

The Need and Legal Right to Teach Religious History in Public Schools

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Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right, from the frame of their nature, to knowledge, as their great Creator, who does nothing in vain, has given them understandings, and a desire to know....¹

John Adams
Declaration signer and 2nd U. S. President

Knowing as we do that the moral foundations of national greatness can be laid only in the industry, the integrity, and the spiritual elevation of the people, are we equally sure that our schools are forming the character of the rising generation upon the everlasting principles of duty and humanity? ... Are they [children] so educated, that, when they grow up, they will make better philanthropists and Christians, or only grander savages? For, however loftily the intellect of man may have been gifted, however skilfully [sic] it may have been trained, if it be not guided by a sense of justice, a love of mankind and a devotion to duty, its possessor is only a more splendid, as he is a more dangerous, barbarian.²

Horace Mann
Massachusetts Secretary of Education (1837-1848) and “father of American public education”

Schools do more than train children’s minds. They also help to nurture their souls by reinforcing the values they learn at home and in their communities. I believe that one of the best ways we can help out schools to do this is by supporting students’ rights to voluntarily practice their religious beliefs, including prayer in schools.... For more than 200 years, the First Amendment has protected our religious freedom and allowed many faiths to flourish in our homes, in our work place and in our schools. Clearly understood and sensibly applied, it works.³

William Clinton, 42nd U. S. President (1993-2001)
Excerpt in Introductory Letter of U. S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley,
U. S. Department of Education *Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools* (1995, 1998)

U. S. Department of Education:

Teaching about religion: Public schools may not provide religious instruction, but they may teach **about** religion, including the Bible or other scripture: the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture)-as-literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries all are permissible public school subjects. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature, and social studies.⁴

U. S. Department of Education *Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools* (1995, 1998)

Teaching values: Though schools must be neutral with respect to religion, they may play an active role with respect to teaching civic values and virtue, and the moral code that holds us together as a community. The fact that some of these values are also held by religions does not make it unlawful to teach them in school.⁵

U. S. Department of Education *Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools* (1995, 1998)

Student Assignments: Students may express their beliefs about religion in the form of homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments free of discrimination based on the religious content of their submissions. Such home and classroom work should be judged by ordinary academic standards of substance and relevance, and against other legitimate pedagogical concerns identified by the school.⁶

U. S. Department of Education *Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools* (1995, 1998)

U. S. Supreme Court Decision:

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.⁷

U. S. Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark, in *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 255 (1963), in the opinion of the court that public school education may include teaching about religion

The holding of the Court today plainly does not foreclose teaching about the Holy Scriptures or about the differences between religious sects in classes in literature or history. Indeed, whether or not the Bible is involved, it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion.⁸

U. S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, in *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 255 (1963), in a concurring opinion of the court that public school education may include teaching about religion

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS):

Omitting study about religions gives students the impression that religions have not been, and are not now, part of the human experience. Religions have influenced the behavior of both individuals and nations, and have inspired some of the world's most beautiful art, architecture, literature, and music. History, our own nation's religious pluralism, and contemporary world events are testimony that religion has been and continues to be an important cultural influence.

The NCSS Curriculum Standards for Social Studies state that “Students in social studies programs must study the development of social phenomena and concepts over time; must have a sense of place and interrelationships...; must understand institutions and processes that define our democratic republic...” The study about religions, then, has “a rightful place in the public school curriculum because of the pervasive nature of religious beliefs, practices, institutions, and sensitivities.”

Knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity. Knowledge of religious differences and the role of religion in the contemporary world can help promote understanding and alleviate prejudice. Since the purpose of the social studies is to provide students with a knowledge of the world that has been, the world that is, and the world of the future, studying about religions should be an essential part of the social studies curriculum.⁹

National Council for the Social Studies, *Study About Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum: A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies*

Religion in the Public School Curriculum Guidelines:

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.¹⁰

Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, First Amendment Center, *Religion in the Public School Curriculum*, guide to how to teach about religion and religious history in public schools (2002)

Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide Guidelines:

To adopt any particular Bible—or translation—is likely to suggest to students that it is normative, the best Bible. One solution is to use a biblical sourcebook that includes the key texts of each of the major Bibles or an anthology of various translations.

At the outset, and at crucial points in the course, teachers should remind students about the differences between the various Bibles and discuss some of the major views concerning authorship and compilation of the books of the Bible. Students should also understand the differences in translations, read from several translations, and reflect on the significance of these differences for various traditions.¹¹

Bible Literacy Project and First Amendment Center, *Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*, guide to teaching the Bible in public schools (1999)

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- ¹ John Adams, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, 1765, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, ed. Charles F. Adams, vol. 3 (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1851), 456.
- ² Horace Mann, Ninth Annual Report on Education for 1845, in Horace Mann, *Life and Works of Horace Mann*, vol. 4: Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Board of Education of Massachusetts for the Years 1845-1848 (Boston, MA: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1891), 4.
- ³ William Clinton, Excerpt in Introductory Letter of U. S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, U. S. Department of Education Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools, 1995, 1998, in “Religious Expression in Public Schools,” *America’s Heritage: An Adventure in Liberty*, High School Edition (Houston, TX: American Heritage Education Foundation, Inc., 2012), 171; William Clinton, Excerpt in Introductory Letter of U. S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, U. S. Department of Education Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education, 1995, revised 1998), <<http://www.ed.gov>>.
- ⁴ U. S. Department of Education, Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools, 1995, 1998, in “Religious Expression in Public Schools,” *America’s Heritage: An Adventure in Liberty*, High School Edition (Houston, TX: American Heritage Education Foundation, Inc., 2012), 176. See also Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, “Religious Expression in Public Schools: United States Department of Education Guidelines,” in *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2002), 128.
- ⁵ U. S. Department of Education, Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools, *America’s Heritage*, 176. See also Haynes and Thomas, “Religious Expression in Public Schools,” *Finding Common Ground*, 129.
- ⁶ U. S. Department of Education, Legal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools, *America’s Heritage*, 176. See also Haynes and Thomas, “Religious Expression in Public Schools,” *Finding Common Ground*, 128.
- ⁷ *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 255 (1963).
- ⁸ *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 255 (1963).
- ⁹ National Council for the Social Studies, “Study About Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum: A Position Statement of the National Council for the Social Studies” (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 1984, 1998), <<http://www.socialstudies.org>>.
- ¹⁰ Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, “Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers,” in *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2002), 90. <<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org>>.
- ¹¹ Natilee Duning, ed., *The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center; New York: The Bible Literacy Project, Inc., 1999), 8-9. <<http://www.freedomforum.org>>.