



Religious Studies News

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News

AAR Board Approves Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools



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Diane L. Moore pursues research interests in the public understanding of religion through education from a cultural studies lens. Her current focus is on the intersections of religion, ecology, and human rights. She is also interested in the relationship among religion, the arts, and social change. She is the director of the Program in Religious Studies and Education at Harvard University and serves on the editorial boards of the journals Religion and Education and the British Journal of Religious Education. She is also chair of the American Academy of Religion's Task Force on Religion in the Schools, which is completing a three-year initiative to establish guidelines for teaching about religion in K-12 public schools. Her book Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education was published by Palgrave MacMillan Press in 2007. She was one of two professors chosen by Harvard Divinity School students as the 2005-2006 Outstanding Teacher of the Year. Moore also taught at Phillips Andover Academy in the department of philosophy and religious studies until 2007. She is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Sarah M. Pike is professor of religious studies and Director of the Humanities Center at California State University, Chico, where she teaches courses on American religions. She is a member of the AAR Religion in the Schools Working Group. She also chairs the AAR Public Understanding of Religion Committee and is a member of the AAR's Executive Committee and Board of Directors. Pike is the author of Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community (University of California Press, 2001) and New Age and Neopagan Religions in America (Columbia University Press, 2004).



At its meeting in April, the AAR Board unanimously approved the **American Academy of Religion Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States**. The document is the product of a three-year initiative undertaken by the Religion in the Schools Task Force in consultation with educators and the broad constituency of the AAR. The *Guidelines* are written for public school teachers, administrators, members of school boards, and other citizens to provide guidance for how to teach about religion in intellectually sound ways from the nonsectarian perspective appropriate for public schools. Contrary to popular opinion, religion is embedded in state standards across the K-12 spectrum and is especially prominent in English and social studies curricula. In spite of this fact, very few educators have been trained in the religious studies methods required to teach this content responsibly. Furthermore, until now there were no guidelines produced by religious studies scholars comparable to those available in other disciplines that focus on K-12 educational contexts. Given that religion is widely misunderstood and often controversial, this gap in training and resources placed teachers in an untenable situation. Our hope is that these guidelines will provide a useful tool for them as they face the challenges and opportunities that teaching about religion entails.

The fifty-page document is divided into four main sections that address: 1) Why teaching about religion is important; 2) The distinction between a devotional approach to religion and a non-devotional religious studies approach appropriate for public schools; 3) How to teach about religion with a variety of approaches, pedagogical strategies, and "snapshots" of classroom practices across the K-12 spectrum; and 4) The content and skill competencies required for teachers to teach about religion in intellectually sound ways. The document also includes endnotes, a bibliography of works cited, and appendices that offer additional practical resources and suggestions.

The AAR has published the *Guidelines* on its website ([see here](#)) and is planning several initiatives to advertise and promote the document among educators and school administrators. For example, Diane L. Moore will partner with Task Force member and public school educator Stephanie McAllister to make presentations about the *Guidelines* at a variety of national education association meetings, such as the National Council for the Social Studies, the National Council for Teachers of English, and the World History

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Association. We will also send an announcement to education related listservs and write articles for publication in relevant journals and newsletters.

The *Guidelines* initiative is the latest effort in a long-standing commitment of the AAR to promote education about religion in precollege contexts. The earliest effort began in 1973 following landmark Supreme Court cases in the 1960s (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962, and *Abington v. Schempp*, 1963) where school-sponsored prayer and Bible readings were banned, but teaching about religion from a nonsectarian perspective was affirmed. Religious Studies scholar Nicholas Piediscalzi was approached by the AAR leadership to form a consultation on "Teaching about Religion in the Public Schools," to be held at the 1974 Annual Meeting. This led to the creation of the "Working Group on Religion Studies in Public Education" that was established for a four-year term. The Working Group was enormously productive during its short tenure. Members conducted sessions at four consecutive Annual Meetings, helped establish religious studies and education initiatives at several colleges and universities, and produced three edited volumes. When the Working Group on Religion Studies and Public Education ended, issues related to religion and public education were taken up by the standing "Committee on Education and the Study of Religion" that also focused on higher educational contexts. Over time, the interest in addressing issues related to teaching and learning about religion in K-12 settings diminished in comparison to a growing emphasis on higher education. A host of larger factors (including controversies surrounding teaching about religion in public schools from a nonsectarian perspective) contributed to the loss of sustained attention to teaching about religion in precollege settings. By 1991 Nick Piediscalzi lamented that "All the activities of this [earlier] period and most of the materials produced are virtually unknown today."

Like the Working Group discussed above, the Religion in the Schools Task Force is a temporary entity and will be dissolved following the Annual Meeting in Atlanta. Learning from this past experience, the AAR Board of Directors recognized the importance of finding an institutional "home" for the *Guidelines* initiative once the task force is disbanded. That function might appropriately be taken on by the AAR's Public Understanding of Religion Committee (PUR), which would assume responsibility for ongoing promotion, dissemination, and review of the *Guidelines*. Long-term plans include pursuing funding to support educational initiatives aimed at providing in-service teachers with the content and skills outlined in Part Four of the *Guidelines*, and supporting the establishment of collaborations among religious studies departments and schools of education for pre-service educators to gain exposure to religious studies content and methods. The PUR Committee will also work with AAR members in the regions to promote educational opportunities and initiatives at the local level. AAR members are encouraged to support efforts to disseminate the *Guidelines* and to work with the PUR Committee to promote teacher education opportunities.

Everyone involved in the process of creating and vetting the *Guidelines* over the past three years can attest to the excitement that this project has generated. We hope the final product will prove to be a relevant and helpful resource for teachers, administrators, and others who are eager to strengthen literacy about religion in the service of deepening understanding of the religious dimensions of multiculturalism, strengthening cross-cultural competence, and enhancing our understanding of the profound roles that religions play in contemporary and historical experiences.

