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# Religion and Education: Walking the Line in Public Schools

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# Religion and Education: Walking the Line in Public Schools

## **Abstract**

In recent years religion has moved out of the private sphere and into the public square. Whether it's the invocation for God to bless America, the sudden interest in Islam, or the tale of Alabama Judge Roy Moore and the Ten Commandments, religion and its impact on our world have become less private and more public. Therefore, teachers who wish to involve their students with the world around them must also address religious topics in their classrooms.

## **Disciplines**

Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Public Policy | Religion

## **Comments**

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# Religion and Education: Walking the Line in Public Schools

World events, increasing diversity in the classroom, and headlines about the latest court cases all ensure that religion will remain a sensitive and sometimes contentious issue in the public schools. Ms. Marshall challenges readers to think about how they would respond to 12 hypothetical classroom situations involving religion.

BY JOANNE M. MARSHALL

**I**N RECENT years religion has moved out of the private sphere and into the public square. Whether it's the invocation for God to bless America, the sudden interest in Islam, or the tale of Alabama Judge Roy Moore and the Ten Commandments, religion and its impact on our world have become less private and more public. Therefore, teachers who wish to involve their students with the world around them must also address religious topics in their classrooms.

However, issues related to religion generally make teachers very nervous. Teachers continue to struggle to observe the line between private and public expression and between church and state. This line has usually been marked by legal decisions, and no one wants to be the cause of a lawsuit. Fortunately, there are several resources available to assist teachers who are uncertain about how to teach sensitive religious topics and what they can say about their own religious beliefs. (Some of these materials are listed in the Resource Guide on page 242.) To test your own knowledge of where the line is currently drawn, try the following 12-question self-test. Are the following actions on the part of teachers and students okay or not okay?

1. A Jewish teacher lectures on the Five Pillars of Islam.
2. During a class discussion of the U.S. role in the Middle East, two students claim that the U.S. is obligated to "protect the Holy Land because America is a Christian nation."
3. During a unit on the American civil rights movement, a teacher assigns a group of students to research the role of the church in African American life.

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4. A student brings a Bible to class every day and reads it silently during free reading time.

5. A student wears a T-shirt to class that reads, "Hell will keep you warm" on the front and "Are you saved?" on the back.

6. In response to an essay prompt asking students to write about the most influential person in their lives, a number of students write about Jesus.

7. In response to a speech prompt that asks students to give a seven-minute speech about the most influential person in their lives, one student talks about the Dalai Lama and Buddhist teachings.

8. A Muslim girl wears a head covering (*hijab*) to class.

9. A teacher tells his class that he is fasting for Ramadan.

10. A teacher has a calendar on her desk with Bible verses on each page.

11. After polling her class and finding that all of the students identify themselves as Christian, a teacher holds a party on the last day of school before winter break and plays Christmas music at it.

12. A teacher tells students who are being rude to one another that they have a moral obligation to be good and kind to one another.

## DRAWING THE LINE

The line between public and private expression of religion requires balancing the constitutional guarantee of the free exercise of religion and the constitutional prohibition against the establishment of religion. Public schools, as government entities, and the teachers in them are allowed neither to inhibit the free exercise of religious expression nor to encourage it. This means that teachers may teach *about* religion but may not teach the religion itself. Students have a little more leeway in their religious expression because they are not official representatives of government. My discussion of the answers to the quiz reflects this line of thought but should not be construed as legal advice.

1. *A Jewish teacher lectures on the Five Pillars of Islam.* This is okay. It is permissible as long as the lecture does not "advance or inhibit" (*Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 [1971]) the Islamic religion, regardless of the teacher's own religious affiliation. Students need to know about Islam, just as they need to know about other religions. A recent poll indicates that only 7% of Americans say that they know the tenets of Islam "very well."<sup>1</sup> Teachers who need

to know more about Islam or the needs of Islamic students could consult the website of the Council on Islamic Education ([www.cie.org](http://www.cie.org)).

2. *During a class discussion of the U.S. role in the Middle East, two students claim that the U.S. is obligated to "protect the Holy Land because America is a Christian nation."* This is okay. Students are generally entitled to free

speech, even religious speech, as long as that speech is not disruptive (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 [1969]).

A teacher moderating this discussion would need to be careful to refrain from agreeing or

disagreeing with the students' religiously based position. However, a teacher would also need to point out that the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the U.S. Constitution prohibit America from being an explicitly religious nation of any kind — Christian or otherwise — while simultaneously protecting the freedom of all religious and non-religious people. A teacher might also want to unpack the students' logic behind linking U.S. Middle East policy with being "Christian," particularly if it seems possible to do so in a way that respects the students' religious beliefs. Follow-up questions could be, "What does it mean to be a 'Christian' nation?" or "Should the U.S. make foreign policy based on religious beliefs?" Such questions engage students in discussion about the role of religion in American policy without either promoting or inhibiting it.

3. *During a unit on the American civil rights movement, a teacher assigns a group of students to research the role of the church in African American life.* This is okay. Again, the topic teaches *about* religious influences in history without endorsing religion itself. Students in the group who objected to the assignment because of their own religious beliefs might be excused and given an alternative assignment if the teacher wished to honor their objections.

4. *A student brings a Bible to class every day and reads it silently during free reading time.* This is okay, as long as the student is not disruptive. Like individual silent prayer, private religious expression is generally not restricted.

5. *A student wears a T-shirt to class that reads, "Hell will keep you warm" on the front and "Are you saved?" on the back.* This is okay, subject to school dress codes. The U.S. Department of Education guidelines say that "religious messages may not be singled out for suppression, but rather are subject to the same rules as generally apply to comparable messages."<sup>2</sup> *Tinker* also supports free speech in schools, even religious or offensive free speech.

Like individual silent prayer,  
private religious expression is  
generally not restricted.

6. In response to an essay prompt asking students to write about the most influential person in their lives, a number of students write about Jesus. This is okay. Students who fulfill assignments by expressing religious views are to be evaluated "free of discrimination based on the religious content," subject to "standards of substance and relevance."<sup>3</sup> Particularly because the assignment is an essay, the religious expression is relatively private.

7. In response to a speech prompt that asks students to give a seven-minute speech about the most influential person in their lives, a student talks about the Dalai Lama and Buddhist teachings. Again, this is okay. Students are free to choose religious content to fulfill an oral assignment. However, because the speech is a more public religious expression than the essay above, a teacher would need to be careful that the speaker does not use this "captive audience" as an opportunity to harass other students who do not share these beliefs.

8. A Muslim girl wears a head covering (hijab) to class. This is okay as free religious expression.

9. A teacher tells his class that he is fasting for Ramadan. This could be questionable. If the teacher is initiating this announcement, then, as an official representative of the school, he needs to be careful not to endorse religious activity through his own religious expression in the classroom. While teachers "do not shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" any more than students do (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 [1969]), there are those who would argue that the teacher is "endorsing" a religious belief simply by mentioning it because of his position as an authority figure and a role model for impressionable students. This would be particularly true at the elementary level. However, if the teacher in this situation is responding to a student question, it would be appropriate to briefly explain the history behind Ramadan and the tradition of fasting, without going into details of his personal beliefs. If the class has studied religious holidays or Mus-

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lim cultures, the teacher could mention this personal experience as an example of a more general phenomenon and then refer more curious students to outside sources for additional information.

10. A teacher has a religious calendar with Bible verses on her desk. This is a questionable practice. Again, as an agent of the school, the teacher cannot endorse a particular religion. A desk calendar should be relatively private religious expression, but a teacher should be careful about how to answer students who notice it and want to know more.

11. After polling her class and finding that all of the students identify themselves as Christian, a teacher holds a party on the last day of school before winter break and

plays Christmas music at it. This is definitely *not* okay. The teacher is not allowed to celebrate religious holidays, even if the Christmas music and party are primarily secular. The teacher could teach *about* religious holidays, though she should be careful to teach about holidays celebrated by both majority and minority religions. In this case, the teacher should also be sensitive to the peer pressure to conform inherent in her poll of the class.

12. *A teacher tells students who are being rude to one another that they have a moral obligation to be kind to one another.* This is okay. Schools can teach civic virtues “and the moral code that holds us together as a community”<sup>4</sup> without endorsing the religious systems that also revere these virtues.

### WALKING THE LINE

Since much of the policy about religion in public schools has been determined by the courts, teachers have been understandably leery of introducing religious topics in the classroom. In addition, Stephen Carter has pointed out that many people fear that teaching about religion is a smokescreen for infiltration of the education system by the Religious Right.<sup>5</sup> However, calls from curricular organizations such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the American Textbook Council have seconded Justice Clark’s opinion in *Abington v. Schempp* (374 U.S. 203 [1963]) 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.”<sup>6</sup>

These organizations are supported in this opinion by approximately 75% to 80% of Americans, who say they would not object to instruction about major world religions or the use of the Bible in literature and social studies classes.<sup>7</sup> Americans also acknowledge their relative ignorance of other religions, with only 43% saying they understand Catholicism “very well,” 28% responding likewise for evangelical Christianity, 17% for Judaism, and 7% for Islam.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, there is widespread support for including religious topics in the classroom as well as a need to do so. While the line may be a difficult one to walk, as teachers, we owe it to our students to model for them how to be well-informed, thinking, and morally concerned citizens in the modern world.

1. Steve Farkas et al., *For Goodness’ Sake: Why So Many Want Religion to Play a Greater Role in American Life* (New York: Public Agenda, 2001).

2. “Religious Expression in Public Schools,” May 1998, available on the U.S. Department of Education website at [www.ed.gov/inits/religionandschools/index-archive.html](http://www.ed.gov/inits/religionandschools/index-archive.html), select Guidelines.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 207.

6. Gene Carter, “Religious Liberty Guidelines for Public Schools,” distributed by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Va., 1999; *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Silver Spring, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), available at [www.socialstudies.org/standards/toc.html](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/toc.html); and Gilbert T. Sewall, *Learning About Religion, Learning from Religion: A Guide to Religion in the Curriculum and Moral Life of Public Schools with Recommendations for Textbook Publishers, School Boards, and Educators* (New York: American Textbook Council, 1998).

7. George Gallup, Jr., and Sarah Jones, *100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Religion Research Center, 1989).

8. Farkas et al., op. cit.



### RESOURCE GUIDE

**Anti-Defamation League Website.** Includes many useful items dealing with hate crimes, discrimination, and the treatment of religious topics in public schools. Many items focus on Judaism. ([www.adl.org/adl.asp](http://www.adl.org/adl.asp))

**Council on Islamic Education Website.** Includes a variety of information about Islam and its history, in addition to items dealing with the treatment of religion in public schools. ([www.cie.org](http://www.cie.org))

**First Amendment Center/The Freedom Forum Website.** The entire First Amendment is the focus of the Freedom Forum website. (<http://www.freedomforum.org>)

**Teaching about Religion with a View to Diversity Website.** Provides academic information and teaching materials related to teaching about religion in public schools, with a particular focus on religious diversity. It features a helpful set of links to related sites. ([www.teachingaboutreligion.org](http://www.teachingaboutreligion.org))

Nord, Warren A. *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. This book tracks the history of religion in American schools and explores religion-related issues such as textbooks, liberal education, and vouchers.

Nord, Warren A., and Charles C. Haynes. *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998. This book provides a constitutional framework for religion in the curriculum and then outlines ways in which religion could be integrated into curricular areas such as elementary education and the sciences. — JMM