



Schools should teach religion (now more than ever)

By Valerie Strauss

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The 2010 school year began at a moment when religion was front and center in American popular dialogue. Debates about [a proposed Muslim community center](#) at Cordoba House in New York coincided with the observance of the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks; the celebration of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year; Eid ul'Fitr, the festival ending the holy month of Ramadan; and Ganesh Chaturthi, during which 1.5 million Hindus in the United States celebrate the birthday of the Hindu god Ganesh.

Regrettably, the one place those issues and events were least likely to be discussed was in American schools. This is because learning about religion, understanding religious faiths and the relationships between faith and culture is almost completely absent from our nation's public schools.

More than ever before, Americans need to be able to have informed, intelligent discussions about religion and religious pluralism.

Since 1965, when immigration reforms opened America's doors for the first time in generations to immigrants from beyond Europe, the United States has seen an unprecedented flourishing of religious diversity. America has been religiously diverse since the Colonial Era, but more groups are building communities and houses of worship today than ever before.

Contemporary classrooms, workplaces, and the very "public square" of American social and political dialogue are as religiously diverse as they have ever been, and growing more so.

However, this increasing diversity has not been matched by the education needed to appreciate it or to interact effectively with others. Instead, we are stymied by misinformation about the tenets of other religions.

As an educator who teaches teachers and observes the contemporary K-12 classroom, I have seen that the academic study of religion is absent. The reason for its absence is that public schools have misinterpreted and over-applied the idea of "separation of church and state"—a phrase which appears in neither the Constitution nor the Declaration of Independence. When educators and school administrators misunderstand the First Amendment, they fail our kids.



The [Establishment Clause of the First Amendment](#) prohibits government, including public schools, from having rules or policies that favor one religion over another, or advocate religion over irreligion. But it contains no restriction on the study of religion. More simply put, schools may not preach, but they may, and should, teach.

If teachers can understand that distinction, they can acknowledge and incorporate religion appropriately. Christianity is already present in schools, from the calendar to the religious identity of most teachers, who—as Christians—may know and use Biblical metaphors and stories (“Good Samaritan” or “turn the other cheek”) without realizing they exclude some students.

It's time both to acknowledge Christianity's role in schools and society, and to incorporate other religions. Doing so will allow schools to offer students a more comprehensive and meaningful understanding of subjects from world history and literature to biology and—yes—current events.

Acknowledging and incorporating religion in schools also enables teachers to appreciate their students as whole people, by acknowledging that religion is part of the identity of many students, including Christians.

To realize the potential of this moment, teachers and administrators must do two things: First, develop an understanding of the First Amendment, and the broad leeway it offers them to incorporate the teaching of religious topics into the curriculum. And, second, develop a basic understanding of the religions present in their own classrooms.

Teachers needn't become religious scholars. Rather, they need to know some basic terminology, such as what houses of worship are called and the names of major holidays. This avoids alienating students with questions like, “What is your church?” or “When is your Christmas?” And they need to develop the wise habit of questioning their own assumptions about other faiths and communities.

The call I'm issuing is as uniquely American as our diversity. The framers began an amazing experiment 234 years ago. The work of enriching America by adapting to its new religious pluralism is our piece of the charge to create “a more perfect union.”

There is no more important place or time to provide young Americans with these tools for 21st century society. Young people are ripe to learn, and find themselves part of friendships that didn't exist a generation ago: friendships among Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Baha'i, and other classmates of various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

America will be stronger if all of us can strengthen those ties—and be better equipped to understand the next “Ground Zero Mosque” debate, when it occurs.