

History Now. From the Teachers Desk

Teaching the Topic

Illustrating U.S. History in the Classroom

by Bruce Lesh and Philip Nicolosi

In the history classroom, teaching religion's impact on the past is a pedagogical experience fraught with challenges and rewards. Many students see any reference to religious doctrine, practice, or the interplay of religious forces on the historical landscape as a violation of their definition of the intermingling of church and state. Out of fear for their jobs or criticism from parents or administrators, many teachers shy away from deep examinations of religion's impact on people and events from the past. What students need to understand, and central to the conundrum that religion in the classroom generates for teachers, is that studying religion in a historical context is not about teaching students what to believe. It is, instead, what happens when different religious tenets come into contact, the changes wrought by these interactions, and how these changes rippled across history. To understand the events, leaders, and transformative ideas students must understand not only the concept of religious belief, but how doctrinal differences served as both perpetuators of continuity and authors of change. This edition of *History Now* reminds all history teachers of the tests and prizes religion in the classroom provides.

This issue of *History Now* allays the fears of crossing the line between church and state and provides teachers with four valuable essays to seamlessly integrate religion's role into America's story, thus allowing students to see that everyone has a place at history's table. It's tricky enough to explain the complex motivations and economic policies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe without delving into the complexities of the religious influences on the colonies and the early founding era. Lessons tend to focus on a rather benign

study of the Christian influences in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, focusing primarily on the “characters” of American History—the Pilgrims, Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, and the like. The Salem Witch Trials capture our students’ imaginations of a time long ago and beliefs that seem like something out of a Harry Potter novel. Religion is rarely mentioned in the founding of other colonies other than, perhaps, William Penn’s “Holy Experiment” and is glossed over after the mention of the Bill of Rights and the separation of church and state. Teaching American history by watering down religion’s role side-steps the complicated role that religion provides in defining the American experience.

In *Jewish Settlers in America*, Eli Faber enhances the story of Dutch New Amsterdam and enriches the story of the New York’s incredible history. Teachers can easily enhance a student’s understanding of the colonial powers’ mercantile interests with a more diverse cast of actors. Faber also includes the story of Jewish immigration in places such as Georgia, South Carolina, and further inland in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Faber explains the hardships of attempting to recreate the life known back in Europe and dispels the notion that colonization was a success story for everyone involved. In addition, the settlement of Rhode Island is linked to New York through the Jewish immigrants, and it is a connection that allows students to see history as active and on a continuum rather than a brief tale of Roger Williams receiving his walking papers from Massachusetts Bay. In fact, coupling this essay with Francis Bremer’s essay on Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams allows students to see that Williams’s and Hutchinson’s expulsions from Massachusetts was not a monocausal event and enhances our understanding of what freedom of religion and thought meant to those living in Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s.

Sparking a discussion of the role religions played in American history would certainly not be complete without a thorough analysis of the Quakers. Barry Levy’s essay provides an easily digestible history of the Quakers from their im-

portance in England in business and politics to the settlement in the colonies. Levy takes the story well beyond William Penn and stresses the importance of the Quaker influence on women including Lucretia Mott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jane Addams, and Alice Paul. Despite the dwindling numbers of Quakers and the struggles to keep the religion alive, Levy places them at the center of nearly every major reform movement in America.

Teaching Thomas Jefferson's writings and teachings on the separation of church and state and the deist philosophy seems safe and raises little in terms of controversy or questioning from students. However, sharing Peter Onuf's essay on "Thomas Jefferson and Deism" with students presents a golden opportunity to teach that history is always open to interpretation and the historiography of a topic is always changing. Rather than treat deism and Christianity as mutually exclusive influences, Onuf contends the Founders, notably Jefferson, sought ways to marry the deist thought and Christianity. Rather than advocating for the separation of church and state as a means for being hostile to religion as many of his political opponents of the day claimed, Jefferson believed that separating religion and the state would allow religions to prosper without interference from secular powers. Onuf's essay clarifies a rather confusing topic for students and yet illuminates the prominent role religion played with even the most ardent supporters of a separation of church and state.

To allow students to believe that American history occurred without religious influence is to allow them to see history through a very narrow lens. Teachers should not run from the challenge that the role of religion presents to students. Instead, as this issue of *History Now* outlines, history instructors should embrace the challenge. This issue should allay the fears of any teacher hesitant to delve into America's religious past.

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