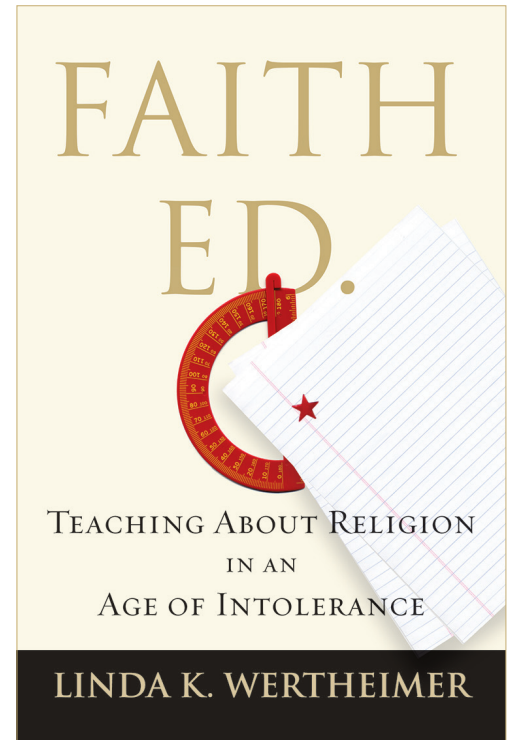




FAITH ED

Teaching About Religion in an Age of Intolerance

by Linda K. Wertheimer



About the Book

Courts long ago banned public school teachers from preaching of any kind. But the question remains: How much should schools teach about the world's religions? Veteran education journalist Linda K. Wertheimer traveled to communities around the nation, listening to voices on all sides of the controversy surrounding teaching religion in public schools. She interviewed clergy, teachers, children, and parents who are Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Sikh, or atheist.

Wertheimer's fascinating investigation reveals a public education system struggling to find the right path forward and offers a promising roadmap for raising a new generation of religiously literate Americans.

About the Author

Linda K. Wertheimer is an award-winning education writer and essayist. She was previously the education editor of the *Boston Globe* and a reporter at the *Dallas Morning News* and *Orlando Sentinel*. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *USA Today*, and the *Boston Globe Magazine*.

INTRODUCTION

This guide includes a summary of each part of *Faith Ed*, discussion questions, and links and suggestions for further reading. Teachers can use it on their own or in groups with colleagues. Try the questions below as a starting off point to assess your own knowledge about religion's role in public schools and your comfort level with teaching about religion. All teachers, whether they teach in a private or public school, need to think about how they can provide balanced lessons on the world's religions. Those in private schools, however, have fewer restrictions since they are not beholden to rules on separation of church and state.

1. How would you rate your level of understanding about the First Amendment and how it determines what you can do as a teacher regarding religion in the public schools?
2. How would you describe what it means to 'teach' v. 'preach' about religion?
3. How religiously literate do you think you are? Try Pew Research Center's religious literacy quiz and see how you fare: <http://www.pewforum.org/quiz/u-s-religious-knowledge>.
4. How comfortable are you teaching about religions, especially one different than your own? If you are an atheist, how does that affect your comfort level?
5. What are your biggest fears when it comes to teaching about religion in the classroom?
6. Everyone has built-in biases based on their own experiences with religion. What's it like for you to teach about Islam in your school? What about Christianity or Judaism?
7. After reading *Faith Ed*, how did your comfort level with religion change?



PROLOGUE

Summary: The prologue examines a recent string of anti-Semitic incidents in a town near where the author lives. It also sets the stage for the book and the need for instruction about religion by referencing the kind of harassment many religious minorities face.

Discussion Questions

1. How aware are you and your school of the experiences of religious minorities?
2. How does your school handle religious holidays as days off and as a mention on the calendar? (A Bedford, Mass., elementary school now lists the holidays of many religions on its calendar as an educational tool for teachers and to alert them when Muslims, Hindus and other non-Christians may need a day off for a religious observance. It also can make teachers more sensitive to when they assign homework and big tests.)
3. What could you do in your school to help religious minorities without singling them out?
4. Suppose someone in your school found anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim graffiti. What would you

do? What do you think your school should do?

5. What's the biggest issue regarding religion in your own school?

Further Reading and Resources

- My commentary: "How Schools Overlook Religious Harassment," *Religion News Service*, <http://religionnews.com/2016/01/08/schools-overlook-religious-harassment-commentary>
- *PBS NewsHour* special on Somalian Muslim immigrants in Minnesota: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/how-one-minnesota-school-district-handles-a-rising-immigrant-population>
- First Amendment Center article on teaching about religion: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/teaching-about-religion>



CHAPTER 1: BURKAGATE

Summary: Lumberton, Texas, teacher Sharon Peters had taught the same lesson for 15 years in her advanced world geography class for freshmen. She often brought in clothing from different countries for students to try on. She also incorporated lessons about Christianity, Judaism and Islam where such instruction made sense. No one complained until 2013 when a student took a photo of five teens trying on clothing from Muslim-majority countries, including a burka. The photo was posted on Facebook, and it went viral. Peters, who had taught for 39 years, soon faced vitriol from a few parents and mostly from hundreds of strangers outside of Lumberton. She was accused of promoting oppression of women and indoctrinating students in Islam. The school system supported her, but Peters retired early because of the furor.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it appropriate to use clothing with a religious connotation as a hands-on exercise in a lesson? Why or why not?
2. Let's say a student club in your school proposes showing solidarity with Muslims with a World Hijab Day activity. Students would urge peers to try on hijab to create more understanding and perhaps decrease Islamophobia. They ask teachers to participate, too. What would you do?
3. The First Amendment prohibits the state (i.e. teachers, schools, public officials) from promoting a particular religion. Talk about the examples you observed in the chapter that could cross that line. Is it okay for a school superintendent to display crosses? What do you observe in your own school?
4. Lumberton school officials, after the controversy, gave parents the option to have their children excused from lessons on religion in geography classes. Should instruction about religion be treated like sex ed, as an opt-out possibility?

5. Think about what may come close to resembling ritual in a classroom. Where does trying on clothing fit? What about writing the Muslim statement of belief as a calligraphy exercise?

Further Reading and Resources

- News story on calligraphy lesson controversy in Virginia: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2015/12/17/furor-over-arabic-assignment-leads-virginia-school-district-to-close-friday/>
- My commentary on the calligraphy controversy: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/18/teaching-about-religion-in-public-schools-can-be-risky-but-its-worth-it/>
- My commentary on World Hijab Day activities in schools: <http://religionnews.com/2016/02/09/teachers-not-ask-students-try-hijab-commentary/>



CHAPTER 2: DID A FIELD TRIP PUT STUDENTS IN THE LION'S DEN?

Summary: Wellesley Middle School in suburban Boston since 2000 has prided itself on its sixth-grade Global Beliefs course, taught half the year as part of social studies. The students take field trips annually to a mosque and a synagogue. They hear from Christian and Hindu guest speakers. They have rich discussions while they also learn basic information about four religions. But in 2010, the school's field trip to a mosque went awry. Invited by a worshipper, five boys joined the line of worshippers during the call to prayer and mimicked the motions of prayer. The school acknowledged that a mistake was made. The boys should have observed, not participated. But an outcry, largely fueled by Islamophobia followed. Once again, accusations of indoctrination in Islam flew. Questions, too, were raised about the wisdom of taking students on a field trip to a house of worship, especially when there was active prayer.

Discussion Questions

1. Wellesley did send home permission forms for the field trip and explained the purpose. What type of guidelines do you believe schools should use for field trips to houses of worship?
2. Should schools take trips to churches, temples, and mosques for the purpose of education? Why or why not?
3. A religion scholar questioned the wisdom of such field trips saying there was no way for schools to show the diversity within a religion by going to just one mosque or one synagogue. What do you think? Is it better to forego field trips if you can't visit more than one of the same religion's house of worship in a school year?
4. Wellesley, at the mosque's request, asked students to dress modestly, keep their arms covered. Girls were not asked to cover their hair. But they have been in other districts. What's the best approach to handling dress codes in a house of worship? Should students don yarmulkes if they are not Jewish, for example?

5. A new Hindu temple has opened in your community, and you want to take your students. The Hindu priest offers to conduct the tour. Do you let him? Why or why not?

Further Reading and Resources

- First Amendment Center's "A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools." (Has part on field trips), <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/madison/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/teachersguide.pdf>
- American Academy of Religion, "Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Schools" (mentions field trips), <https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Publications/epublications/AARK-12CurriculumGuidelines.pdf>
- News story on Colorado school system controversy: <http://douglascountynewspress.net/stories/Board-member-sees-value-in-school-mosque-visit,178455?>
- News story on Tennessee field trip brouhaha: <http://douglascountynewspress.net/stories/Board-member-sees-value-in-school-mosque-visit,178455?>

CHAPTER 3: WHOSE TRUTH SHOULD THEY HEAR?

Summary: In 2012, protestors streamed to the Hillsborough County School Board meetings in Tampa to object to a guest speaker on Islam at Steinbrenner High School. In the fall of 2011, the speaker, Hassan Shibly, had spoken to several world history classes and one world religion class about the basics of Islam. Shibly is an imam and executive director of CAIR-Florida, a Muslim civil rights organization. He was one of several guest speakers that teacher Kelly Miliziano invited each year to supplement instruction about the world's religions as part of world history.

What is known: Shibly said nothing controversial during his talks to students. He gave a PowerPoint presentation about the basics of Islam, including the five pillars. He talked about his trip to Mecca and how he juggles his religious obligations in the modern world. His organization, while it has a controversial history, has never been indicted on anything. Shibly, who was just 25 when he gave the talk, is considered an eloquent, knowledgeable speaker about Islam.

The Opposition: As many as 50 opponents at a time came to school board meetings to protest Shibly's visits. They sometimes spewed anti-Muslim sentiment, but they also raised a question that school board members could not ignore. Should Hillsborough County establish stricter guidelines for guest speakers and ban people like Shibly?

Supporters: Shibly said nothing wrong in the classes. He's an eloquent speaker. He has given these kinds of talks all over Florida. The teacher reviewed what he would say beforehand. He provides firsthand experience with Islam that the teachers cannot. It would hamstring teachers if the school board established too strict guidelines for speakers.

Discussion Questions

1. Should Hassan Shibly, both an imam as well as head of a political action group, be invited back to Steinbrenner High School? Explain why or why not.
2. What type of guidelines does your school system have for guest speakers on religion, if any? If you could create guidelines, what would they be? What role should an administrator play when guest speakers visit?
3. How can you define 'neutral' when it comes to a speaker on religion? Can a rabbi be neutral, for example? Why or why not?
4. Teachers often ask parents to come in as guest speakers on their family's religion. What do you think of this practice? What pitfalls might there be?
5. In the same school where the imam's talk caused a fuss, there was a smaller to-do over a guest lecture by an Eastern Lebanese Catholic. He spread some common stereotypes of Muslims, which greatly bothered a Muslim student. What role should a teacher play during a guest's talk?

Further Reading and Resources

- First Amendment Center's "A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools."
- American Academy of Religion "Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Schools"



CHAPTER 4: HOW YOUNG IS TOO YOUNG?

Summary: Teachers at Minneha Core Knowledge Magnet Elementary School in Wichita, Kansas, have taught about the world religions as early as first grade since the late 1990s. They use the Core Knowledge curriculum, created by E.D. Hirsch, an education researcher. Minneha had a controversy in 2013 when a parent took a photo of a yet-to-be-filled bulletin board. All it said was "Five Pillars of Islam," but the parent thought the bulletin board should have a sixth pillar, jihad, which she contended was the demand for Muslims to kill all non-Muslims. Her photo, which she shared with a state lawmaker with similar views, went viral and became national news. The main objection was that a school was teaching about religion, particularly Islam, to such young students. Opponents expressed Islamophobia but also questioned how teachers could teach about religion to such young students. First-graders were getting introductory information about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Second-graders learned about Hinduism. Fourth-graders studied the spread of Islam.

Discussion Questions

1. How young is too young to teach about religion in public schools?
2. How can schools deal with parents' concerns? Parents who have no religion in the home worry

that such lessons may upset their children and cause discomfort. Others worry about their children learning conflicting values to their own faith.

3. How should teachers manage young kids' comments? i.e. A child said "All Jews are bankers" in the first grade class. What would you have done?
4. The Core Knowledge Foundation, which oversees the Core Knowledge curriculum, provides training for its overall approach but not on religion. How can teachers prepare themselves to teach about religion to young children?
5. Elementary schools traditionally have focused only on religious holidays in terms of celebration. The Wichita school moves discussion about holidays to the religions unit and tries to keep the attention on education v. celebration. How would you try to accomplish this in your school?
6. Say a Jewish parent offers to bring in a menorah and explain Hanukkah to your class because she's concerned about an over-emphasis on Christmas. How do you respond?

Further Reading and Resources

- My commentary on handling the Christmas dilemma in public schools: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/12/20/christmas-public-schools-controversy-separation-church-state-column/76993068>
- First Amendment center article on religious holidays and schools: <http://www.firstamendment-center.org/religious-holidays>
- Debate over Georgia's standard on Christmas instruction in kindergarten: <http://getschooled.blog.myajc.com/2016/06/10/do-we-need-a-little-christmas-in-georgias-kindergarten-curriculum>



CHAPTER 5: THE CHURCH LADY

Summary: In 1974, when the author moved to northwest Ohio in fourth grade, she felt different for the first time in her life as one of the only Jews, other than her brothers, in the Van Buren school system. Making matters worse, the school system allowed a woman hired by a local church to come into elementary classrooms every week and teach Bible stories and lead the children in praise songs about Jesus. The author was excused, but the experience singled her out because she was the only one who left each week. This was clearly preaching religion in the public schools. In 2013, the author returned to see if the school was doing a better job of heeding the lines separating church and state. She found a mixed bag, even as Van Buren embraced the state standard to teach middle schoolers about the world's religions. A youth pastor regularly visited the lunch room recruiting students for weekly meetings. There was a new religious club, God's Knights, that met during the lunch hour. The principal sometimes visited and read scripture.

Discussion Questions

1. What was your view of the principal participating in the youth Christian club?
2. How does your school handle visits from pastors and other clergy?
3. Legally, private religious organizations can run religious programs on school grounds after or before school. What do you think of this practice?
4. How can teachers intercede when students are picked on because they are a religious minority? What role can teachers play if they see their school violate the separation of church and state?
5. What guidelines should schools establish when it comes to teachers, aides, and administrators participating in religious activities on school grounds?
6. Let's say you teach social studies at your school and teach about religion as part of it. You also are the faculty adviser for a student Christian club. How do you keep yourself from showing bias toward Christianity when you're teaching?

Further Reading and Resources

- First Amendment Center's article on religious clubs: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/religious-clubs>
- Book: *The Good News Club and the Christian Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children*, by Katherine Stewart. (Published in 2012)
- Podcast, *The Church Lady*, in the *Us & Them* series. This 30-hour podcast, which includes an interview with me and religion scholars, examines the Weekday Religious Education movement in the United States. <http://usandthempodcast.com/podcast/the-church-lady>



CHAPTER 6: CAREFULLY TAUGHT

Summary: Modesto, California, in 2000 became the only school system in the country to require all high school freshmen to take a world's religion's course before graduation. This chapter takes readers to a Modesto teacher's classroom and gives a taste of the course and its effect on students. Modesto has never encountered controversy for its religions course. It prohibits the use of guest speakers; field trips; trying on ritual garb; and heavy discussion on religion in the classroom. Teachers have gone through training and visited houses of worship to prepare for the course. They also receiving coaching on what the First Amendment says as well. Research has shown that Modesto students learn to stand up for others through the course and retain some, but not all, of what they're taught about the basics of a minimum of six religions. In Modesto's case, the school system requires that Sikhism is taught, given the large Sikh population in California.

Discussion Questions

1. Many in the education world hold up Modesto as a model for world religion instruction. What could be some of the drawbacks of its course, given teachers are discouraged from going beyond direct instruction?
2. What lessons can other school districts learn from Modesto?
3. Modesto picked six religions by looking at who lived in its community. How should schools pick which religions to study?
4. Modesto sees ninth grade as the best time to begin such instruction. Wellesley thinks sixth grade is best. The Core Knowledge Foundation promotes the idea of beginning teaching about religion as early as first grade. What age do you think is best and why? Or should religion be taught in various grades in different ways?
5. What did you experience in terms of learning about religion in primary and secondary schools?
6. How could you teach your students to stand up for the rights of the smallest religious minorities?

Further Reading and Resources

- Article in Teaching Tolerance magazine about Modesto and teaching about religion: <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-32-fall-2007/feature/one-nation-many-gods>
- CBS Evening News special in 2008 on Modesto's course: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/teaching-not-preaching-in-ca-bible-belt/>
- Teaching about Religions, a Democratic approach: by researcher Emile Lester, who surveyed Modesto students on what they learned. Published in 2011 by University of Michigan press, https://www.press.umich.edu/2180004/teaching_about_religions

CHAPTER 7: RAISING RELIGIOUSLY LITERATE AMERICANS

Summary: The final chapter raises questions on how American can do a better job of raising religiously literate Americans. No one has replicated Modesto's model. Educators and communities around the country disagree on the best time to begin instruction about religion. There is only a free-for-all movement when it comes to teach about religion.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you see as the next best steps for you and your school when it comes to teaching about religion?

2. What role should the U.S. Education Department play in promoting instruction on religion?
3. Examine the suggested standards by the National Council for the Social Studies and other national associations on English and geography for teaching about religion. What do they require or encourage? What would you add or take out?
4. What steps should schools take to better prepare teachers to teach about religion? Consider the grade level of students in your answer.
5. Brainstorm with your colleagues about how to get others, including teachers, parents, students and administrators, to support fostering more religious literacy in your school system.

Further Reading and Resources

- The Pluralism Project at Harvard University: Numerous resources on world religions. Pluralism.org
- Harvard Divinity School's Religious Literacy Project, which provides information and training for teachers: <http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/>
- California's Three Rs Project: Provides resources for teachers for teaching about religion within world history and geography or for those teaching separate comparative religion courses. <http://ca3rsproject.org/>
- *Religious Literacy and God is Not One*, books by religion scholar Stephen Prothero, based at Boston University. Reading both books would help teachers improve their own religious literacy.
- *The Norton Anthology of World Religions*, general editor, Jack Miles. Published by Norton.
- The National Council for the Social Studies position paper on studying religions in the curriculum. http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/study_about_religions
- For more information on national standards, go to: <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/>

Many thanks to Erik Owens, the associate director of the Boisi Center on Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, for his assistance with this guide.