



California Three Rs Project: Rights, Responsibility and Respect



THE DECEMBER DILEMMA **Religious Holidays in Public Schools**

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Introduction

Every year the month of December has the potential for being a time of conflict in today's culturally diverse schools unless we make a strong effort to remind all educators, students and parents that public schools belong to all members of the community equally. Our civic agreement in America, found in the Constitution and especially the Bill of Rights, binds us to the promise to protect the right of each person to freedom of conscience. The last decades of exploding diversity has challenged California's public schools to deal creatively and sensitively with student populations representing many faiths or beliefs. Global political issues related to faith have only exacerbated the problem.

During a time of the year when major religious holidays are celebrated, it is important to remember that not everyone shares the beliefs of the majority. On the other hand, everyone does have the same right to believe or not to believe. To deal with this diversity effectively and with the least harm, it is essential for public school leaders, parents, and students to remember that the primary purpose of public schools is academic. It is appropriate in the school setting to learn about religious beliefs and practices, but it is not right to celebrate or practice these beliefs in any manner.

December holidays are always a challenge because educators often receive conflicting

and confusing advice about how to treat religious holidays in the public schools. It is best to remember that not only is December the month for the Christian holiday of Christmas, the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, but it is also when the Mahayana Buddhists celebrate the Enlightenment of Buddha and humanists observe Human Light. The month ends with the African American spiritual and cultural celebration of their African heritage. In 2011, December 6th (North America) also marks the Muslim holiday of Ashura; December 21st marks the Solstice and Yule holidays that are sacred to those of Northern European ancestry and believers of traditional folk religions; and December 26th is the anniversary of the death of the prophet Zarathustra of the ancient Persian Zoroastrian religion which now has an active presence in California.

Sensitivity to First Amendment rights may be difficult to garner on a school campus because for many the December "Christmas Season" is not religious but cultural. This happy time of decorated trees, parties, gifts and special food treats is sentimentally connected to people's perception of their childhood and to American folk tradition. In fact, some of these practices have been declared "secular" by the courts, so people have become used to the presence of decorated trees in city parks and libraries.

However, Dr. Charles Haynes of The First Amendment Center in Washington DC and a nationally recognized religious liberty scholar, warns that even if these symbols of a "secular" Christmas are legal in schools, they may make some students feel their culture has been pushed aside. A more appropriate course of action is to focus on the school's academic role for all students. In **Finding Common Ground Revised Edition**, <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/publications>, there is a chapter entitled "Religious Holidays in the Public Schools" which has been endorsed by a wide range of religious and educational leaders. Here Dr. Haynes recommends that before planning December holiday concerts or other activities in a public school, choral directors, teachers, and administrators should ask themselves three simple questions:

1. Do we have a clear educational purpose? Under the First Amendment, learning about religious holidays is an appropriate educational goal – celebrating or observing religious holidays is not.

2. Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider by the concert, lesson or activity? Most parents and students are fine with learning about religious traditions – as long as the school's approach is academic, not devotional. It is never appropriate for public schools to proselytize.

3. Is our overall curriculum balanced and fair? December shouldn't be the only time sacred music pops up in the curriculum. Students should learn about religious music from various traditions at other times of the year.

The California Three R's Project suggests that school leaders and teachers plan any holiday related activity during December with these questions in mind. It is also important to note that some traditionally emphasized December holidays are not major celebrations in the religious traditions of which they are a part, but have become so in many schools through efforts to achieve balance and fairness. This is especially true of Hanukkah.

DECEMBER 2011 HOLIDAYS

6* **	Hijra – New Year - Muslim
8	Bodhi Day (Rohatsu)** - Buddhist Immaculate Conception of Virgin Mary - Catholic Christian
12	Feast day - Our Lady of Guadalupe – Catholic Christian
16-25	Posadas Navidenas – Christian
20-28*	Hanukkah – Jewish
21*	Yule – Christian, traditional religions Winter Solstice – Wiccan, nature religions
23	Human Light – Humanist, free thinkers
25	Christmas – Western Christian
26	Death of prophet Zarathustra – Zoroastrian
31	Watch Night – Christian
26 - January 1, 2011	Kwanzaa – Interfaith
*	Begins at sundown
**	Regional Differences may cause a variation in date

INTERNET RESOURCES

Using the academic role of schools as the guide, the following websites may be of value for teachers in helping students to understand their world and the beliefs and cultures of their neighbors.

December dilemma: What should schools do about Christmas?

<http://archive.firstamendmentcenter.org/commentary.aspx?id=12217>

This is a Charles Haynes' article on issues related to schools and the December holidays.

The 'December Dilemma': December Holiday Guidelines for Public Schools

http://www.adl.org/issue_education/december_dilemma_2004/default.asp

This Anti-Defamation League site has a clearly written description of religious holiday concerns and a set of suggestions for public schools to follow during the holiday season in December.

Interfaith Calendar

<http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/index.htm>

This calendar describes and lists the dates for major religious holidays for religions throughout the world.

BUDDHISM

Rohatsu (Bodhi Day)

<http://buddhism.about.com/od/buddhismglossaryr/g/Rohatsu.htm>

Rohatsu is Japanese for "eighth day of the twelfth month." December 8 has come to be the day Japanese Buddhists observe the enlightenment of the historical Buddha.

Rohatsu

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Buddhism/2000/11/What-Is-Rohatsu.aspx>

Rohatsu [the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month] is a time when Zen Buddhists commemorate the Buddha's enlightenment. It begins on the 1st of December and ends on Rohatsu Day itself, the 8th of December.

JUDAISM

Hanukkah's Light

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/december-3-2010/hanukkahs-light/7597/>

This Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly site has video and lesson material on Hanukkah and its meaning. Free registration required.

Hanukkah Traditions

http://hanukkah.123holiday.net/hanukkah_traditions.html

This site provides basic information on Hanukkah for young people including celebrations, traditions, food and drink.

Hanukkah

<http://www.history.com/topics/hanukkah-traditions/videos#history-of-hanukkah>

This History Channel site offers several short video segments providing information on the history and traditions of Hanukkah.

Chanukah on the Net

<http://www.holidays.net/chanukah/>

Read the story of the Maccabees and Chanukah, learn about the Menorah, and hear the music for "Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel" at this site.

CHRISTIANITY

Feast day - Our Lady of Guadalupe

<http://www.inside-mexico.com/guadalupe.htm>

Before the Christmas season "officially" begins on December 16, Mexicans join together for the festivities of Our Lady of Guadalupe, on December 12. This is one of the most important dates in the Mexican calendar.

Christmas Trees and More

<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/trees/>

Here is a wealth of information about Christmas traditions of all kinds and Christmas trees in particular.

Colonial Christmas Customs

<http://www.history.org/Almanack/life/xmas/customs.cfm>

Here is a brief account of Christmas in Colonial Virginia by the Williamsburg Foundation.

History of Christmas

<http://www.history.com/topics/christmas>

This History Channel site provides information and video segments about the history of Christmas traditions, the evolution of Santa Claus, and the Christmas tree tradition.

ISLAM

The Day of 'Ashura

<http://islam.about.com/od/otherdays/a/ashura.htm>

This About.com describes what the Muslim religious observance of Ashura commemorates.

Ashura

<http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/holidays/ashura.htm>

This Religion Facts site explains that Ashura traditionally commemorates two events: the day Noah left the ark and the day Musa (Moses) was saved from the Egyptians by Allah.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroaster

<http://www.history.com/topics/zoroaster>

This History Channel site describes the life and contributions of Zoroaster, the Latinized form of Zarathustra. Though a relatively small sect today, this ancient Persian religion has an active presence in the United States.

KWANZAA

Kwanzaa

<http://www.history.com/topics/kwanzaa-history>

This History Channel site has video segments and text describing the history and traditions of Kwanzaa.

Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture

<http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/index.shtml>

This site outlines the history, the idea behind and the values of Kwanzaa.

HUMANIST and TRADITIONAL FOLK HOLIDAYS

Human Light

<http://humanlight.org/>

The Human Light celebration focuses on a secular vision in which all people can identify with each other, behave with the highest moral standards, and work together toward a happy, just and peaceful world.

Winter Solstice Celebrations

http://www.religioustolerance.org/winter_solstice.htm

Religious folk worldwide observe many seasonal days of celebration during the month of December. Most are religious holy days, and are linked in some way to the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere.

Solstice a Cause for Celebration Since Ancient Times

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/12/1220_021220_solstice.html

Since ancient times, people have celebrated the solstice and observed it with many different cultural and religious traditions. Some of them survive to the present day.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS IN GENERAL

Religious Tolerance.org

http://www.religioustolerance.org/main_day.htm

This page lists some of the main holy days of the 8 largest faiths in the U.S.: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Baha'i World Faith and Wicca. The advertisements on the site are distracting.

INTERNET LESSON PLANS

Kwanzaa

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/kwanzaa2.html> or
<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/kwanzaa.html>

These are lessons from TeacherLINK, a service of Utah State University's College of Education.

Hanukkah

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/HANUKKAH.HTML>

This is material from TeacherLINK, a service of Utah State University's College of Education.

Maccabees and Their Place in Jewish History

<http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/activity/maccabees/>

This SCORE History-Social Science lesson traces the story of the Maccabees and the history of the holiday of Hanukkah.

The Christmas Tree

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/christmas.html>

This lesson traces the history of the Christmas tree and how it is used at various times and places in the world.

The Nutcracker - Story and Music

<http://themes.pppst.com/nutcracker.html>

Read the story, hear the music and learn about the holiday traditions included in the ballet.

Gingerbread

<http://teachingheart.net/gingerbreadman.html>

This is a literature unit on gingerbread that may be used any time of the year.

A Christmas Carol

<http://novelinks.org/pmwiki.php?n=Novels.AChristmasCarol>

Here are reading strategies and activities to support Charles Dickens' famous Christmas story.

A Dickens of a Party WebQuest

http://www.readwritethink.org/lesson_images/lesson238/dickens_WebQuest.html

You have been invited to a Victorian New Year's Day Party, honoring Ebenezer Scrooge, the protagonist of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

A Colonial Christmas in Williamsburg

<http://www.history.org/History/teaching/colxmas.cfm>

Feasting and celebration were a big part of the Christmas season in colonial Virginia. In eighteenth-century Virginia, the holiday season began on December 24 and ran through Twelfth Night on January 6.

The Twelve Days of Christmas

<http://dimacs.rutgers.edu/~judyann/LP/lessons/12.days.html>

Find the total cost of the items in the song, "The 12 Days of Christmas."

How To Celebrate Bodhi Day

<http://www.doityourself.com/stry/bodhi-day>

In the world of Buddhism, an important day is the December 8th celebration of Bodhi Day. It was on this day in 596 BCE that the Buddha attained enlightenment after a long period of meditation under the Bodhi tree.

Thus Spake Zarathustra: Good and Evil - A Choice

<http://members.megapipe.net/jstafford/zarathustra.htm>

Ancient Persia was in what is now modern Iran. Zarathustra was the great prophet of Persian religion. According to legend, he had been called from the beginning of time for his mission to teach the true religion of the supreme god Ahura Mazda.

December Days: Ten Activities to Celebrate a Month of Special Days!

http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson151.shtml

Learn about Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and even more including Poinsettia Day and Beethoven's Birthday that make December special.

Celebrate Winter!

<http://www.educationworld.com/holidays/archives/winter.shtml>

As the winter solstice approaches, it might help your students to know that the darkest days are nearly behind them. Students can explore a variety of Web sites and do activities that provide information about the Winter Solstice.

It's Winter in the Northern Hemisphere

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/calendar-activities/winter-northern-hemisphere-20377.html>

The onset of winter weather varies from year to year and from place to place, but December 21, the winter solstice, is considered the first official day of winter. This ReadWriteThink website has winter related activities for elementary students.