

*Congress shall make  
no law respecting an  
establishment of religion  
or prohibiting the free  
exercise thereof; or  
abridging the freedom  
of speech, or of the press,  
or the right of the people  
peaceably to assemble,  
and to petition the  
Government for a redress  
of grievances.*

# 7

CHAPTER 7

## Religion in the Public School Curriculum



*Congress shall make  
no law respecting an  
establishment of religion  
or prohibiting the free  
exercise thereof*

Growing numbers of people in the United States think it is important to teach *about* religion in the public schools.<sup>1</sup>

But what is the appropriate place of religion in the public-school curriculum? How does one approach such issues as textbook content, values education, creation science and religious holidays?

## QUESTIONS *and* ANSWERS: RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

The following questions and answers are designed to assist school boards as they make decisions about the curriculum and educators as they teach about religion in ways that are constitutionally permissible, educationally sound, and sensitive to the beliefs of students and parents.

### **Is it constitutional to teach about religion in public schools?**

Yes. In the 1960s school-prayer cases (that prompted rulings against state-sponsored school prayer and Bible reading), the U.S. Supreme Court indicated that public school education may include teaching about religion. In *Abington v. Schempp*, Associate Justice Tom Clark wrote for the Court:

[I]t 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>1</sup> "Teaching about religion" includes consideration of the beliefs and practices of religions; the role of religion in history and contemporary society; and religious themes in music, art and literature.

### What is meant by “teaching about religion” in the public schools?

The following statements distinguish between teaching about religion in public schools and religious indoctrination:

1. The school’s approach to religion is *academic*, not *devotional*.
2. The school may strive for student *awareness* of religions, but should not press for student *acceptance* of any one religion.
3. The school may sponsor *study* about religion, but may not sponsor the *practice* of religion.
4. The school may *expose* students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.
5. The school may *educate* about all religions, but may not *promote* or *denigrate* any religion.
6. The school may *inform* the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to *conform* him or her to any particular belief.<sup>2</sup>



### Why should study about religion be included in the public school curriculum?

Because religion plays a significant role in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. Omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant. Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices and concepts of the various religions makes much of history, literature, art and contemporary life unintelligible.

Study about religion is also important if students are to value religious liberty, the first freedom guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Moreover, knowledge of the roles of religion in the past and present promotes cross-cultural understanding essential to democracy and world peace.

<sup>2</sup> This answer is based on guidelines originally published by the Public Education Religion Studies Center at Wright State University.

**Where does study about religion belong in the curriculum?**

Wherever it naturally arises. On the secondary level, the social studies, literature and the arts offer many opportunities for the inclusion of information about religions — their ideas and themes. On the elementary level, natural opportunities arise in discussions of the family and community life and in instruction about festivals and different cultures. Many educators believe that integrating study about religion into existing courses is an educationally sound way to acquaint students with the role of religion in history and society.

Religion also may be taught about in special courses or units. Some secondary schools, for example, offer such courses as world religions, the Bible as literature, and the religious literature of the West and of the East.

**Do current textbooks teach about religion?**

Rarely. Recent textbook studies conclude that most widely used textbooks largely ignore the role of religion in history and society. For example, readers of high school U.S. history texts learn little or nothing about the great colonial revivals, the struggles of minority faiths, the religious motivations of immigrants, the contributions of religious groups to many social movements, major episodes of religious intolerance, and many other significant events of history. Education without appropriate attention to major religious influences and themes is incomplete education.

**How does teaching about religion relate to the teaching of values?**

Teaching about religion is not the same as teaching values. The former is objective, academic study; the latter involves the teaching of particular ethical viewpoints or standards of behavior.

There are basic moral values that are recognized by the population at large (e.g., honesty, integrity, justice, compassion). These values can be taught in classes through discussion, by example and by carrying out school policies. However, teachers may not invoke religious authority.

Public schools may teach about the various religious and nonreligious perspectives concerning the many complex moral issues confronting society, but such perspectives must be presented without adopting, sponsoring or denigrating one view against another.

**Is it constitutional to teach the biblical account of creation in the public schools?**

Some states have passed laws requiring that creationist theory based on the biblical account be taught in the science classroom. The courts have found these laws to be unconstitutional on the ground that they promote a particular religious view. The Supreme Court has



acknowledged, however, that a variety of scientific theories about origins can be appropriately taught in the science classroom. In *Edwards v. Aguillard*, the Court stated:

[T]eaching a variety of scientific theories about the origins of humankind to schoolchildren might be validly done with the clear secular intent of enhancing the effectiveness of science instruction.

Though science instruction may not endorse or promote religious doctrine, the account of creation found in various scriptures may be discussed in a religious studies class or in any course that considers religious explanations for the origin of life.

### **How should religious holidays be treated in the classroom?**

Carefully. Religious holidays offer excellent opportunities to teach about religion in the elementary and secondary schools. Recognition of and information about such holidays should focus on the origin, history and generally agreed-upon meaning of the observances. If the approach is objective, neither advancing nor inhibiting religion, it can foster among students understanding and mutual respect within and beyond the local community.



## Resources

The following resources offer excellent background material for understanding not only how religion has influenced the past, but also how it continues to influence society today. Additional assistance can often be found through local colleges and universities, which may provide both workshops and speakers.

Taking religion seriously in the curriculum will require a commitment by schools of education to give teachers more exposure to the study of religious influences and appropriate resources for teaching about these influences in the public school setting.

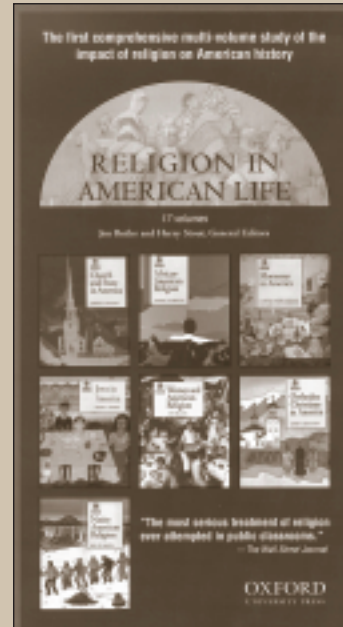
### **Religion in American Life - Oxford University Press**

At long last, a series of scholarly works on religion written for young readers is available. Edited by Yale University professors Jon Butler and Harry Stout and published by Oxford University Press, *Religion in American Life* is a 17-volume series authored by some of the nation's leading scholars in the field of religious studies.

The series is an invaluable resource for teachers of junior and senior high school students. Teachers of U.S. history will find all of the volumes most useful, but world history, government and literature teachers will also be able to use many of the volumes in a variety of ways. Three chronological volumes give the religious history of the United States from the colonial period to the present. Nine volumes cover significant religious groups in America, including Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Native Americans and Eastern faiths. Four volumes address specific topics — women, church-state issues, African American religion, and immigration — that are of special importance in understanding the role of religion in American life.

With the addition of these books to school and classroom libraries, students and teachers will have access to scholarly works that fill the gaps left by inadequate textbook treatment of religion. In fact, the chronological volumes would themselves be excellent textbooks for an elective course on religion in America or religion in U.S. history. A teacher's guide, prepared by the First Amendment Center, suggests ways to use the volumes for supplemental reading and research projects in history and other courses.

For more information, visit Oxford University press at [www.oup-usa.org](http://www.oup-usa.org).



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**On Common Ground (CD-ROM)**

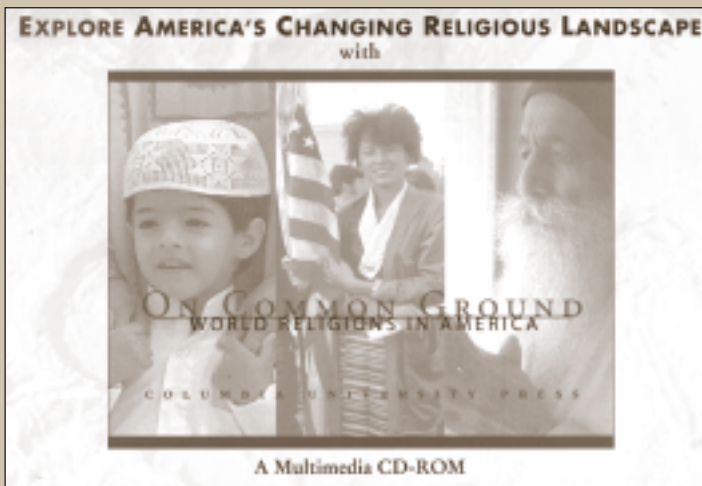
Another groundbreaking resource for students and teachers is *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a CD-ROM published in 1997 by Columbia University Press. This multimedia resource uses text, primary sources, photographs, music, film and the spoken word to bring alive the extraordinary religious diversity in the United States. Prepared by Harvard Divinity School professor Diana Eck, the CD-ROM draws on the Pluralism Project, a Harvard-based study that has documented America's religious landscape.

Using the CD-ROM, students can find out about the beliefs and practices of America's many faith traditions. They are able to explore the religious diversity of eighteen cities and regions of the United States. Fifteen different religions are represented, from the long-established Native American, Christian and Jewish traditions to more recent arrivals such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

What is especially impressive about this resource is its use of documents, photographs, film, and music to enable practitioners of each faith to provide students with some experience of the religion from the inside. It is also noteworthy that differences within various traditions are discussed (e.g., Orthodox and Reform Judaism). Even issues debated within various traditions — the role of women in Islam, for example — are included. In short, this is an essential resource for every secondary social studies and literature classroom.

For more information, visit the web site at [www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/catalog/electronic/idx\\_cd.html](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/catalog/electronic/idx_cd.html).

Orders can be placed at: 1-800-944-8648 (phone); 1-800-944-1844 (fax); or Columbia University Press Order Department, 136 South Broadway, Irvington, NY 10533.



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Religion in the Public School Curriculum

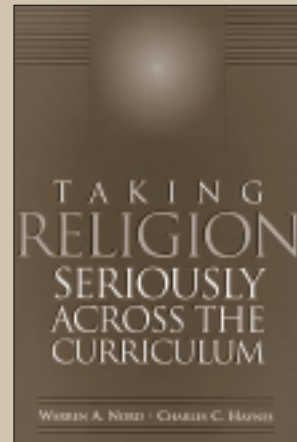




### **Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum**

In *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes chart a middle course in our culture wars over religion and public education – one that builds on a developing national consensus among educational and religious leaders. In Part One, Nord and Haynes explain why schools should take religion seriously, and they outline the civic, constitutional and educational frameworks that should shape the treatment of religion in the curriculum and classroom. In Part Two, they explore the major issues relating to religion in different domains of the curriculum – in elementary education and in middle- and high-school courses in history, civics, economics, literature and the sciences. They also discuss Bible courses and world religions courses, and they explore the relationship of religion to moral education and sex education. The result is a book that is unique in the scope of its consideration of the relevance of religion *across the curriculum*.

This book is available from: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org).

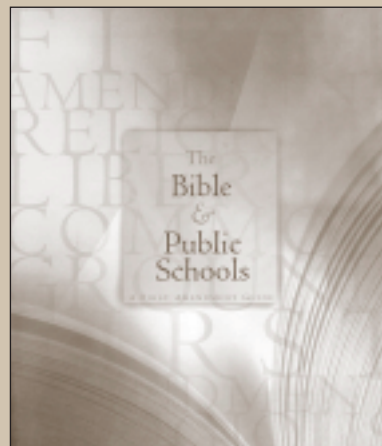


### **The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide**

The First Amendment Center and the Bible Literacy Project jointly published these First Amendment guidelines for teachers on the appropriate role of the Bible in the public school curriculum. This guide is endorsed by a wide array of organizations, ranging from the People for the American Way Foundation and the American Jewish Congress to the Christian Legal Society and the National Association of Evangelicals. The guide is based on a question-and-answer format addressing such issues as whether the Bible can be taught in public schools, methods and approaches that are constitutional, and what the courts have said about the subject.

This guide is available online at [www.freedomforum.org](http://www.freedomforum.org), or by calling 1-800-830-3733 and requesting publication No. 99-F03.

[www.biblecurriculum.org](http://www.biblecurriculum.org)



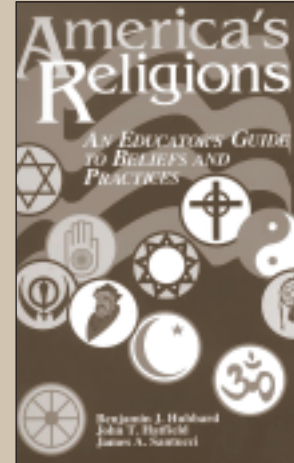
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### **America's Religions: An Educator's Guide to Beliefs and Practices**

Teacher Ideas Press presents a guide by Benjamin Hubbard, John Hatfield, and James Santucci to the beliefs and practices of a number of the world's religions. Designed specifically for teachers, the guide examines each religious group in terms of its origins, beliefs, sacred scriptures, practices, main subgroups, common misunderstandings and stereotypes, and classroom concerns.

This book is available from Teacher Ideas Press, Dept. B40, P.O. Box 6633, Englewood, CO 80155-6633; by phone at 1-800-237-6124, ext.1; or on the web at [www.ti.com/tip](http://www.ti.com/tip).





## Organizations That Provide Classroom Resources

### **Council on Islamic Education**

P.O. Box 20186  
Fountain Valley  
CA 92728-0186  
(714) 839-2929  
www.cie.org  
email: CIE@Islam.org.



The Council on Islamic Education (CIE) is a national, non-profit resource organization dedicated to providing information on Islam and Muslim history to K-12 textbook publishers, education officials, curriculum developers, teachers, and other education professionals. CIE is comprised of scholars and academicians associated with major universities and institutions throughout the United States. CIE produces resource materials, conducts workshops, attends education conferences, and convenes events in its efforts towards accurate, balanced, and sensitive coverage of Islam in the context of a global approach to world history.

### **Religion and Public Education Resource Center**

Director: Dr. Bruce Grelle  
Department of Religious Studies  
California State University — Chico  
Chico, CA 95929-0740  
(530) 898-4739  
e-mail: bgrelle@csuchico.edu



The Religion and Public Education Resource Center (RPERC) provides resources for teaching about religions in public schools in ways that are constitutionally permissible and academically sound. The Center serves both as a depository of existing materials and as a catalyst for the development and distribution of new materials relating to pedagogical and legal issues that arise in connection with teaching about religion in public schools. RPERC offers curriculum guides and sample lessons in several subject areas for classroom teachers.

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### **Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education**

Executive Director: Peter W. Cobb  
1465 Northside Drive, Suite 220  
Atlanta, GA 30318-4225  
(800) 298-4599  
fax: (404) 355-4435  
e-mail: [info@csee.org](mailto:info@csee.org)  
[www.csee.org](http://www.csee.org)



The Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education is a membership organization that serves as a national resource for schools to encourage the moral, ethical, and spiritual development of young people. CSEE promotes community service, provides resources and a network for schools' involvement in community service and service learning. CSEE also supports instruction in world religions and ethics as essential components of a complete education.

### **Religious Studies in Secondary Schools**

7735 SW 87th Avenue  
Portland, OR 97223  
[info@rsiss.org](mailto:info@rsiss.org)  
[www.rsiss.org](http://www.rsiss.org)



RSISS is a growing coalition of public and private secondary school teachers committed to the idea that education is not complete without the academic study of the world's religious traditions and the ethical values, literatures, and cultures so inextricably linked to them. There are no membership dues, just people in the field willing to help.

### ***Religion and Education***

Mike Waggoner, Editor  
University of Northern Iowa  
508 Schindler Education Center  
Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0604  
(319) 273-2605



email: [jrae@uni.edu](mailto:jrae@uni.edu)  
[www.uni.edu/jrae](http://www.uni.edu/jrae)

*Religion and Education* is a journal devoted to news, reviews of books and curricular materials, and essays relating to interactions of religion and education. *Religion and Education's* mission is to facilitate informed, constitutionally appropriate teaching about religions in history and culture that enables students to participate in a pluralistic and religiously diverse world.



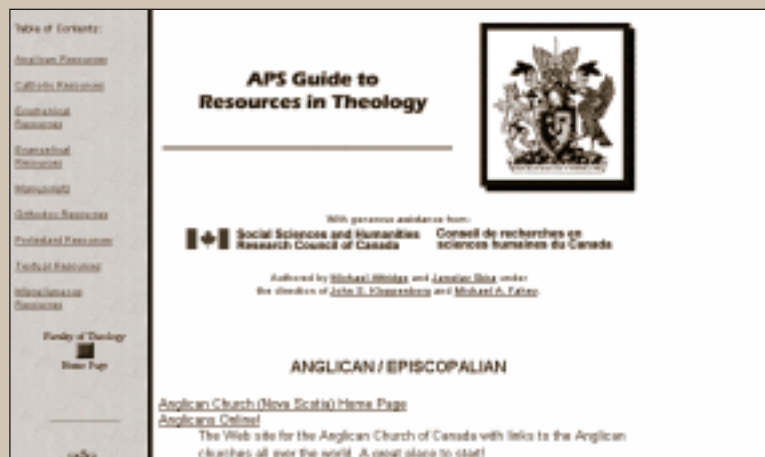
## Internet Resources

The Internet has become a valuable tool for exploring religious liberty issues in education and the role of religion in the curriculum. In response to this growth, we have prepared a list of resources relating to various religious information sites that can be found on the Internet. Some of these sites target the academic community, and as such are more useful to the teacher who is trying to better understand a variety of faith traditions. A word of caution is due here. As the Internet is an ever-changing entity, the content of the sites mentioned is also changing. Whenever students are using the Internet, they should be closely monitored. In fact, we encourage teachers to preview these sites before students are allowed to access them. While we have attempted to choose sites that are well established, their addresses and locations can change frequently. Also, please remember that these sites are not endorsed by the First Amendment Center but are merely areas that might provide valuable information for the classroom.

### APS Guide to Resources in Theology

[www.utoronto.ca/stmikes/theobook.htm](http://www.utoronto.ca/stmikes/theobook.htm)

This University of Toronto site is actually a list of links to other sites, primarily those dealing with Christian resources. It is of interest because it links to sites that provide primary materials (papyri, manuscripts, etc.) Most of the linked sites are fairly sophisticated and would be most useful as resources for teachers seeking a deeper understanding of some of the various Christian denominations and early source materials in Christian studies.



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**Interfaith Calendar by Mall Area Religious Council**  
[www.interfaithcalendar.org](http://www.interfaithcalendar.org)

This site is a listing of the religious holidays observed by various religious groups. It is a useful resource for teachers who are interested in these holidays.



**Yahoo! Listing of Religious Sites**

[dir.yahoo.com/Society\\_and\\_Culture/Religion\\_and\\_Spirituality/](http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Religion_and_Spirituality/)

This site is from the Yahoo! Search engine. It lists a number of different faith traditions and sites that apply to each. It is of questionable usefulness to students, due to the number of issues included in some of the indices, and to the large number of sites that are listed. (It is hard for teachers to preview the more than 13,000 sites that are listed in the Faith and Practices indices.)



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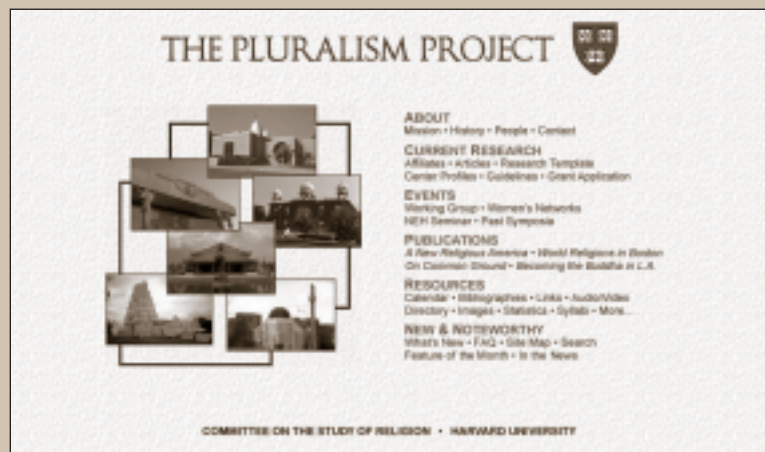
**Academic Information on Religion**  
[www.academicinfo.net/relindex.html](http://www.academicinfo.net/relindex.html)

This is an academic version of the Yahoo! Site noted above. It not only lists various religions, but also lists them according to their presence in various geographic locations. This site is valuable in that it also links to the art and literature of the various belief systems, a useful feature for teachers seeking visual aids. This site links to college- and graduate-level sites and is too complex for younger children.



**Pluralism Project**  
[www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/)

The Pluralism Project web site at Harvard University is filled with such resources as pictures of various U.S. worship centers, links to other sites with content related to various faiths, syllabi from college courses on the topic of religious pluralism, and archives of news articles reporting on recent faith traditions in the United States.



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**National Humanities Center**

<http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/tserve/tserve.htm>

The National Humanities Center TeacherServ web site is designed to provide practical planning helps for teaching topics in the liberal arts. Instructional guides and resource materials are provided to assist teachers with secondary-school humanities topics, particularly as related to teaching about religion. The current guide, *Divining America*, is an invaluable resource for teachers attempting to achieve a deeper understanding of religion's place in American history.



**Education for Freedom**

<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=13588>

*Education for Freedom* is offered by The Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center. These lessons (beginning and advanced levels) address constitutional principles and contemporary issues involving the First Amendment. They will draw young people into an exploration of how their freedoms began and how they operate in today's world. Students will discuss

just how far individual rights extend, examining rights in the school environment and public places. The lessons may be used in history and government, language arts and journalism, art and debate classes. They may be used in sections or in their entirety.



7

Religion in the Public School Curriculum