

THREE RS BULLETIN

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The California Three Rs Project

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

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The First Amendment and the '3Rs' of Religious Liberty: A U.S. Approach to Religion Education and Human Rights

Dr. Bruce Grelle

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The following is an excerpt from Dr. Bruce Grelle's chapter in Human Rights and Religion in Educational Contexts (Springer, 2016). In it, Dr. Grelle discusses the American Academy of Religion's "three basic premises" of teaching about religion in an academic context: Religions are (1) internally diverse, (2) dynamic, and (3) embedded in culture. A link to the AAR's guidelines to teaching about religion can be found at the end of this excerpt.

We intend this to be immediately useful as a reference for educators in the field of history-social studies and intend this to be the beginning of discussion of the premises in future issues of the Three Rs Bulletin. We are grateful to Dr. Grelle for his permission to reprint this excerpt.

Citations and references have been removed for the sake of space and readability for the general audience. If you would like a list of the references made by Dr. Grelle in this excerpt, please email me at damon@crf-usa.org. DH

Teaching about religion in American public schools has by and large been confined to describing the main ideas and practices of the world's major religions. There is a tendency to portray religions as whole, discrete, and relatively stable systems of belief rather than as internally diverse, fluid, and historically dynamic traditions. Students are often given no more than a snapshot of a religion in a particular time and place — usually a long time ago — with little sense of how religions change over time nor of their complex manifestations in the present. Curriculum frameworks, standards, and textbooks tend to concentrate on the origins and basic tenets of religions and largely neglect their historical and

cultural variations, especially as these are evident in the lives of contemporary religious communities.

There is also a tendency to overstate similarities between religions and to avoid controversial topics, thereby leading to an overly "warm and fuzzy" presentation of religion. Little attention is paid to the relation between religion, power, and conflict in society nor to the ways that race, class, gender and other factors influence how some religious beliefs and expressions become culturally and politically prominent,

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The California Three Rs Project is co-sponsored by Constitutional Rights Foundation, California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, and the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute.



There is a tendency to portray religions as whole, discrete, and relatively stable systems of belief rather than as internally diverse, fluid, and historically dynamic traditions.

while others become culturally and politically marginalized. Neither is there much attention to the self-reflexive dimensions of knowledge and education; there is little explicit recognition of how teachers, students, and those whom they study are all actively engaged in the process of interpretation and the production of meaning. Moreover, the degree to which our interpretations and knowledge are shaped by our own conscious and unconscious assumptions about religions often goes unexplored. Such static and uncritical portrayals risk leaving students with the impression that religions are relics of ancient history rather than vital parts of contemporary life for millions of people around the world.

Of course education about religion is not the only public school subject that has been charged with superficiality and lack of critical perspective. Self-reflective and critical inquiries regarding history, society, and politics (not to mention health

and sex education) are often viewed as fraught with controversy and perhaps better left to families or postponed until university level education. It should probably come as no surprise that, rightly or wrongly, critical inquiries regarding religion fall into the same category.

If we are to move beyond superficial and uncritical discussions of religion, there are a number of obstacles that will have to be addressed. Among the most significant of these is the issue of teacher education. In parts of Europe, religion is a well-established subject matter in the curriculum and an area of professional specialization for which teachers can become certified. In the U.S., however, despite the rare elective courses on world religions or the Bible as literature, public school teaching about religion typically occurs in the context of history-social studies or literature classes rather than in stand-alone religion classes, and most teachers in these fields have had minimal or no spe-

cialized training in the academic study of religion as part of their professional preparation. Even in the context of multicultural education, religious diversity is typically given far less attention than diversity in the areas of language, race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Combined with the emphasis on high stakes testing that gives pride of place to math and reading skills, it appears that less attention than ever is being given to history-social studies and the civic mission of schools, let alone to the question of promoting religious literacy among teachers and students.

The 2010 publication of the American Academy of Religion's *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* is a constructive attempt to address these issues. Building on [a First Amendment framework] . . . the AAR *Guidelines* recognize that "the treatment of religion by unprepared teachers may fall short of constitutional guidelines in approach or ac-

curacy in regard to content.” They identify *content* and *pedagogical* competencies for those who teach about religion in the contexts of world and U.S. history, art, and literature, and they outline appropriate “attitudes” and “postures” that are consistent with respect for students’ and parents’ rights and professional standards for teachers. Acknowledging that textbooks and curricula in local school districts employ diverse approaches — historical, literary, traditions-based, and cultural studies — the *Guidelines* aim to help teachers move beyond overly superficial and uncritical understandings of religion by elaborating on the “three basic premises” of academic religious studies, namely that 1) religions are internally diverse; 2) religions are dynamic and changing rather than static and fixed; and 3) religions are embedded in culture and are *influenced by* cultures while also *influencing* cultures. The *Guidelines* illustrate these premises with examples of instructional practice at various grade levels in history-social science and English-language arts classrooms. There is also attention to frequently asked classroom

questions and examples of how teachers can address them while taking the three premises into account. All of this may still fall short of the more thoroughgoing sort of critical inquiry that some scholars, teachers, and parents would prefer, and it may still be too critical for what others might prefer. As we have acknowledged above, the academic approach to religious studies is not without controversy.

Looking forward, it is apparent that there is much more that needs to be done. Familiarity with First Amendment guidelines is still not as widespread as it should be among educators and the general public, and consequently there are ongoing confusions and controversies in local schools regarding the religious liberty rights of public school students and teachers and regarding exactly how and how not to teach about religion in the classroom. The need for greater attention to religion in the education of future teachers persists, and the need for initiatives such as 3 Rs Projects to assist teachers who are already in the classroom is as pressing as ever, even

though it is increasingly difficult to find reliable sources of funding for this work.

Even so, when it comes to clarifying the place of religion in U.S. public education, much progress has been made since the 1980s. This is thanks largely to the work of scholars, educators, and civic leaders who have worked to promote the First Amendment consensus approach to teaching about religion and the three Rs of religious liberty.

The American Academy of Religion Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States is available here:

<https://www.aarweb.org/about/teaching-about-religion-aar-guidelines-for-k-12-public-schools>

Download Dr. Margaret Hill’s free guides to teaching about major religious holidays in the public schools at the California Three Rs Project website: ca3rsproject.org.

Each guide is a factsheet with cultural and historical background, discussion of First Amendment implications, online teaching resources, and a children’s literature list.

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For information on teaching world religions:

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For information on First Amendment religious liberty:

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The California Three Rs Project (CA3Rs) is a program for finding common ground on issues related to religious liberty and the First Amendment in public schools. The CA3Rs’ approach is based on the principles of American democracy and citizenship, reflected in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights and applied in a public school setting.

For over two decades, the CA3Rs has provided resources, professional development, and leadership training for teachers and education professionals in order to foster the three “Rs” of rights, responsibility, and respect in our public schools. The CA3Rs disseminates essential information about religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and the history of religion in America.

Common Ground Resources

Haynes, Charles C., and Oliver Thomas. *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in the Public Schools*. Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2007. URL: freedomforuminstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FCGcomplete.pdf

Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute: www.religiousfreedomcenter.org.

A New Year of Bulletins

We’re back!

Over the years at the California Three Rs Project (CA3Rs), we have been proud to bring you information, guidelines, and news that has impact on teaching about religion and freedom of conscience in California’s public schools. The *Bulletin* has been on hiatus as a project of the CA3Rs, but that in no way reflects a dormancy of the CA3Rs.

CA3Rs Director Damon Huss has presented at the California History-Social Science Framework Rollouts on the subject

of teaching about religion in public schools. We have also continued to update and revise Dr. Margaret “Peg” Hill’s fact-sheets on holidays in the public schools (see Page 3).

This first issue of the new 15th volume also comes with a new title for easy reference: the *Three Rs Bulletin*.

We hope to see the CA3Rs network expand in the coming years as the state’s students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in our schools experience a growing pluralism of cultures and worldviews.

Going to the 2019 CCSS Conference in San Jose?

Come to our session:

The First Amendment Is Your Friend
When Teaching About Religion

Presented by

Dr. Margaret Hill and Damon Huss

Saturday, March 16

10:00 AM – 10:50 AM

[Click here](#) for more information.