

# PRO/CON: Is it time for public schools to put religion back into schools?

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Jewish children wear skull caps, or kippah, in their pre-kindergarten class at the AI & Sonny Gindi Barkai Yeshivah in Brooklyn, New York, March 11, 2015. Photo by: AP Photo/Seth Wenig

## PRO: Religion too important to ignore

It's easy to understand why discussions of religion, no matter where they take place, make some people uncomfortable. Still, that's no reason to ban the topic from American classrooms.

Many of the people who first came to America were seeking a place to freely practice their faith. The majority of our colonies, at one time, had official churches.

### Teaching Without Preaching

Over time, the idea of religious tolerance developed. Colonies with established religions agreed to tolerate the practice of other faiths. By the time of America's founding, we had moved beyond religious tolerance to an American understanding of religious liberty, which is protected in our founding documents.

However, in protecting “the free exercise of religion,” as the Bill of Rights puts it, we have sometimes gone too far. The separation of church and state does not require that the government shun religion, it only requires that government not force people to worship or favor a particular religion.

The American social studies classroom is the ideal place to talk about the role religion and faith have played in American history. According to the National Council for the Social Studies, knowledge about religion is “necessary for effective and engaged citizenship.”

Even the American Civil Liberties Union agrees with this. “It would be difficult to teach art, music, literature and most social studies without considering religious influences,” notes a statement on religion in public schools. The note was jointly signed by the ACLU and numerous other organizations with a range of ideological, political and religious beliefs.

The Ashbrook Center at Ashland University holds a similar view. Our academic programs are all based on the idea that the best way to learn about American history and government is to learn it from those who lived and shaped it.

## **Religion's Role In American History**

To know what they thought and how they felt, our students read their letters, speeches, pamphlets and books. When they do, they often find that Americans throughout history have been motivated their faith. Religion has played an important role in shaping Americans' lives and shaping American history.

To understand the motivations and thinking of the early colonists, for example, we suggest that students read John Winthrop’s 1630 discourse, “A Model of Christian Charity.” It lays out a vision for building a godly commonwealth and urges Massachusetts Bay colonists to “be generous with their resources ... considering the good of their neighbor to be integral to their own good.” Good advice for today as well.

Our suggested reading list on religion in American politics includes 25 core documents that helped shape our nation, such as:

Cotton Mather’s 1718 essay on “the principles of reason”;

George Washington’s 1790 letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport R.I.;

Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address, delivered in 1865; and

Henry Ward Beecher’s “Moral Theory of Civil Liberty,” written in 1869.

More recent writings include President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1933 address to the National Conference of Catholic Charities, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1962 speech, “Can a Christian Be a Communist,” President Ronald Reagan’s remarks at the 1983 annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, and President Barack Obama’s 2009 address at Cairo University.

As any honest historian will tell you, there is no way to separate American government and history from the religious beliefs of those who created our government and lived that history.

The National Council for the Social Studies puts it like this: “Only through learning about religions and beliefs will young people be adequately prepared for citizenship in a religiously diverse society and world.”

Schools shouldn't run from the topic, they should embrace it.

*ABOUT THE WRITER: Roger L. Beckett is the executive director of the Ashbrook Center at Ashland University.*

## CON: Imperfect school system doesn't need more distractions

Every morning in grade school, we recited the Lord's Prayer. I still remember the words.

That's somewhat remarkable considering I didn't believe in a god back then and still don't today.

That said, being required to pray did not cause any lasting damage. I'm still convinced, however, that there are dangers to mixing religion with public education.

The key question for those who want religion in schools is this: can you handle the truth?

Because the truth is, different people want their children to believe different things, and that's everyone's right.

### **A Boilerplate Approach Would Not Work**

Based on the way our educational institutions work, school-sponsored religious observances would almost certainly be one-size-fits-all exercises, going against the preferences of at least some, if not many.

Even the most basic type of prayer is offensive to those who don't want to pray. And meanwhile, some common prayers might be rejected by devout Christians as weak tea.

The most important feature of America's kindergarten-through-high-school public education system is that its governance is decentralized. And that same attribute would make allowing religious instruction particularly troublesome.

Because birds of a feather flock together and the members of many communities worship in the same way, there are minorities everywhere who would risk being shut out by majorities who would want their local schools to reflect their own religious preferences.

As a result, introducing any particular worship, or even discussing the history of religion in local schools, is a recipe for disagreement and tension, which public schools just don't need.

## Biases Against Certain Religions

Rather than debate about religion, we should focus on teaching students practical skills. In our increasingly integrated world, technology has brought many different groups closer together, requiring individuals to go outside their bubbles and understand broader society.

Also, even if greater discussion of religion were permitted, would local school boards allow teachers to talk about religious groups outside the mainstream?

And what about Islam? No shortage of offensive, ignorant rubbish is circulated about that religion, including by powerful politicians. What would schools have to say about that?

It's also not only Muslims who face discrimination.

My daughter recently gave me a study Bible as a gift. It includes a page that explains why Mormonism is not a real form of Christianity. Along with this inter-Christian squabbling like this, it includes anti-Semitism and attacks against Sikhs.

Us all getting along? The evidence is mixed.

The fact is, schools have their hands full with reading, writing and arithmetic.

For the foreseeable future, I think we'll have to make peace with the fact that, as Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning."

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