

Martha Ball, Butler Middle School



Martha Ball is in her 26th year as a public school teacher, currently teaching ninth grade at Butler Middle School in Salt Lake City, Utah. In 2000, the Daughters of the American Revolution chose her as the Outstanding U.S. History Teacher. Ms. Ball holds both a B.A. degree in History and an M.A. degree in Educational Studies from the University of Utah. She has studied religion and history at the National Humanities Center on an NEH Fellowship. In addition to studying in Poland as an exchange student and in Greece as an NEH Fellow, Ms. Ball studied Hinduism and world religions in India as a Hayes-Fulbright Fellow. She also spent time at the Ackerman Institute at Purdue University, studying how to teach about citizenship. Ms. Ball is the Director of the Utah 3Rs (Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect) Project, which promotes a civic framework for protecting religious liberty, finding common ground, and teaching about religion in the public schools. Ms. Ball has conducted very successful fundraising for the Utah 3Rs Project. The following are excerpts from a telephone interview with Martha Ball, conducted by D. Keith Naylor in March, 2001.

Naylor: How does the study of religion figure in your classroom?

Ball: I use the 3Rs model as a classroom management tool for teaching about religion. In approaching the study of deeply held beliefs and traditions, issues such as civility, equality, diversity, justice, and the common good, all come into play. I seek to develop responsible young people and to serve as a role model for them. On the second day of the term, we begin discussing fair treatment, lack of harassment, and we create together a Classroom Bill of Rights, which we all sign. This sets up our responsibilities to one another in the learning process. Before we get to religion we discuss issues such as core democratic values and living with difference.

I teach a U.S. history unit on world religions in a class in which a large percentage of the students are associated with the Latter Day Saints Church. Starting with the Puritans and

moving to the Mormons, we find that both had to leave their homes to achieve religious liberty. This becomes an ethics lesson and a civics lesson: we turn to questions of religious liberty and the Constitution. We broaden our study to the major world religions, their beliefs and practices, and we raise the issue of how those world religions experience religious liberty in the U.S. Students read excerpts from Supreme Court cases on religion in order to understand what is legally acceptable in studying religion. They take copies of these excerpts home and have their parents read and sign them. In this way parents and students acknowledge that we are teaching about religion, neither proselytizing, nor avoiding religion — which amounts to hostility.

Naylor: What reactions have you had from parents and students?

Ball: We haven't received any parent calls. We have had no name calling or ridiculing in the classroom. In setting up the classroom as a civil learning space on the 3Rs model, we have gained broad cooperation and support.

Naylor: What resources were available to you in teaching about religion?

Ball: We had no resources in the 1980's. There was a Time-Life series on religion in the library. I began doing research on my own. There was nothing about religion in our basic history texts. We did have an in-service training regarding the legalities of student prayer in schools. Then I discovered the University of Utah Middle East Center, which offers many lectures and presentations related to religion. Now we have the *Oxford Series on Religion in American Life*, the *Pluralism Project* CD-Rom with sounds of religious rituals, which really draw students in. There is also a Holt, Rinehart, and Winston video series. I use the religion curriculum materials of the First Amendment Center, such as *Finding Common Ground*, and *Religion in American History — What to Teach and How*. One of our current projects is charting the religious landscape of Utah, thereby creating another resource for students in our state.

Naylor: How did you get involved with the Utah 3Rs Project?

Ball: In 1992, I was looking for ways to connect with the State Office of Education. I went to an intensive workshop on teaching about religion in Salt Lake City, led by Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center. By noon of the first day, I was hooked. I wanted to be involved in bringing this approach to the state. The George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation gave us \$250,000 to bring 3Rs to all school districts in Utah. Money began to flow, some of it going to pay teachers to attend workshops, for instance. This is a very important way of treating teachers as professionals, and of treating them with respect. Teachers are provided with materials from the First Amendment Center. Ten teachers, expert in teaching about religion, now meet regularly to discuss how to improve their skills. I use videotaping of teachers to train them in teaching about religion. Last June, we held a major program for teachers in northern Utah.

Naylor: What hurdles have you faced in recruiting teachers to include the academic study of religion in their classrooms?

Ball: No hurdles. Teachers are always looking for good classes, and they're looking to recertify.

Naylor: In what ways can college and university-based scholars of religion best contribute to teaching about religion in the public schools?

Ball: Well, we do not have religious studies classes at Utah state universities. To help the understanding of diversity, I think religious studies should be part of the general education requirements for undergraduates and elective at high schools. Teachers could benefit from in-service training conducted by religious studies scholars. Our Middle East Center is great in helping teachers. What we need most is for university and public school educators to work as a team.

Naylor: Would you discuss your approach to getting administrators on board the 3Rs Project?

Ball: Ray Briscoe, our first Director of the 3Rs project, started by getting approval from the State Office of Education to bring Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas (of the First Amendment Center) to meet with school superintendents. They spent a whole day raising awareness about the study of religion, the academic framework, and the civic framework. Then we brought in principals and assistant principals, other district officials, and teams from schools. After two months, we did a follow-up meeting with all involved. It is always important to involve

administrators: they're the ones who get the phone calls!

Naylor: What are the most pressing opportunities and obstacles you face in teaching about religion in the public schools?

Ball: Time is the primary issue. For many teachers, finding time to incorporate one more new thing into the curriculum is a problem. The desire is strong, but it seems that there is too much to do. Perhaps the greatest challenge is getting teachers and administrators to overcome their fear of being sued if they teach about religion. Finding the money is key; finding money to reduce classroom size and raise teacher salaries, thus improving morale, is important. Social conditions can have a strange effect. For instance, the recent school shootings have actually resulted in more money for the schools.

Naylor: How has your work with religion in the schools affected your career as an educator?

Ball: It has kept me in education; I was ready to leave. I was sick of the disrespect. I had been offered money to administer a grant. Then I went to Charles Haynes' conference. He said teachers are our hope and our heroes. This work has restored my vision and my commitment to education. Teaching about religion helps me remember why I went into education. I feel that I am doing something important, for I am helping to develop strong citizens.