

# **Building a Comfort Zone: Teacher Training and Standards-Based Education about Religion**

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In November 2000, after half a decade of following national and state academic standards documents for K-12 schools as they emerged after 1994, the Council on Islamic Education (CIE) and the First Amendment Center (FAC) jointly published the study *Teaching About Religion in National and State Social Studies Standards*.<sup>1</sup> Without taking sides on whether standards-based education is a good or bad idea, the study affords itself of the opportunity offered by this nationwide movement of the 1990s to take a snapshot of what educators and officials have decided that teachers ought to teach and students ought to learn about religion. The importance of the various national standards models is that they represent a collaboration between educators and scholars in the disciplines to decide on essential content in each field and how to structure it. State standards documents are important because unlike state guidelines of the past, most standards documents were mandated by state legislation to require minimum content of the states' public schools and are often linked to accountability testing. Accordingly, considerable resources and deliberation have gone into the development of state standards documents; they represent current thinking in each state department of education, including input from district education officials, teachers, and the public.

In other words, if scholars and educators have agreed that teaching about religion is part of essential knowledge, and state boards have confirmed that and will hold teachers and students accountable for it, the likelihood of its being taught in classrooms is quite high. That is a definite departure from the past, when teachers' interest and comfort level was probably the main factor in deciding whether teaching about religion would take place in the classroom. In this article, however, it is argued that teachers' comfort level remains important to quality teaching on this sensitive topic, and that the key to comfort is knowledge of what and how to teach about the worlds' faiths. Since those engaged in pre-service and in-service teacher education about

about religion bear the main responsibility for creating a comfort zone, this article explores what type of knowledge and pedagogical methods are most suitable for the body of information required by social studies standards across the country. In brief, that content involves imparting knowledge about the origins, basic beliefs, and practices of each faith and the historical context in which they arose, spread, and flourished. Importance is also placed on the ideas and traditions of religious thought that grew out of each faith, and the persons and institutions through which it was expressed over time. While some of the state standards cover only one time period early in the history of the faith group, many states do not stop there, but include either general or specific mandates to cover the role of religion and its changing impact on society. Sampling showed that individual state requirements, quoted in the full study, include numerous creative and challenging items, such as study of the way religions have affected economic, environmental, and technological decisions at various times, its role in the history of science, and its theological and philosophical ideas. The complexity of this content would seem to require a framework for teacher training that targets a variety of specific areas concerning each faith tradition in world history and answers similar questions appropriate to religion in US history. Following discussion of the study itself, this article proposes such a framework for use by teachers and teacher training specialists.

### *Patterns of Inclusion*

Most content about religion resides in the social studies as a core curriculum area, although religion receives some coverage in language and fine arts standards. By compiling all direct and indirect references to religion found in national and state standards documents currently in use, it was possible to ascertain what, when, and how much standards documents include on teaching about religion. As a corollary, the study may be read as an indicator of progress in the several decades' effort to teach about religion in schools in constitutionally appropriate ways. The study's goal was not, however, to produce a definitive scorecard in order merely to praise those with many references and damn those with few. Rather, analysis was undertaken in order to discern how religion fits into social studies curricula and at what grade levels it is taught. Most importantly, the study analyzes how the various structural models for teaching social studies differ in their capacity to effectively convey sound information about religions, and how they are best integrated into an overall social studies program.

In brief, the study reveals that teaching about religion has been included, both directly and indirectly, in nearly every social studies standards document. Most standards documents follow a similar pattern in placement of content

on teaching about religion, incorporating it into US and world history, world cultures, and geography standards in elementary and secondary grades. Attention to religion and religious expression is also mandated as part of a multidisciplinary approach to social studies and history teaching, including the sciences and humanities. Most states that outline content and skills requirements for literature and the arts also require content and skills related to interpreting religious expression and influence in these fields. Some states also outlined elective high school courses in world religions or regional studies. Taken together, these courses will discuss the role of religion in US history and contemporary life, and introduce major world religious traditions and describe their role in history and culture. Civics instruction also includes religious influences in law, civic values, and principles as well as the role of religious freedoms.

As a measure of the extent to which the guidelines for teaching about religion have been disseminated over the years, the study finds that nearly all of the states have framed the study of world religions in language that conforms to the guidelines for balance, neutrality, and fairness on a minimal level. Most documents state basic information requirements in terms of the origins, beliefs, traditions, and customs of each major world religion, sometimes writing this mandate into a single standard or subtopic. A few documents fail to meet minimum guidelines, either due to patently biased language, omission of one or more faith tradition, or imbalance among specific traditions. In world history standards, the tendency toward emphasis on Western civilization often ensures that Western Christianity receives the lion's share of coverage.

Examination of the placement, quantity, and characteristics of content on religion revealed the limitations in approach and gaps in integrating discussion of the human religious experience in the nation's social studies standards. Despite religion's secure place in state and national standards, it is questionable whether the topic is being pursued with much seriousness or depth. In public schools across the nation, most content on world religions is really taught between grades 6 and 8, when most students are between the ages of twelve and fourteen. Most content on religion in US history takes place in grade 5 and in middle school, where the earlier historical periods containing the most content are taught. Instruction about world religions takes place in survey courses on world history or world cultures, usually in grades 6, 7, 9, or 10. One must question, however, the ability of eleven-to-fifteen year old students to absorb and appreciate the various spiritual traditions. Middle school is rather an early stage to have absorbed and dispensed with knowledge about world religions, especially when such content is barely expanded upon in later grades.

### *The Thumbnail Sketch*

Students are typically given a thumbnail sketch of each world religion: its origins, beliefs, traditions, customs, and leading personalities. A few hundred years of history associated with the religious group is covered, with particular attention to schisms, political repercussions, and cultural achievements. The set of beliefs and practices of each faith is related directly to present cultures. Units on each religion may be completed within a week to a month at most. These thumbnail descriptions provide the only instance of serious exploration and discussion of the religions in the whole curriculum. In terms of chronology, with few exceptions, little content on religion is written into state world history standards covering the period after 1800 in US and European history, and after 1500 in non-Western cultures.

With notable exceptions, most state standards documents — and some of the national models — expand little on the thumbnail sketch. Religious institutions and thought are presented as though they remained static over time, if they are covered at all. The exception is Western Christianity, with its lengthy discussions of early Church doctrines, medieval scholasticism, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. Other faiths receive no such extended discussion of change, as though none ever took place. Coverage of religion in modern history is often problematic, and in some cases glaringly so. Although history standards in some states reflect a clear intent to redress past exclusion of religion, omissions and distortions mitigate against the possibility that students will see the vitality of religions through the ages. If religions are covered in one-shot, thumbnail descriptions during the ancient and medieval units, and religions' later histories are barely discussed, this surely reinforces the idea that religions are exotic relics of the distant past, and it is a direct argument against some of the documents' assertion that religious values live on and should live on in modern societies. In fact, the study produced numerous examples of religion being treated exclusively as a negative aspect of modern times, either as a source of conflict or fundamentalist expression, without any content to counter that impression. Such language is written into some of the national models and repeated in several states.

### *Do We Have a National Curriculum or 50 Different Standards?*

The educators who developed national standards in the social studies disciplines have included considerable content on religions in the history and geography standards, as well as some discussion in civics. Only the economics standards came up seriously lacking in teaching about religious views and influence. Despite the unsurprising fact that the states have not embraced a

national curriculum, the study shows that individual state standards documents forged since 1994 generally adhere to one or more of the national standards documents as a model. Furthermore, most state standards follow the national standards in geography, civics, and economics, differing most sharply in their models of history teaching. The state documents utilize the national models' rubrics and incorporate lists of topics, subtopics, content and skills, and several state documents amount to a sketchier form of the model on which they are based, and refer to the more detailed national document. That is one reason why a simple scorecard approach to measuring content on religions does not give an accurate picture of the status of teaching about religion. Some state standards include very few direct references to religion, but the documents refer to the more detailed national document for use in writing school districts' programs of study for the classroom. There are also wide discrepancies between standards documents mandating general guidelines and those with highly content-specific standards.

*Structural Issues: Unfinished Marathons or Paced Relays?*

The CIE/FAC study argues that it makes a great deal of difference how teaching about religion is structured within the sequence of courses or topics in the social studies program. These program models reflect varying emphasis among the enormously broad array of disciplines gathered together in the core subject area called Social Studies. The four core disciplines of history, geography, civics/government, and economics are the most important. Other social science disciplines such as sociology and political science are often integrated into the core areas through multidisciplinary instruction, including the full range of the humanities and even some science. The various models give different answers to the question of which discipline will dominate, or drive the curriculum.

The *Expectations of Excellence* model put forth by the National Council for the Social Studies, for example, is a traffic control system designed for even coverage of the "strands" or disciplines housed in social studies. Ideally, each year of study in the K-12 sequence would be a balanced, integrated survey of these nine strands at increasing levels of sophistication. The NCSS model stands poorly on its own, however, since the mandate to do everything is spelled out in general terms rather than being linked to specific content from any one area. The NCSS document has relatively few direct references to teaching about religions, but mainly a larger rubrics such as *culture*, *beliefs*, or *civilization*. In practice, states using the NCSS framework often embed the national standards from the four core disciplines into the appropriate strand. Those states that do not add on content-specific guidelines

have standards vaguely requiring a little of this and a little of that. Overall, the lack of specificity leaves teaching about religion to the districts' or teachers' discretion, which is where we were before standards.

In contrast, a plurality of the states have what the study terms "history-dominant" social studies programs. The history-dominant model integrates geography, social sciences, and humanities by subsuming them under historical studies. The programs feature multi-year studies of state, US, and world history, divided chronologically. For example, students take state history in grade 4, then US history from the Explorers to 1800 in grade 5, with a middle school course covering 1800-1900, and an eleventh grade concentration (plus review) on the period after the Civil War. World history courses are usually divided into two parts – prehistory to 1500 CE in grade 9 and 1500 to the present in grade 10, or some other division, but California has three-year sequences of both US and world history.

The main value of these programs in terms of teaching about religion is (1) they allow enough classroom time to concentrate on religion and other topics in some depth, and (2) they integrate the various realms of history into a coherent narrative framework rather than teaching the social science disciplines separately. The states have embraced the history-dominant trend because of the widespread failure of repeated attempts to cover all of US or world history at two or three grade levels. To understand the problem, think how many times you ever "finished the textbook" in a social studies class. Across the nation, nearly every state now teaches US history courses in the draped sequence, and draped world history/world studies courses are becoming much more common. Sampling knowledge from the American religious experience is a great deal more likely when two or three years are available for the whole topic. Draped courses are often consciously paired with American literature surveys, increasing the likelihood of exploring the American spiritual experience in tandem with its history. Draped world history programs are typically taught in grades 9 and 10 or 8 and 9. Others split the sequence, with early middle school courses in ancient to medieval history, and modern history in high school. A few states still cling to the one-year world history course, including Texas, a very influential state for commercial textbook sales.

### *Religion and the New World History*

In addition to course structure, world history is currently undergoing a paradigm shift in the schools that offers enormous advantages for teaching about world religions. The states are still divided on the shift, but the trend

toward the new world history is clearly underway, with forty percent of the states utilizing it in standards.

Some states have developed history standards that correspond to traditional ways of teaching world history, whose core is the narrative of Western civilization and its heritage, with additional content on various other “great civilizations,” such as those of China, India, the Muslim world, Africa and the Americas. These courses generally focus in detail only on developments in Europe, while providing coverage of selected periods from the rest of the world’s civilizations. Whether Western-centered or not, the focus on limited regions where civilizations existed leaves out tremendous swaths of territory where people lived, including trade and migration routes along which religions and other ideas spread. Chronologically, traditional courses tend to jump back and forth across centuries and millennia, effectively eliminating the possibility of studying cultural exchanges effectively. Civilizations are often studied as incubators for certain cultural characteristics, focusing on a brief period in their total history that is considered its “golden age.” In these courses, major world religions are only traced for the brief period associated with their initial rise and spread and the development of cultural and social characteristics that are assumed to be its unchanging legacy. Thus, Judaism is not mentioned after Biblical times; Hinduism is mainly associated with early Indian history; Buddhism with Asoka’s India, classical China, and medieval Japan; and Islam is covered only up to the late Abbasid period in the 1200s. In all of these cases, formative events, personalities (usually one or two at most), religious institutions, and social influences are set in motion and carried to a crescendo in only one lesson or chapter. Only Western Christianity is seen to undergo change, to experience intellectual movements and institutional upheavals with social and cultural consequences, but only because its historical development is followed more closely in the course as a whole. Once the world story has reached the point at which secularization is thought to have occurred, the story of religion drops off, and in many standards is viewed as a negative force, either a hindrance to scientific and social progress or a source of ethnic/national conflict.

The paradigm shift in teaching world history is embodied in the *National Standards for World History* and to a lesser extent *Building a World History Curriculum*.<sup>2</sup> These models improve the balance and focus of world history coverage in two ways: (1) history study is divided into a series of world eras with activity surveyed across the whole global landscape during the period, somewhat akin to a graph in which chronology is the vertical axis, and global geography is the horizontal axis; (2) history is the lead discipline for integrating geography, economics, humanities, and the

other social sciences as realms of history. The difference between the old and the new methods might be compared to the experience of visiting a portrait gallery and viewing a series of landscapes or murals in which the people appear in relationship to one another, changing from era to era.

The possibilities for teaching about religions in the new world history model are profound. Instead of a one-shot thumbnail sketch of each major faith, the major world religions are each considered in the context of the era in which they emerged, but they are also considered in subsequent eras. Instead of jumping back and forth in time, picking up new civilizations after dropping others, the new world history approach follows major regions and cultures through each era and shows how they developed and interacted in later eras.

The standards developed for teaching the new world history include both Standards for Historical Thinking that provide a set of criteria for comprehensiveness on each major topic and each era. Historical realms such as religious institutions and thought, cultural expressions of religion are mandated for discussion in each era. Each religion's origins, beliefs, practices, and spread are discussed individually, but they are described both in terms of the societies in which they developed and those to which they spread. Because global coverage is more even, coverage of non-Western societies has more depth and features more discussion of interactions among civilizations.

### *Geography is Good, Right?*

There is a third model used by a minority of the states to cover world studies: the study terms these programs as "geography-dominant." This model affects only the way certain states approach study of the world. A handful of states, among them Texas and others in the South and Midwest, devote two to three years of their programs to world studies at the secondary level, but instead of draped courses, students in grades six and/or seven study the world from a geographic perspective in courses called "Western Hemisphere" and "Eastern Hemisphere." Now, there is nothing wrong with geography, and *Geography for Life: the National Geography Standards* is an outstanding document. A stand-alone geography course in the early years, however, does not work well as a substitute for systematic history study. Such Western/Eastern Hemisphere courses are overloaded for a number of reasons, and they make a poor vessel for introductory teaching about religion.

Like most geography courses, a region-by-region survey of the contemporary world is the foundational structure of the course, and its goal is understanding the world today. Since these courses offer young students

their first exposure to study of the world, it must of course provide historical background in at least one lesson per region, usually covering ancient or medieval history of non-Western cultures, and including pre-modern and modern history of Europe and its effect on the world. Since students have already studied US and state history, the Western Hemisphere course adds knowledge of contemporary North and South America without much difficulty. These Eastern Hemisphere courses are structured quite differently, however, since they often contain a mini-course on ancient civilizations or even “world history.” The mini-course, unfortunately, covers the old, core narrative of Mesopotamia-Egypt-Greece-Rome-Medieval to Modern Europe, all the way to the World Wars in the early part of the course. India, China, Africa, the Muslim world, and Southeast Asia are covered separately, however, with their encapsulated histories, chapters and chapters later, fully detached from the main narrative. This approach wreaks havoc with historical understanding and turns the clock back to a time 20 or 30 years ago when the non-West was essentially excluded from world history. One may assume that many grade seven classrooms never get much beyond the historical survey of Europe by June.

This problem more than anything points out the problems of the continent-by-continent geography survey. The geography standards teach that the meaning and configuration of regions change with time, but the middle school geography course defies this by imposing modern regional groupings upon ancient and medieval history. Requirements in the National Geography Standards to learn about migration, trade routes, use of the environment, and geographic connections and barriers that changed over time are not honored in these courses. The spread of religions did not follow patterns based on modern political regions today. The regional and contemporary approach to the world’s cultures is like peering into a series of opaque tunnels; no tunnel allows the viewer to see what was happening in other tunnels at the same time or to see the spaces between the tunnels. World religions, which spread and affected numerous cultures, interacted with one another, and changed over time, become in this model mere aspects of culture that can be described in a paragraph or so on their rituals and supposed customs. History becomes completely disjointed, and only the story of the West and its antecedents has any coherence. Even information about religion in Europe is sharply curtailed because of space limitations in the geography model. The historical material is the minimum necessary for background to the present and is sharply circumscribed in length. A chapter or unit in a history text becomes a lesson or a subheading in one of these geography texts. These courses carry a double burden of knowledge objectives from both contemporary and ancient/medieval time and lengthy descriptions of physical geography, contemporary economy, and politics.

Worse still, the distant and recent past are conflated, precluding any understanding of how religious expression in societies changes over time. Religion has become just one undifferentiated, static aspect of “culture.” For example, a recent textbook manuscript for such a course contained a one-paragraph account of the rise of Islam, immediately followed by a paragraph on the rise of the al-Saud family and the founding of Saudi Arabia. The rest of the lesson gave one paragraph on beliefs, practices, and “Islamic law” and covered society and oil in the Saudi kingdom—all in less than ten illustrated pages. Simplistic sketches of the major religions often harbor absurd factual errors and misconception, foster stereotypes, and leave out institutional and social history altogether. They trivialize world religions into a study of surviving rituals, customs, dress, and cookery. Teachers seriously trying to use this model must work backward from a superficial and often blatantly incorrect reading of contemporary life, especially given the negative slant on modern religions in most textbooks – religions as relics.

#### *Training for Teaching About Religion in the Standards Environment*

Despite the disparities among curriculum models and the shortcomings in current standards documents, the study makes it clear that religion has a firm, even prominent place in the nation’s schools. Now that it is in the standards, teachers are expected to teach about religions, whether it comes in the primary grades, in US history, world history, or geography. Whether they feel comfortable or not, facing rows of students who actually represent most of the world’s faith traditions in a single classroom, many teachers cannot afford to think of religions as exotic, mysterious phenomena from another place and time. In a few states, teachers may have to work around incomplete or biased standards on religion. The first step toward meeting the standards and realizing their potential for a rich and useful experience in young students’ lives is to raise the level of knowledge about religion and to make teachers aware of the shortcomings and strengths of various models. Above all, it should give them the information they need about the guidelines and how they apply to specific historical and cultural knowledge about each world faith. Teacher training must be carefully calibrated to the requirements of the standards and the parameters of the guidelines for teaching about religion. A framework for teaching and teacher training which covers the most common aspects of standards mandates on religion is laid out in the rest of this article.

### *Pre-Service and In-service Training*

The most concentrated, effective environment for improving the knowledge of teachers is in the context of pre-service training. Administrators of university teacher training programs must realize that pre-service teacher education must keep pace with the demand for teaching about religions by offering candidates more religious studies and history courses tailored to their needs, which are different from the needs of beginners in religious studies.

Universities should engage their own or nearby religion departments in designing multidisciplinary courses in world religions tailored to the needs of educators, both those seeking degrees and re-certification credits. These courses should be practical in the sense that they address what is taught and how to teach within the guidelines, that they engage discussion on enhancing implementation of current curricula, and that they can be tailored to state or regional standards while meeting the needs of a more general framework of necessary information. They should involve exposure to serious scholarship in religious studies, history, and pedagogy. Giving teachers more information on each religion must involve the right kind of depth, based on what they need to teach. In line with the principle of “natural inclusion,” such courses should be anchored in historical studies and not orbit mainly in the realm of religious esoterica, since this provides the wrong type of depth, involves content that is very difficult to teach in the public school environment, and does not correspond to standards requirements anywhere.

University students preparing themselves to teach secondary history/social studies should be required to take at least one course in comparative world religions and at least one course in the development of a specific tradition, its changing religious thought, cultural expressions, and historical context, so that they become exposed to the intellectual frameworks for discussing such matters. World history courses that include high-caliber, recent scholarship are a must for preparing effective teachers in the current environment.

Few teachers – especially those in service for a more than a decade – would maintain that they were well prepared by their undergraduate or even graduate programs to meet the demands of teaching history/social studies at the secondary level. Still fewer elementary teachers would argue that they were well prepared to realize the potential benefits of teaching about religion or other social studies topics in a multidisciplinary approach, or even in terms of the basics. Apart from requiring extensive university coursework for working teachers, the only way to make up the knowledge deficit is through in-service efforts of various kinds. Necessary elements of

in-service training include peer collaboration based on shared expertise, workshops in which teachers are exposed to content knowledge by specialists in the field, exposure to available resources, and workshops on teaching about religions. Summer institutes and after-school series on world religions as well as autumn orientation sessions can be useful approaches. In the coming few years, as standards-based curriculum and accountability testing take hold, schools are scrambling to prepare their faculties for success. There is no time to wait and allow the idea to incubate, as many of the testing programs are scheduled to “bite” with real consequences for graduation in the coming few years, if they are not already doing so. Some states are already in the first revision cycle, and textbook adoption is on the horizon in the coming years as well. States with rigorous testing are forced to follow their legislative mandates on standards with money for teacher training.

#### *A Standards-Based Framework for Teaching about Religion*

Despite the strengths and weaknesses in teaching about religion among the various models and individual standards documents, the standards do mandate considerable teaching about religion – and the mandates are nearly universal. This situation is a vast improvement over recent decades, but the mandates contained in the standards represent possibilities, not ends in themselves. The standards documents contain general language, some expansive and some very circumscribed. Reading some of the standards items, one wonders if their writers thought out the implications of what they wrote in terms of content and scope, since they state general intent or even aspirations. Some of the items are very thoughtful and demonstrate that the standards framers have intended that students understand and engage with the human spiritual experience in history and in the contemporary world.

It is important that people who have an overview of available knowledge in religious studies begin to spell out what these mandates mean in terms of each faith tradition and the historical cultures associated with it. In redressing the traditional imbalance between Western Christianity and other faiths, for example, certain aspects of the non-Western faiths must be included in order to achieve balance and meet the standards as stated. Students naturally assume that what is not taught does not exist. If the general standards mandates for teaching about religion are only fully realized in content on the Western Church, then the standards will not have been implemented. The following points lay out a framework for overcoming weaknesses and realizing the potential for teaching about religion in the implementation phase.

*1. Accurate discussion of the basic outlines of each religious tradition.*

Since it is a universal element of all standards documents, the basic introduction to each tradition in a history, geography, or world cultures survey is of critical importance. The description of each religion's origins, beliefs, practices, traditions (in the broad, cultural sense of the word), and customs is a thumbnail sketch, but it should be neither a caricature nor a travesty. Teaching about the faith as perceived by its adherents requires scholarship that applies the mandated rubrics in these standards with sensitive interpretation of religious beliefs, not a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, many religious persons would object to calling a prophet or other spiritual leader a "founder," because the religion's true "origin," according to its adherents, lies in revelation or spiritual communion with God. Similarly, in the interest of differentiating among religions, the thumbnail sketch may assign an arbitrary beginning to the faith that violates some of its tenets, or pigeonhole the faith in a manner that obscures continuity. Portrayal of the monotheistic faiths suffers particularly from this treatment. The prophetic and scriptural traditions based on divine revelation are lost in the recital of each group's "founder," "book," and "origin." In extreme cases, such presentations become utterly secular, casting Abraham as a shepherd, Jesus as a carpenter, and Muhammad as a merchant with a wealthy wife. A pervasive secular bias is often detectable in these presentations, which focus almost exclusively on worldly causes and barely relay any sense of the spiritual context of the religion. Sometimes beliefs, moral teachings, and practices of the faith are formatted in congratulatory tones as group "achievements," pushing aside the significance of belief in divine, not human origins, and of their normative nature in the society. This is multiculturalism run amok, and it does not meet the guidelines for teaching about religion because it secularizes, and in so doing dismisses, religion. A secular tone has been so pervasive in basic presentations as to force one to the conclusion that such an approach is mistakenly considered to be editorially neutral. These failings become all the more blatant when the introduction to each group is very brief and is followed by an account of the related culture in static, fragmentary outlines.

A neutral presentation that meets the guidelines, on the other hand, is aligned in its approach and in the categories it applies with the religion's beliefs. It describes the tenets strictly and clearly with attribution to its adherents. The separation between the text and the researcher's or writer's views must be distinct. When it comes to interpretations and differences of opinion within the tradition, these, too, can be appropriately described and attributed to various sects or scholarly sources. Teaching about religion well

and accurately may in fact contribute to silencing forever the omniscient textbook voice at the K-12 level and replacing it with primary source investigation, multiple perspectives, and use of recent, specialized sources. If teaching about religion performed no other service than this, it would be worth the effort expended. In seeking to improve the implementation of mandates on teaching about religion, states may need to look no farther than the high standards for skill acquisition in critical thinking and research set within the state documents themselves. It is one thing to write them, however, and quite another to bring them to life.

Teaching about a wide variety of religious traditions is an excellent exercise in teaching about multiple perspectives and in recognizing and overcoming bias and oversimplification. Educators and instructional material developers have begun to grapple seriously with the basic descriptions of world religions by delving into their scriptures and scholarly traditions, examining the changing social and political ramifications of their teachings and researching their historical and artistic influences. They are often required to make non-qualitative comparisons among religions, and these do not violate constitutional guidelines as long as religions are not compared unfavorably to one another. Another task of training is to help teachers to sort through important issues of interpretation, belief, and practice in order to provide sufficiently differentiated and complex explanations and avoid simplistic, static conclusions and stereotypes. A number of the standards items require students to understand how ideas and beliefs influence behavior; how religious influences combine with social status, ethnic, and geographic factors; and to utilize skills in examining and analyzing evidence of these beliefs in action. Only such authentic presentation will meet the standards, and only such presentations will achieve the stated goals of acquiring knowledge, improving skills, discerning and incorporating values and ethics, and building a foundation for public discourse that is essential to civic tolerance. Continuing implementation of teaching about religion and developing coverage based on these guidelines will open similar opportunities to those already noted.

## *2. Discussion of Religious Traditions in Their Historical and Cultural Setting*

Historical discussion should go well beyond introducing the basic outlines of each religious tradition and identifying the regions and cultures in which it is or was practiced. Most standards documents require coverage of various historical realms in a multi-disciplinary context. Implementing general mandates to cover religious groups and their literary, philosophical, and artistic expressions and influences must include teaching about the history

of that tradition in any relevant historical periods covered in the course. It is inadequate and inaccurate to cover a major religious group's social, political and cultural history for a century or two out of a tradition lasting millennia and to let this brief overview stand for the group every time it is subsequently mentioned. To do so violates standards for historical pedagogy, yet the practice is common.

As a minimum requirement, study of each major tradition must include the development of a religion's institutions, and the growth and influence of its intellectual tradition. Internal consistency within the standards document often means that basic mandates on "*understanding and appreciation for the culture*" must include the role of changes in interpretation and practice in different cultures and at different levels of society where the religion has been practiced. Use of primary sources and specialized resources help produce a sufficiently differentiated treatment of the topic based on evidence from several historical periods. Coverage of the religious dimension of history and culture enhances rather than supplants other types of information, since it provides another tool for integrating the many disciplines of the social studies.

It is necessary to overcome the limitations of the single teaching unit, lesson, or period of history into which each faith tradition has been pigeonholed in most textbooks and programs of study. In a better-integrated model for teaching history and geography, it is natural to follow developments across time and space and to integrate knowledge about religious dimensions of social, intellectual, and cultural history in the period when they arose as well as subsequent periods. Omission of these historical aspects of any major religion covered in the curriculum amounts to failure to meet the guidelines for accuracy and balance because it indicates to students that one or more tradition lacks these areas of development. Omission also sets up the program of standards for failure when enormous gaps in chronological coverage separate content items that mention religion in connection with different historical periods. Filling the gaps through proper implementation of the standards creates internal consistency among standards throughout the K-12 program. The same process applies to coverage of religion in US history.

### *3. The Geographic Spread and Current Distribution of Religions*

Geography and history courses, and especially those programs that strive to integrate both disciplines, should follow the spread of the religious traditions in a manner that produces understanding of the geographic, historical and cultural circumstances within which this took place. The spread and mingling

of Buddhism and Hinduism in Southeast Asia, the many religious groups that interacted in Central Asia, and the spread of Islam beyond the initial expansion of the Muslim state during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries are essential parts of the common requirement that students be able to map (and comprehend the importance of) the distribution of world religions today. Coverage of this and other global processes would do much to bring into the curriculum areas of the globe that are often omitted in world history surveys. It also helps students understand the interaction of cultures and the effects of trade, migrations, and other movements on a hemispheric or global scale. Understanding the dynamics of religious continuity and change lessens the tendency to think in stereotypes.

#### *4. Religions in Early Modern History, 1500-1900 CE*

Many standards documents, following recent tendencies in textbooks and curriculum, drop the thread of religion at about 1800 CE. Numerous standards documents, on the other hand, do include religion as an aspect of the contemporary era, a facet of nationalism, ethnic identity, or communal diversity.

As a condition for meeting standards on contemporary events, sound implementation of standards-based education requires that any existing standards items on religion in the modern era – in all societies – must be backed up by discussion of religious thought and influence during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, state standards that require students to understand the role of religion in modern conflicts, need to teach about Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Protestantism, Catholicism, or Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the centuries since their origin, not relying solely upon knowledge of these cultures in ancient times alone. Students will not get much mileage out of content studied years earlier in units on the ancient or early medieval world when asked to comprehend, say, religious responses to imperialism or social costs of industrialization. If such information is missing, however, the standard on the modern era will not and cannot be met. If the question framed to cover the role of religion in modern life is answered with static assumptions and vague stereotypes, then such coverage fails to meet the guidelines for accurate, fair, and balanced coverage. Religious responses to scientific advances, industrialization, imperialism, and social modernization were dramatic and dynamic in the West and in colonized societies of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. If religions are mentioned at all for later periods, examination of the religious impulse must take the place of default assumptions about traditionalism vs. modernization, or conventional wisdom about the anti-Western mind-set of religious groups, or about the irrelevance and atrophy of religious institutions. To the contrary, religious institutions

often were on the front lines of these societies' encounter with modern conditions, both in the West and the non-West (temperance movements, social conditions in the cities, anti-colonial struggles, and the interface between missionary work and diplomatic liaison). Implementation of content and skills means complex investigation of primary source evidence and current analytical scholarship. What teachers have never heard of, they cannot teach, and will tend to fall back on shallow, over-summarized textbook-speak.

##### *5. Study of Contemporary Religious Expression*

Contemporary study of religions has a perhaps inadequate place in most of the models and standards documents, but the study documents its presence both in specific content mandates and in general requirements to cover the religious dimension of culture. If religion is mentioned at all, it must be studied well, or the standards become meaningless and the guidelines are violated. Even seemingly simple mandates to explain or describe the religious component of local, national, or global diversity, or the numerous, ill-conceived requirements to associate multi-dimensional global hot-spots solely with religious conflict cannot be met if students haven't heard about religion since ancient or medieval history lessons. Thumbnail descriptions of the tradition served up in grade 6 or 7 provide little traction in understanding modern religious expression or distinguishing it from political, social, or economic expression. Yet a look at many standards documents' perspective on specific religious traditions reveals just such a yawning gap in coverage combined with sweeping mandates to grasp complex global conflicts and cultural movements. Sound implementation at the district level can help fill the gap, but teacher training by scholars fills the content gap that textbooks have not yet begun to bridge.

In another example, students who learned nothing about Judaism since Abraham and Moses will not be prepared to understand contemporary Judaism and its global or national distribution and significance; discussion of medieval and modern persecution of Jews is no substitute for engagement with its intellectual and religious thought. In US history, standards on the modern civil rights struggle are incomplete without content on the growth of African American churches since the 1700s, nor can the contemporary role of Christianity in elective politics be understood when American Protestantism was last heard from during study of the Thirteen Colonies. Many similar examples would show that even seemingly simple standards on the 20<sup>th</sup> century could not really be met without ongoing and penetrating coverage in earlier periods, even though this is not spelled out in the standards documents.

Unexamined notions about modernity and religion, as prevalent as they are in contemporary culture, slip naturally into the knowledge vacuum.

### *Conclusions*

The discussion above has provided a brief overview of the results of the Council on Islamic Education/First Amendment Center study on *Teaching About Religion in National and State Social Studies Documents* and attempted to show how the amount, placement, and integration of content mandates on teaching about religion appears in current legislatively mandated and commissioned academic standards. It is shown that teaching about religion is well represented across the nation, and that there is a great deal to work with for those interested in seeing such instruction in the classroom. Both general mandates and skills mandates, taken together, provide clear evidence that there is room for such knowledge in the implementation of standards-based education, even though few of the documents lay out specific details. The study provides a wide variety of examples of opportunities provided to specialists to work out the implications of what standards framers have written into the mandates, without which the requirements are empty statements or mere pipe dreams. Effective implementation of the standards in the realms of social studies education where it is taught requires a multidisciplinary effort by teacher trainers with the help of specialists in pedagogy, religious studies, history, literature, and the arts. A concerted effort by these groups will provide confidence and spark the interest of teachers because it will address exactly what they are required to teach, creating the comfort level that will ultimately contribute to an improved public discourse involving religion among educated members of society in the near future.

### *Notes*

1. Susan L. Douglass. *Teaching About Religion in National and State Social Studies Standards*. Washington, DC: Council on Islamic Education and the First Amendment Center, 2000. The publication and an executive summary of it may be ordered or downloaded as an Acrobat file at [www.freedomforum.org](http://www.freedomforum.org) and [www.cie.org](http://www.cie.org).
2. See *National Standards for History, Basic Edition*. National Center for History in the Schools, 1996. *Building a World History Curriculum: Guides for Implementing the History Curriculum Recommended by the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools*. National Council for History Education, 1997.