

Bunny Goes to School

One day, while a teacher was grading papers in her classroom - long after the children had gone home - a most curious thing happened.

She heard the door slowly creak open. At first she didn't see anyone enter the room. Then she saw the tips of furry, floppy ears bobbing just above the children's desktops and making their way towards her. She put down her pencil and shifted in her seat to get a better look just as a large rabbit came to the front of her desk.

"Howdy!" said the bunny as he put the finishing touches on the egg in his hand.

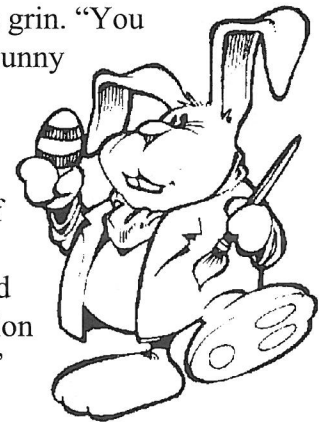
"Hello," said the teacher with a grin. "You wouldn't happen to be the Easter Bunny would you?"

"The one and only," he said, reaching into his pocket for another egg. "I've come to drop off a few eggs for your students."

"Thank you very much," replied the teacher. "Can I ask you a question that has always been on my mind?"

"By all means!" he said with a wiggle. "By all means!"

"Why do you do this? I mean the eggs and all."



"That's a very good question," he said with a smile. "Very good, indeed! It must seem kind of silly to have a holiday celebrated with bunnies and chicks and painted eggs.

"You see, it's all about new life. Easter is really about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is celebrated by nearly 2 billion Christians around the world. Bunnies, chicks, and eggs all represent new life - like the Resurrection."

"I think I'll stick to teaching my students that Easter is about springtime," said the teacher.

"That's too bad," said the bunny.

"What do you mean?" asked the teacher.

"Well, here in America, Easter has profound cultural significance. I've heard some people argue that Easter originally got its name when pre-Christian European tribes worshiped Eoster - the goddess of Spring. And so they teach that Easter is about Spring. But that has no real bearing on America's culture. You don't see a lot of people running around worshiping the goddess Eoster, do you?"

"You've got a point," said the teacher. "How do you know all this?"

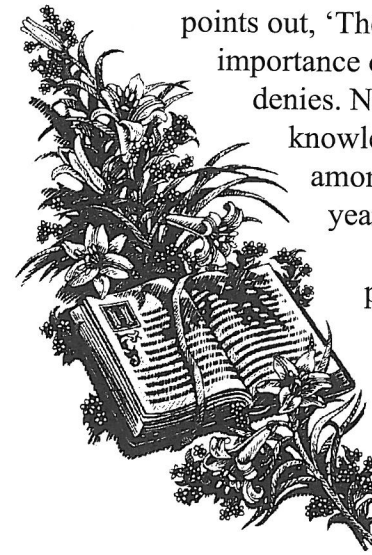
"I read a lot," said the bunny. "I'm not Santa Claus. I don't have to spend all year making toys in sub-zero weather. I munch carrots and read.



"It seems to me," he continued, "that a well-rounded education means learning about the things that form the very foundation of your culture. Christianity certainly has been and continues to be a strong cultural force in America.

"Just the other day, I was reading E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s book, *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. He

points out, 'The linguistic and cultural importance of the Bible is a fact that no one denies. Nonetheless, elementary knowledge of the Bible has declined among young people in recent years.'



"He goes on to say, 'No person in the modern world can be considered educated without a basic knowledge of all the great religions of the world... But our knowledge of Judaism and Christianity needs to be more detailed than that of other great

religions, if only because of the historical accident that has embedded the Bible in our thought and language. The Bible is a central book in our culture, just as the Koran is central in other nations...'

"Okay," said the teacher. "I agree that teaching about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is an important cultural lesson. And I'd like to do it, but I can't teach religion in a public school classroom. It's illegal - unconstitutional! You know, separation of church and state," she explained.

"That doesn't apply to teaching students about why millions of Americans celebrate Easter," said the bunny. "A few years ago the American Civil Liberties Union sued a school district claiming that it was too open to teaching about religious holidays. Do you know what happened?" He smiled. "The ACLU lost. A United States Court of Appeals said this about public schools and religious holidays: 'It would be literally impossible to develop a public school curriculum that did not in some way affect the religious or nonreligious sensibilities of some of the students or their parents. School administrators should, of

course, be sensitive to the religious beliefs or disbeliefs of their constituents and should attempt to avoid conflict, but they need not and should not sacrifice the quality of the students' education. They need only ensure that the primary effect of the school's policy is secular."

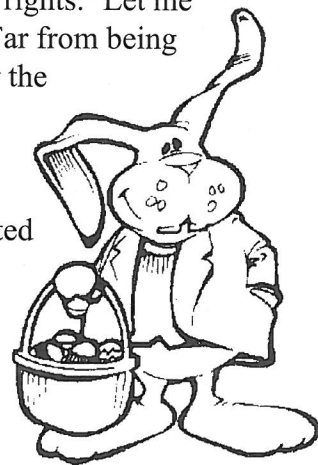
The teacher was quite confused when she heard this. For years she had assumed that teaching the real meaning of Easter was off limits.

"What makes a school's policy secular?" the teacher asked.

The bunny put down his eggs. "The key is to be objective. Teaching *about* the Resurrection doesn't mean you are encouraging a *devotion* to Christianity. It's educating students about the event that is the very basis for all Christianity. And that has had a major impact on America from the Pilgrims' coming to this land to establish a 'city on a hill' to our Declaration of Independence stating that 'all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.' Let me again quote from E. D. Hirsch, Jr.: 'Far from being illegal or undesirable, teaching *about* the Bible is not only consistent with our Constitution, it is essential to our literacy.'"

The bunny placed a brightly painted egg in the teacher's hand. "I think teaching about Easter is like this egg. It's nice to look at a painted egg but an egg is most beneficial when you sink your teeth into what's beneath the surface." With that he turned, and hippity, hoppity, he was out the door.

The End



The National Education Association On Teaching About Religion

"The National Education Association believes that educational materials should accurately portray the influence of religion in our nation and throughout the world." (Resolution E-7, 2000-2001)

The Anti-Defamation League On Teaching About Religion

"Teaching about religion is permissible when it is presented as a part of the secular educational program. Such programs should teach about the role of religion in the historical, cultural, economic, and social development of the United States and other nations and should instill tolerance and respect for a pluralistic society."

(ABC's of Religion in the Public Schools, Anti-Defamation League)

A Common Concern of Educators

Some educators are understandably concerned that if they teach about the religious nature of Christian holidays such as Easter or Christmas, some students will feel left out.

However, the academic objective should be to help all students gain an honest understanding of American culture. It is reasonable for American schools to teach American students about American culture, and that includes its religious culture.

Most teachers would agree with this principle when teaching about *other* countries. For example, it is considered reasonable to teach about Hinduism when teaching about India, or Islam when teaching about Saudi Arabia.

Teachers should never denigrate anyone's religious beliefs, but neither do they need to withhold significant cultural information about the most influential religion in America.

Christianity in America has a major impact on such things as our political debates, our social values, and our legal system. Islamic students, Jewish students, atheist students, or students of any faith are impacted by these beliefs whether or not they agree with them. A good education for all students needs to include accurate information about the major religion in America. While the lessons can be creative and engaging, using art, drama, literature, and music, they should not be devotional or worshipful.

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A Model Policy That Passes Constitutional Scrutiny

In 1979, the Sioux Falls school district was sued by the ACLU because of its policy on the celebration of religious holidays. On April 22, 1980, the U.S. Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit, upheld the constitutionality of the school policy. As of September 2002, this has not been overturned. The policy reads as follows:

Recognition of Religious Beliefs and Customs

It is accepted that no religious belief or non-belief should be promoted by the school district or its employees, and none should be disparaged. Instead, the school district should encourage all students and staff members to appreciate and be tolerant of each other's religious views. The school district should utilize its opportunity to foster understanding and mutual respect among students and parents whether it involves race, culture, economic background or religious beliefs. In that spirit of tolerance, students and staff members should be excused from participating in practices which are contrary to their religious beliefs unless there are clear issues of overriding concern that would prevent it.

The Sioux Falls School District recognizes that one of its educational goals is to advance the students' knowledge and appreciation of the role that our religious heritage has played in the social, cultural and historical development of civilization.

Observance of Religious Holidays

The practice of the Sioux Falls School District shall be as follows:

1. The several holidays throughout the year which have a religious and a secular basis may be observed in the public schools.
2. The historical and contemporary values and the origin of religious holidays may be explained in an unbiased and objective manner without sectarian indoctrination.
3. Music, art, literature and drama having religious themes or basis are permitted as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented in a prudent and objective

Ideas For Teaching About Easter In Public School Classrooms

1. Have students use encyclopedias to write a one-page report on why and how Easter is celebrated in America.
2. Read the Easter story to the class. It is found in the Bible. Start reading at Luke 22 and continue to the end of the book of Luke - a total of 180 verses. Read approximately 36 verses each day for one week. Themes that can be discussed are: the Roman Empire, betrayal, sacrifice, resurrection, love, hope, new life.
3. Ask a parent to read to the class the Easter story from the Bible, and share what the holiday means to his or her family.
4. Have Christian students in your class share what their families or churches are doing to celebrate Easter.
5. Prepare a lesson on the ways Christianity has affected America. You can include such things as: the Pilgrims, the Declaration of Independence, the President's inaugural oath taken on a Bible, the phrase "In God We Trust" on our coins, the abolition movement, the Rev. Martin Luther King's Christian faith, the origin of our system of law.
6. Have students discuss the meaning of John Adams' statement: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."^{*} Do students agree or disagree? Why? How does this relate to Easter?
7. Review some of the famous teachings of Jesus such as: the Golden Rule, the Sermon on the Mount, and the parable of the Good Samaritan.
8. Have students pretend they are newspaper reporters and interview a local member of the clergy about Easter. What will their church be doing to remember Jesus' death and resurrection? Why is Easter important to them? Have each student write an article based on the interview.

^{*}John R. Howe, *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1966, p. 189