

Making Christmas a teachable moment

We live in confusing times. There's a national debate about whether we say "Christmas" or "Xmas," and apparently if you say "Happy Holidays" the terrorists have won.

It's easy to make fun of our national bewilderment, but things aren't any clearer locally: in the latest effort to see how many administrators can dance on the head of a pin, the Greece Central School District has a new policy on religious holidays in class. The policy determines that "Oh Come All Ye Faithful" is inappropriate to sing because it is a call to action, while "Silent Night" is acceptable in school because it mentions that the virgin and child are holy but doesn't ask you to do anything about it. Religion is apparently not religion if it uses the passive voice.

It's unfair to single Greece out, however, because nobody else's policies make sense either. Some schools are taking Xmas trees out while others are putting Christmas trees in - Little Drummer Boys sit

sing the same songs in school that they're already going to hear for two months in every department store, doctors' office and street corner?

They have no educational value, and so they should be taken out of schools entirely. The same with Christmas trees, Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, and that tired Menorah that people who know nothing about Judaism think is inclusive when put next to Santa but in fact is incredibly patronizing. Kids will get it all elsewhere... Schools shouldn't waste their time.

Am I saying there should be no religion in schools? No - I'm saying religion has much more to offer than this hackneyed fare.

Much of the greatest music in the Western canon was written for religious purposes and shaped everything - religious and secular - that came after. Introduce students to the motets of Thomas Tallis (1505 - 1585) or the missas of Roland de Lassus (1523 - 1594), which

are of incalculable beauty and historical importance, and Christian. Never heard of them? Exactly - that's called "education." It belongs if it teaches students something about history and music.

Nor should we try to celebrate the holiday traditions in school - putting up stockings or distributing candy canes. Schools aren't here to "celebrate," they're here to educate. Celebrating a religious holiday is, by definition, proselytizing, which is out of bounds. But there can be no legitimate objection to a study of the significant archeological evidence that relates to the New Testament. That's history, anthropology, literature...

... educational gold. How about a virtual tour of the Middle East? Or a look at how global Christianity has changed over the last 100 years?

Even theology is legitimate if it had a significant historical impact. Thomas Aquinas had a major effect on European intellectual history, so he's fair game. Of course, to make

sense of his Summa Theologica you'll need to study Aristotle and Plato and... aw, now you see what I've done? I've gone and made the month of December useful again.

The same logic applies to the other holidays, which also belong if they can be part of a real education instead of a dry, dead repetition meant to make people feel better because they're included. You want to study Harukkah? Great - a unit on historical Assyria and Babylon is called for. Should Ramadan be included? I'd say so - but do it right. Hey, why not study medieval Andalusia - the only time and place when all three monotheistic religions lived in relative harmony?

Holidays should add to students' education, not detract. We can do so much better with this simple gold standard:

don't celebrate - educate. Forget whether it's "too religious" or "not religious enough." If it's got educational value, it's in. If it doesn't, it's a colossal waste of time that they'll get plenty of on television.



next to dreidels spun by snowmen. There's no logical explanation for it, and nobody's happy.

There is a better way. We just need to get serious about the season. I offer this idea up to our schools as they prepare for next December's culture war.

Neither "Oh Come All Ye Faithful" nor "Silent Night" nor even "Jingle Bells" should be sung in schools. Not because they're religious - because they're bad songs. They have anemic melodies, trite lyrics, and are used in so many commercials that we might as well print them on the back of... coupons. I know they're holiday favorites, but, isn't that the point? Why should students