

Religion is a third rail in public schools. Legal battles about religion and education shock educators around the country who are fearful of provoking new lawsuits. Teachers' anxieties are understandable: issues related to religion and education account for more than two-thirds of the Establishment Clause cases brought before the Supreme Court of the United States.¹ Widespread misinformation about key legal rulings strengthens a culture of fear and avoidance. According to a major survey conducted in 2010 by the Pew Research Center, sixty-seven percent of Americans say incorrectly that the law prohibits public school teachers from reading the Bible as literature, and fifty-one percent of Americans say inaccurately that the Supreme Court has barred public schools from offering world religions courses.² Many educators lack the training to dispel the general public's legal illiteracy about religious literacy education because teaching institutions do not provide reliable information about the First Amendment or quality instruction in religious studies.

This volume acknowledges educators' fears while affirming that religious literacy education can empower students to take informed action as guardians of our First Amendment rights. Religious literacy education is both constitutional and necessary for preparing young citizens to engage with an increasingly diverse country and globalized world. Teachers who follow the proper legal framework, informed by the theories and methods of religious studies, can protect themselves from legal challenges by parents or other members of the community. This chapter reviews key Supreme Court cases in order

¹ John Jr. Witte and Joel A. Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, Third (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011), 191.

² Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey" (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2010), 33, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/09/religious-knowledge-full-report.pdf>.

to sketch the boundaries of religious literacy education before suggesting a specific pedagogical framework for teaching about religion in the public school classroom.

Public schools cannot prepare students for college, careers, or civic life without teaching about religion. As Harvard scholar Diane L. Moore eloquently states in her book *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, “Religious beliefs, expressions, and worldviews have inspired the full spectrum of human agency in artistic, philosophical, ethical, political, scientific, and economic arenas.”³ Teachers who remove religion from any area of social studies make it impossible to understand the complex interplay of forces that shape our world. Students who cannot describe religion’s influence on all aspects of life are ill-prepared for college-level courses, which require both content knowledge about religion and the critical thinking skills necessary to parse the elements of culture. Young professionals entering the workforce need to understand the role of religion in private and public life if they are to work with—and potentially within—religious communities to improve society as leaders in government, business, non-profits, education, and more. And as citizens of a religiously diverse democracy, young Americans must learn about religion in order to develop a stronger commitment to religious liberty, a cornerstone of our democracy. Religious literacy might not alone end religious bigotry or violence, but it can reduce discrimination and develop a stronger commitment to protect the rights of minorities.⁴ Despite all of the benefits of religious literacy education, many teachers still hesitate to talk about religion in the classroom without clear legal guidelines.

³ Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33. See also Emile Lester and Patrick S. Roberts, *Learning About World Religions in Public Schools: The Impact on Student Attitudes and Community Acceptance in Modesto, Calif.* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2006).

Put simply: teachers may constitutionally teach about religion in public schools from an academic perspective, but they may not teach religion from a devotional perspective.⁵ Moore writes, “First and foremost, scholars highlight the difference between the *devotional expression* of particular religious belief as normative, and the non-sectarian *study of religion* that presumes the religious legitimacy of diverse normative claims.”⁶ Teachers cannot legally “teach religion” in the way that a religious leader might in Sunday school with the children of parishioners. They may not advance or inhibit religion or non-religion. Nor may teachers ask students to accept, reject, or enact specific religious beliefs or behaviors.

Teachers can more fully differentiate between the academic and devotional approaches—teaching religion versus teaching about religion—by following the guidance found in *A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*, quoted below. A coalition of seventeen religious and educational organizations including the National Council for the Social Studies endorsed a version of the following statement, which the Department of Education distributed to all public schools in the nation in 2000:

- 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.

⁵ Charles C. Haynes et al., *The First Amendment in Schools: A Guide from the First Amendment Center* (Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003), 52.

⁶ Diane L. Moore, “Diminishing Religious Literacy: Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks for Promoting the Public Understanding of Religion,” in *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, ed. Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (Chicago: Policy Press, 2016), 27.

- The school *informs* students about various beliefs; it does not seek to make students *conform* to any particular belief.⁷

These consensus guidelines outline some of the norms of religious studies, an interdisciplinary field that analyzes the variety of religious identities within and between religions without making a theological, evaluative claim about orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Teachers who utilize a religious studies approach in the classroom will remain within the legal boundaries set by Supreme Court jurisprudence over the last seventy years.

Public school educators need a basic understanding of Supreme Court jurisprudence in the 20th century to recognize how and why the religious studies and legal frameworks reinforce one another. Teachers' legal education should emphasize 20th century jurisprudence because in the 1920's, the Supreme Court began to apply portions of the Bill of Rights to the states, not just the federal government, through a process called "incorporation." By the 1940's the Court began to hear its first cases about the First Amendment—specifically, the establishment and free exercise of religion—in public schools.⁸ The Supreme Court's landmark decisions in *McCullum v. Board of Education* (1948) and *Zorach v. Clauson* (1952) were among the first to affirm that public schools may not "teach religion" from a devotional, sectarian perspective. In fact, public schools may not allow guest speakers to teach religion on school grounds during normal school hours, even if the speakers are not paid or employed by the school. In *McCullum*, the Court struck down a religious education program in Illinois because devotional instruction took place on public school grounds during regular school hours.

⁷ Charles C. Haynes, "A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools" (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2008), 3. Distributed to all public schools in a slightly different version in "Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers" (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1988). These guidelines are based on those published by the Public Education Religion Studies Center at Wright State University.

⁸ For more on incorporation, see Witte and Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, 122–127.

Justice Black wrote in the majority opinion in *McCullum* that the release time program on school grounds resulted in the use of “tax-supported property for religious instruction and the close cooperation between school authorities and the religious council in promoting religious education.”⁹ However, four short years later in *Zorach*, the Court affirmed that schools could release students during normal school hours to attend sectarian religious education or services, as long as students left school property for those programs. *Zorach* and *McCullum* affirmed a key point: programs designed to teach religion from a devotional perspective belong in the home and community, not the public school.

Engel v. Vitale (1962) and *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (1963) extended *McCullum* and *Zorach* by affirming that public schools may not endorse or teach religion through “nondenominational” devotional instruction, no matter how brief. In *Engel* and then again in *Abington*, the Court ruled that educators may not design and implement religious exercises to begin each school day, even if the school allows students to opt out of those exercises.¹⁰ In *Engel*, the Court found that the State Board of Regents of New York violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment by adopting a nondenominational prayer for students and teachers to recite at the beginning of each school day. Soon after, the Court found in *Abington* that a local public school district in Pennsylvania violated the Establishment Clause by mandating that schools begin each day by reading ten Bible verses without comment. In both cases, the Court found that the schools’ optional exercises attempted to promote devotional religious instruction and establish an official religion. In the words of Justice Black, writing for the majority in *Engel*, “When the power, prestige, and financial support of government is

⁹ *McCullum v. Board of Education*, 333 U.S. 203, 209 (1948).

¹⁰ See Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper, *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies*, Second (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 29.

placed behind a particular religious belief, the indirect coercive pressure upon religious minorities to conform to prevailing officially approved religion is plain.”¹¹ Public schools have a duty to safeguard the rights of all, including religious minorities, by leaving devotional instruction to parents and religious communities.

After the *Abington* and *Engel* decisions in the 1960’s, political forces on the right and left generated and perpetuated a myth that the Supreme Court banished all religion from public schools. In reality, the Court’s decisions consistently upheld the importance of students’ religious free exercise while prohibiting the “establishment” of religion in the classroom.¹² Students may still exercise their right to religious liberty through un-coerced individual or group prayer, student-led religious clubs, garb, and other forms of religious expression that do not disrupt the learning environment. Teachers and administrators, on the other hand, act as agents of the state who must inculcate democratic values, and as such they may not favor one religion over others, or favor religion over non-religion.¹³ Teachers should not force students to advocate for certain expressions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy (i.e. “correct” beliefs and practices within a religion), nor should they ask students to evaluate the ultimate validity of various religious expressions. Teachers must adhere to an academic, not devotional, approach to instruction. To return to the distinction made by Dr. Charles Haynes and his colleagues, public schools may teach about religion, but they may not teach religion.

¹¹ *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421, 431 (1962).

¹² Witte and Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, 198–199.

¹³ Instead of reviewing the full scope of First Amendment jurisprudence on religion in public education—including cases about free exercise and the right of religious groups to gain equal access to “facilities, forums, and even funds” provided by public schools—this chapter focuses on those cases relevant to religious literacy education. *Ibid.*, 192, 199.

The Supreme Court has explicitly affirmed both the constitutionality and importance of teaching about religion, but the justices have declined to provide a substantive pedagogical framework. In the *Abington* case in 1963, for example, Justice Clark and the majority rejected school-sponsored devotional Bible readings (i.e. teaching religion), but Clark wrote in favor of religious literacy education (i.e. teaching about religion):

It might well be said 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. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historical qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.¹⁴

While Clark furnished clear and compelling support for religious literacy education, he provided little specific pedagogical guidance for teachers. The Court has outlined legal boundaries for teaching about religion, but it has not commented on the specific foundational knowledge about religion that students should acquire or the measurable skills related to religious literacy that teachers should assess.

Fifty years after the *Abington* decision, do religious studies scholars still recommend Bible-as-literature courses or comparative religion courses? Not all scholars agree on an answer to this question, despite general consensus about the need for religious literacy education. After presenting one popular but highly contested traditions-based perspective as represented by the work of Stephen Prothero, a professor at Boston University and well-known scholar of religious literacy education, this chapter advocates for a six-point framework for teaching about religion that integrates the study of religion

¹⁴ School District of Abington Township v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 225 (1963).

across social studies courses.¹⁵ The proposed six-point framework—a response to Prothero’s simplified depiction of religious norms and worldviews—leverages the disciplinary concepts and skills of religious studies to ensure that public school teachers develop curricula that are constitutionally sound, academically sophisticated, and consistent with the study of religion, not devotional expression.

Prothero takes Justice Clark’s lead and strongly advocates for standalone world religions and Bible-as-literature courses. He does a great service by advocating for religious literacy as a core civic competency, and he convincingly argues that religious illiteracy not only fuels prejudice and misunderstanding but also weakens Americans’ religiosity.¹⁶ However, Prothero’s prescription of a specific traditions-based approach to teaching about religion, which heavily emphasizes scriptural narrative and doctrine, can inhibit a student’s ability to investigate the complexity of religious identity and the full extent of the relationship between religion and other aspects of life, including politics, economics, and culture.¹⁷

¹⁵ This six-point framework was first discussed in Benjamin Marcus, “Six Guidelines for Teaching About Religion,” *Education Week*, April 4, 2016, sec. Global Learning,

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/global_learning/2016/04/six_guidelines_for_teaching_about_religion.html.

¹⁶ Prothero claims that widespread religious illiteracy in the United States stems from Americans’ “ironic” efforts to strengthen religion: missionaries in the early 19th century favored emotionally-driven religious revival over doctrine in their attempts to Christianize the country, replacing theology with morality; Protestants set aside doctrinal differences to present a united front against Catholics in the mid to late-19th century, thereby forgetting distinctions between denominations; and Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—and later other religious groups—formed new coalitions to fight the rising tide of secularism in the 20th and 21st centuries, including through “nondenominational” prayers in public schools. As religious Americans built new and larger coalitions, they increasingly minimized doctrinal difference in favor of inter-communal bonds. See Stephen Prothero and Lauren R. Kerby, “The Irony of Religious Illiteracy in the USA,” in *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, ed. Matthew Francis and Adam Dinham (Chicago: Policy Press, 2016), 55–62.

¹⁷ For Prothero’s approach, see Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--And Doesn't* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 17–18. For an alternative approach, see Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*, 56–57.

Prothero’s traditions-based, doctrinally focused pedagogy is evident in *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World*. In this book, he describes the doctrines and narratives of Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba, Judaism, and Daoism—with an extra chapter on atheism. Prothero rightly rejects the idea that all of these religions contain the same essential teachings, but he argues instead that students should study each religion using a distinct interpretive lens—including “submission” for Islam and “salvation” for Christianity.¹⁸ Though this approach pays attention to the real differences between religions and requires an honest engagement with disagreements about issues of ultimate concern, this type of a traditions-based approach can reinforce the idea that religions are internally uniform.

Many religious studies scholars advocate for an even more rigorous investigation of difference not only between but also within religions. Utilizing a traditions-based model that considers different religions (e.g. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) as discrete, monolithic categories can erase critical differences within religious communities.¹⁹ For example, Prothero himself cites a study by eminent sociologist Robert Wuthnow, which demonstrates that liberal Protestants and Catholics are more similar in some ways than liberal and conservative Protestants.²⁰ Public school teachers should ask students to describe religious identity or expression and to compare and contrast religious expressions within a religious community, between religious communities, and between religious and non-religious communities. Students who study the many ways individuals and communities experience religion in their own lives will not only gain a more nuanced

¹⁸ See Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

¹⁹ See Thomas A. Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion--and Vice Versa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 119–143.

²⁰ Prothero and Kerby, “The Irony of Religious Illiteracy in the USA,” 62.

understanding of religion but will also cultivate a stronger commitment to work with and protect the rights of religious groups—a hallmark of constitutional, civic education.

The remainder of this chapter presents a constitutionally-sound six-point framework for planning academic, non-devotional lessons about religion that encourage students to engage with the full diversity of individual and communal religious identities and expressions. Teachers can utilize this framework when integrating the study of religion across the curriculum or when developing standalone religion courses that avoid the over simplification of some traditions-based models. Points one through three come from *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* published by the American Academy of Religion, the world’s largest association of religious studies scholars.²¹ The first three assertions about a religious studies perspective provide a foundation for learning about religion across time and place. Points four through six will provide a framework for describing and analyzing different expressions of religious identity. Each of the six points satisfies, reinforces, and builds upon one or more key requirements of the legal guidelines for teaching about religion.

Point 1: “Religions are not internally homogenous but diverse.”²² Whereas it might be obvious that students should learn about differences between religions, some teachers might not consider the importance of creating lessons for students to explore diversity within a single religion. Not all members of a religious group share the same beliefs or practices, and the public school has no legal right to advocate for a normative

²¹ These premises also appear in Moore, “Diminishing Religious Literacy: Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks for Promoting the Public Understanding of Religion.”

²² Diane L. Moore, “Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States” (American Academy of Religion in the Schools Taskforce, April 2010), 12, http://aarweb.org/Publications/Online_Publications/Curriculum_Guidelines/AARK-12CurriculumGuidelines.pdf.

vision of what members of a religious group should think or how they should behave. Students should compare and contrast the ways that individuals within a religious community express their religious identities. For example, students might not only learn that Christianity contains multiple branches (including Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox) and denominations (e.g. Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Russian Orthodox), but also that a diversity of expressions exists within any given denomination. A teacher might develop a lesson that asks students to describe differences in funerary rituals among Roman Catholics in the United States, Mexico, and Kenya. Such a lesson exposes students to various beliefs and practices while leaving room for religious communities to cultivate specific ways of thinking or acting through devotional instruction. Public school lessons about religions' internal diversity will challenge common stereotypes and prejudices by deconstructing crude generalizations.

Point 2: "Religions are dynamic and changing as opposed to static and fixed."²³ In other words, religions change over time. Students should learn about religion in historical context in order to dispel the misconception that religious beliefs, practices, and communities remain absolutely uniform in different eras. For example, teachers may be tempted to explain contemporary relations between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Middle East by investigating the split between these two groups thirteen hundred years ago. While history lessons are critical, students must also understand that they cannot project 7th century debates about communal leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad onto 21st century post-colonial power dynamics and geo-political concerns. Lessons about religious dynamism will destabilize narratives about inherent, intractable conflict between religious groups by exposing a history of change. Teaching about the

²³ Ibid., 13.

dynamism of religion also assures that educators expose students to multiple views, per the legal guidelines for teaching about religion, instead of inadvertently imposing one particular view through an overly simplified presentation of a religion.

Point 3: Religions “are embedded in cultures and not isolated from them.”²⁴ Religion does not exist in a separate, private sphere unaffected by public life. Individuals and communities interpret and reinterpret religion according to cultural context; these same groups interpret and reinterpret culture according to religion. The components of culture—including politics, economics, geography, and social norms—all affect and are affected by religion. For example, late 19th century Native American religious expressions, including the Ghost Dance movement of the Lakota Sioux, influenced and were influenced by political and social forces related to the settlement of white Americans across the West. Students would be unable to explain the Ghost Dance movement and its effects without historical and cultural context. Lessons that enable students to identify the relationship between religion and culture in a given time period and location will more accurately represent the role of religion in American public life. Such lessons will avoid promoting non-religion, or at least pervasive secularism, over religion—a key requirement of the legal framework for teaching about religion.

While the first three points provide a foundation for learning about religion across time and place, the next three points provide a legally-sound framework for describing and analyzing religious identity in a way that, per the legal guidelines, informs students about various identities but does not seek to conform students to any particular practice or expression. This 3B Framework teaches students to recognize that individuals and communities construct religious identity not only through their beliefs but also

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

through their behaviors and experiences of belonging.²⁵ “Faith” and “belief”—which are often used as synonyms of “religion”—only comprise one aspect of religious identity. In fact, for some religious people, behaviors and experiences of belonging to a community or communities shape religious identity more than belief.²⁶ While religious belief might in some cases produce behavior (Graphic 1), research from sociology and psychology demonstrates that individuals’ behaviors and experiences of belonging to religious community may affect belief (Graphic 2). Lessons about religion in the public school should encourage students to analyze others’ religious identities in order to understand the relative importance of each of the three B’s for an individual and community. In Graphic 3, for example, Person A values belief above all else, while Person B constructs her religious identity according to her experience of belonging.

Graphic 1

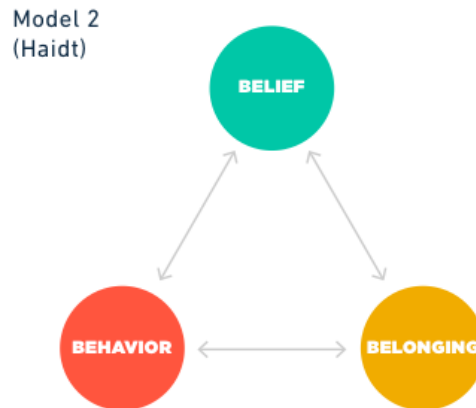
Model 1



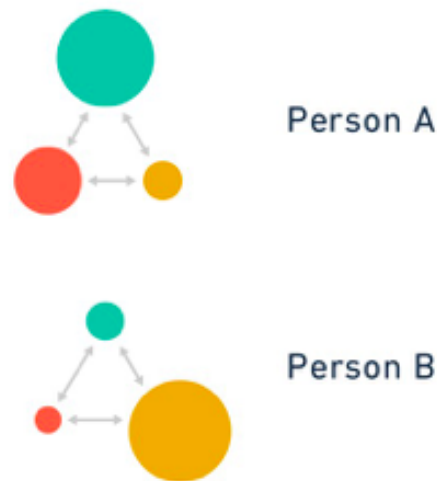
²⁵ Benjamin Marcus, “Religious Literacy in American Education,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Education*, ed. Michael D. Waggoner and Nathan C. Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, In Press).

²⁶ See, for example, Vassilis Saroglou, “Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging: The Big Four Religious Dimensions and Cultural Variation,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42, no. 8 (November 2011): 1320–40.

Graphic 2²⁷



Graphic 3



If religious literacy education trains students to understand the “language” of religion, then the 3B Framework is a linguistic exercise that begins by examining the “grammar” of religious identity (i.e. beliefs, behaviors, and experiences of belonging) before it tackles the distinction between “vocabulary” words across religions. Put another way, a traditions-based approach to teaching about religion excels at helping students memorize distinct religious vocabularies; taking a step beyond the traditions-based approach, the 3B Framework asks students to analyze the “grammar” that undergirds

²⁷ Adapted from Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

religion in order to “linguistically” compare and contrast the construction of religious identity for religious individuals and communities, whatever their vocabularies. For example, students might learn that “dialects” of two different religions (e.g. Theravada within Buddhism and Orthodoxy within Judaism) may employ “grammatical structures” (e.g. a religious identity centered on behavior, not belief) that more closely resemble one another than “dialects” of the same religion (e.g. Reform and Orthodox Judaism). This is a constitutionally admissible descriptive exercise, not an illegal prescriptive exercise that tells students what to believe or how to behave. Teachers must develop a keen familiarity with the fullest definitions of belief, behavior, and belonging if they are to guide students through this “linguistic” analysis.²⁸ Belief, behavior, and belonging are defined in points four through six of our six-point framework.

Point 4: Religious beliefs affect behaviors and the construction of communities of belonging. Teachers should remind students that beliefs manifest in a variety of ways, including theology, doctrine, sacred narratives, and holy texts, as well as the social values and ethics that guide daily life. In a classroom, for example, a teacher might ask students to examine multiple Islamic perspectives on justice, conducting a constitutional lesson that makes students aware of multiple beliefs but does not press for acceptance of any one belief. Primary source material might include passages about justice, in theory and in practice, in the Qur’an and Hadith, traditional commentary about justice in scriptural texts, and legal rulings by Islamic jurists. Students should also consider how beliefs and values in the “mundane” sphere of politics and society affect and are affected by beliefs and values drawn from religious tradition. A teacher might encourage students to

²⁸ Marcus, “Religious Literacy in American Education.”

compare and contrast the beliefs of Muslims in different social, political, and economic contexts, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia.

Point 5: Habitual behaviors of religious individuals—within a place of worship as well as in the home and workplace—affect their beliefs and experience of belonging to a religious community. Behaviors include holy rites and rituals as well as habits and practices associated with daily life outside of a strictly sacred setting. To explore religious behavior in a contemporary social studies course, students might study different Buddhist rites and rituals connected with the interaction between Buddhist monks, nuns, and laypeople in Thailand and Burma during the 20th and 21st centuries. A teacher might encourage students to compare and contrast the ways Thai and Burmese monks and nuns solicit alms from laypeople, and the lay practice of giving gifts to the *sangha*. Students might also examine how these practices forge a sense of community among Buddhists and create or reinforce a belief in the impermanence of material goods. Teachers should also encourage students to consider how Thai and Burmese habitual practices in daily life—those that dictate how people of different social rank greet one another, for example—might affect religious rites and rituals connected with the interaction between religious and laypeople. In this example, a teacher exposes students to multiple Buddhist practices without unconstitutionally promoting or denigrating religious behaviors, and without inappropriately asking students to physically perform Buddhist practices through participatory classroom exercises.

Point 6: The experience of belonging to a religious community—which intersects with other types of communities—affects a person’s behaviors and beliefs. Belonging refers to a community of co-religionists, complete with a social structure, which extends

through time and geographic space. Critically, belonging also refers to racial, ethnic, familial, class, gender, sexual, and other identities that may affect and be affected by an individual or community's religious identity. In a 20th century history course, teachers might choose to devote class time to study Jewish responses to the Holocaust. Students might analyze how religious communities in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East experienced and interpreted the Holocaust differently based on their nations of origin and proximity to Hitler's Germany. Students might also describe how Jews forged bonds despite geographic distance, including through a shared consciousness of the long history of oppression and diaspora, and the post-war creation of the state of Israel. Teachers might encourage students to pay particular attention to the intersection of religious communities with national and racial identities that create a sense of belonging—for example, by contrasting the experience of white Ashkenazi Jews and Middle Eastern or North African Mizrahi Jews in the 21st century. This lesson exemplifies how teachers can inform students about multiple communities without forcing students to conform to any one community.

Note that each component of religious identity described above includes both a “sacred” and “mundane” element (see Graphic 4). This connects with the three premises about religion published by the American Academy of Religion. Since religion is embedded in culture, the components of religious identity affect and are affected by aspects of life that students might not recognize as religious per se. The definitions and examples provided reflect the interconnectedness of religion and culture, and the implications this has for internal diversity and change over time. Graphic 5 depicts how religious communities interpret and reinterpret a received religious tradition—which

includes elements of belief, behavior, and belonging—based on their direct experience of the world around them, including social, economic, and political life. Through this process of interpretation and reinterpretation as mediated by people’s embodied experience of specific times and places, religious expressions change over time and vary across cultures.

Graphic 4

3B Framework	A: SACRED	B: MUNDANE
● 1. BELIEF	theologies, doctrines, sacred narratives, and holy texts	social values and ethics
● 2. BEHAVIOR	holy rites and rituals	habits and daily practices
● 3. BELONGING	trans-historical, trans-national community of co-religionists complete with a social structure	racial, ethnic, familial, gender, sexual, and other identities

Graphic 5



By combining the three premises about religion articulated by the AAR with the 3B Framework, teachers can develop lessons about religion for the public school social studies classroom that abide by the requirements of the legal framework for teaching about religion. The six-point approach derives from a religious studies perspective, not a devotional one. Teachers should be careful not to promote or denigrate the credibility of religious perspectives—including those that might contradict some of the key premises that undergird religious studies. For example, a specific religious community may consciously describe its beliefs and behaviors as unchanging and eternal. Teachers should not actively seek to undermine this religious system or evaluate its validity, but rather should encourage students to identify how and analyze why that community might conceive of itself in a particular way. The three premises about religion and the 3Bs are meant to help identify and describe patterns that students might observe when they study religion in a social studies course, a valid practice according to the guidelines distributed by the Department of Education. The six-point framework does not claim to represent ultimate truth about what is “right” and “wrong” in a religious sense, but rather functions as a lens to study religion from an academic perspective.

Students with a strong working proficiency in the religious studies framework will be better prepared to excel in college-level courses in social studies disciplines, to engage professionally with religious and non-religious others, and to take informed action to safeguard fundamental religious and civil liberties through civic participation. Students will gain the skills necessary to continue learning outside the classroom through formal study about religion and informal conversations with people outside their own religious communities. Teachers can help students learn to ask open-ended questions that can

identify those aspects of religion and religious identity most important for other people, and students can then participate in meaningful dialogue about issues of profound importance instead of surface level conversations about topics assumed to be—but not actually—important for themselves and their interlocutors. Perhaps most important in a religiously diverse nation experiencing a surge in religion-related hate crimes, the study of religion from a constitutional, academic perspective can decrease students’ negative attitudes and prejudices toward the religious and non-religious other without affecting students’ own religiosity.²⁹ Thus, social studies teachers who adhere to a legal framework for studying religion will ultimately reinforce the foundational principles that undergird our constitution, including the incalculable value of our “first freedom”—religious liberty.

²⁹ See the promising research conducted by Lester and Roberts in Modesto, CA. Lester and Roberts, *Learning About World Religions in Public Schools: The Impact on Student Attitudes and Community Acceptance in Modesto, Calif.*