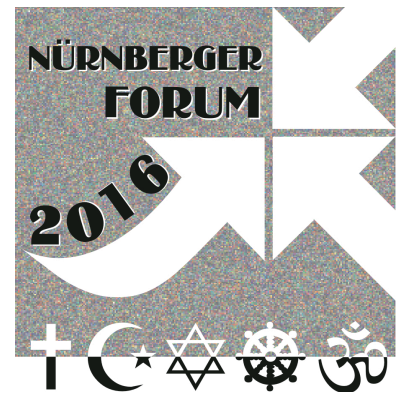


Bruce Grelle

**Religious Studies in Public Education:
Promoting Appreciative and Critical Perspectives on Self, Society,
and Nature**



ABSTRACT

Public schools in the United States are legally required to take a secular, non-devotional, academic approach to teaching about religion. In this context, “secular” refers to a constitutionally defined approach to religion that “neither privileges nor rejects any particular religious tradition or expression.”¹

This *religious studies* approach encourages student *awareness* of religions, but *not acceptance* of a particular religion; *learning about* religion, but *not practicing* religion; *exposing* students to a diversity of religious views, but *not imposing* any particular view; and *educating* about religions but *not promoting or denigrating* religion.² Religious studies is thereby distinguished from a faith-based religious or theological approach to teaching and learning about religion.

The rationale for including religious studies in public schools is that it contributes to religious, cultural, historical, and civic literacy – it informs students about the basic beliefs and practices of the world’s religions; about the historical and contemporary roles of religion in shaping literature, art, music, philosophy, law, ethics, and politics; and about the rights and responsibilities of citizens in religiously diverse societies.

In this paper I move beyond this focus on the promotion of basic literacy. I explore how religious studies can foster 1) an appreciation of diverse religious and secular worldviews as resources for students’ own ecological and moral imaginations and 2) a critical awareness of students’ taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves, their societies, and their relationship to the natural world. More specifically, I explore how religious studies can be brought to bear on questions regarding the impact of digital culture on students’ inner lives and on the religious dimensions and ecological implications of the consumer economy and lifestyle.

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¹ American Academy of Religion, *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*, 2010, p. 4.

² *Ibid*, pp. i; 7-8.