

# Different Drummers

Nonconforming Thinkers in History

Teacher Resource Section

**Acknowledging Religious Diversity and Nonbelief:  
Toward Impartial Teaching about Religion**

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Mynga Futrell

Paul Geisert

Instructional Systems

Sacramento, California

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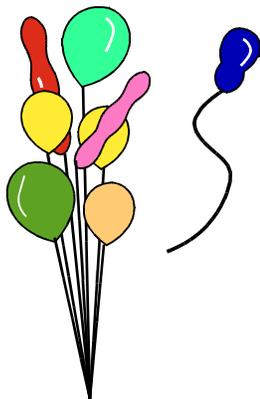
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# **Acknowledging Religious Diversity and Nonbelief**



**Toward Impartial Classroom  
Teaching about Religion**



**Ms. Jones, did Noah and the flood come before or after the ancient Egyptians?**

Sorting out what is *historical* and what is *religious* is complicated and controversial. Teachers need to be sensitive to the differences between conventional history and the varieties of sacred history.

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## Author's Note

This monograph on impartial handling of religion speaks mainly to educators in California public schools, although it is certainly applicable also to public school teachers throughout the United States. The presentation itself is directed toward classroom teachers, but the content is useful also for administrators or others who are involved in selecting and implementing curricula related to the realm of religion in public education.

Drawing in part upon California-oriented publications adopted by the California State Board of Education and issued by the State Department of Education, *Acknowledging Religious Diversity and Nonbelief* has as its intent aiding educators in responding more effectively to the following civic principle:

**RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS:** *Public schools may not inculcate nor inhibit religion. They must be places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect.* (p. 138)

This principle is one of six to which the Department refers readers of its 1997 *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools*.<sup>1</sup> The cluster of six resides in a new section (Appendix C: “Religious Liberty, Public Education, and the Future of American Democracy”) that was *not* present in the Department’s prior (1988) framework guiding the state’s history and social science teachers.

All state framework documents, it should be noted, provide direction to California’s classroom teachers at both elementary and secondary levels. While I may quibble with some content, I find the intent of the new appendix section to be sound. Its attempt to offer “ground rules” for how we in public education debate our differences with respect to religion and values and how we resolve conflicts is a welcome addition to an important guiding document. Still, there is a long way from the fine-sounding phrases to the sought-after reality the Department promotes (“academic excellence, fairness, and shared civic values”) in this controversial realm.

Of the six principles, I find the one cited above to be of prime relevance to teachers in terms of actual classroom and curricular pragmatics. However, only two brief sentences accompany the text of this “religious liberty and public schools principle.” Teachers have little to go on. So, in this monograph, I add my two cents worth of interpretation to the bare bones commentary offered by the Department. In particular, I try to tackle the above principle in light of its *first* accompanying sentence: “Public schools uphold the First Amendment when they protect the religious liberty rights of students of *all faiths or none*.” (my emphasis).

Can educators really come forward with the “fairness and respect” that is due to the full panorama of convictions and also be neutral with respect to (not inhibiting/not inculcating) religion? What a challenge!

Mynga Futrell, Ph.D.  
Instructional Systems

## Foreword

When introducing a new appendix section in its *1997 Updated Edition of the History-Social Science Framework*,<sup>1</sup> the California State Department of Education noted:

*Few issues have stirred greater controversy in Americans' attitudes toward public education than the role of religion and values in public schools.”*(p. 137)

The section then reaffirmed California's “official response to this controversy” as being expressed in two publications: 1) the *Framework* itself, and 2) the *Handbook on the Rights and Responsibilities of School Personnel and Students*.<sup>2</sup>

One notes that both the current framework and its earlier 1988 version refer to religion with the “mandate statement” replicated here:

*This framework acknowledges the importance of religion in human history. When studying world history, students must become familiar with the basic ideas of major religions and the ethical traditions of each time and place. Students are expected to learn about the role of religion in the founding of this country because many of our political institutions have their antecedents in religious beliefs. Students should understand the intense religious passions that have produced fanaticism and war as well as the political arrangements developed (such as separation of church and state) that allow members of different religious groups to live amicably in a pluralistic society. (p. 7)*

Within its *Handbook*, one can survey the brief guidance that the Department offers teachers toward accomplishing the above stated ends (see the section entitled, “Teaching About Religion in the Public Schools” and also page 35 in the same document).

The aforementioned *Framework* section (Appendix C) explains the Department's inclusion of six civic principles “...to assist educators as they implement both the framework and the State Board of Education's handbook and as they respond to community concerns” with respect to religion. In such an admittedly controversial area, guidance is much needed. Every teacher represents the citizenry at large, and so teachers need to act in keeping with those civic principles. However, the very brief statements are themselves much in need of further explication.

In this pamphlet, *Acknowledging Religious Diversity and Nonbelief*, the author takes a step toward just such explication as she addresses in some detail one of the most important of the several civic principles. Concentrating her attention around the one issue of *fairness*, Dr. Futrell puts forth concepts and suggestions with regard to how educators actually implement their mandate for teaching about religion. The author's position is that teachers can and must learn to be impartial when they encounter those who hold to unfamiliar religious beliefs or who are not believers in any religion. They need to exhibit a stance of impartiality toward the varied belief systems and not seemingly endorse any above others. This neutral stance will necessitate acknowledging the *unbelief* as well as the wide spectrum of *religious diversity* present in students, parents, other adults in the community, across the nation, and around the globe.

John B. Massen, Founder and Coordinator of OABITAR  
Objectivity, Accuracy and Balance In Teaching About Religion

## Preface

*Acknowledging Religious Diversity and Nonbelief* seeks to enhance teacher inclination toward full *objectivity* and *neutrality* in carrying out whatever instructional events or classroom discussions deal with or enter into the subject matter domain of religion.

The monograph offers a brief overview of elements of **religious heterogeneity** pertinent to the respectful and fair handling of religious discussion and subject matter in a classroom. It also introduces the topic of **nonbelief** as integral to the complete spectrum of religious diversity. To enable readers to explore the topics in further depth, a listing of resource materials is provided.

An educator is responsible for *intellectual fairness* in depicting and dealing with such subjects as religion. Teachers versed in the broad panorama of the religion realm are more likely to be adroit and comfortable handling open discussions in the areas of religion and ethics in a *fair-minded* manner. They are also apt to be more responsive to the full spectrum of belief and nonbelief presented by their curriculum and by the students who occupy their classrooms.



## Introduction

If you open the Department of Education’s *Handbook on the Rights and Responsibilities of School Personnel and Students*<sup>2</sup> and turn to the section regarding “Teaching About Religion,” you will find the handbook directing California classroom teachers to discuss religion with **sensitivity**. The *Handbook* also offers a bit of guidance for doing so.

Within the text the *Handbook* states: “Conflicting points of view are to be expected and considered; open discussion is a proper method for searching for truth ... indoctrination is to be avoided.” Reading further, you will note the presentation of two major principles that underlie the Department’s prescriptions for action:

- Need for **factual accuracy**. This is a paramount obligation. Careful and balanced examination of sources is requisite for informed judgment. Primary sources can be helpful.
- Need for **empathy**. Empathizing sufficiently with the conflicting points of view, understanding why a view is held and why it is valuable in the life of the one who holds it, and seeking to come to understanding within an historical context (rather than solely from personal viewpoint) are all relevant.

Certainly, whenever teachers are charged *both* to sensitively handle conflicting points of view in a discussion *and* to expect lack of harmony, it pays to be prepared. Many of us don’t always feel we are adept, especially when the domain is religion.

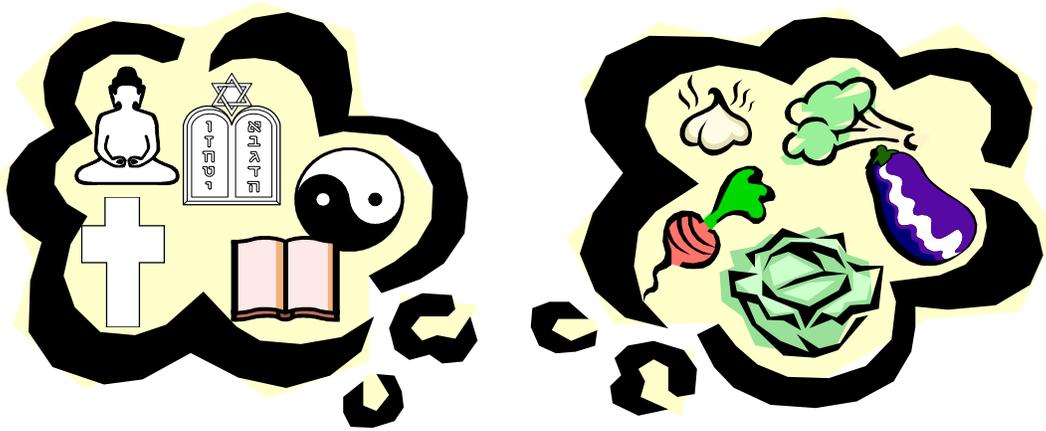
This booklet will delineate and explore two concepts germane to the task of teaching about religion in school settings. An understanding of these two concepts is likely to convey to you a greater facility in handling with accuracy and empathy the various circumstances you are likely to encounter.

The first target concept is **religious diversity**. *How do you yourself actually conceive of the heterogeneity involved in the religion domain?*

Regardless of the extent to which a teacher is grounded in comparative religion, she or he will be better served if the underlying conception of religious variance is fundamentally accurate and complete. It helps to be alert to one's own cultural premises and take care that they not impede a just handling of the topic. One needs to be able to respond with open-minded empathy to diverse perspectives. One needs to anticipate encounters with unfamiliar philosophical and religious beliefs.

The second concept of interest within this booklet is **nonbelief**. *When you teach about religion in your classroom, to what extent are you able to conceive of the absence of religious belief as being a part of the religious picture?*

Freethought is a notion that is pertinent to any teacher's ability to teach in a neutral and unbiased manner about religion's role in history and society. It is important that your own understanding of religious variance be sufficiently comprehensive that you not inadvertently omit freethought outlooks from curricular consideration when you are teaching about religion. As a public school teacher, your mandate to evidence neutrality in your handling of religion goes beyond how you approach the various forms of religious belief you may teach about or encounter. It also precludes favoring religion itself over nonreligion, or being otherwise prejudicial with respect to the worldviews of the varied sorts of freethinkers that may inhabit your curriculum or your classroom.

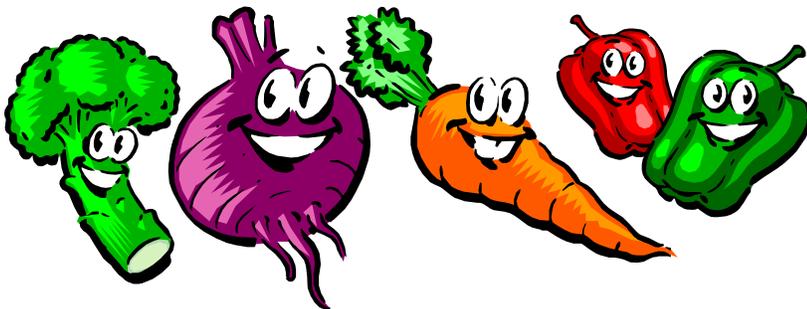


## Religion Stew

### **Heterogeneity**

Religion is a realm in which there are many strongly held positions and emotions. In addition, it is one in which there is lots of diversity of belief and practice.

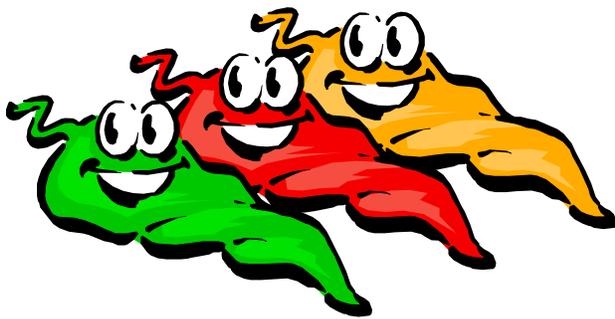
Across the spectrum of belief (and lack thereof), the variety is astounding. According to *The State of Religion Atlas* (1993),<sup>3</sup> eighty percent of the world's population claims some religious affiliation. Twenty percent do not.



Beyond the major popular religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, and Taoism—we find countless indigenous faiths. And within each major religion are innumerable variants.

The makeup of the United States is comparatively homogenous with respect to major world religions. According to the

*Atlas*, about 88 percent of Americans claim Christian affiliation of some kind. Slightly over half of U.S. citizens are Protestant Christian affiliation, and 30% are Roman Catholic. Remaining citizens distribute in single digit percentages. The declared *nonreligious* outnumbers Jewish by at least two to one.



These data may make U.S. schools appear rather homogeneous with respect to religion. Perhaps they *are*—in a “broad brush” sense. But there can be plenty of interesting differences represented among the youngsters in any California classroom. Just consider this tidbit: within Christianity alone there is a wide range of emotional investment in belief, depending on the denomination. And the *Atlas* reports 2550 *separate* Christian denominations!

### ***Dealing with Degrees of Belief and Nonbelief***

Beyond variety in professed allegiances, there can be plenty of additional variance represented in a classroom’s religion stew. Depending on age, exposure, and innumerable other factors, pupils’ personal understandings and beliefs may be sketchily or ill-formed with respect to general public understanding of the faith tenets of their professed religion.

And, in any classroom, there may be nonbelievers as well as faith adherents. Nonbelief is ever-present in classrooms. In fact, if you think about it, a believer in any single faith becomes in several senses a *nonbeliever* with respect to the *other* faiths. (This is true for *you* as well!)

Adding further to the heterogeneity goulash, though, may be the “real nonbelievers” (those who do not adhere to or profess faith in *any* religion). Like the religious youngsters in your class, these children will hold to their perspectives with varying degrees of firmness and cognitive maturity. They may have formed their ideas through reasoning patterns different from the rest of the children, and they may also have reached their outlook of *unbelief* via different rational paths from one another.



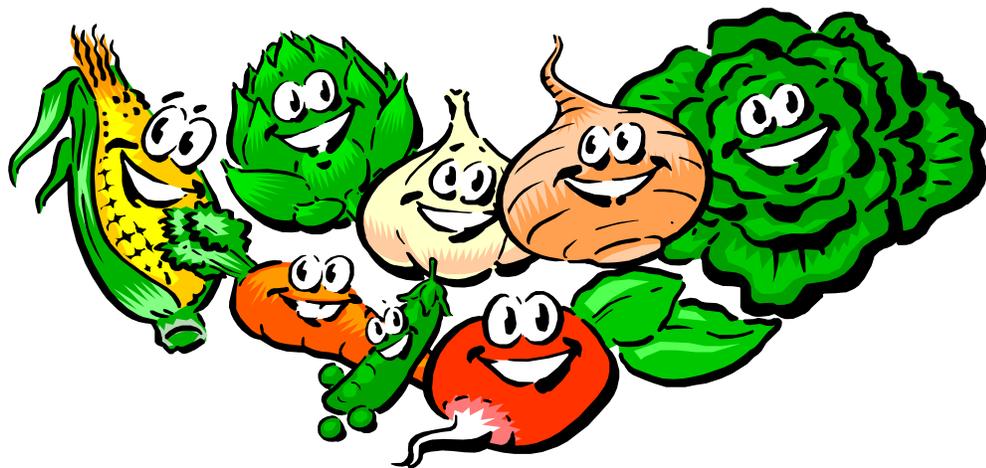
All this variety is quite sufficient to keep a classroom teacher mindful and on his or her toes. This is where *factual accuracy* and *empathy* really do come into play. These attributes will serve you well in handling the spectrum of students’ religious beliefs, and will also apply when you are handling any lack of belief that may be present (expressed or unexpressed) in your classroom. It is a matter of knowing enough and summoning the requisite empathy.

A teacher’s own personal religious perspective is highly relevant, because people’s tendency is to receive and interpret the religious perspectives of others through the lens of their own particular variant. Certain information within the following table may be helpful to you in “loosening up” on characteristic preconceptions and in expanding your flexibility with the subject matter domain. (See the table that follows, which contains material excerpted from *The State of Religion Atlas*.<sup>3</sup>)

<b>Did you know?</b>		
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Major Idea</b>	<b>Elaboration</b>
<b>stating religious affiliation</b>	The meaning of “claiming a religious affiliation” differs from faith to faith, (as well as from country to country).	In both Islam and Hinduism, the notion of religion as a separate ingredient is <i>unthinkable</i> . In many places, Islam describes itself as a “way of life” rather than as a “faith.” And Hinduism’s “faith” is not what is meant when a Christian talks of faith.
<b>how much a faith is practiced</b>	Questions about how <i>much</i> a faith is “practiced” are not really appropriate to those whose religious identity goes hand in hand with ethnic, social and cultural identity.	For many if not most people, their religious faith is not a matter of conscious choice. They are born into and reared in a given set of values and beliefs, and unless some trauma shakes them or they move out of their own culture, the religion of their birth remains their religion throughout life.
<b>religious observance / attendance</b>	It is a mistake to equate religious life with church attendance or to assume that lack of attendance is any measure of a discrepancy between professed belief and practice.	Compared to other countries, the USA has developed a high level of church attendance among those professing a faith. TV and radio and other alternatives, however, are available as means of religious observance, and there is growing interest in spiritual explorations through secular and unconventional channels.
<b>religion and life</b>	Even within Christianity, the notion of religion as separate from life is largely a Protestant northern European/North American idea.	The division into a public, secular world and a private, religious/spiritual world has colored how religion is understood. This in turn has led to a greater marginalization of religion from social life and use of a model that divides secular from religious.
<b>uncertainty and doubt</b>	The issue of religion is difficult for the many people who are uncertain that they can believe anything specific about the divine or who are sure that they cannot.	It is not socially acceptable anywhere to profess to be an agnostic or atheist. In a handful of places (e.g., Iran) it is dangerous. Worldwide, the number who count themselves agnostic or as having no faith is growing. The number who say they are atheists is not sizable and is not growing.
<b>agnosticism</b>	Many who see themselves as personally agnostic wish to abandon overt religious practices but maintain moral ethical insights and codes.	In many places there exists a form of agnostic Christianity, people seeing religion as useful for its moral code, but not so important for truths. This is particularly widespread in Europe, where a majority claims allegiance to a faith but there is steady growth in secular culture and decline in religious observance.
<b>atheism</b>	Many who identify as atheists often do so to make a stance not just against the beliefs of any given religion, but against the whole apparatus of organized religion.	They may take a position that religion is not rational or subject to reasoned study and analysis, or they may regard religious faith as being a state of mind that hinders the fullest development of humanity. Atheism for some can become a belief system in which humanity or the well-being of the planet becomes central.
<b>prejudice</b>	Activities of official atheist states in suppression or eradication of religion has caused problems for many holding an atheist personal stance.	Atheism interpreted as a movement results in the term “atheist” being often regarded with suspicion. Atheists have been instrumental in founding many international humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.
<b>humanism</b>	The proportion of people who call themselves humanists and are organized is small, and the nature of organized humanism exhibits tremendous diversity.	In some places humanist organizations have a strong scientific basis and seek to confront what they see as the illogicality of religion. In others there is a quasi-religious foundation arising from 19th century attempts to provide a human-centered faith. Others arise from concern for human well-being and the need for moral/ethical codes based on human interests and not reference to divine will or purpose.

As the preceding table makes clear, it is no wonder some teachers feel a bit of reticence about their adeptness to manage open classroom discussion of religious topics. They want to do it evenly and fairly, but the range of possible pitfalls makes it seem a formidable task.

You may well ask yourself, “Can I muster the requisite empathy to deal *objectively* with the array of religious and nonreligious viewpoints I am likely to encounter?”





## Gaining Comfort with Nonbelief

When it comes to testing one's mettle with respect to handling the full gamut of philosophical worldviews, the issue of *nonbelief* offers a teacher an excellent example to consider.

Presume, for example, you are a typical teacher who holds to a theistic conviction. Do you think you will be able to respond objectively to an *atheistic* viewpoint?

Sure you can, *if* you are knowledgeable about the subject of freethought and see how it fits into the religious heterogeneity picture.

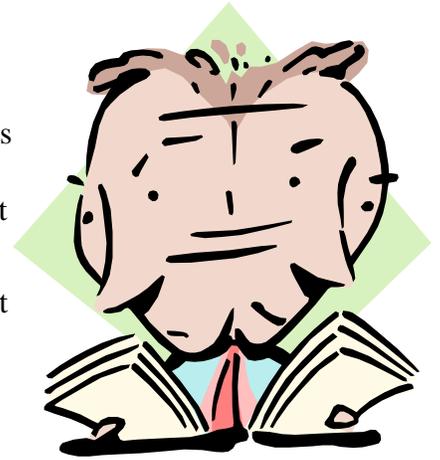
Whether you are teaching world or U.S. history or any other social science area in which such topics as ethical behavior, moral codes, values, and so on arise, the full gamut of belief may present itself, including *departure from* religious belief (free-thinking).

Comprehending freethought's part in the picture of human progress helps you to deal more professionally with the full range of religious beliefs and practices, as well as the variations in unbeliever stances that you are likely to encounter in the classroom at some point. You can more ably and impartially handle discussion when you are able to explain with accuracy and precision what it means to be a freethinker, and to describe the various forms.

## **Understanding Freethought with Respect to Religion**

You already know well that religion in varied forms has been present throughout human history. It obviously has been one of the decisive factors in the development of civilizations.

But did you know that freethought too has been present throughout recorded human history? Atheist philosophy dates back to at least 400 BCE, when Democritus in Greece postulated the existence of atoms and two atheistic schools of Hinduism developed in India.



*Quiz time!* World history contains important examples of cultural revolutions fueled by freethinking. *Can you identify any?* Freethought and freethinkers have contributed enormously to human progress and welfare. (Examine items by Stein<sup>4</sup>, Larue<sup>5</sup>, Haught<sup>6</sup>, and Gaylor<sup>7</sup> in the resource listing, pp. 18-20.) That is why the history of freethought deserves separate and significant treatment whenever curricula include teaching about religion. Freethinking and religion are intertwined.

Freethought contributions to our own United States history are also considerable. *Are you able to name a few?* Such information can be crucial to your aims for impartiality and accuracy in handling religious topics in the classroom. If you are not savvy with regard to this subject matter, then some study of the topic of freethought will prove fruitful. For example, reading in just one source (a chapter by Larue<sup>5</sup> devoted to “Freethought in America”) would be particularly helpful in reminding you that you are already acquainted with some of American history’s most eminent freethinkers, although you may not be acknowledging them as such.

Most teachers can readily identify for students the important world religions and can sensitize youngsters to the necessity of unprejudicial behavior toward peers who adhere to some religion that is different from their own. But what if students ask corresponding questions about *nonreligious* thinking or learn that someone in the class does not believe in *any* religion or god at all?

If such a situation arises when you are guiding the discussion, then some acquaintance with freethinking *categories* would stand you in good stead. You would be cognizant of the various types of freethinkers and could describe them correctly, and with the neutrality that is desirable. One item in the resource listing, *Freethought and Religious Liberty—A Primer for Teachers*,<sup>7</sup> offers general background on the topic and some perspective on freethought’s particular relevance to teachers of U. S. history.

## **Teaching about Freethought**

A nitty gritty understanding of freethought as well as religion helps any history and social science teacher provide students with a more accurate picture of cultural development through the ages and of the world in which they live. All too often, though, focusing on the prevalent religion(s) of a country (or region, or period in history) by categorical name (e.g., Hindu or Christian or Islam) results in ignoring any corresponding freethinking segment in that same place or timeframe.

It helps to recall that the global picture in our own times presents *nonbelievers* as twenty percent of the world population. Academic objectivity in teaching about religion would appear to call for informing students about *this* aspect of humanity and human inclination, too.

There are some barriers, however, to such intentions. For example, important historical figures whose freethought philosophy propels their conduct may not be identified as nonbelievers. Although textbooks often stipulate when people are being motivated by a religious belief or cause, actions of freethinkers are rarely labeled as such. Thus, you may be unaware of the freethinking individuals that occupy your own instructional realms of interest.

Even though many unbelievers were historical movers and shakers, it is doubtful you know them *as* freethinkers. So, you may wish to research a bit further the particular historical events you teach about to decipher whether freethinkers—or freethought *ideas*—are at hand.

### Within the History Curriculum

The *Framework* states that students need to comprehend how religious ideas have helped to shape Western and Eastern cultures and civilizations. Pupils should be made aware of the influence of religion on lifestyles and on the development of ideas. But they should *also* understand the influences and impact of freethinkers on the edification of humanity. As a public educator who is sincerely striving to be impartial in your teaching about religion in history, you will want to divulge to students the role and relevance of the freethinkers, too.



You know you can teach about a creed or a ritual or a deity of a world religion, and you can just as comfortably teach about some of the ideas (e.g., rationalism) that have been propounded by noted freethinkers. Students need to consider occasions throughout recorded history in which freethinking persons (e.g., 18<sup>th</sup> century deists) have acted on their philosophical principles to perform historically momentous actions. It is certainly of significance when such persons (e.g., Thomas Paine) are noteworthy critics of the governing belief system(s) of their particular places and times. Students need to learn how these ideas and thinkers have shaped various cultures, most particularly their own.

It makes sense to integrate teaching about known freethinking perspectives (e.g., skepticism, rationalism, deism, agnosticism, atheism, secular humanism) into any of your historical presentations that inform students about the various religious beliefs, dogmas, creeds, sects, denominations, movements, and so forth that have appeared across the span of human history.

As you aim for objectivity, accuracy and balance in your teaching, the following guidelines may be helpful:

- Whenever you identify and examine the roles and actions of important *religious* leaders in their times, give similar consideration to any significant *freethinking* counterparts.

- When you conduct discussions of the development of varied ethics and beliefs, include such freethought philosophical stances and events as are recorded along with those of the particular religion(s) of the times.

Once you yourself are made aware, you can teach about the freethought domain every bit as objectively and with just as much ease as you develop for teaching about religion. As you impart notable *religious* movements and person-ages, you will point out, any time they are germane, those people and groups whose actions are motivated by *freethought* positions, too.



### As a Distinct Topic



For youngsters, learning about the nature of freethought, about how it so often runs counter to religious thinking, and about the role of important freethinkers throughout the ages can prove fascinating. You may wish to develop a separate study unit—depicting freethought and freethinkers—to put into your social science program.

The resource listing beginning on page 18 contains some materials useful for teachers who are inclined to involve students in a unit of study concerning dissenters from mainstream belief. Of particular value to initiating any historical study of the topic would be *Free and Independent Thinking Through the Ages—A Timeline*.<sup>8</sup> This teacher reference tool touches on other sorts of nonconforming thinkers from history as well as freethinkers.

### Curriculum Issues

At present, few educators would take the position that the instructional resources for teachers who are teaching about religion in their classrooms are satisfactory. Most would argue, in fact, that the textbooks and materials for teaching about religion in history and social science classes are sorely inadequate. Without doubt, however, the situation is even worse for teachers who are planning and conducting lessons and activities related to freethinking philosophies and movements. Their challenging task is compounded by the fact that our state-adopted textbooks seem to skip the topic altogether!

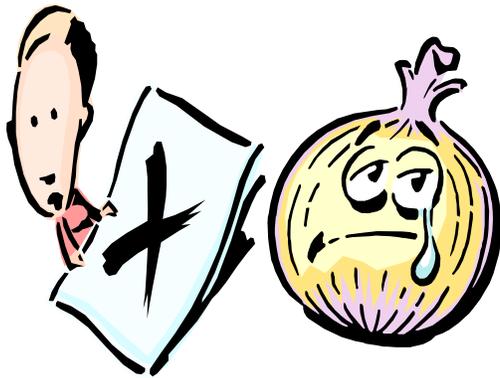


Here is an example of how the textbooks treat two significant areas of history—the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. The Renaissance led Europe out of the Dark Ages. The Enlightenment underlay the formation of our own United States. Both

were seminal times for the development of our country as a nation, culture, and political system. The commonality and hallmark of these two ages was a burst of intellectual energy that forever changed the minds of humans, and therefore the very foundations of world society.

The surge of rationality that formed the Renaissance and the Enlightenment did not take place within the existing institutions of society. Rather, it came from without. Existing institutions had stagnated and centuries of dogma and staid cultural beliefs had supported kings and clergy over common people. The road to the future lay in a clear departure from mainstream belief and tradition. It resided in *freethought*, and that was the road taken by some of the most influential individuals of those two ages.

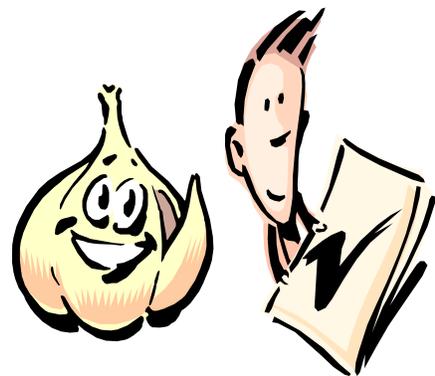
The Renaissance and Enlightenment were important influences on those leaders who laid the foundations of our government and gave vision to the development of American society. Given that much of the intellectual advancement within both eras was in fact fueled by freethinkers, it is reasonable to ask whether history and social science textbooks *recognize* freethought contributions when depicting the heritage that has been passed down to us..



Even the most cursory look at the social science texts currently adopted by the California State Board of Education will bring to light the simple fact that, whereas religion is touted as a basis for a multiplicity of human actions, freethought is overlooked as a factor in human progress. Presently adopted textbooks<sup>†</sup> for grades 6, 7, and 8 make scant mention of any category of freethought whatsoever.

Houghton-Mifflin does have one—a reference in the 7th grade text to humanism, a *philosophical* stance that may derive from either religious or nonreligious sources. In addition, the teacher edition of that same text has two paragraphs (p.474) relating to the fact that many of the leaders of the American revolution (Franklin, for example, and Washington and Jefferson) were deists, although there is no glossary entry to explicitly define the perspective or index entry to lead one to this fact.

As more educators become aware of and comfortable with freethought as subject matter, they will act to accord it appropriate recognition within the curriculum.



<sup>†</sup>California's presently adopted textbooks are: Houghton-Mifflin's *A Message of Ancient Days* (6th grade), *Across the Centuries* (7th grade), and *A More Perfect Union* (8th grade), and Holt, Rinehard Winston's *The Story of America* (8th grade).



## Aiming for Neutrality

For most youngsters, it is their nonsectarian “civil public schools” that mold their conceptions of citizenship. In school, they learn how fortunate they are to live in a country where the notion of citizens’ rights and equality under the law is so fundamental. Perhaps through their schooling and the conduct of their classroom teachers, budding citizens can learn best what citizenship entails.

Through its laws, our nation acknowledges for *every citizen* the important human rights bestowed by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Liberty of conscience—religious liberty—is a right bestowed on *all* Americans.

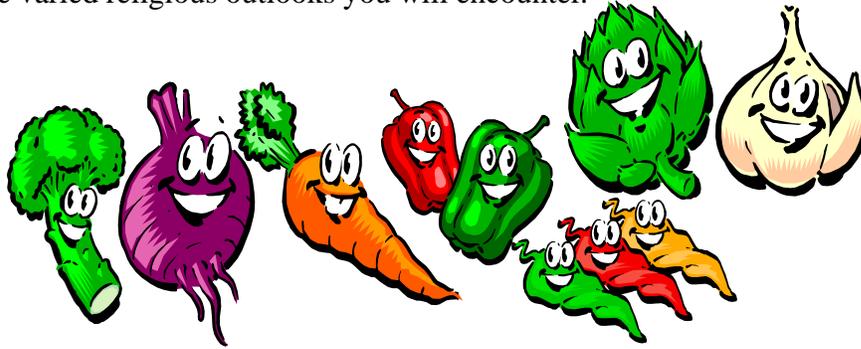
For over 50 years the U. S. Supreme Court has taken *neutrality* as its touchstone in settling court cases related to the relationship of religion to government and to the public schools. As government institutions, public schools must be religiously neutral in two senses: they must be neutral *among religions*, and they must be neutral *between religion and nonreligion*. In other words, public schools cannot privilege one religion over another; nor can they privilege religion generally over nonreligion.

Public schools are to be places where people of every faith and no faith are treated with fairness and respect. This is the ideal put forth by the California Three Rs approach to the just handling of religion in public education.<sup>9</sup> Neutrality and fairness is possible, however, only when teachers clearly understand their roles and their mandate to act on behalf of all citizens.

As a public school teacher, you owe to *all* the children you teach equitable consideration, acknowledging each as an individual who is fully *free* to hold to his or her individual faith position. Schools uphold the First Amendment when teachers act impartially and protect the religious liberty rights of students of all faiths or none.

## Responding to Diversity

With *impartiality* clearly stated as an imperative for teaching about religion in the public schools, most teachers know that it is not appropriate for any one child's religious beliefs to be given favor over another's. Thus, when interacting with your students, you will continuously strive to meet the challenge of regarding *evenhandedly* the varied religious outlooks you will encounter.



Professional educators must attempt to respond to diverse outlooks in an impartial and academic manner. This stance lets you accord to those children who abide by unusual or unfamiliar faith systems, and to those who may reject all faiths, the same respect and consideration you give to the youngsters who affirm your own worldview or who adhere to conventional belief systems that are more familiar to you.

There is an oft-stated maxim known as the “golden rule.” It appears in some form in almost all religions and is present in most secular philosophies as well. In complying with its edict, you grant to those who have contrasting religious beliefs the same regard you would wish to be given persons who share your own outlook.

To any student's question, you will respond as *sensitively* and as *factually* as you can. Whether the questioner follows a majority faith, or a minority faith, or no faith at all will not matter. This is not to say that, in doing so, you are bestowing on the worldviews themselves equivalent cultural legitimacy. Nor are you deeming them equally valid. Rather, by your conduct, you are upholding the *right* of each student you are teaching to have and adhere to his or her faith (or non-faith) convictions. All the students in your classroom can be at ease and free of apprehension on this count.

As the classroom teacher, you impart an image to students of how America looks upon its citizens' religious freedom. In a civil classroom, no students need ever feel distress of teacher condescension or classmate derision for having their religious (or unbelieving) ideology.

Teachers who aim for the neutrality ideal and model it in their classrooms will help the students (proto-citizens all) to look upon one another with similar fairness. In a conducive classroom atmosphere, the youngsters will be able to *learn* to respect their classmates' freedom to have and maintain individuality of conscience with regard to religion. Having students properly practiced in respectful acknowledgment of each person's individual liberty of conscience is necessary if we are to have citizens that will continue to preserve for all Americans one of our nation's most important freedoms.

## Considering Societal Biases

The neutrality required of teachers by the First Amendment is intended to prevent the government itself (i.e., the public schools) from imposing either religious or anti-religious views on students. On the whole, however, this ideal is hard to reach.

At present, there exists a broad societal seal of approval for the *monotheistic* religions. Consider, for example, the various references to “God” extant in the public sphere. These reflect the country’s Judeo-Christian heritage.

It is understandable that, to some degree, the dominant religious views acceptable to a broad segment of the citizenry would also find wide public expression. But, for the classroom teacher, the situation does give something of an obvious tilt away from any sought-after neutrality in teaching about religion or handling student discussions that touch upon religion because, when you are focusing on this realm, the “playing field” for the various student beliefs is not a level one.

American culture exudes an endorsement of the “one God” idea, a majoritarian conception not really genuinely felt by the various American citizens who are adherents of Buddhism or Taoism, for example, or by believers in a multitude of the smaller minority indigenous religions, or by those holding to any of the secular philosophies. Whether the cultural endorsement seems subtle or blatant depends to some extent on one’s personal religious position.

Interestingly, some of most prominent and frequently stated references to God in the public sphere actually have rather recent origin.

During the 1950s, amidst a reactionary political atmosphere in which “Cold War” concerns swept the nation, new forms of “patriotic expression” came about. National alarm about the Soviet Union and the spread of (atheistic) communism took a pro-God form in our politics. In 1954 Congress incorporated the mention of God for the first time into the nation’s Pledge of Allegiance. Many of today’s older adults will recall how, in their own school days, they had to switch over from the “one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all” to the newly worded version of the pledge (“one nation, under God”).

The present “In God We Trust” motto on coinage and stamps has not always been with us, either. The nation’s Great Seal, drafted by Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin, had born the phrase “E Pluribus Unum” (illustrating the making of our one nation out of many colonies) and this phrase is still in use.



The first public issue coin to carry the religious motto was minted in 1865. (Interestingly, the very first U.S. coins bore the statement, “Mind Your Business.”) The story of the initial placement on coinage of the motto affirming a national single deity faith is historically interesting, and so are the political climates in this century that led to a 1908 Congressional action making use of the monotheistic affirmation on coinage a requirement of law and the 1956 bill establishing it as a national motto.



In the wake of the so-called “McCarthy era,” a de facto *public piety shows patriotism* stance took hold nationwide that seems to persist, in milder form, to this day. Few students are unaware of this societal “bent.” It is common that presidential addresses close with a “God bless America” message, and it is the rare political speech on a campaign trail that does not draw upon God somehow.

Infusion of such God references into our national symbolism and “public-speak” gives religious monotheism a “one-up” that naturally creeps into the curriculum by way of textbook or other materials’ presentations of religious issues and events.

A further tilting of the societal scales away from the minority religions and unbeliever worldviews derives from the nature of the present-day American political process. The dominant monotheism perspective gets far fuller expression in the language of politicians and some public officials due to the intensity and incessancy of the powerful electronic media.

There are other societal biases—less noticeable, perhaps, but just as strong. “To believe, or not to believe,” for example, is (supposed to be) an equal opportunity legal option for a United States citizen. *Nonbelief* is not as acceptable socially, however. American society at large is like other societies worldwide, in that it venerates having at least *some* faith perspective over the holding of a skeptical or *no-faith* philosophy. Recall the *State of Religion Atlas* information concerning the unpopularity of agnostic and atheist positions (see chart, page 5). Most of your students are pretty well aware that their own society strongly favors religious belief over disbelief. Would a candidate for public office be vocal about religious skepticism and realistically think himself or herself to have *improved* chances of being elected?

Even in our free country, personal expressions of atheism in some places and contexts are almost taboo. Individual expressions of religious belief and piety, on the other hand, are commonplace throughout the country and acceptable in many, if not most, contexts.

There is a case to be made that freethinkers who clearly state their views or fail to yield when asked to affirm a god-belief are at particular disadvantage. For example, in 1961 a Maryland citizen who wished to be a notary public was refused his



commission because he would not declare a belief in God. The man, Roy Torcaso, had to persist all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court (which ruled the state's religious test unconstitutional under the Federal Constitution's Article VI) so he could assume this rather routine public office.

Those who reject religion are subject to cultural stereotyping. In newspaper op-ed pages, one often sees the word "atheist" cited in written narrative in the company of a sampling of criminal perpetrations. Despite lack of evidence and much evidence to the contrary, it is widely held that atheistic persons are evil or lacking in morals.

Unless you are cognizant during classroom discussions, this baseless cultural partiality *will* translate into religion occupying a strong majority *value* position in your classroom. Through classroom interactions, children can readily ascertain that believing in a religion—*any* religion—is the sanctioned standpoint. You can anticipate and counter any such penchant, of course. But, if you are unaware, the bias can be reinforced and strengthened, disadvantaging children of no faith (whose philosophy may or may not be openly communicated).

When evaluating the academic objectivity of your teaching resources, you may be surprised at the extent to which, upon examination, the information at hand values and reinforces having *some sort of* religious belief (compared to *no belief*) as the more commendable position. Teaching about varied religions *absent* teaching about even the existence of freethought bolsters this particular disparity.

An example of the aforementioned societal predisposition exists in the California *Framework* itself, in the very place where the document argues most forcefully for



teaching in the public schools about religion and about religion's role in history. The topic? Church / state separation. One can easily argue that the separation principle, so important in our nation's progress, owes its existence to Enlightenment thinking and to an optimistic confidence in human *reason*. Yet, what "gets the credit" when the *Framework* offers the church/state separation principle as a prime example of "an important political arrangement developed from historical antecedents"? It is *religion* that garners the mention (p. 7).<sup>1</sup>

Such a source attribution is questionable. In fact, one can more readily attest that this country's major societal experiment in detaching government from religion derives much more from *nonreligious* than religious antecedent tenets.

In short, whereas there is a propensity to give religion its due in terms of motivating events in history, there seems almost a determined effort to exclude from youngster's minds the concept that many of the most sweeping changes in Western civilization came about from the actions of freethinkers and freethought movements. This is not a position of *neutrality* with respect to religion and nonreligion. From the position of the nonbeliever, it is seen as bias in behalf of religion.

An alert teacher will be able to detect whether or not her materials bequeath unfair merit to the *religious* above a *freethought* worldview. In a free society, it befits the school curriculum that it not seemingly promote believing in a religion *as* a "doctrine" preferable to not adopting a faith.

## Looking to the Future: Pluralism

As you and your colleagues respond to the challenge to teach *impartially* about religion, you will move toward ensuring neutrality in your own actions and your school curriculum. In your dealings with students and in your instruction about religion, you will take care that your own actions and statements do not promote a belief in any sect or faith above any other. Neither will you endorse a student's position of religious belief as being more salubrious than another student's freethought convictions.



With the type of scholarly integrity given to all subject matter, you will take care that the curriculum does not advance any religious doctrine over others and that it encompasses the minority stance, freethought. A fair curriculum acknowledges both religious and nonbelieving individuals as being players in human affairs and gives each a nod for making their marks in history.

Schools play a very large role in building those attitudes and values in youngsters that will help them function agreeably with people who differ from them in many important respects. The best position for public school teachers who are teaching about religion is that they foster *pluralism*.

Pluralism goes beyond diversity. Pluralism is the condition of society in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups *coexist amiably within one nation as fellow citizens*. Through your impartiality in teaching about religions and freethought perspectives, you can provide the types of information and classroom experiences that will help mold just such an American citizenry.



## Relevant Resources for Teachers

 mentioned in this monograph     also worth a look

### ***Policy Directives and the Law***

-  [1: cited on p.ii, iii, 16 ] The mandate to teach about religion in California schools is contained in the *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools (K-12)*. The current version is the 1997 edition. The document is published by the California Department of Education and is available from the Publications Division, Sales Office of the Department (P. O. Box 271, Sacramento CA 95812-0271). Phone (916) 445-1260 for current price and ordering options.
-  [2 cited on pp. iii, 1 ] The California Department of Education has a booklet that relates to the teaching of religion in the classroom. The work is titled, *Handbook on the Rights and Responsibilities of School Personnel and Students in the Areas of Providing Moral, Civic, and Ethical Education; Teaching about Religion; Promoting Responsible Attitudes and Behaviors; and Preventing and Responding to Hate Violence*. It can be secured by contacting the Bureau of Publications, Sales Unit, California Dept. of Education, P.O. Box 271, Sacramento, CA 95812-0271, or by calling 1-800-995-4099.
-  *Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law*, a publication endorsed by a large number of diverse religious and educational organizations, offers a summary of present legal requirements. You can obtain the most recent version of this document by writing to 15 East 84<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 501, New York NY 10028.
-  *Religion in the Public Schools: Guidelines for a Growing and Changing Phenomenon* is an Anti-Defamation League publication in a Q & A format. It offers sample scenarios regarding religious activities in public schools (K-12) along with guidelines. To learn how to obtain this handbook, write to the ADL at 823 United Nations Plaza, New York NY 10017.

## **Concise References for Religion and Nonreligion**

- 📖 [3 cited on pp. 3–5 ] *The State of Religion Atlas* is a succinct survey of the world’s religions. Written by Joanne O’Brien and Martin Palmer, this small paperback is a superb compendium resource for those who teach about religion and freethought (and other social science topics as well). Diagrams and textual portions objectively view the spectrum of uncertainty and nonbelief along with concise fundamentals of the faiths. Its annotated maps provide a pictorial overview of the global scene. The book is published by Touchstone (U.K.) and is available in the U.S. from Simon and Schuster, Rockefeller Center, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, NY, NY 10021.
- 📖 [4: cited on p. 8 ] *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, edited by Gordon Stein, Ph.D., uses alphabetical entries to survey the spectrum of agnosticism, atheism, freethought, humanism, skepticism, and unbelief historically and on the contemporary scene. Also included are biographies of prominent freethinkers. “*There is no comparable volume.*” —Library Journal. Available from Prometheus Books (call 1-800-421-0351 24 hrs., or write to 59 John Glenn Dr., Amherst NY 14228-2197).

## **Background on Freethought**

- 📖 [5: cited on p. 8 ] *Freethought Across the Centuries: Toward a New Age of Enlightenment* was written by Gerald A. Larue, Emeritus Professor of Biblical History and Archeology at the University of Southern California. Published in 1996, the textbook is an important background source to use for furthering academic studies of freethinking as subject matter. You can obtain this item by writing Humanist Press, P O Box 1188, Amherst NY 14226-7188, or by calling 1-800-743-6646.
- 📖 [6: cited on p. 8 ] *2000 Years of Disbelief* by James A. Haught is an excellent source for examining many of the contributions of freethinkers across the past two millenia. Called “*a Bartlett’s for the unbeliever*” by the Dallas Morning News, this insightful collection chronicles dozens of great minds who contributed much while rejecting God and the supernatural. Published by Prometheus Books, the book may be obtained by calling the publisher at 1-800 421-0351 or writing to 59 John Glenn Drive, Amherst, NY 14228-2197.
- 📖 [7: cited on p. 8 ] *Women Without Superstition—No Gods; No Masters*, edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor, contains the collected writings of women freethinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries along with biographical sketches and photographs. This book compiles provocative, original, timely and eloquent views of freethinking women, past and present, including social reformers, authors, leaders in the freethought movement, and current feminists. Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., the book may be obtained by writing FFRF at P O Box 750, Madison WI 53701 or phoning (608) 256-8900.
- 📖 [8: cited on p. 8 ] *Freethought and Religious Liberty—A Primer for Teachers*. This 17-page pamphlet provides a glimpse of what freethinking entails (definition, context, contributions) along with a concise overview of five categories of freethinkers (skeptics, deists, agnostics, atheists, and secular humanists). The booklet also outlines briefly the history of the U.S. experiment in church/state separation and highlights its relevance to the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of conscience for all citizens. Contact Instructional Systems at 1-800-666-9796 for ordering information.

📖 [9: cited on p. 10 ] *Free and Independent Thinking in History—A Time Line*. Developed specifically as a tool for teachers, this display chart documents chronologically the important events of free and independent thinking in history. Listed are actions that involved significant departures from the conventional thinking of the times, whether by freethinkers or by persons acting on their religious beliefs. Each event is referenced by date and positioned across from noted historical events. Entries noted match the source citations in *Freethought Across the Centuries*, by Professor Larue (see item 5, above). Contact Instructional Systems at 1-800-666-9796 for availability and ordering information.

### **Further Resources on Religious Liberty**

📖 [10: cited on p. 12 ] *The California Three Rs Project: Rights, Responsibilities and Respect* is a teacher and community civic education project that includes offering of seminars, curriculum workshops, and community programs to prepare teachers to teach about religions and cultures in ways that are constitutionally permissible and educationally sound. For information on the project, write to the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, One Market Street, Steuart Tower, 21<sup>st</sup> Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105.

📖 *The Right to Religious Liberty (2nd Edition)* by attorneys Barry Lynn, Marc Stern, and Oliver Thomas was published in cooperation with the American Civil Liberties Union. This small (Q & A style) handbook clearly sets forth an individual's religious rights under present law and offers suggestions as to how they can be preserved. In Chapter 2, "Religion and Public Education," the authors summarize succinctly the special rules about the place of religion and government that apply to the nation's public schools. The authors (two ordained Christian ministers and an Orthodox Jewish rabbinical school dropout) make a strong argument for church/state separation as being in the best interest of both religion and state. The 1995 paperback edition is published by Southern Illinois University Press and is available through bookstores (ISBN 0-8093-1967-5).

📖 *The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom* is a store of interesting reading and a source of raw material for a teacher who seeks to enlarge students' understanding of religious liberty by developing games and activities. The quotes were compiled by Albert Menendez and Edd Doerr (1991). You can obtain this item by writing to Americans for Religious Liberty, P. O. Box 6656, Silver Spring, MD 20916.

## Helpful Classroom Materials

Fairness in handling of religious views and teaching about belief systems in public school classrooms involves *neutrality* with respect to the full religious spectrum, *including* any unfamiliar religions and freethought (unbelief) perspectives. Teachers may find these supplemental instructional materials particularly useful when aiming for greater inclusivity and academic objectivity.



### ***Teaching Tolerance***

This project of the Southern Poverty Law Center promotes interracial and intercultural understanding in the classroom (materials include a magazine and many multimedia educational materials, including teaching kits). Write to Teaching Tolerance at P.O. Box 548, Montgomery, AL 36101 for descriptive information on the project and a catalog.

### ***The Enlightenment***

A carefully focused publication from the National Center for History in Schools, this manual offers secondary level lessons based on primary sources that deal with this important period of history, a period propelled to an appreciable extent by freethinkers and highly influential in affecting how the U.S. political system is organized. Ask for publication #7023 from the CDE Sales Unit, California Department of Education, P.O. Box 271, Sacramento, CA 95812-0271, or by calling 1-800-995-4099.

### ***Thinking About Religion (From a Global Perspective)***

This is a classroom unit written by classroom teachers Brant Abrahamson and Fred Smith and based on their lengthy classroom experience in guiding non-tracked, multi-aged Global Area Studies classes. The authors hold to a philosophy that secular and religious peoples can be taught how to work together to achieve commonly held earthly goals. Their unit seeks to help young people put their own life understandings into a global framework. The student packet consists of a student text and a volume of “analysis materials” containing single-page readings. Critical analysis and bias-avoiding principles are a focus. The annotated bibliography is most useful, and there is commentary in a small manual that helps a teacher to clarify what it means to teach about religion in an academic way, dealing with such issues as what one tells students about one’s own personal beliefs and what one says about “historical events” accepted as facts only by members of a particular faith community. For information, call (708) 485-5983 or write The Teachers’ Press, 3731 Madison Ave., Brookfield, IL 60513.