

**THE FIRST AMENDMENT AND
CHRISTMAS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS:
RESPECTING MULTICULTURAL & MULTI-THEISTIC
DIVERSITY**

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I have lived a few lives as a student of criminal justice and social work, a lawyer, a parent, and bilingual education social studies teacher in middle school, and now I am exploring a new life in a doctoral program in bilingualism, biliteracy, and multicultural education. Some might think I'm just stuck on the first amendment, but why do any of us ever have to address Christmas in public schools? The impetus to address this question more recently was an email or two on a popular international email list serve for educators. One teacher¹ wrote: "I don't do a lot of fluff, but in my district at Christmas it is *almost a requirement*," (emphasis added). Another responded:

"I manage at Christmas to survive by picking a social studies theme. ... Last year it was Christmas in Mexico, as our penpals were largely children of legal migrant workers. We decorated the tree with aguinaldos (an idea provided to me as a result of similar appeal) , cut tissue banners and red, white and green paper chains along with little paper Mexican flags. Read great books about Mexican Christmas traditions (DePaola, Bunting). Made six huge pinatas, had our party revolve around our annual caroling outing with parents and the potluck featured Mexican food. Wonderful time, far less stressful than a fullblown program or play this time of year.

This year, it is Arizona as our snail mail penpals are in Phoenix. "

This commentary does not seek to cast dispersions upon either of these educators. Clearly, they are seeking to create interesting and effective lesson plans and wanting to use events that are familiar to children as a way to motivate participation. There is nothing wrong with that. The problem is that around this time of year teachers and administrators alike are increasingly aware that not everybody celebrates Christmas. The reason is not everybody in the public school system is Christian. That's what makes it public school, and not religious indoctrination.

The issue is complex because our society has perhaps diminished Christmas as a Christian celebration by commercializing it. Santa Claus and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer are icons of Christmas in many places more so than Mary or Jesus. I believe this tendency toward commercialization has diminished in the minds of educators (and likely society at large) the

¹ The names of the educators have been withheld because their identities are irrelevant to this writing.

religious nature of the theme, and therefore many do not see the risk in establishing Christmas in the classroom every December. However, despite that commercialization...

Christmas is a Christian holiday and public schools must observe the First Amendment.

What does this mean? Well, there are a number of Supreme Court cases on the subject. But, most educators are not made to read them during their education in becoming teachers and administrators. They receive what's called a sort of bright line theory on the *do's and don'ts* of Christmas – generally to avoid complaints or lawsuits. But the thing that caught my attention is the first educator's statement that "...in my district at Christmas it is almost a requirement."

Since when should any District make it feel as though it is a "requirement"? Not that we can't cover Christmas as a cultural tradition as the responding educator recommended, and, that's a good beginning. Certainly better than merely decorating our classrooms with Christmas decorations while doing some non-Christmas unit - which would suggest that everyone celebrates Christmas. I do not think it is *sad* that a child has never heard "Twas the night before Christmas". That reaction presumes the child is Christian and should be involved with a Christmas tradition at home.

Maybe that's not the case. Maybe that child is Jewish, Muslim, Atheist, Agnostic, or of some other cultural tradition that is not Christian. We need to be careful about our assumptions – even when they are innocently or unwittingly made. Perhaps more careful when they are ingrained.

One ingrained assumption – rather like a presumption - many educators still make is that the United States is a Christian or Judeo-Christian nation. It is not. It was not built on these religions or their tenets. Many of our forefathers were Freemasons and deliberately referred to "nature's God" in the Declaration of Independence rather than using the term "God". They put the amendment about free speech, freedom of religion and the prohibition against the government's establishment of religion FIRST because they had felt the cold hand of persecution for centuries as the Catholic Church had long been persecuting atheists, agnostics, Freemasons, Pagans, Celts, and others.

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The problem in general is that teachers and administrators – including top level administrators - are not prepared to tell children the truth or at least the whole story about history, and so the "heroes and holidays" approach persists. I think we need to give voice to multicultural viewpoints on history in the classroom, and not just pay homage to one other viewpoint besides the textbook mainstream voice that educators are told must be consistent with our textbook or what our administrators say is *okay*.

We need our next generation to become **critical thinkers**, to **question their textbooks**, to **question authority**. Otherwise, it will be too late for them and for us. The children of today who do not learn to question will become governmental automatons, rather than free thinkers. And, it seems this presidential administration would be happy with that. Our legislators at the state and federal levels want children who can pass standardized tests rather than children who have fresh ideas and critical approaches. That would be too threatening. Parents have become convinced to cooperate in many states and local districts. A few have protested by not sending their children to school on test days. But there may be a better, more subtle way to create critical thinkers by just changing our approaches to the everyday education of our next generation.

It might be good idea for anyone wanting to cover *Christmas* as a multicultural tradition to look into - as a matter of setting the record straight on culture and tradition and history - the Christmas tree and its true origins. The Tree is a Pagan tradition borrowed by the early Christians as a way to convert Pagans to Christianity by using symbols familiar to them. Similar approaches were used in Mexico by the Catholic Church (e.g., *El día de los muertos* is celebrated very differently in Mexico as it is based in Indigenous traditions as opposed to European Catholic traditions in Spain). The tree really is a symbol used as part of the celebration of the **Winter Solstice** - still celebrated by Wiccans and other Pagans today. Such a discussion would necessarily involve an acknowledgement that not all people are Christian, not all celebrate Christmas, and perhaps lead to fruitful debate or discourse about freedom of religion and why we don't teach religion in public school. *It's a thought*.

Also, in the Fall and Winter there's Kwanzaa, and we just passed through Ramadan, and then there's Chanukah (though that has nothing to do with Christmas). But we do not have to

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cover things in the same time frame they occur. Sometimes the importance of a holiday is highlighted by certain events rather than the time of year. I think of the Holocaust as an example of demonstrating the importance to Jews of Chanukah.

I think the real question is, *is it our job as school teachers to cover holidays?* And, if we decide that it is, *how should holidays be "covered"?* There is a book called *Holidays and Heroes* that warns against covering culture in the classroom by way of holidays and heroes. It seems we need to incorporate multicultural **viewpoints** in everything we do, every **day** of the year. I taught social studies - American History - in the 8th grade and never covered African American History in "African American History Month". It was my subtle rebellion to the *heroes and holidays approach* to education. Parents were pleased that I was covering the Amistad as a legal case and its factual underpinnings, the notion of ownership of people as property and how our constitution could abide that notion, how it was written *specifically to abide* that notion despite its statements about freedoms and individual rights. We did that unit in November-December and parents would say, "it's not even African American History Month", with a smile on their faces. They realized we were covering it because it's important and not because of some schedule of holidays and heroes the District or the nation or the conservative right **Channel One** advises us to cover.

One thing that might be helpful is to organize history or social studies by themes of the development of individual rights and then to incorporate these holidays, heroes, and other cultural issues as they arise within those thematic units. The discussion of the history of the development of the cotton industry could be accompanied, for example, by a discussion of the plight of migrant farm workers, Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta and the Farm Workers Union, why and how it was created. Children could visit the web sites on the internet and hear speeches made by Mr. Chavez and Ms. Huerta, as well as see the work that the Farm Workers Union is doing today, and what the current problems are for workers. My student teacher did a unit similar to that last year and the children and parents were touched by what they learned. I do not think we have to wait until the children are in eighth grade to do lessons or units like this. There are ways to introduce young children, elementary school children, to themes involving social justice in history.

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When we covered the Holocaust last year, we talked about the importance of continuing cultural and religious traditions while being held captive and the meaning of Chanukah as it related to dreams of victory in WWII for the oppressed, as well as the reasons why each country entered World War II (or failed or refused to at this or that juncture), what the United States knew about the mass slaughter of Jews and millions of others long BEFORE it entered the war and why it didn't choose to be involved, the creation of the League of Nations contrasted with today's United Nations. We also talked about the “red scare” in the United States and the persecution of atheists and communists through **black-listing** in the McCarthy era.

These thirteen and fourteen year old students wrote newspapers of four to six pages each covering different stories they felt were important about the Holocaust bringing in various cultural viewpoints. Some students were surprised to learn there were 9 million non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust who often do not get discussed because of the heroes and holidays approach to schooling. So, these students addressed the Gypsies and the continuing problems with immigration and acceptance or rejection of Gypsies in various places in Europe. Some addressed children in general, regardless of cultural background. They said they learned a lot and their parents seemed proud of their work.

By far, the most distressing thing I've heard is that a teacher might feel *compelled* to tell a traditional outdated story of history, like that of Christopher Columbus when Columbus Day rolls around. The compulsion is what marks the distress. The State of Arizona chose not to celebrate Columbus Day, but instead celebrate the birthday in January of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This meant that public schools would operate on Columbus Day and be closed for a holiday on Martin Luther King Day. This exchange of holidays seems not to be discussed in many classrooms. It is where I began every Columbus Day - why we do not celebrate Columbus is a great way to research who he was and what he *actually* did.

However, for some reason, I am told that some K-3 teachers still believe they cannot tell the truth about *Cristobal Colon*. They think they have to lie to their students. One such example is more personal. My daughter came home this year quite upset, angry, and not knowing what to do when her teacher told the story of Columbus as hero, as discoverer of the Americas, as having

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"befriended" the "Indians", giving them lovely blankets and gifts in exchange for their *help* in "settling" the new world. My seven year old had already heard the truth from her parents so she knew this was a lie, fabricated to make European descent Americans feel better. (I happen to be of European descent but do not buy the "party line".)

My daughter was *downgraded* for not participating in social studies discussions in the first quarter. She didn't participate, she explained, because the teacher lied and she did not want to be rude in correcting the teacher in front of the other children. So she simply chose to keep her mouth shut. I told her that was probably the right thing to do at that time, and praised her for thinking of what would be the respectful approach and not just about squaring away the content. But I advised her to find a way to insert the truth into the class discussions on such subjects.

Well, it became clear at the parent-teacher conference that had she done so, the teacher would not have been prepared to have let her voice be heard. I directly addressed the teacher on the issue of lying to the children about important information and about downgrading my daughter for lack of participation. I told her that if she wanted my daughter to participate more, she should be prepared to hear different facts and incorporate the truth – or at least different versions of it - into her history lessons. When I explained that my daughter wanted to hear a discussion of what Columbus really did when he arrived, the teacher replied, "I can't tell second graders that."

Well, if we can't tell second graders the truth about Columbus, **when do we start telling them the truth?** I suggest we begin in kindergarten as I did with my children, as my daughter's kindergarten teacher found a way to do with her class. We don't have to use words that will confuse or terrify, but we can certainly tell them that Columbus enslaved and slaughtered (you can say killed if you prefer) the Indigenous peoples to the point where races and cultures were forever eliminated, and languages lost. We can talk about **ethnocentrism** as a concept and discuss why countries feel they have the right to conquer and destroy. (This issue also pertains to current events.) We can talk about where all the pre-existing inhabitants come from if Columbus discovered the Americas and that what Columbus discovered was what was *new to Europe* - and the purpose of the discovery was to conquer, not to befriend and cohabitate.

We should not feel **compelled** to leave children with the impression that Columbus was a *nice guy* and a *hero*, or that he *discovered* the Americas. We should feel compelled to tell the truth – or more accurately, to be true to perhaps a variety of accounts and viewpoints on American History and World History. There are usually two or more sides to every story. Isn't that what we believe?

Lying to children is dangerous because when we eventually (I hope) start telling them the truth, they will question the truth more than the lie they've grown up with.

Teaching history has always had its problems since the beginning of schooling. Teaching any subject near the holidays celebrated by so many in this country presents conflicts that educators are not necessarily equipped to negotiate. And, that's not necessarily their fault. Teacher Education needs to address this issue more directly to help educators negotiate the quagmire that has become a First Amendment battleground. We all should support the First Amendment because it protects each of us – regardless of our religious beliefs or lack thereof – from persecution even in the subtlest of forms. Being made to stand out because you don't believe in any god or because you don't believe in a particular god that happens to be of the majority of people in this country can be a rather uncomfortable place for a child to be. The Pledge of Allegiance and the current fervent debate over the phrase "under God" is an example of the conflict a child or his or her family can feel.

The Conflicts will not go away. We must address them head-on.

While the email exchange about writing elementary education lessons around the holiday season were not meant to attract this kind of commentary, it was the mere discussion of holidays and my daughter's recent experience that triggered the response.