

Avoiding Prejudice When Teaching About Religion

Most states include teaching about religion in their History/Social Science frameworks and subject matter standards. This requirement recognizes the significant influence that various religious movements have had on the course of history worldwide. The role of religion is usually included when students are studying a particular historical period such as the ancient world, the medieval world, and the cultures of various countries.

Teaching about religion provides the opportunity to impart an understanding of the role religion has played in the history of the world. Unfortunately, it also provides the opportunity to instill prejudice among believers of one faith toward those who hold different beliefs. Teachers can, and must, avoid this pitfall. However, even for well meaning people this can be difficult to avoid, as some beliefs are so deeply ingrained that they are not easily recognized as prejudicial against another group. Some guidelines to follow include:

- ✓ Remain neutral—Teachers must remain neutral when they present various religious beliefs. This means that they cannot be perceived as favoring one religion over another, or over no religion. Time allotted to teaching about religions should be consistent with the state standards. Additional time should not be spent teaching any one religion because it is more familiar or, on the other hand, because it is different and therefore more interesting.
- ✓ Avoid inappropriate language — Teachers should avoid dramatic adjectives when describing the accomplishments of one group compared to other groups, e.g., “brilliant” “glorious.” Language used to describe different groups should be dispassionate, neutral, and factual.
- ✓ Differentiate between faith and fact—Teachers should not present matters of faith as if they are matters of fact. To accomplish this teachers should constantly use attribution such as “Jews believe...,” “Christians believe...,” “Muslims believe...,” “Hindus believe...,” “The New Testament says...,” etc. Apply the same standards across the board. Key foundational events should not be presented as historical fact for some religions and dismissed as ahistorical for others.
- ✓ Avoid using religious titles with theological implications, such as the Holy (Jewish) Temple, Jesus Christ, Saint Paul, Prophet Muhammad. These have sacred meaning to believers and are not appropriate as general terminology for public school classrooms. Teachers need to clarify that these are religious titles used by believers of a certain faith, as in “the Temple, considered a holy place to Jews...,” “Muhammad, considered the greatest and last prophet by Muslims...”, “Jesus, considered the messiah, or Christ, by Christians...”.
- ✓ Avoid engaging in religious activities. It is tempting, especially during holiday seasons, to replicate some religious aspects of holiday observance in the classroom. However, doing so can divide students along religious lines and provide an opportunity for pupils to advocate their family’s religion and denigrate those who believe differently.
- ✓ Be mindful of replacement theological perspectives. Replacement Theology views Judaism as an imperfect prelude to Christianity and focuses on negative



aspects of Judaism. It implies that Judaism died out or became irrelevant when Christianity began. This problematic concept has been repudiated by scholars of religion and by most Christian denominations, and it should be carefully avoided in teaching about these two faiths.

Replacement Theology

- justifies persecution of Jews because they did not accept Jesus as the messiah;
 - ascribes Jewish expulsion from the land of Israel as deserved because of Jewish misbehavior;
 - presents Judaism as a religion of law as compared to Christianity as a religion of love;
 - omits acknowledging the Jewish sources of most of Jesus' teachings;
 - omits the continued development of Rabbinic Judaism after the advent of Christianity.
- ✓ Avoid using materials that have historically instilled prejudice by one religious group against another. It is common for sacred writings and other materials dealing with religion to contain language and concepts that denigrate other religions. Such materials should not be brought into the classroom. The California State Board of Education recognized this potential problem when it adopted this criteria for History/ Social Science materials which requires that:

Materials on religious subject matter remain neutral, do not advocate one religion over another, do not include simulation or role playing of religious ceremonies or beliefs, do not include derogatory language about a religion or use examples from sacred texts or other religious literature that are derogatory, accusatory or have instilled prejudice against other religions or those who believe in other religions.

*--From Criteria for Evaluating Instructional Materials in History-Social Science, Kindergarten Through Grade Eight,
Adopted by the California State Board of Education 2003*

From a Jewish perspective, a number of common themes are deeply problematic because they have been used throughout history to instill prejudice against the Jewish people. These are:

- ✓ Depictions of Jews as unfeeling or uncaring such as some versions of the Parable of the Good Samaritan that miss the universality of the parable's message.
- ✓ Materials that present the Jewish Bible as strict and harsh in contrast with Christian teachings as warm and loving.
- ✓ Implications that Jesus' message to love God and love your neighbor was/is different from the message of Judaism instead of acknowledging that Jesus was an observant Jew and most of his teachings are deeply rooted in Judaism and the Jewish Bible.
- ✓ Depictions of Jews as responsible for, or instigators of, the crucifixion of Jesus.
- ✓ Depictions of Jewish Saul as a persecutor of Christians until his conversion, when he became the Christian Paul and was persecuted by Jews.

By following these guidelines, teachers can focus on the role of religion in world history and avoid spreading prejudice or becoming embroiled in religious disagreements in the classroom. No student should be made to feel that his or her personal beliefs are being questioned, infringed upon or compromised.

