

# Religion and Teacher Education

## Lessons for the College Classroom

### Lesson 1: Religion in the Classroom

#### Objectives:

- To introduce the topic of religion in the teacher education classroom.
- To consider ways religion influences the K-12 classroom.
- To recognize religious and non-religious beliefs as aspects of identity that may influence teachers and students.

**Time:** 60-90 minutes

**Materials needed:** Computer and projector, online polling platform, computers for students

#### Links to articles:

- *Study about Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum* (NCSS, 2021)  
<https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/study-about-religions-social-studies-curriculum>
- Chapter 5 in *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools* written and edited by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas (pp. 41-56).  
<https://www.freedomforum.org/commonground>
- *The Religious Landscape Study* by the Pew Research Center.  
<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

---

**Opener:** Before class, assign the reading *Study about Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum* (NCSS, 2014) that introduces the topics of religious literacy, citizenship education, and cross-cultural understandings.

- Engage students in a discussion using the following prompts about the reading:
  - According to NCSS, why is knowledge about religions important?
    - Why should a teacher develop his or her religious literacy?
  - Why was religious content omitted from some school curriculum in the past?
    - Why can this omission be a problem?

**Lesson:** Many teachers are not required to teach religious content or curriculum. However, the next exercise highlights other ways religion and religious beliefs can intersect with public schooling—no matter the curriculum or grade level.

- Begin by having students take a quiz (**Appendix A**) to assess their understanding about religion in public schools.
- After the quiz, have students read Chapter 5 (*A Teachers Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*) in *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment guide to Religion and Public Schools* (pp. 41-56). Instruct students to assess their quiz as they read. After they complete the reading, conduct an anonymous online poll to determine the questions students missed. One online platform an instructor could use is Poll Everywhere <https://www.polleverywhere.com>. The instructor could ask, “Which questions were more difficult to answer?” This can be completed anonymously online or as part of a class discussion. The instructor should be mindful that some students may be hesitant to share their views or answers. Engage in a class discussion on questions students found challenging.
- Following this discussion, guide students through an activity on religious identity. Students just read Chapter 5 in *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment guide to Religion and Public Schools* that mentions ways a teacher’s faith may be notable at school. Haynes and Thomas (2007) state, “Teachers...bring their faith with them through the schoolhouse door each morning” (p. 52). Highlight that religious or non-religious beliefs, and past experiences with religion, may influence a teacher’s classroom and students. Explain that the next activity will focus on religious belief and religious identity.
- Ask students to anonymously share their religious affiliation, if any. Explain that they are not required to answer and will have the option to respond, “Prefer not to answer.” Since some students may be hesitant to openly share this information, an online anonymous poll is a helpful tool and strategy. The teacher can use the following questions for the poll:

- Do you consider yourself to be affiliated with any religious group?
- If yes, what faith tradition or denomination?



Sample questions created on polleverywhere.com

- After the class views the results, instruct students to compare their class demographics with the *Religious Landscape Study* by the Pew Research Center.
  - Instruct students to view the chart and data about religious groups in the United States. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>
  - Ask the following:

- What surprised you about the information about religious groups in the United States?
  - How does our class compare with the study?
- Instruct students to examine the demographics in their area or state (under geography on the site) and ask:
- How does our state compare with other parts of the country?
  - Do you consider our class (or our state) to be religiously diverse? Why or why not? What does religious diversity mean to you? How should we define religious diversity?

- To close the lesson, instruct students to write a reflection paper on possible ways their religious views or experiences with religion may influence them as future teachers.

Homework assignment:

Reflect upon your experiences with religion. Choose one of the following questions to answer:

- *Do your past experiences in K-12 schooling influence how you will address the teaching of religion or religious beliefs in the classroom? In what ways?*
- *How might your personal religious or non-religious beliefs affect your future classroom?*
- *What are your concerns about possible ways religious beliefs may surface in your future classroom?*
- *Do you believe teacher preparation programs should spend more time addressing religion and the religious beliefs of teachers and students? Why or why not?*

The instructor may decide to further the discussion in a future class after reading students' responses. It is likely that students will provide examples from their experiences in K-12 classrooms that will illuminate different aspects of this topic.

**References:**

Haynes, C. C., & Thomas, O. (2007). *Finding common ground: A First Amendment guide to religion and public schools*. Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center.

National Council for the Social Studies. 2014. *Study about religions in the social studies curriculum: A position statement of National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)*. Retrieved from: [https://www.socialstudies.org/positions/study\\_about\\_religions](https://www.socialstudies.org/positions/study_about_religions)

*Religious Landscape Study*. (2015, May 12). Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

Appendix A: Religion in the Classroom Quiz
--

**True (T) or False (F):**

1. It is unconstitutional to teach about religion in a public school. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Teachers may invite religious leaders to their classrooms to help students learn about a specific religion. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Teachers may teach about religious holidays in the classroom. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Teachers may celebrate religious holidays in the classroom. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Teachers may pray while at school. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Teachers may answer students' questions about their personal religious beliefs. \_\_\_\_\_
7. Students are allowed to pray at school. \_\_\_\_\_
8. Students may express their religious beliefs in school assignments. \_\_\_\_\_
9. A teacher must monitor a child's compliance with a particular religious requirement. \_\_\_\_\_
10. Students are allowed to create a Bible club or other religious club at school. \_\_\_\_\_
11. Students are allowed to distribute religious literature at school. \_\_\_\_\_
12. A teacher may lead students in prayer at school. \_\_\_\_\_
13. Simulations and role plays are helpful and effective strategies to teach students about religious practices and rituals. \_\_\_\_\_
14. Teachers may have a Christmas tree in their classrooms in December. \_\_\_\_\_

## Answer Key

### True (T) or False (F):

1. It is unconstitutional to teach about religion in a public school. **F**
2. Teachers may invite religious leaders to their classrooms to help students learn about a specific religion. **T**
3. Teachers may teach about religious holidays in the classroom. **T**
4. Teachers may celebrate religious holidays in the classroom. **F**
5. Teachers may pray while at school. **T**
6. Teachers may answer students' questions about their personal religious beliefs. **T**
7. Students are allowed to pray at school. **T**
8. Students may express their religious beliefs in school assignments. **T**
9. A teacher must monitor a child's compliance with a particular religious requirement. **F**
10. Students are allowed to create a Bible club or other religious club at school. **T**
11. Students are allowed to distribute religious literature at school. **T**
12. A teacher may lead students in prayer at school. **F**
13. Simulations and role plays are helpful and effective strategies to teach students about religious practices and rituals. **F**
14. Teachers may have a Christmas tree in their classrooms in December. **T**

Answers and additional information can be found in *A Teachers Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* in *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment guide to Religion and Public Schools* (pp. 41-56). **The instructor should be aware that many of the answers require further explanation and context.** For example, with question #2, teachers *may* invite religious leaders to their classroom but are cautioned to “consult their school district policy” and ensure “that any guest speaker understands the First Amendment guidelines for teaching about religion in public education and is clear about the academic nature of the assignment” (p. 47). With question #5, teachers *may* pray at school but only outside the presence of students. The instructor should review each section and question addressed in the teacher's guide.

Question 14 is not addressed in *A Teachers Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*. Students should understand that the courts do not consider a Christmas tree to be a religious symbol. However, a teacher should be mindful of a Christmas tree's religious ties and work to create a classroom that considers students who do not celebrate Christmas or winter break.

## Lesson 2: Religion and the First Amendment

### Objectives:

- To provide an overview of the First Amendment Religious Liberty clauses.
- To highlight how the Religious Liberty clauses are interpreted by judges and courts.
- To recognize ongoing issues and conflicts regarding religion and public schooling.

**Time:** 60-90 minutes

**Materials needed:** Computer and projector, computers for students

### Links to articles:

- *3Rs & First Amendment Framework* by Freedom Forum. <https://newseumed.org/tools/lesson-plan/3rs-first-amendment-framework>
- *For a Lot of American Teens, Religion Is a Regular Part of the Public School Day*  
<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/03/for-a-lot-of-american-teens-religion-is-a-regular-part-of-the-public-school-day/>
- *Establishment Clause Overview* by Hana M. Ryman and J. Mark Alcorn  
<https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/885/establishment-clause-separation-of-church-and-state>
- *Free Exercise Overview* by Frederick Gedicks and Michael McConnell  
<https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/amendments/amendment-i/interpretations/265#the-free-exercise-clause>
- *The Jigsaw Method* by Jennifer Gonzalez  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euhtXUgBEts&t=2s>

---

**Opener:** Before class, have students complete the *3Rs and First Amendment Framework* module by NewseumEd.

- Open by discussing with students:
  - What does religious liberty mean to you?
  - What do you think religious liberty looks like in a public school setting?

- According to Dr. Haynes, what are the differences between the “sacred public school,” “the naked public school,” and “the civil public school”?

**Lesson:** Explain that this lesson addresses religious liberty and the First Amendment Religious Liberty clauses, including debates about how these clauses are interpreted.

- Begin by helping students summarize the Establishment clause and Free Exercise clause. As a reference and resource, a teacher can use summaries from the articles above.

Instruct students that they will now investigate some key court cases on religion and the First Amendment with a Jigsaw Activity.

- Jigsaw Activity<sup>1</sup>: Divide students into groups of four. Each person in each group will be assigned a court case to research and summarize:
  - Engel v. Vitale
  - Lemon v. Kurtzman
  - Abington School District v. Schempp
  - Edwards v. Aguillard
- Provide students with **Appendix A** that provides online resources to help students begin their research. Instruct each student to answer the questions at the bottom of the handout and work independently to investigate their court case. When they are done, rearrange the groups by court cases. In other words, put all the students who examined Engel v. Vitale together and have them discuss and review what they learned. Instruct students to prepare to teach their peers about their case. When each group has finished discussing their case with their group, have students return to their original groups. Instruct students to now take turns teaching their peers about the court case they researched.
- The teacher may choose to have a class discussion on the cases and answer students’ questions.
- If time permits, have students read and review the data from the Pew Research article *For a Lot of American Teens, Religion Is a Regular Part of the Public School Day*.

## References:

---

<sup>1</sup> To review how to implement the Jigsaw method, visit the *Cult of Pedagogy* website. <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/jigsaw-teaching-strategy/>

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2020, June 18). Engel v. Vitale. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Engel-v-Vitale>

Edwards v. Aguillard. (n.d.). *Oyez*. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1986/85-1513>

Engel v. Vitale. (n.d.). *Oyez*. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1961/468>

Middle Tennessee State University (2009). *Establishment Clause (Separation of Church and State)*<https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/885/establishment-clause-separation-of-church-and-state>

Gonzalez, J. (2015, April 15). *4 things you don't know about the jigsaw method*. Cult of Pedagogy. <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/jigsaw-teaching-strategy/>

Hudson, D. L., Jr. (2019, July 8). *The fate of the Lemon test: D.O.A. or barely surviving?* Freedom Forum Institute. [https://www.freedomforum.org/content/uploads/2023/09/article\\_FFI\\_dhudson\\_070819.pdf](https://www.freedomforum.org/content/uploads/2023/09/article_FFI_dhudson_070819.pdf)

Lemon v. Kurtzman. (n.d.). *Oyez*. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1970/89>

McCullough, S. R. (2020, June 10). *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/School-District-of-Abington-Township-v-Schempp>

Pew Research Center. (2009, May 14). *The Lemon test*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/05/14/shifting-boundaries6/>

Pew Research Center. (2019, October 3). *For a lot of American teens, religion is a regular part of the public school day*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/03/for-a-lot-of-american-teens-religion-is-a-regular-part-of-the-public-school-day/>

School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp. (n.d.). *Oyez*. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1962/142>



Appendix A: Jigsaw activity

<b>Case:</b>	<b>Online resources for students:</b>
Engel v. Vitale:	<a href="https://www.oyez.org/cases/1961/468">https://www.oyez.org/cases/1961/468</a> <a href="https://www.britannica.com/event/Engel-v-Vitale">https://www.britannica.com/event/Engel-v-Vitale</a>
Lemon v. Kurtzman:	<a href="https://www.oyez.org/cases/1970/89">https://www.oyez.org/cases/1970/89</a> <a href="https://www.pewforum.org/2009/05/14/shifting-boundaries6/">https://www.pewforum.org/2009/05/14/shifting-boundaries6/</a> <a href="https://www.freedomforum.org/content/uploads/2023/09/article_FFI_dhudson_070819.pdf">https://www.freedomforum.org/content/uploads/2023/09/article_FFI_dhudson_070819.pdf</a>
School District of Abington Township v. Schempp	<a href="https://www.oyez.org/cases/1962/142">https://www.oyez.org/cases/1962/142</a> <a href="https://www.britannica.com/topic/School-District-of-Abington-Township-v-Schempp">https://www.britannica.com/topic/School-District-of-Abington-Township-v-Schempp</a>
Edwards v. Aguillard	<a href="https://www.oyez.org/cases/1986/85-1513">https://www.oyez.org/cases/1986/85-1513</a> <a href="https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edwards-v-Aguillard">https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edwards-v-Aguillard</a>

Provide a brief summary of the case:

What question did the court seek to answer?

What was the Supreme Court's decision?

How is this case still relevant today?

## Lesson 3: Religion in the K-12 Curriculum

### Objectives:

- To examine the importance of religious literacy for teachers.
- To highlight religion's role and influence in the K-12 curriculum.
- To provide future teachers with resources to help teach religious content.

**Time:** 60-90 minutes

**Materials needed:** Computer and projector, computers for students

### Links to articles:

- U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz <https://www.pewresearch.org/quiz/u-s-religious-knowledge-quiz/>
  - *What Americans Know About Religion* <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/what-americans-know-about-religion/>
  - *The Pluralism Project* <https://pluralism.org/home>
- 

**Opener:** This lesson addresses the topic of religious literacy and religion in the K-12 curriculum.

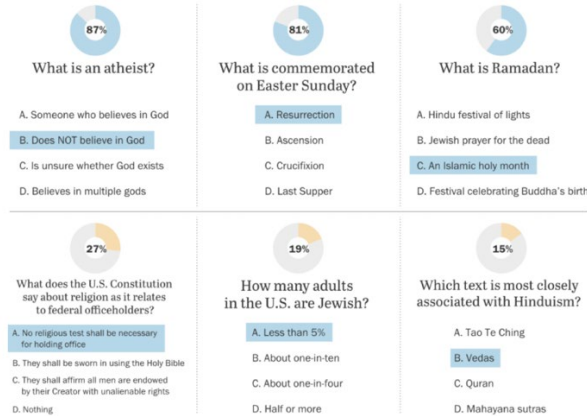
- Begin by instructing students to take the U.S. Religious Knowledge quiz by the Pew Research Center. Explain to students that they will not be required to share their score.

### Lesson:

- After students complete the quiz, review findings from Pew Research's study *What Americans Know About Religion*.

**Most Americans correctly answer basic questions about Christianity, atheism and Islam; fewer know about Judaism, Hinduism or what the Constitution says**

% who answer each question correctly

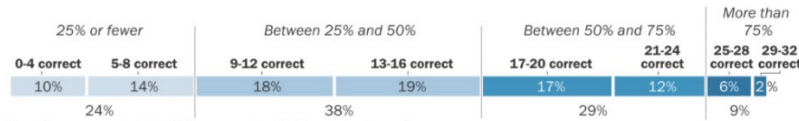


Note: Correct answers are highlighted. For most survey questions, the order in which the answers were listed was randomized. Respondents had the option to click "not sure" on all questions. See [topline](#) for full question wording and order. Source: Survey conducted Feb. 4-19, 2019, among U.S. adults. "What Americans Know About Religion"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

**Most respondents got between 25% and 75% of questions right; very few gave all correct answers**

% who answered \_\_\_ questions correctly



Note: Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding. Source: Survey conducted Feb. 4-19, 2019, among U.S. adults. "What Americans Know About Religion"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

WHAT AMERICANS KNOW ABOUT RELIGION

**4. Feelings toward religious groups**

The survey included some questions designed to see whether higher levels of religious knowledge tend to go hand in hand with more positive attitudes toward various religious groups.

Overall, the answer is "yes." In general, respondents who are highly knowledgeable about a religious group tend to express relatively warm feelings toward that group, and respondents who are most knowledgeable about religions overall tend to

express relatively warm feelings toward a variety of religious groups. There are, however, some exceptions to this pattern, which are outlined below. And of course, the causal arrow also could go in the other direction – a person who feels warmly toward a religious group may be more likely to learn more about that group.

**In U.S., Jews viewed warmly, atheists and Muslims less so**

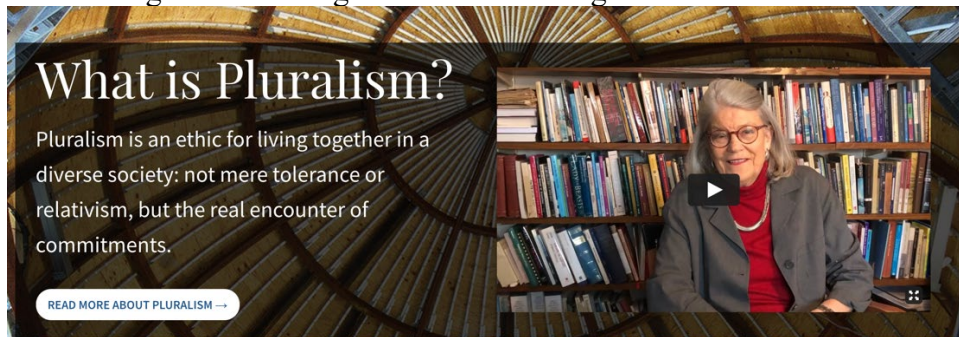
	Mean thermometer rating	% rating each group in the ___ part of thermometer		
		Warmest (67-100)	Middle (34-66)	Coldest (0-33)
Jews	63	41%	49%	8%
Catholics	60	38	47	13
Mainline Protestants	60	36	51	11
Buddhists	57	31	53	13
Evangelical Christians	56	34	44	21
Hindus	55	27	58	14
Mormons	51	23	55	20
Atheists	49	26	46	27
Muslims	49	22	51	25

Note: Respondents who declined to rate a group are not shown. Source: Survey conducted Feb. 4-19, 2019, among U.S. adults. "What Americans Know About Religion"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Instructors may highlight a particular graph from the study to further classroom discussion. One integral finding for this lesson is the connection between religious literacy and attitudes toward religious groups: “Those who are most knowledgeable about a religion (and are not members of that religion) tend to rate the religion’s adherents most favorably.”

- Highlight this connection and segue into a discussion regarding why religious literacy matters for teachers.
  
- Discuss with students:
  - Why do you think a teacher’s religious knowledge matters in the classroom?
  - How could a teacher’s knowledge of religions (or lack of knowledge) affect his or her students?
  - Do you feel prepared to teach religious content if needed?
  
- Next provide students with a link to *The Pluralism Project* by Harvard <https://pluralism.org/home>. This part of the lesson will highlight arguments for greater religious knowledge and understanding.



- Watch the video *What is Pluralism?* by Professor Diana L. Eck and then engage students in a silent discussion on the four aspects of pluralism described on the site.

## What is Pluralism?



First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity.

Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.



Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.

Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotypes, the half-truths, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.



Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments.

The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.



Fourth, pluralism is based on dialogue.

The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the "table" will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table -- with one's commitments.

- For the silent discussion, print out each of the four descriptions of pluralism (the photo and text) and place them on large posters. Arrange the posters around the classroom on tables and instruct students to silently write responses to the text on the posters. Students are encouraged to draw arrows and respond to what others have written, building on the "silent" conversation. The instructor may choose to share and discuss the responses written on the posters after the conclusion of the activity.

Students have now examined their religious knowledge and learned more about why religious knowledge and pluralism matters. The next part of this lesson will provide students with an opportunity to explore resources that can help build their religious knowledge.

- Instruct students to go to the *Rivers of Faith* webpage <https://pluralism.org/home>. There are 17 "Rivers of Faith" represented in this section. Most of the sections include an introduction to a particular faith, details about that faith in America, experiences and practices, and current issues. Have students examine three faith traditions and answer:
  - What are some of the beliefs found in this religion?

- What are some of the practices, rites, and rituals found in this religion?
- What are some issues that members of this religion are currently facing?

Students may complete this activity independently or with a partner.

- After the activity, ask students:
  - What did you learn about the religious landscape of America?
  - What surprised you?

Highlight how religious traditions change over time and are internally complex.

- Next provide students with a weblink to your state’s social studies standards and have them research religions found in the standards. The instructor may choose to assign grade levels to certain groups of students and have each group share their findings. This activity will provide an overview of what religions are taught across the K-12 curriculum.
- After students explore state standards, highlight how religion can appear in content outside these standards and influence other school subjects. Place students into groups and assign each group a subject area from the following list:
  - Language arts, economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, civics, U.S. history, world history, government, geography.

Instruct students to brainstorm and research ways religion may influence their assigned subject area. For example, *How might religious beliefs, behaviors, and identity influence language arts? . . .etc.* Have each group share the connections they made.<sup>2</sup>

- To close the lesson, provide students with a list of resources (Appendix A) to help them continue to develop their religious literacy.

## References:

Harvard University. (n.d.). *Religions: An introduction to world’s religious traditions through the lens of America*. The Pluralism Project. <https://pluralism.org/religions>

---

<sup>2</sup> The instructor may refer to the article *Teaching and talking about religion: Strategies for teacher educators* to help students with this task. The authors provide examples of how religion influences different disciplines under the section: *Religious literacy and the influence of religion in the social studies*.

Logan, K. R., & Hartwick, J. M. M. (2019, July). Teaching and talking about religion: Strategies for teacher educators. *Social Studies Research and Practice*. 14(2), 167-179. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SSRP-05-2019-0027>

Logan, K. R., & Hartwick, J. M. M. (2019, July). Teaching and talking about religion: Strategies for teacher educators. *Social Studies Research and Practice*. 14(2), 167-179.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/SSRP-05-2019-0027>

Pew Research Center. (2019, July 23). *U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz*.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/quiz/u-s-religious-knowledge-quiz/>

Pew Research Center. (2019, July 23). *What Americans know about religion*.  
<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/what-americans-know-about-religion/>

Appendix A: Resources to develop religious literacy
---

Fraser, J. W. (1999). *Between church and state: Religion and public education in a multicultural America*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Harvard University. (n.d.). *Religions: An introduction to world's religious traditions through the lens of America*. The Pluralism Project. <https://pluralism.org/religions>

Haynes, C. C. (2008). *A teacher's guide to religion in the public schools*. Nashville, TN:First Amendment Center.

Haynes, C. C. (Ed.). (2019). *Teaching about religion in the social studies classroom*. Silver Springs, MD: National Council for the Social Studies.

Haynes, C. C., & Thomas, O. (2007). *Finding common ground: A First Amendment guide to religion and public schools*. Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center.

James, J. H. (2015). *Religion in the classroom: Dilemmas for democratic education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

O'Neil, J., & Loschert, K. (2002). Navigating religion in the classroom. *NEA Today*, 21(3), 8-11.