



Teaching about Religions: A Democratic Approach for Public Schools

Emile Lester

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"This provocative and timely book challenges Americans to rethink what it means to take democracy and religious freedom seriously in public education. Emile Lester takes the reader beyond culture war conflicts rooted in religious divisions and offers bold, new solutions for addressing our differences with fairness and robust toleration. Instead of battlegrounds, he argues, public schools can and should be places that include all voices in ways that prepare citizens to engage one another with civility and respect. *Teaching about Religions* is essential reading for all who care about the future of public schools---and the health of American democracy."

--- Charles C. Haynes, Senior Scholar, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center

"More than simply a synthesis of existing scholarship, [this book is] an original contribution to the field. [The] major themes are timely, and this book might well contribute to public discussion of important issues in our culture wars."

---Warren Nord, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

"Arriving in the wake of a bitter battle over the place of Islam in America and in the midst of calls for greater understanding and civility, Emile Lester's new book is a timely contribution to the debate about the best ways to teach about religion in our nation's public schools. A pioneering researcher in this field, Lester offers thoughtful critiques of existing proposals as well as fresh ideas. His recommendations reflect painstaking efforts to understand the concerns of groups (most notably, conservative Christians) to which he does not belong, and a firm grasp of the difference between fostering understanding of other faiths and pressing for acceptance of them. Lester's prescriptions, always informed and fair-minded and sometimes provocative, should drive the debate forward in productive ways."

---Melissa Rogers, Director, Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University School of Divinity and Nonresident Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution

Frequent news stories about the debates waged between secularists and religious conservatives have convinced most Americans that public schools must choose between promoting respect for religious minorities and respecting the interests of conservative Christians. As a result, public schools fail to teach students about the meaning and value of protecting religious liberty and consequently perpetuate mistrust across the cultural divide, further empower extremists, and obscure the fact that most Americans of all religious backgrounds share a commitment to basic democratic principles.

In response, the public schools in the religiously diverse and divided community of Modesto, California, have introduced a widely acclaimed required world religions course. Drawing on groundbreaking research on the creation of and response to the Modesto course as well as on political philosophy, Emile Lester advocates a civic approach to teaching about religion in public schools that at once emphasizes respect for all views about religion and provides a special recognition of conservative Christian beliefs.

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