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# TEACHER'S GUIDE TO INCLUSIVE TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION AND HOLIDAYS

## Why Unique and United?

Students Rebuild: Unique and United helps students explore what makes them special while celebrating how everyone is different in wonderful ways. Through art and sharing around cultural and holiday traditions, students will learn that being unique is something to be proud of and that differences make communities stronger and more interesting. This educator guide was created by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding for the Students Rebuild Unique & United project.

## About the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

Tanenbaum promotes justice and builds respect for religious difference by transforming individuals and institutions to reduce prejudice, hatred, and violence.

As a secular and non-sectarian non-profit, Tanenbaum works to promote religious peacebuilders who help counter extremism and violence in armed conflicts, and to reduce religious bullying of students, harassment in workplaces, and disparate health treatment for people based on their beliefs.

Tanenbaum's Education program works to teach students skills of respectful curiosity and positive communication, setting them up for lifelong success. We develop curricular and professional development resources and work with educational institutions to build environments where students of all religious and non-religious backgrounds feel safe, heard, and respected.

## General Principles for Inclusive Education and Teaching About Religion

Many educators feel uncertain or under-equipped when addressing religion in the classroom. As a result, the topic of religion is often excluded from inclusive education practices.

Keep in mind:

- Making space for learning religious difference alongside differences of race, class, gender, national origin, and ability and disability can provide an opportunity for students to bring their full selves to the classroom, and to practice empathy, respectful curiosity, and positive communication skills.

- You do not need to be an expert in every holiday or religious tradition in order to create a welcoming learning environment and opportunities for both you and your students to learn about unfamiliar traditions.

## **"Teaching Religion" vs. "Teaching About Religion"**

It is a common misconception that educators -- especially in public schools -- cannot teach content related to religion. In fact, teaching about religion and religious difference is a crucial part of holistic, inclusive education. The Supreme Court of the United States, as well as professional organizations such as the American Academy of Religion and the National Council for the Social Studies, have affirmed the constitutionality and value of the non-devotional, academic study of religion. Educators can ensure lessons about religion are non-discriminatory by teaching content that does not promote any religious tradition or religion over no religion at all.

The constitutional scholars Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas summarize what "teaching about religion" means with a few helpful distinctions:

- The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional.
- The school strives for student awareness of religions, but does not press for student acceptance of any religion.
- The school sponsors study about religion, not the practice of religion.
- The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view.
- The school educates about all religions; it does not promote or denigrate religion.
- The school informs students about various beliefs; it does not seek to conform students to any particular belief.<sup>1</sup>

Teachers, in short, should approach the topic of religion in an academic, non-biased, and non-devotional way. They should raise student awareness of the beliefs, practices, and communities of different religious traditions without imposing any particular point of view or pressing students to accept any one religious tradition. Teachers should feel free to investigate the role of religion in academic subjects like history, social studies, music, visual arts, and literature without promoting or denigrating any religion.

## Inclusive Teaching About Religion

We recommend making religious difference part of your broader pedagogical approach to inclusive teaching, rather than separating it out into its own special topic. In practice, this can look like:

- Designing activities that focus on all of the ways that students think about belief (values that shape who we are), behavior (customs, rituals, and the ways we live our lives), and belonging (the communities we participate in), rather than drawing a distinction between "religion" and "culture."
- Focusing on intrareligious diversity and the dynamic nature of religious traditions.
- Religious practices, beliefs, and community structures can look profoundly different in different times and places.
- Teaching critical social-emotional learning skills to encourage listening with empathy, practicing respectful curiosity, and building conflict-transforming communities as part of any lesson that deals with religion and/or religious difference.
- Designing lessons that make space for students of any religious or non-religious background.

## Holidays and the "December Dilemma"

Since the celebration of Christmas is culturally dominant in the U.S., it can be challenging to teach about religion and holidays during the late fall and early winter without centering Christmas celebrations or reinforcing normative, cultural Christianity. Here are some common pitfalls to avoid:

- Avoid a "December-only" emphasis. While many culturally significant holidays are typically celebrated in December (including Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, St. Lucia Day, Winter Solstice, Bodhi Day, and Guru Gobind Singh's birthday), designing a "December Holidays" activity leaves out many students' most significant holiday celebrations. An open calendar approach allows for more self-expression and a wider variety of traditions to be included.
- Make sure not to "blend" holidays. When you recognize the shared values, practices, and themes that holidays have in common, it is important to also recognize the differences between them.
- Make sure that the same standards for research and representation apply to all traditions and holidays so that you avoid creating a distinction between "normal" and "exotic" holidays. One way to do this is to take a lived religion

approach, bringing in experts from local religious communities or emphasizing what these celebrations might look like for everyday practitioners.

- Avoid spokesperson syndrome and encourage students to use "I" statements when describing their holiday traditions. The goal is for students to share the beliefs, rituals, and practices that have been meaningful for them and their communities, not to represent an entire religious tradition.
- Encourage students to think about holidays as components of larger practices, identities, and ways of life. One way to do this is to teach religious and cultural diversity year-round, so that you can make connections between learning about holidays and learning about unfamiliar cultural practices in other contexts.

## FAQs: Religion and Holidays in the Art Classroom

### **1. What should I do if there are students in my class who may not be comfortable learning about other traditions, or who may criticize beliefs other than their own?**

Setting up classroom norms for respectful communication before starting activities that address religious differences will help students learn with curiosity without feeling that their own beliefs are under threat. An additional technique you can use when teaching about different religions is bracketing. Bracketing involves having students temporarily set aside their personal beliefs and attitudes in a safe and respectful way while learning about different religious traditions. This practice allows students to protect the importance of their own beliefs while being open and attentive to religious diversity. [Click here for a classroom-ready lesson plan on bracketing.](#)

### **2. I teach in a culturally homogenous environment; how can I create a learning opportunity that increases my students' knowledge of cultural diversity?**

It is fine to run activities using a range of holidays that are already familiar to everyone in your educational community, and to focus on teaching symbolism and self-expression through art.

This could also be an opportunity to emphasize diversity within communities and to foster respect for different ways of expressing shared values.

Alternatively, to increase knowledge of less familiar holiday traditions, we recommend taking a "research and empathy" approach to the lesson by allowing students to choose a holiday from a culture they would like to learn more about. This will require allocating time to do research and, ideally, getting the perspective of members of the community about which students are learning. Guest speakers from cultural organizations or community members can be a wonderful resource, and documentaries, blogs, and literature are also windows into other cultural experiences.

### **3. Some of my students are Jehovah's Witnesses and do not celebrate any holidays. How can I include them in a holiday-based activity?**

While many Jehovah's Witnesses refrain from celebrating birthdays and many holidays, students are also welcome to make creative expressions about significant family traditions (e.g., Sunday dinner) or other major life celebrations with a ritual element (e.g., weddings). Students could also create a creative expression that explores the values and practices in their tradition that inform their decision not to celebrate some holidays. The goal is for every student to have an opportunity to express themselves creatively, share something significant about their values or history, and feel that they have an equal seat at the table. (See also: opt-outs.)

### **4. My student practices an aniconic religion<sup>2</sup>, how can I respect that in a visual arts environment?**

It's important to ask respectful questions early on when meeting students and parents, and to refrain from making assumptions. Different families and individuals will have different levels of comfort with exposure to depictions of sacred figures. One Muslim student may be very troubled by a portrait project and need alternative ways to demonstrate the desired competencies of that unit, while it may pose no problem at all for another. The best way to find out is to ask open-ended questions of all the parents you meet, like "Does your family have any values I should be aware of related to creating art or art history?" or "Do you have any special goals or concerns about your student's participation in my class?" (See also: opt-outs.)

For assignments involving creative expression, remember that thinking symbolically and non-literally is an important skill for students. There should be plenty of ways for students to create their creative expression that feel culturally comfortable and representative of the tradition they are depicting.

### **5. What if my student prefers to opt out of an activity entirely for religious reasons?**

We always recommend leading with curiosity and respectful questions. Don't make assumptions and make sure that you fully understand the needs of the student and their family. In many cases, it will be possible to find an accommodation plan within the class that works well for everyone.

However, if an opt-out is the best solution for your student, make sure to follow your school's administrative procedures and work with your team to coordinate any practical steps (e.g., time in other classrooms). When a student opts out of a lesson or unit, it is important to make sure their learning experience does not become an afterthought. Their alternative assignment should be thoughtfully designed and aligned with the goals of the unit.

## Further Reading and Additional Resources

- [Harvard Multifaith Calendar of Religious Holidays](#)
- [Tanenbaum's Seven Principles for Inclusive Education and Six Behavioral Learning Outcomes](#)
- [Creating Agreements of Respect in Your Classroom \(lesson plan\)](#)
- [Six Behavioral Learning Outcomes Applications: Religion, Identity, and the School Calendar \(lesson plan\)](#)

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Finding Common Ground, Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2001, pp. 75-76.*

<sup>2</sup> *An aniconic tradition avoids, prohibits, or places restrictions on the depiction of sacred figures and/or humans in art.*