

## **Cultural Studies, Education & Religious Exploration at Central Montessori School**

Different schools in different parts of this country feel differently about religion in school. Generally the concern is that one religion will be promoted at the exclusion of other religions. Many schools do not encourage any type of religious exploration at all.

Central Montessori School does not endorse, teach, or promote any religious beliefs. We do offer students and families opportunities to participate in activities that may have colorings of a religious event as part of cultural studies. Here is a quick overview of Montessori's cultural studies.

### **Nobel Peace Prize Nomination**

Dr. Montessori talked about the child as the instrument of peace and was twice nominated for a Nobel Prize because of this important work. She believed that if children were exposed to all types of information and were presented with opportunities to study other cultures (including religion) that they would make decisions, based not in ignorance, prejudice or fear, but by tolerance. These children would grow up to be problem solvers and critical thinkers: all the skills needed to be a peaceful leader. As far as I know, Montessori education is the only methodology/pedagogy that has this component. It is one of the reasons I personally find the Montessori Method so compelling.

### **The study of spiritual needs is a part of cultural curriculum**

Dr. Montessori placed science, geography and history in cultural studies. She believed that our interpretation of this data is determined by the society in which we live. She also encouraged teachers to present the best that a child's society has to offer to the children and to expose our children to these influences and experiences with go-trips (elementary) and classroom lessons and materials.

Dr. Montessori categorized religious practice as a Spiritual Need in her study of the Fundamental Needs of Humans. The category of Spiritual Needs also includes the arts and music. The elementary students use this time line to discover that humans (possibly only humans) have this need. Spiritual needs can be met in many different ways.

### **Gifts, food, travel, visiting, lights and bells...**

Many components of religious events are based in the Fundamental Needs of Humans. These are a few examples of modern day religious practices that may have had their beginnings in the very pragmatic rituals that predate organized religion.

During the dark cold winter months, when humans were crowded inside shelter for long periods of time, without baths or other ways to meet the current day standards of personal hygiene, illness, hunger, and depression may have well been a large part of daily life. The lighting of candles, lamps etc. would have been a welcome sight and quite a treat. It may have lifted spirits.

The cutting and bringing of evergreen boughs (trees) into a shelter would freshen the air and remind people that rebirth was possible: life continues even during period of darkness and spring would return.

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Following harvests, traveling to check on relatives and friends may have meant the difference between survival and death. The sharing of resources of food and other goods also created strong social bonds.

During the season when few birds could be heard, the ringing of bells would have certainly lifted spirits.

Bells, light, gifts, music and fellowship are incorporated into many religious celebrations. They also speak to the general human condition, no matter the religious orientation.

### **How and when your child may encounter religious information at Central Montessori School.**

At Central Montessori School, we recreate some of the religious celebrations that have these shared components. They are presented during the cultural studies in the classrooms and throughout the school. We have held a Diwali celebration, a Las Posadas celebration, Hanukah, St. Lucia and others. Although Kwanza is not a religious holiday, it incorporates many of the components of religious holidays. We have participated in Kwanza celebrations. Meditation and yoga have been practiced as well.

Students are exposed to religious practices in literature, theater and art. Go-Trips to the museums and certain literature may have religious elements. A small children's bible may be put on the timeline of communication to mark the time when Gutenberg's first printing press was developed. Iconic images of Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha and other religious leaders may be placed on timelines or used in celebrations, art or plays.

During the study of the Big Bang (elementary) and the Coming of Life, parents may come in to read about Adam and Eve or discuss their family's personal beliefs about creation. Creation myths are read before, during and after this study and students may be invited to create their own creation myths.

### **Children openly discuss their religious beliefs in class.**

Another component of a Montessori environment is the multi-year age span. Children of mixed ages interact freely together. Our children come from mixed racial, gender, social-economic backgrounds and religious orientations. This makes for a rich and lively social/emotional classroom life. Lively conversations about religion and other beliefs can sometimes be overheard in the classroom. Children are always encouraged (and teachers model) tolerance and kindness towards those who have different opinions or beliefs.

All of these experiences provide children (and their families), many opportunities to discuss their own family's beliefs. They are truly valuable learning opportunities that provide students with experiences that can possibly lead to their own personal foundations to grow and develop into tolerant and successful adults that our world so desperately needs.

If you prefer your child not participate in any of these activities and would like to be notified before lessons or parent presentations about religion or religious celebrations are presented in class, please just contact the school. Children often visit other classrooms and will be invited to do so during these times.

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### **Did You Know?**

Many people find it interesting that Dr. Montessori was a practicing Catholic. When she first began to write and develop her methodology, she incorporated her religious beliefs into her lessons for children. Once Dr. Montessori spent time in India, corresponding with Mahatma Gandhi for a time, her focus on Christian practices shifted somewhat and became more universal in nature.