

## Teaching the Reason for the Season

Many teachers have the mistaken view that religion is a forbidden topic in public schools. In too many cases, they have been misled or bullied into cleansing their curriculum of all religious references. Rather than purifying education, this cleansing process actually makes education sterile, lacking in depth, fullness, and diversity. It is an inappropriate censoring that harms students' education. Teachers' unfounded fears over violating the First Amendment (or incurring their colleagues' wrath) have even resulted in the avoidance of patriotic songs that refer to God.

Teachers have been intimidated into restricting their academic freedom, not because of the law, for the law supports them, but by someone else's ideology and intentional misrepresentation of teachers' rights or the First Amendment. It is neither appropriate nor legal for the public schools to promote a religion or to create schools that are religion-free zones.

C. Frederick Risinger, Associate Director of the Social Studies Development Center and Associate Director of ERIC/ChESS at Indiana University, writes in "Teaching about Religion in the Social Studies, ERIC Digest,"

In this era of educational reform, the social studies curriculum has been a frequent target of critics representing every point on the political spectrum. While educators argue that history is neglected and traditional values are missing, others contend that the curriculum lacks social relevance and avoids significant public issues. Most agree, however, that religion is not adequately included in the social studies curriculum. They argue that teachers, administrators, school boards, and textbook publishers have tended to strip social studies courses of all but the most bland references to religion as a social force in the past and present. As a result, students are prevented from learning in school about one of the most significant factors in human societies from the prehistoric era to the world today.

Religion is a major force in human affairs and, as such, should be included in the social studies curriculum. This ERIC Digest examines (1) reasons for including religion in the curriculum; (2) the current status of religious studies in the schools; (3) guidelines for including religion in the social studies curriculum; and (4) ideas for teaching about religion in the social studies.

Drawing upon the guidelines set forth in the presidentially promulgated Religious Expression in Public Schools, President Clinton's Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, noted in a speech that when studying art or music, a teacher may objectively discuss, perform, critique, and overview religious music, composition, and history. Furthermore,

geography, sociology, mathematics, physics, science, English, spelling, history, and other topics cannot be adequately discussed without also objectively over viewing religion and religious influences. ([www.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html](http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html))

Students' knowledge and understanding of the world are enhanced when they understand the beliefs and customs of various religions such as Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.

NEA's 2000-2001 Resolution E-7, "Religious Heritage in Instructional Materials," supports the objective inclusion of religion in the curriculum: "The National Education Association believes that educational materials should accurately portray the influence of religion in our nation and throughout the world." (<http://www.nea.org/resolutions/00/00e-7.html>)

Mathew D. Staver, Esq., a constitutional attorney, states in "Teachers' Rights on Public School Campuses" regarding the topic of holidays, symbols, music, art, drama, and literature:

The constitutional principle regarding religious holidays, symbols, music, art, drama, or literature is simple — mix the secular and the sacred. In other words, if a public school teacher displays or presents a secular aspect along with the religious holiday, symbol, music, art, drama, or literature, then the display or the presentation is constitutional. A teacher may display a nativity scene during the Christmas season so long as within the same context of the religious symbol is a secular symbol of the holiday, such as Santa Claus. Adding the secular aspect to the religious aspect is considered an objective presentation and consequently places the state in a neutral position.

A concert in public school during the Christmas holiday season containing only Christian music would be considered unconstitutional, but Christian Christmas songs such as "Silent Night, Holy Night" may be sung so long as secular songs of the holiday are also sung, like "Rudolph the Red - Nosed Reindeer." A school Christmas program may include Christian and Jewish songs so long as they are presented "in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday."<sup>(1)</sup> There is no magical formula between the balance of the secular versus the religious song. The main issue is that secular songs must be within the context of the Christian songs just like a secular symbol must be in the context of a Christian symbol.

Likewise, in art class, the teacher can overview religious art so long as secular art is also overviewed. Religious literature can be read and studied so long as it is objective and combined with other secular aspects of literature. The Supreme Court has long ago acknowledged that "[m]usic without sacred music, architecture minus the cathedral, or painting without the Scriptural themes would be eccentric and incomplete, even from a secular view."<sup>(2)</sup>

*(1) Florey v. Sioux Falls Sch. Dist.* 49-5, 619 F.2d 1311, 1314 (8th Cir.), *cert denied*, 449 U.S. 987 (1980).

(2) *McCollum v. Bd. of Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203, 206 (1948) (Jackson, J. concurring).

Eric Beuher, President of Gateways to Better Education and Association of American Educators Advisory Board Member, states that it is vitally important that teachers help “students understand and appreciate the value and contributions of Christianity to our society, the world, and even their academic subject” because it is “culturally relevant, academically legitimate, legally permitted, and morally imperative.”

A complete copy of the Department of Education’s [A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools](#) is available for download at

<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=3964>. It answers these questions:

- Is it constitutional to teach about religion?
- Why should study about religion be included in the curriculum?
- Is study about religion included in textbooks and standards?
- How should I teach about religion?
- Which religions should be taught and how much should be said?
- May I invite guest speakers to help with study about religion?
- How should I treat religious holidays in the classroom?
- Are there opportunities for teacher education in study about religion?
- What are good classroom resources for teaching about religion?
- What is the relationship between religion and character education?
- May I pray or otherwise practice my faith while at school?
- How do I respond if students ask about my religious beliefs?
- May students express religious views in public schools?
- May students express religious views in their assignments?
- How should public schools respond to excusal requests from parents?
- May public schools accommodate students with special religious needs?
- May students form extracurricular religious clubs?
- May students distribute religious literature in school?

NWPE encourages teachers to teach their students about religions and their role in shaping our world. As Michael M. Clarke, associate professor of English at Chicago’s Loyola University writes in the May 21st issue of *America*: “Intellectual integrity and distinction require that we include the religious element of human life in our teaching and scholarship . . . we owe it to our students to ensure that they are cognizant of the place of religion and understand its concepts. This is not proselytizing. It is good scholarship – and true education.”

NWPE supports the rights and academic freedom of teachers to teach free from an imposed ideology and to enjoy an educational environment free from institutional power over the intellect. Only when teachers have the right to teach, study and think free from coercion or control will their students gain the knowledge, wisdom, insight and discernment to become citizens free to pursue truth and the common good. Contact NWPE if you have any questions or difficulties exercising your right to teach appropriately about religion.