformation and stereotypes. Therefore, it is imperative to foster a climate of tolerance, respect, and honesty by encouraging students to

- move away from making generalizations toward more qualified statements—from, for example, “All Christians are intolerant” to “I have heard that Christians are intolerant—is this true?” Or to “Some Christians are intolerant”;
- examine how their judgments may impact others; and
- explore ideas and ask questions without fear.

Not everyone in the class is expected to agree. But students should understand that

- the goal is developing awareness and understanding; and
- accurate representations of traditions reduce the misunderstandings arising from false generalizations, bigotry, or valorization of a particular religious or non-religious worldview.

Once students have had a chance to think about their preconceptions of religion, and educators have established a classroom culture of respect, teachers need to decide how to approach content. With limited time and resources, teachers are often faced with the challenge of selecting the most basic, central ideas of any religion to cover. A study of Buddhism becomes a look at the Four Noble Truths, for example, or reading an excerpt from Hesse's *Siddhartha*. While teachers will always be constrained by the concerns of coverage, time, and materials, introducing students to the following fundamental premises of religious studies will help challenge common misunderstandings and give students a good foundation for further study. The premises outlined below are that 1) religions are internally diverse; 2) religions are dynamic; and 3) religions are embedded in culture. There are three “snapshots” of practice that follow a description of each premise representing primary, middle, and secondary school age groups with examples focusing on either English language arts or social studies. There are several more snapshots included in Appendix D.

## **PREMISES OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

### ***Religions are Internally Diverse***

A basic premise of religious studies is that religions are not internally homogeneous but diverse. In schools and in popular culture, faith traditions are often presented as a single set of beliefs, practices, and representations without internal variation. While the major differences within a tradition may be introduced (“the majority of Muslims are Sunnis, while others are Shi’i”), less dramatic or clearly defined distinctions are often overlooked or presumed not to exist. It is important for students to learn, for example, that Muslims in Indonesia will practice their faith differently than Muslims in Nigeria. In a similar vein, wealthy Muslims in Jakarta may practice an Islam that looks somewhat different than poor Muslims in rural Java. Helping students see that there are many “Islams” (or Judaism or Hinduisms) in the world enables them to consider carefully both what it means to study Islam and the complexity of answering the question, “What do Muslims believe?”

One general classroom strategy is to begin with an example of the diversities represented in a tradition that students are familiar with, such as Christianity, and then help them apply that understanding to other less familiar traditions and worldviews.

## Snapshots of Practice

### *Elementary School English Language Arts*

Ms. X. decides to do an oral storytelling unit with her first-grade classroom. Each day she reads aloud a Native American story from different tribes to her class.<sup>26</sup> Afterwards, she asks them to return to their desks and draw what they remember of the story. After several stories have been shared, each student chooses her or his favorite and is assigned to learn it and retell it to a friend or family member. Throughout the unit, Ms. X. discusses differences between oral, written, and visual representations and encourages her students to practice all three skillsets. Her students are exposed to both variety in the beliefs, subjects, and settings of Native American religions and many different forms of literacy.

### *Middle School Social Studies*

Ms. Q. is teaching an eighth-grade world history course that covers the fall of Rome to the beginnings of the European Renaissance. As part of their study of the “Golden Age” she has them act as explorers of the diverse cultures that came under the rule of expanding Islamic empires. After reading excerpts from the logs of medieval Muslim travelers such as Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Batuta, and Naser-e Kosraw,<sup>27</sup> Ms. Q. has students watch clips from the documentary “Islam: Empire of Faith”<sup>28</sup> and conduct outside research on medieval cities from Central Asia, North and West Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Arabia that includes an investigation into mosques that were built in these locations during this time period.<sup>29</sup> Students conclude by creating their own “Explorer’s Journals” in which they describe, through writing and illustration, the similarities and differences they saw between expressions of Islamic life and practice as Muslims moved into these culturally diverse regions.

### *Secondary School English Language Arts*

Before reading Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, Ms. R. has her eleventh-grade students research the life of Hesse to introduce them to his cultural context and the influences that led him to write his most popular novel. While studying the text, she introduces students to readings from John Strong’s *The Buddha: A Short Biography*<sup>30</sup> and Strong, ed., *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*<sup>31</sup> to give her students tools to compare Hesse’s interpretation of South Asian Buddhism with scholarly accounts representing a variety of different perspectives. She helps them explore these diverse interpretations and how different genres shape perception.

## *Religions are Dynamic*

A second premise of religious studies is the recognition that religions are dynamic and changing as opposed to static and fixed. When religious practices or texts are taught without historical context, it is easy for students to view the rituals or stories as having one meaning that persists for all times and places. Religions, however, exist in time and space and are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by believers. For example, the Confucian concept of the “mandate from heaven” evolved within dynasties, geopolitical regions, and historical eras and continues to evolve today. Seeing examples of the way that religious beliefs, practices and imagery change over time and place helps students recognize that, from a religious studies perspective, there is no such thing as “a single meaning” of a given tradition, practice, or belief system.

## Snapshots of Practice

### *Elementary School Social Studies*

Mr. Y.’s fourth-grade social studies curriculum focuses on North American geography and peoples. His students learn about the lives of native communities in the U.S. and Canada before and during the time that European explorers and colonists began to make contact with the continent. He is also eager to include contemporary representations of the communities he is exploring and selects a few for students to research in groups and to present reflections regarding how the traditions have evolved and changed over the years and how core values have been interpreted and preserved.<sup>32</sup>

### *Middle School English Language Arts*

Ms. M.'s sixth-grade class is exploring the art of storytelling. She has students write a series of their own stories interspersed with selections of stories from a diverse array of cultures and traditions. In one section, she focuses on how ancient stories are often retold with contemporary significance and chooses selections from *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling*<sup>33</sup> as one example of this common literary practice.

### *Secondary School Social Studies*

Mr. W. is in the midst of a unit on the Roman Empire with his tenth-grade world history students and wants to include a section on the origins of Christianity. He has students read the portion in their textbook about Jesus and his message, but supplements this lesson with additional resources to show 1) how there were many different and often competing interpretations of who Jesus was and what he promoted in the early years following his death, and 2) how those interpretations changed and evolved over time. He gathered a series of resources from the PBS series *From Jesus to Christ*<sup>34</sup> depicting these tensions and evolutions and engages his students in a series of inquiries regarding the significance of these insights.

### *Religions are Embedded in Culture*

A third premise of religious studies is the recognition that religions are collections of ideas, practices, values, and stories that are all embedded in cultures and not isolated from them. Just as religion cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural manifestations, it is impossible to understand culture without considering its religious dimensions. In the same way that race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are always factors in cultural interpretation and understanding, so too is religion. Whether explicit or implicit, religious influences can virtually always be found when one asks “the religion question” of any given social/historical experience. For example, rather than assuming in an American history class that a focus on religion is only relevant when studying the Puritans, the Great Awakenings, or the rise of the “Moral Majority,” this approach assumes that there are rich avenues of inquiry that open when one considers the religious influences that shaped

the Constitutional Convention, the institution of slavery, women’s suffrage, the Industrial Revolution, and the U.S. involvement in World War II. Finally, it is important to underscore (again) that religions are *influenced by* cultures while also *influencing* cultures.

### **Snapshots of Practice**

#### *Elementary School English Language Arts*

Mr. B. and his third-grade class read *In the Heart of the Village: The World of the Indian Banyan Tree*<sup>35</sup> by Barbara Bash. They discuss how the tree functions as a central location of the community and compare the different people who meet there—kids at school, merchants trading goods, villagers gathering to talk. He then shows them images of Banyan trees around the world, including the oldest such tree in America in Fort Myers, Florida.<sup>36</sup> Several of these are artistic representations of the Hindu God Shiva in his aspect as Jnana Dakshinamurti, teacher of wisdom, always shown seated at the foot of a Banyan tree; others are of the Buddha under the Bodhi Tree, a Banyan species under which (according to legend) the Buddha gained enlightenment. Mr. B. and his class then discuss various places and objects that are central points in their own lives (school playground, churches, grocery stores, temples) and then write their own stories about all the different types of people who come there every day.

#### *Middle School Social Studies*

A consistent theme of Mr. H.’s seventh-grade geography class is the relationship between the inhabitants of each region his class studies and the major features of its natural landscape. Several times throughout the year he has asked his students to research and prepare short debates about use and protection of various natural resources, and each time he has his students consider the ways in which religious worldview may influence the assumptions of the perspectives they are representing. While his students are familiar with well-known natural sites of veneration such as the Ganges River in India, he also introduces them to less frequently considered contexts. Using Diana Eck’s *A New Religious America*<sup>37</sup> as a resource, he provides examples such as the spot in Pittsburgh at which the Allegheny, Ohio, and Monongahela rivers converge. Known as a “sangam” in the Hindu tradition, students learn that this confluence has been recognized by many Hindu immigrants to Pennsylvania as a particularly



auspicious location, holding much symbolic importance. Mr. H. uses such examples both to explore the ways immigration continues to transform the cultural geography of the modern world, and to encourage students to consider multiple, and perhaps overlooked, religious perspectives on the natural landscape of any geographic context.

### *Secondary School English Language Arts*

Mr. J. always starts his tenth-grade English class with a unit on biblical stories in order to prepare his students for the Western classics they will read that year. First, he gives his students a selection of biblical-themed cartoons from the *New Yorker*<sup>38</sup> and asks them to identify in writing as many of the characters and stories as they can in five minutes. As most students discover they know only a few of the “big ones” (Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses). Mr. J. shows them “He forgot – and I – remembered” by Emily Dickinson and points out the various biblical allusions that they would need to know for an in-depth exploration of the poem. He then hands out a list of several popular biblical allusions to know<sup>39</sup> and students choose which story they will research and present. As part of a five-minute Powerpoint presentation, students must provide both of the following elements: a short synopsis of the story as it appears in the King James Bible (Mr. J. chooses this translation since it is the one the majority of English authors they are studying would have known and used) and a representation of this story in an art form other than literature. For an assessment at the end of the week’s unit, Mr. J. gives his class the lyrics to Bob Dylan’s “Angelina” and asks them to write a one-page essay on the use of biblical allusion.

*See Appendix D for additional snapshots representing the three premises of religious studies.*

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

Even the most carefully prepared lesson can be derailed by a difficult question, and lessons that involve the study of religion are especially challenging in this regard. Because of the level of sensitivity about religion, teachers may try to avoid addressing these questions for fear of offending or giving wrong information. Teachers may also fear that they will cross the line of what is constitutionally acceptable. When addressing difficult questions, teachers should help students remember that the goal of the academic study

of religion is understanding, not agreement, and that different religious views may and often will conflict with one another. Nor is the academic study of religion designed to answer the same types of questions that religious communities answer for believers. Questions about what is the “right” or “true” belief are theological questions and not ones that teachers can answer for students in a class focused on the study of religion. It is also important to know that many common questions about religion frequently represent a host of problematic assumptions that are often too involved to address in the moment but which can be “flagged” for later follow up in a class discussion or incorporation into a lesson. The answers we offer here are not comprehensive, but we hope they will serve as helpful initial guides. With these general parameters in mind, here are a few commonly asked questions and possible answers or suggestions for how teachers can respond.

### *Why do people still believe in religion?*

Some believe that religion is a product of the ancient world and that advances in science and philosophy have rendered religious belief obsolete. Religions, however, address more than answers to questions about the natural world; they address fundamental questions of meaning and provide frameworks for ethical reflection and structures of social formation. The assumption that religion is obsolete often rests upon a rigid and extremely narrow understanding of religion, history, and science. Therefore, helping students identify the assumptions that inform the question itself can be a useful exercise in its own right.

### *Are religion and science incompatible?*

No, not categorically. Most religious traditions and worldviews can function in concert with scientific worldviews and are, indeed, complementary with them. Furthermore, there are many scientists who are people of faith and many people of faith who are devoted scientists. Within traditions, however, there are some theological beliefs that are in tension with certain scientific assertions. The most publicized example of these tensions in the US is between some Christian communities and the biological theory of evolution. Though these tensions are real for the communities involved, it is wrong to assume, for example, that all Christians experience a contradiction between their theological beliefs and evolutionary theory or, by extension, that religious and scientific worldviews are fundamentally incompatible.

### *Can creation science or intelligent design be taught in schools?*

Yes, but **not** in science classes. Creation science and intelligent design represent worldviews that fall outside of the realm of science that is defined as (and limited to) a method of inquiry based on gathering observable and measurable evidence subject to specific principles of reasoning. Creation science, intelligent design, and other worldviews that focus on speculation regarding the origins of life represent another important and relevant form of human inquiry that is appropriately studied in literature or social sciences courses. Such study, however, **must** include a diversity of worldviews representing a variety of religious and philosophical perspectives and must avoid privileging one view as more legitimate than others.

### *Does the Bible say that homosexuality is wrong?*

Some Jews and Christians believe that same-sex relationships of all kinds are sinful and often cite passages in the Torah and the Christian Bible to support this view. Others argue that passages referencing same-sex sexual encounters vary considerably in their details, offer different possibilities of interpretation, and as the product of ancient cultures they are of little relevance for understanding homosexuality in its contemporary forms. While some Jewish and Christian communities oppose same-sex marriages, others have endorsed their legality and support the ritualized blessing of such unions. The range of views found on this issue illustrates the internal diversity of these two traditions (among others) and the different ways in which sacred texts are given meaning through interpretation.

### *Do Jews believe in heaven?*

Much of Jewish tradition and teaching is focused on human agency in this world with the assumption that what happens following death is unknowable and in the realm of the Holy. Still, there is also much speculation within Jewish tradition about the afterlife and most religious Jews believe that humans possess a soul that does not die when one's physical being dies. Though there are many and diverse views of the afterlife within Jewish tradition, it is important to note that Jewish perspectives tend to differ from Christian ones, and that common images of and associations with "heaven" are most likely informed by Christian viewpoints.

### *Did the Jews kill Jesus?*

It is important to realize at the outset that our primary historical evidence for the existence of Jesus is limited to just four books, the New Testament Gospels, which present differing interpretations of Jesus and which themselves are subject to differing interpretations. What is known is that Jesus lived and died under the authority of the Roman Empire, the political power in Judea during his lifetime. He was, himself, a Jew who gained followers and most likely came to be seen as a threat to the peace and stability of the region by Roman officials and some members of the Jewish community who may have been troubled by his interpretation of Judaism. Most historians agree that it was the Roman authorities that sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion, which was a common Roman form of execution at the time. The Jewish community was itself very divided on how it viewed Jesus, and those Jews who were his followers and took up his message had a vested interest in distinguishing themselves from those Jews who did not. There were also non-Jewish followers of Jesus, some of whom experienced tensions with factions of the Jewish community. Thus some early Christians began placing the blame for the death of Jesus on "the Jews," and this perspective (sometimes referred to as "blood guilt") became deeply intertwined with influential strands of early Christian beliefs and practices.

### *Is the Buddha a god?*

The Buddha was a fifth-century BCE Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama who, as legend has it, gained enlightenment and became known as the Buddha ("the one who woke up, enlightened one"). Some strands of the tradition represent the Buddha as human and challenge the legitimacy of any association of Buddha with cosmological significance. Other strands venerate him as a saint or as someone with special spiritual power. There is tremendous diversity of beliefs and practices among Buddhists in this regard. Exploring what the questioner means by "god" would be important in formulating a relevant response.



### ***Do you have to follow all the rules of a religion to be religious?***

Religious identification is both a deeply personal and broadly cultural feature of human society. Because religion is intertwined with ethnicity and culture, many people identify themselves as members of a religious community even if they infrequently participate in that religion's rituals or only partially adopt that religion's beliefs. Others can be deeply committed to their religious practice and yet see themselves as on the periphery of their religious community. What it means to be "really religious" within one tradition can also vary dramatically from place to place.

### ***Is God real?***

This is a theological question and one that is appropriate to address within the context of one's family and/or faith community. In the public school classroom, however, an appropriate response would be to turn the student's attention toward examining the diversity of beliefs regarding the existence of God.

### ***Is Islam a violent religion?***

Islam (like Christianity, Buddhism, Paganism, etc.) is neither violent nor nonviolent. In the hands of believers, all religious expressions are capable of being interpreted in ways that can inspire the full range of human agency from the heinous to the heroic. It is one of the clearest manifestations of religious illiteracy when any tradition is classified with a singular characterization. The widespread association in non-Muslim communities of Islam with violence is due to a host of factors, including media coverage of violent activities perpetrated by a minority of Muslims. In the absence of opportunities to study Islam in its rich and full diversity, these depictions are often wrongly interpreted as comprehensively representative of the tradition itself.

### ***I'm Hindu (or Muslim, Christian, Buddhist) and my religion is really different from the Hinduism (or Islam, Christianity, Buddhism) we are studying. Why?***

It can be disorienting for students to see their own tradition presented in unfamiliar ways, and teachers can help students by reminding them of the vast diversity of religious expressions within as well as between religious traditions. It is best to frame any unit or lesson on religion with this reminder at the outset so that when questions such as this one arise teachers can reference back to this framework and help the student situate his or her own practice within the wider tradition being studied. A good rule of thumb for teachers is that particular theological expressions of a tradition should be represented accurately and respectfully, but never exclusively.

### ***Why do we need to study religion anyway? We're in school, not church!***

There is a difference between the secular study of religion and the practice of religion as devotional expression. Unfortunately, many in the United States do not understand this distinction, and this has led to a belief that it is inappropriate to learn about religion in schools. However, the courts have made clear that, under the Constitution, learning about religion is both legal and an important dimension of a comprehensive education. It is impossible to understand human history and culture without understanding its religious dimensions. Furthermore, illiteracy about religion fuels prejudice and bigotry between and among communities. Learning about religion in schools deepens our understanding of human experience and promotes appreciation of diversity.

## **CONCLUSION**

Teachers often feel ill prepared and anxious about the mistakes they might make when faced with the challenges associated with teaching about religion in their classes. The temptation can be to avoid religion altogether or to present only elements that seem the most "objective": the Ten Commandments, the Five Pillars, the Four Noble Truths, etc. Our goal here is not to make teachers feel more overwhelmed or to place greater demands on them. Our goal is to help empower teachers to expand their repertoire of approaches to the study of religion, and to have good justifications for why this element of their curriculum deserves time and space.

# Part 4

## Teacher Education

In order to effectively include the study of religion in K-12 curricula, teachers must be prepared to do so. If religion is left out of pre-service and in-service teacher education, it is likely either that religion will be left out of the classroom because teachers feel uncomfortable with content they feel unqualified to teach or, if included, that the treatment of religion by unprepared teachers may fall short of constitutional guidelines in approach or accuracy in regard to content.

The following brief recommendations regarding teacher education for the teaching of religion in public K-12 schools take a learning outcomes approach, rather than stipulate particular courses or require minimal credit hours of college or university work in religion.

The American Academy of Religion recommends that teacher education, especially in social studies and English, be driven by the following set of educational outcomes or competencies in teacher pre-service and in-service education.

### *Content Competencies*

All teachers should have some contact with the history and cultural context of the discipline of religious studies, including the awareness that “religion” itself is a Western construct.<sup>40</sup>

### *For those who teach world history, as well as world cultures, societies, religions, and arts*

1. Familiarity with the basic outlooks, experiences, and practices of the widespread living religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and of indigenous regional religions (religions of the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific), with special

attention to the diversity of expressions and practices within as well as between religions and regions.

2. An understanding of how specific religions function in particular social/historical contexts.
3. An understanding of how religions affect and are affected by their cultural contexts and thus how religions are internally diverse and dynamic.

(This is the content often covered in university-level world religions courses.)

### *For those who teach U.S. history*

1. Familiarity with the basic beliefs and practices of Native North American (and Hawaiian) religions, as well as the religions of important/sizable immigrant communities.
2. An understanding of the place of religion in the founding documents of the U.S., especially in the First Amendment, and how the religion clauses have been interpreted in the courts over the history of the nation.
3. An understanding of some of the ways in which religious belief, practice, and affiliation have affected the course of the nation—whether on an individual, group, or societal level—and including political, economic, and social behavior.

(This is the content often covered in university-level course on U.S. religion.)

### *For those who teach the Bible as literature*

1. An understanding of the ancient religious communities that produced various biblical texts.
2. An understanding that different faith communities have different Bibles (e.g., Jewish, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant) and that there are many different translations of the Bible that often reflect significant theological differences (e.g., the New Jewish Publication Society, the Living Torah, the New Standard Revised Version, the King James Version, the New International Version).
3. Familiarity with the most important narratives, characters, and teachings contained in the Bible from the perspective of differing traditions.
4. Understanding and working knowledge of the historical critical method for the study of the Bible (and other ancient texts).

(The above content is often covered in single university-level introductory courses on the Bible, or in introductory two-course sequences on the Hebrew Bible (or the Christian Old Testament) and the New Testament.)

5. Knowledge of how biblical narratives, characters, figures of speech, images, and teachings occur throughout the literary culture of the West.

### *Pedagogical Competencies*

1. Be aware of examples of best practices in teaching about religion.
2. Be able to address in a constructive way religious disagreements and conflicts that arise in the classroom.
3. Be able to find and recognize appropriate resources about religion when needed, on the Internet or in more traditional media.

4. Be aware of, and manage effectively, religious diversity in the classroom.
5. Develop the ability to present multiple religious perspectives in a fair or neutral way.
6. Become familiar with the religious make-up of the larger community.
7. Understand the difference between the secular academic and devotional approaches to religion, and consistently use the secular academic approach.
8. Develop skills in leading students in discussion regarding their religious beliefs and practices, as well as the beliefs and practices of others.
9. Create an environment of respect and tolerance—a safe environment in which students feel free to talk about religion.<sup>41</sup>

### *Appropriate Attitudes/Postures*

1. Teachers should never try to coerce students to accept or reject any particular religious tradition, belief, or practice, as well as non-belief or atheism.
2. Teachers should not give any particular religious belief, practice, or tradition inappropriate (or unfair) emphasis.
3. Teachers should not discourage students' free expression of their religious beliefs or ideas.
4. Teachers should present religion content in the context of the approved curriculum.
5. The personal religious beliefs or practices of the teacher do not qualify or disqualify the teacher from teaching about religions in his or her classroom. Rather, academic training in religion content and pedagogy are the qualification for teaching religion in the schools, regardless of the personal religion, or lack thereof, of the teacher.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Examples of Opportunities for Teachers to Learn About Content***

Many religious studies scholars in the American Academy of Religion have had the opportunity to work with professional educators who teach students across the kindergarten through twelfth grade spectrum. Most often, these opportunities take the form of workshops or seminars for in-service teachers who are hoping to strengthen their literacy about religion.<sup>43</sup> In some contexts, there are pre-service opportunities for would-be teachers to take religious studies courses at their college or university as part of their content area preparation.<sup>44</sup>

We in the American Academy of Religion urge programs that train pre-service educators to include at least one religious studies course in their requirements. We also encourage educators to avail themselves of opportunities to strengthen their literacy about religion by enrolling in religious studies courses at their local college or university. Obviously, the more exposure teachers have to the academic study of religion, the better equipped they will be to teach about the rich complexities of religion as it manifests itself in human political and cultural life. However, due to the widespread illiteracy about religion in the general population, exposure to even a single well-taught course in religious studies can dramatically enhance one's understanding of, and appreciation for, the important role of religion in human experience.

### ***Notes about Legality, Method and Pedagogy***

In addition to learning about religion to enhance content knowledge, it is also important for educators to learn about the legal and pedagogical dimensions of teaching about religion in the schools. As we have highlighted throughout this document, educators are constantly confronted with challenges and opportunities related to religion in their classrooms and schools through content-related issues as well as through the religious diversity of the students they serve. There are helpful guidelines and manuscripts published to give educators important foundational information,<sup>45</sup> but whenever possible we also urge teachers to enroll in workshops and/or courses that explore these issues in more depth. What seem like clear guidelines in abstraction often become quickly

muddled in practice. Having opportunities to explore the nuances of public policy debates about religion in the schools and how to construct lesson plans that incorporate more accurate representations of religion will provide educators with helpful tools for their own practice while also helping them to serve as a resource for their colleagues in the school and larger district.





## *Conclusion*

We in the American Academy of Religion hope these guidelines will be a useful tool for public school educators, members of school boards, and general citizens as they experience the opportunities and challenges that accompany issues related to teaching about religion in our schools. It has been our pleasure to work closely with educators to construct these guidelines and to learn more about the important role that public school teachers play in helping their students better understand the rich diversity of religious expression in human experience.



# Appendices

## APPENDIX A

### LIST OF RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS TASK FORCE AND WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

#### *Religion in the Schools Task Force:*

Diane L. Moore, Chair: Professor of the Practice of Religious Studies and Education, Harvard Divinity School

Ann Marie Bahr: Professor in the Philosophy and Religion Department, South Dakota State University (Task Force member until November 2008)

Mark Chancey: Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Southern Methodist University

Betty DeBerg: Professor of Religion, University of Northern Iowa

David Haberman: Professor of Religious Studies, Indiana University

Bruce Lawrence: Nancy and Jeffrey Marcus Humanities Professor of Religion, Duke University

Stephanie McAllister: History and Social Science Teacher, Brookline High School, Brookline, MA

Steve Herrick, AAR Staff Liaison (ex-officio)

#### *Members of the Working Group:*

Ann Marie Bahr: Professor in the Philosophy and Religion Department, South Dakota State University (Working Group member as of December 2008)

Wallace Best: Professor of Religion and African American Studies, Princeton University

Elizabeth Bounds: Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

Bruce Grelle: Professor of Religious Studies (Ethics), California State University, Chico.

Carlene Mandolfo: Associate Professor of Religious Studies (Hebrew Bible), Colby College.

Anne Monius: Professor of South Asian Religions, Harvard Divinity School

Keith Naylor: Professor of Religious Studies (Religion in America), Occidental College

Martha Newman: Professor of Religious Studies, University of Texas at Austin

Sarah Pike: Professor of Religious Studies, California State University, Chico.

Marc Raphael: Nathan Gumenick Chair of Judaic Studies, College of William and Mary

## APPENDIX B

### A SAMPLING OF CONSENSUS DOCUMENTS ON TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION

*Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas. <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/PDF/FCGcomplete.PDF>.

*Matters of Faith: Religion in American Public Life, 2000.* <http://www.americanassembly.org>.

*Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, sponsored by the European Commission. [www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3483/index.html](http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3483/index.html).

*The Williamsburg Charter*, 1988. (Signed by Presidents Carter and Ford and Chief Justices Burger and Rehnquist, among many others.) <http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/first-findingcommonground/C02.WilliamsburgCharter.pdf>.

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## APPENDIX C

### NOTES ON OTHER DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION IN SCHOOLS

#### *Stand-Alone Electives*

Some public schools offer elective courses in religious studies, usually at the secondary level. The most typical are *Introduction to World Religions* and *The Bible as Literature*.

For courses on the Bible, we highly recommend that teachers utilize the resources offered through the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the scholarly association of Biblical scholars. The SBL has produced a very helpful document entitled *Bible Electives in Public Schools: A Guide*,<sup>46</sup> which is geared toward educators, and the SBL supports an e-publication entitled *Teaching the Bible: An E-Publication for High School Teachers*, which provides a wealth of information about both content and pedagogical strategies.<sup>47</sup>

For courses on world religions, the same approaches to teaching about religion that are outlined in the main document apply to these and similar stand-alone electives. Specifically, teachers should help students understand that religions are 1) internally diverse, 2) dynamic, and 3) embedded in cultures. Typical survey courses that use popular texts such as Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*<sup>48</sup> rarely represent these elements of religious studies and we urge teachers to include them. One way to do so is to supplement whatever text is used with specific and contrasting case study examples to represent these elements within each tradition.

#### *Guest Speakers*

It is common for educators to invite religious leaders or practitioners into class to give a presentation about their tradition to students. Though we realize that this helps give "life" to the traditions studied, we discourage this practice for reasons outlined in the document regarding the different training that religious leaders and practitioners receive about their faith in comparison to the training one receives from a religious studies perspective. Instead, we recommend that teachers invite religious studies scholars (or religious leaders who are also trained in religious studies) as presenters because they will be able to represent the diversity within the tradition or traditions under consideration. (You may be able to find possible speakers by contacting the religious studies department of a local university.) Another option is to utilize films or personal written narratives to provide at least two differing representations of a given tradition or perspective to give students exposure to some dimension of diversity within a tradition. A good example of diverse representations of Islam is the PBS Frontline video *The Muslims*.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Field Trips to Places of Worship***

Another common way that educators introduce students to religion is to plan field trips to places of worship such as a church, mosque, temple, or shrine. Typically, students will receive a tour of the facility by a member of the community or religious leader and an explanation of the ritual and communal activities that take place there. This practice can be problematic for the same reasons articulated above regarding having religious leaders or practitioners as guest speakers representing their traditions. If students are able to have only one field trip to a place of worship for their study of Christianity, for example, which community should they visit? A Quaker meeting house? A Methodist storefront church? An Evangelical mega-church? A makeshift Roman Catholic chapel in a homeless shelter? A Congregational church? An Orthodox Cathedral? And what if there is only one mosque or temple in the area? Though good teachers will always explain to students about the diversity of religious expressions

within as well as among traditions, the pedagogical power of experiential encounters has to be taken seriously. One way to preserve experiential learning in ways that supports the aim of meaningful exposure to diverse expressions is to plan two field trips and visit different communities *within* the same tradition. This can give students the power of experiential encounters and the dissonances of differing representations through a case study that can then be applied to other traditions.

### ***Teaching About Religions through Music, Theater, Film and the Creative Arts***

These genres provide rich opportunities for studying religion from a nonsectarian perspective. There is a vast and growing literature produced by scholars of religion that explore the intersections of religion and the arts, and though further elaboration is beyond the scope of this project we encourage teachers to explore some of those resources and to seek out professional development opportunities in these arenas.

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## **APPENDIX D**

### **SNAPSHOTS OF PRACTICE REPRESENTING THE THREE PREMISES OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

*Note: The appendix includes snapshots already introduced in Part Three and includes new ones as well.*

#### ***Religions are Internally Diverse***

A basic premise of religious studies is that religions are not internally homogeneous but diverse. In schools and in popular culture, faith traditions are often presented as a single set of beliefs, practices and representations without internal variation. While the major differences within a tradition may be introduced (“the majority of Muslims are Sunnis, while others are Shi’i”) less dramatic or clearly defined distinctions are often overlooked or presumed not to exist. It is important for students to learn, for example, that Muslims in Indonesia will practice their faith differently than Muslims in Nigeria. In a similar vein, wealthy Muslims in Jakarta may practice an Islam that looks somewhat different than poor Muslims in rural Java. Helping students see that there are many “Islams” (or Christianities, Hinduisms) in the world enables them to consider carefully both what it means to study Islam and the complexity of answering the question, “What do Muslims believe?”

#### **Snapshots of Practice**

##### ***Elementary School English Language Arts***

Ms. X. decides to do an oral storytelling unit with her first-grade classroom. Each day she reads aloud a Native American story from different tribes to her class.<sup>50</sup> Afterwards, she asks them to return to their desks and draw what they remember of the story. After several stories have been shared, each student chooses her or his favorite and is assigned to learn it and retell it to a friend or family member. Throughout the unit, Ms. X. discusses differences between oral, written, and visual representations and encourages her students to practice all three skillsets. Her students are exposed to both variety in the beliefs, subjects, and settings of Native American religions and many different forms of literacy.

### Elementary School Social Studies

Mr. N. is teaching a third-grade geography lesson and decides to focus on different expressions of Buddhism through an exploration of architecture. He shows them a selection of images that include temples from around the world and throughout different time periods.<sup>51</sup> An investigation of various architectural representations provides an opportunity to discuss migration, immigration, and differing expressions of faith and practice.

### Middle School English Language Arts

Mr. P.'s eighth-grade class is focusing on voice and perspective in nonfiction and assigns excerpts from *Jerusalem Mosaic: Young Voices from the Holy City*<sup>52</sup> as an example of differing experiences expressed about a shared place and time through the voices of adolescents. Themes addressed include politics, family, love, religion, and war. Mr. P. helps his students recognize the similarities and differences voiced by this diverse group of teens representing Jewish, Christian, and Muslim perspectives from varying positions on the secular-orthodox spectrum.

### Middle School Social Studies

Ms. Q. is teaching an eighth-grade world history course that covers the fall of Rome to the beginnings of the European Renaissance. As part of their study of the "Golden Age" she has them act as explorers of the diverse cultures that came under the rule of expanding Islamic empires. After reading excerpts from the logs of medieval Muslim travelers such as Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Batuta, and Naser-e Kosraw,<sup>53</sup> Ms. Q. has students watch clips from the documentary *Islam: Empire of Faith*<sup>54</sup> and conduct outside research on medieval cities from Central Asia, North and West Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Arabia that includes an investigation into mosques that were built in these locations during this time period.<sup>55</sup> Students conclude by creating their own "Explorer's Journals" in which they describe, through writing and illustration, the similarities and differences they saw between expressions of Islamic life and practice as Muslims moved into these culturally diverse regions.

### Secondary School English Language Arts

Before reading Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Ms. R. has her eleventh-grade students research the life of Hesse to introduce them to his cultural context and the influences that led him to write his most popular novel. While studying the text, she introduces students to readings from John Strong's *The Buddha: A Short Biography*<sup>56</sup> and Strong, ed., *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*<sup>57</sup> to give her students tools to compare Hesse's interpretation of South Asian Buddhism with a scholarly account representing a variety of different perspectives. She helps them explore these diverse interpretations and how different genres shape perception.

### Secondary School Social Studies

The essential question of Mr. T.'s twelfth-grade U.S. History II course is "What does it mean to be an American?" He has already included study of the complex ways in which early twentieth-century immigrants to the U.S. constructed their American identity. In a continuation of this theme, Mr. T. has his students read excerpts from Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*<sup>58</sup> and James Fisher's *Catholics in America*<sup>59</sup> to facilitate a conversation about the diverse practices of peoples within a singular tradition. As students later consider how some Americans feared that the Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy would be a mouthpiece for a papal agenda if elected President, Mr. T. draws on this earlier work to further discuss the intersections between national, cultural, and religious identity. He and his students explore the ways in which these intersections lead to a vast diversity of religious expression and belief even within a tradition with a centralized hierarchy.

### Religions are Dynamic

A second premise of religious studies is the recognition that religions are dynamic and changing as opposed to static and fixed. When religious practices or texts are taught without historical context, it is easy for students to view the rituals or stories as having one meaning that persists for all times and places. Religions, however, exist in time and space and are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by believers. For example, the Confucian concept of the "mandate from heaven" evolved within dynasties, geopolitical regions, and historical eras and continues to evolve today.



Seeing examples of the way that religious beliefs, practices and imagery change over time and place helps students recognize that from a religious studies perspective, there is no such thing as “a single meaning” of a given tradition, practice, or belief system.

## Snapshots of Practice

### Elementary School English Language Arts

Mr. D.’s second-grade class is reading Faith Ringgold’s chapter book *Tar Beach*.<sup>60</sup> As the students read, Mr. D. supplements the text with selections from books such as *The People Could Fly: American Black Folk Tales*,<sup>61</sup> *All Night, All Day: A Child’s First Book of African-American Spirituals*,<sup>62</sup> *Stitching Memories: African American Story Quilts*<sup>63</sup> and recordings of spirituals by the modern R&B singer John Legend to further explore the variety of genres reflected in Ringgold’s text. In his discussion, Mr. D. helps students identify different forms of literacy and the many ways that stories are passed on. In his discussion of themes, he includes those related to religion and helps students identify similarities and differences in how African American forms of Christianity are represented through American history.

### Elementary School Social Studies

Mr. Y.’s fourth-grade social studies curriculum focuses on North American geography and peoples. His students learn about the lives of native communities in the U.S. and Canada before and during the time that European explorers and colonists began to make contact with the continent. He is also eager to include contemporary representations of the communities he is exploring and selects a few for students to research in groups and to present reflections regarding how the traditions have evolved and changed over the years and how core values have been interpreted and preserved.<sup>64</sup>

### Middle School English Language Arts

Ms. M.’s sixth-grade class is exploring the art of storytelling. She has students write a series of their own stories interspersed with selections of stories from a diverse array of cultures and traditions. In one section, she focuses on how ancient stories are often retold with contemporary significance and chooses selections from *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling*<sup>65</sup> as one example of this common literary practice.

### Middle School Social Studies

Ms. C. is teaching a seventh-grade geography unit on Africa and the Caribbean as part of a year-long world geography curriculum. During this unit students learn about the beliefs and practices of the Yoruba peoples of Western Africa. Ms. C. then has students chart the movement of West African peoples from the continent of Africa to Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, and the U.S., and identify the traditions of Santeria, Vodun, and Candomblé that develop as a result of cultural and religious syncretization in those regions. While watching clips from “This Far By Faith: African American Spiritual Journeys,”<sup>66</sup> and reading contemporary testimonials excerpted from *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* by Karen McCarthy Brown<sup>67</sup> and *The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santeria* by Marta Moreno Vega,<sup>68</sup> students explore how the African diaspora continues to result in intertwining features of geographic, religious, cultural, economic and political change.<sup>69</sup>

### Secondary School English Language Arts

Ms. E. chooses Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*<sup>70</sup> for her twelfth-grade literature class. Students investigate the cultural as well as the political history of 20<sup>th</sup> century China as background to understand and appreciate themes they will encounter such as the cultural revolution, arranged marriages, the veneration of ancestors, and social class structures.<sup>71</sup> Cultural/religious themes are present throughout the text and a better understanding of these inferences and references will enhance student understanding of this widely read novel.

### Secondary School Social Studies

Mr. W. is in the midst of a unit on the Roman Empire with his tenth-grade world history students, and wants to include a section on the origins of Christianity. He has students read the portion in their textbook about Jesus and his message, but supplements this lesson with additional resources to show 1) how there were many different and often competing interpretations of who Jesus was and what he promoted in the early years following his death, and 2) how those interpretations changed and evolved over time. He gathered a series of resources from the PBS series *From Jesus to Christ*<sup>72</sup> depicting these tensions and evolutions and engages his students in a series of inquiries regarding the significance of these insights.



## Religions are Embedded in Culture

A third premise of religious studies is the recognition that religions are collections of ideas, practices, values, and stories that are all embedded in cultures and not isolated from them. Just as religion cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural manifestations, it is impossible to understand culture without considering its religious dimensions. In the same way that race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are always factors in cultural interpretation and understanding, so too is religion. Whether explicit or implicit, religious influences can always be found when one asks “the religion question” of any given social/historical experience. For example, rather than assuming in an American history class that a focus on religion is only relevant when studying the Puritans, the Great Awakenings, or the rise of the “Moral Majority,” this approach assumes that there are rich avenues of inquiry that open when one considers the religious influences that shaped the Constitutional Convention, the institution of slavery, women’s suffrage, the industrial revolution, and the U.S. involvement in World War II.

## Snapshots of Practice

### Elementary School English Language Arts

Mr. B. and his third-grade class read *In the Heart of the Village: The World of the Indian Banyan Tree* by Barbara Bash.<sup>73</sup> They discuss how the tree functions as a central location of the community and compare the different people who meet there – kids at school, merchants trading goods, villagers gathering to talk. He then shows them images of Banyan trees around the world, including the oldest such tree in America in Fort Myers, Florida.<sup>74</sup> Several of these are artistic representations of the Hindu God Shiva in his aspect as Jnana Dakshinamurti, teacher of wisdom, always shown seated at the foot of a Banyan tree; others are of the Buddha under the Bodhi Tree, a Banyan species under which (according to legend) the Buddha gained enlightenment. Mr. B. and his class then discuss various places and objects that are central points in their own lives (school playground, churches, grocery stores, temples) and then write their own stories about all the different types of people who come there every day.

## Elementary School Social Studies

Ms. G.’s fifth-grade social studies class is working on a unit about ancient China. Toward the beginning of this unit she uses resources produced for an Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) exhibit entitled “Taoism and the Arts of China,”<sup>75</sup> to construct a “gallery” walk activity for her students. Touring the classroom, students look closely at paintings and sculptures produced from the Warring States period to the Qing dynasty while recording their observations on a graphic organizer with the headings “What I See,” “What I Guess,” and “What I Wonder.” After the students share their reflections with the class, Ms. G. prompts them to think about patterns they see in their observations. Again using materials from the AIC, the class reads about some of the major themes of Taoism and their development from the tradition’s early stages to its “renaissance,” and concludes by reflecting on how these perspectives may have affected the style and content of the art they have just analyzed. Using these aesthetic themes as a touchstone, Ms. G.’s class continues to trace the ways in which religious traditions of China influenced perspectives on power, leadership, nature, and social relationships during the eras of their study.

## Middle School English Language Arts

For a lesson in her unit on journalism with her seventh-grade students, Ms. V. decides to focus on the history of the local community through an investigation of its monuments and burial grounds. Students are assigned a specific monument or burial ground to investigate and the class brainstorms a series of questions that student journalists will pursue in their research. General questions should include relevant religious dimensions of the subject under investigation. (For example, are burial grounds divided by religious affiliation? What religions are represented? Are there historic or contemporary inhabitants of the community who are not represented in burial grounds or monuments? If so, why not?) In addition to these general questions, Ms. V. wants them to focus on three areas of English Language Arts competency: 1) symbolism (both visual symbols, such as angels or stars of David, and textual symbolism, such as biblical quotations); 2) ethnography of names (what cultures are represented? how can you tell? can you tell where someone will be buried or what kind of monument they will have based on their name?); and 3) orthographic development (are there words that are unfamiliar to you? words you know but spell differently? how does this relate to the age of the monument/memorial?).

### *Middle School Social Studies*

A consistent theme of Mr. H.'s seventh-grade geography class is the relationship between the inhabitants of each region his class studies and the major features of its natural landscape. Several times throughout the year he has asked his students to research and prepare short debates about use and protection of various natural resources, and each time he has his students consider the ways in which religious worldview may influence the assumptions of the perspectives they are representing. While his students are familiar with well-known natural sites of veneration such as the Ganges River in India, he also introduces them to less frequently considered contexts. Using Diana Eck's *A New Religious America*<sup>76</sup> as a resource, he provides examples such as the spot in Pittsburgh at which the Allegheny, Ohio, and Monongahela rivers converge. Known as a "sangam" in the Hindu tradition, students learn that this confluence has been recognized by many Hindu immigrants to Pennsylvania as a particularly auspicious location, holding much symbolic importance. Mr. H. uses such examples both to explore the ways immigration continues to transform the cultural geography of the modern world, and to encourage students to consider multiple, and perhaps overlooked, religious perspectives on the natural landscape of any geographic context.

### *Secondary School English Language Arts*

Mr. J. always starts his tenth-grade English class with a unit on biblical stories in order to prepare his students for the Western classics they will read that year. First, he gives his students a selection of biblically themed cartoons from the *New Yorker*<sup>77</sup> and asks them to identify in writing as many of the characters and stories as they can in five minutes. As most students discover they only know a few of the "big ones" (Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses), Mr. J. shows them "He forgot – and I – remembered" by Emily Dickinson and points out the various biblical allusions that they would need to know for an in-depth exploration of the poem. He then hands out a list of several popular biblical allusions to know<sup>78</sup> and students choose which story they will research and present. As part of a five-minute power point presentation, students must provide both of the following elements: a short synopsis of the story as it appears in the King James Bible (Mr. J. chooses this translation since it is the one the majority of English authors they are studying would have known and used) and a representation of this story in an art form other than literature. For an assessment at the end of the week's unit, Mr. J. gives his class the lyrics to Bob Dylan's "Angelina" and asks them to write a one-page essay on the use of biblical allusion.

### *Secondary School Social Studies*

Ms. K.'s eleventh-grade modern U.S. history class is studying the social movements and upheaval that occurred during the 1960s. As part of this unit Ms. K. has her students work in groups to write and perform vignettes depicting people from various conflicting social perspectives engaging in dialogue over some of the major political and cultural topics they have studied, among them shifting gender roles and family structures. Wanting her students to consider the varied and complex forces that converge to form individual and societal assumptions about these topics, Ms. K. includes in her resource packet excerpts from Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*. After reading background on Ruether's perspective as a feminist Christian, students read various passages discussing the ways in which Christianities of the Western world have shaped shifting conceptions of the family from classical to modern times. Students consider the ways in which both personal religious commitments, as well as life in a Christian culture, might shape the assumptions of the characters that will populate their vignettes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This description of a constitutionally sound approach was first articulated by AAR scholars in the 1970s and has been adapted by the First Amendment Center, and reproduced in their *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>There have been several “consensus documents” compiled by religious practitioners, legal scholars, and educators related to teaching about religion in public schools that have been created over the years by nonprofit organizations such as the First Amendment Center and ad hoc groups such as the one formed to construct the *Toledo Guiding Principles*. (See Appendix B for list of these and related documents.) Though these and similar initiatives provide fair, respectful, and constitutionally sound *ways* to teach about religion, none of them provide substantial guidance on *what* to teach about religion, nor do so from the authoritative perspective of religious studies scholars themselves. These guidelines are intended to fill that significant void.

<sup>3</sup>Religious Studies in Secondary Schools (RSiSS) is the closest equivalent, but it is an all-volunteer, grassroots organization comprised (primarily) of independent school teachers who are not subject to the legal and regulatory mandates that shape public schools.

<sup>4</sup>Anne Carr and Nicholas Piediscalzi, eds., *The Academic Study of Religion: 1975 Public Schools Religion Studies* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975); Nicholas Piediscalzi and Barbara De Martino Swyhart, eds., *Distinguishing Moral Education, Values Clarification and Religion-Studies* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976); and Paul J. Will, ed., *Public Education Religion Studies: An Overview* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup>In the 1970s and 1980s academic programs were established at Harvard Divinity School, Western Michigan University, the University of Kansas, and Wright State University. The following resource centers were also established during that time period: The Public Education Religion Studies Center at Wright State University, the Kansas Center for Public Education Religion Studies, the Center for Public Education Religion Studies at San Diego State University, and the National Council on Religion and Public Education. Of these programs and initiatives, two are still functioning: the graduate school program at Harvard Divinity School, now known as the Program in Religious Studies and Education (<http://www.hds.harvard.edu/prse>), and the Religion and Public Education Resource Center at the University of California at Chico ([www.csuchico.edu/rs/rperc](http://www.csuchico.edu/rs/rperc)), the home of materials formerly housed at the National Council on Religion and Public Education.

<sup>6</sup>See Appendix A for a list of the AAR's Religion in the Schools Task Force members.

<sup>7</sup>See National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards at <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards>. These standards were first constructed and adopted in 1994 and are currently being revised.

<sup>8</sup>See National Council for Teachers of English Curriculum Standards at [www.ncte.org/store/books/standards/105977.htm](http://www.ncte.org/store/books/standards/105977.htm). These standards were published in 1996.



<sup>9</sup>This section draws heavily from a previously published essay by Diane L. Moore entitled “Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach,” *World History Connected*, November 2006. <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuc.edu/4.1/moore.html>. Many thanks to *World History Connected* for permission to reproduce these sections. See also Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Schools* (New York: Palgrave, 2007). Stephen Prothero has also published a widely read book on the issues of religious literacy entitled *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007).

<sup>10</sup>Diane L. Moore, “Overcoming Religious Illiteracy,” op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>This is problematic for two reasons. First, religious leaders and believers are appropriately trained in and have allegiances to a particular set of beliefs about their tradition. Many are not trained in other representations, and those that are often learn about other interpretations as heretical or unorthodox in relationship to their own theological worldview. (Note the tensions between some Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians and between some Sunni and Shi’i Muslims, for example.) It is inappropriate to assume, for example, that a local Protestant clergyperson or member of a congregation could accurately and sympathetically represent the many expressions of Christianity as equally valid and worthy of study. Though some religious leaders and believers may *also* be trained in religious studies, their training *as* religious leaders or believers will usually not equip them to accurately depict the diversity within their traditions. Second, religious leaders and believers approach and practice religion from a devotional perspective that is appropriate for their roles within their own faith communities but inappropriate as a lens to represent religion in the public schools.

<sup>12</sup>For example, in three separate searches throughout the day on January 18, 2010, the top Google search result for the entry “Religion, Haiti” referenced a controversial comment made by Christian televangelist Pat Robertson on the recent earthquake. Less “newsworthy” but more representative were the

efforts by religious organizations and individuals worldwide that mounted or contributed to relief efforts. The media is also the primary contemporary source for the widespread association of Islam with violence and terrorism. (See Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, revised edition (New York: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>13</sup>It is important to note that it is not the role or responsibility of faith communities or the media to present a comprehensive understanding of religion. It is the responsibility of education and educators to provide citizens with the knowledge base required to understand this important dimension of pluralism.

<sup>14</sup>There are many other consequences stemming from illiteracy about religions that concern scholars of religion, including a diminished intellectual understanding of the rich role that religion plays human social and cultural life. We highlight the civic consequences of religious illiteracy here for it is the one most universally relevant for educators across the K-12 spectrum.

<sup>15</sup>The consultation was sponsored by the “Alliance of Civilizations,” a UN program formed at the initiative of the Secretary-General to counterterrorism through understanding. The consultation took place over the month of May 2006.

<sup>16</sup>For example, the European Commission launched a three-year project in 2006 entitled *Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries* (REDCo). See <http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3483/index.html> for a review of this comprehensive initiative.

<sup>17</sup>The religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

<sup>18</sup>For an excellent study on the controversy regarding these decisions and their role in the current tensions about religion in public life, see Joan DelFattore, *The Fourth R: Conflicts over Religion in America’s Public Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For an excellent historical overview of the relationship between religion and public education in the United States, see James Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999).



<sup>19</sup> *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania, et al. v. Schempp et al.* 374 US 203 (1963).

<sup>20</sup> Peter Bracher, et al., *PERSC Guidebook, Public Education Religion-Studies: Questions and Answers* (Dayton, Ohio: Public Education Religion Studies Center, 1974), 2.

<sup>21</sup> First Amendment Center, *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1999). Another useful general guidebook is Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* (Nashville, TN: The First Amendment Center, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> First Amendment Center, *A Teacher's Guide*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Special thanks to public school educators Lisbeth Liles and Anna Mudd for their formidable help in constructing and vetting the snapshots found throughout these guidelines.

<sup>24</sup> Harvard Divinity School Study About Religion in the Schools (H-STARS), 2005 present.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Roger B. Beck et al., *World History: Patterns of Interaction* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005), 296.

<sup>26</sup> Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Native American Stories: Myths and Legends* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1991) and Joseph Bruchac *Native American Animal Stories* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> See Michael Wolfe, ed., *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage* (New York: Grove, 1997), 11–67, for edited excerpts of their travel journals.

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam> for information about the DVD. Note: we suggest using relevant selected excerpts vs. viewing the film in its entirety.

<sup>29</sup> For mosque resources, see the ARCHNET site at <http://www.archnet.org/lobby>. This site provides an excellent set of historical and contemporary resources about Islamic architecture from around the world. The site is free but requires registration. For general resources, see Malise Ruthven and Azim Nanji, *Historical Atlas of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) and Azim A. Nanji, ed., *The Muslim Almanac: A Reference Work on the History, Faith, Culture, and Peoples of Islam* (New York: Gale, 1996.)

<sup>30</sup> John S. Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: One World, 2001.)

<sup>31</sup> John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Thompson Wadsworth, 2008.)

<sup>32</sup> See Joel W. Martin, *Native American Religion* (New York: Oxford, 1999), a volume in John Butler and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Religion and American Life* series; Joy Hakim, *The First Americans: Prehistory-1600* (New York: Oxford, 2003), a volume in Joy Hakim, *A History of US* series; and Lois Crozier-Hogle et al., *Surviving in Two Worlds: Contemporary Native American Voices* (Austin: University of Texas, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> Steve Zeitlin, ed., *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling* (New York: Fireside, 1997), 25–56.

<sup>34</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion>.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Bash, *In the Heart of the Village: The World of the Indian Banyan Tree* (Layton Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> See <http://www.panoramas.dk/fullscreen7/f23-banyan-tree.html> for a 360-degree view.

<sup>37</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 154.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Mankoff, ed., *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers) 2004. This volume comes with a two-CD set that is searchable by key term (e.g., “bible” or “Noah” or “ark”).

<sup>39</sup> See Martin Manser and David Pickering, eds., *Facts on File Dictionary of Classical and Biblical Allusions* (New York: Facts on File, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* for an explanation of how “religion” is a European construct of relatively recent origin.

<sup>41</sup> See *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) 2007, p. 35; Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2001), 188.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., and *The Society of Biblical Literature, Bible Electives in Public Schools: A Guide*, <http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/SchoolsGuide.pdf>, 2008, 8–9.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, workshops run by religious studies scholars through non-profit educational organizations such as Facing History and Ourselves, Teachers as Scholars, and Primary Source; courses offered by religious studies scholars through summer institutes or the continuing education arm of their college or university; and courses offered through national foundations such as the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Social Science Research Council. Additionally, the Harvard Divinity School has also partnered with the Harvard Extension School to offer a Citation in Religious Studies and Education for in-service educators who wish to pursue training in religious studies that goes beyond a single workshop or seminar. See <http://www.extension.harvard.edu/2009-10/courses/citations/crse.jsp>.

<sup>44</sup> For example, at California State University, Chico some undergraduates who are enrolled in a teaching credential program can fulfill one of their content requirements by taking an Introduction to World Religions course offered by members of the Department of Religious Studies. There is also one graduate school education program in the United States at the Harvard Divinity School that specializes in training pre-service middle and secondary school educators to teach about religion as it manifests itself within the context of several licensure areas. See <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/prse>.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see Kent Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) and Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2007) or online at [www.freedomforum.org/publications/first/findingcommonground/FCG-complete.pdf](http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/first/findingcommonground/FCG-complete.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> This document can be downloaded at <http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/thebibleinpublicschools.aspx>.

<sup>47</sup> The e-publication can be accessed at [http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/media/TBv2\\_i1.htm](http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/media/TBv2_i1.htm).

<sup>48</sup> Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperOne, 2009). This is the fiftieth-year anniversary edition.

<sup>49</sup> *Muslims*, Frontline DVD, 2003. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/muslims> for more information.

<sup>50</sup> Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Native American Stories: Myths and Legends* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1991) and Joseph Bruchac *Native American Animal Stories* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1991).

<sup>51</sup> Anne Geldart, *Buddhist Temples* (Chicago: Heinemann-Raintree, 2005). Recommended for ages 9–12.

<sup>52</sup> I.E. Mozeson and Lois Stavsky, *Jerusalem Mosaic: Young Voices from the Holy City* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994). Recommended for grades 6–12.

<sup>53</sup> See Michael Wolfe, ed., *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage* (New York: Grove, 1997), 11–67, for edited excerpts of their travel journals.

<sup>54</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam> for information about the DVD. Note: we suggest using relevant selected excerpts vs. viewing the film in its entirety.

<sup>55</sup> For mosque resources, see the ARCHNET site at <http://www.archnet.org/lobby>. This site provides an excellent set of historical and contemporary resources about Islamic architecture from around the world. The site is free but requires registration. For general resources, see Malise Ruthven and Azim Nanji, *Historical Atlas of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) and Azim A. Nanji, ed., *The Muslim Almanac: A Reference Work on the History, Faith, Culture, and Peoples of Islam* (New York: Gale, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> John S. Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: One World, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Thompson Wadsworth, 2008).

<sup>58</sup> Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 2002. This is an ethnographic study and excerpts can be used and appreciated by a secondary school audience.

<sup>59</sup> James T. Fisher, *Catholics in America* (New York: Oxford, 2000), a volume in John Butler and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Religion and American Life* series. This resource is written for a younger audience but can serve as a supplement to the Orsi text.

<sup>60</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach* (Albuquerque: Dragonfly Books, 1996). Recommended for ages 4–8.

<sup>61</sup> Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly* (New York: Knopf, 2009). Recommended for ages 4–8.

<sup>62</sup> Ashley Bryan, *All Night, All Day: A Child's First Book of African-American Spirituals* (New York: Athenium, 2003). Recommended for ages 4–8.

<sup>63</sup> Eva Ungar Grudin, *Stitching Memories: African American Story Quilts* (Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art, 1990).

<sup>64</sup> See Joel W. Martin, *Native American Religion* (New York: Oxford, 1999, a volume in John Butler and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Religion and American Life* series); Joy Hakim, *The First Americans: Prehistory—1600* (New York: Oxford, 2003), a volume in Joy Hakim, *A History of US* series; and Lois Crozier-Hogle et al., *Surviving in Two Worlds: Contemporary Native American Voices* (Austin: University of Texas, 1997).

<sup>65</sup> Steve Zeitlin, ed., *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling* (New York: Fireside, 1997), 25–56.

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/>

<sup>67</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). This is an ethnographic study and excerpts can be used and appreciated by a middle school audience.

<sup>68</sup> Marta Moreno Vega, *The Alter Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santería* (Oxford: One World, 2001). This is an ethnographic study and excerpts can be used and appreciated by a middle school audience.

<sup>69</sup> Another resource to consult is Albert J. Raboteau, *African-American Religion* (New York: Oxford, 1999), a volume in John Butler and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Religion and American Life* series.

<sup>70</sup> Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> A helpful resource is James Miller's edited volume entitled *Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion>.

<sup>73</sup> Barbara Bash, *In the Heart of the Village: The World of the Indian Banyan Tree* (Layton Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2002).

<sup>74</sup> See <http://www.panoramas.dk/fullscreen7/f23-banyan-tree.html> for a 360-degree view.

<sup>75</sup> See <http://www.artic.edu/taoism/introduction.php>. There is also a book that was published out of the exhibit: Stephen Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>76</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001) 154.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Mankoff, ed., *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers, 2004). This volume comes with a two-CD set that is searchable by key term (e.g. “bible” or “Noah” or “ark”).

<sup>78</sup> See Martin Manser and David Pickering, eds., *Facts on File Dictionary of Classical and Biblical Allusions* (New York: Facts on File, 2003).



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