

TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

by David J. Bryant*

INTRODUCTION

Public education in the U.S.A. had a distinctly evangelical Protestant flavor in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the mid-twentieth century several developments helped to create a greater sensitivity to the need to remove religious advocacy from public education. The changes in education following from the effort to remove religious influences from public schools have often led to a lack of any education about the role of religion in history and society. The result is ignorance about a central aspect of human history and culture.

Supreme Court decisions have made it clear that the separation of church and state does not preclude teaching about religion in a non-sectarian way. It is my contention that this provides an opening for a very important component of education today. However, to be truly adequate, teaching about religion must be teaching about religions, for the truly educated person needs to know something about the diversity of religious traditions that have contributed to the world as we know it and continue to influence it. Moreover, education about religions needs to attend to their ongoing dynamic character, as well as their past historical manifestations. As the U.S. grows ever more diverse, learning about religions (past and present) is also necessary for an adequate understanding of American society. Courses exclusively focused on the subject of religions can be useful, but they cannot truly answer the need and are vulnerable to opposition from several quarters. I suggest that an effective way to begin to improve education about religions in public secondary education today is to include attention to America's diverse religious communities in courses on American history (or other courses that include a focus on contemporary America). Does religion have a place in public education in the United States? The effort to answer this question has created controversy, especially since the 1960s, when some landmark court decisions heightened public awareness of the issue. The debate has tended to focus on prayer and aspects of science education in the public schools, often leaving another, more important issue, in the background (if not altogether lost from sight): namely, the question of what, if anything, schools will teach students *about* the religions that have shaped,

*Professor, Eckerd College,
St. Petersburg, Florida

and continue to shape, major civilizations and countless lives. Many appear to have assumed that public schools should leave this subject alone since it harbors many dangers, both constitutionally and politically. Cases such as a recent effort in the state of Florida to teach Bible classes in some public schools, which were little more than Sunday School classes, help to fuel constitutional concerns. On the other hand, many have recognized, as Justice Tom C. Clark of the Supreme Court wrote in one of his opinions, “[I]t might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.”¹

This paper will support and extend the point made by Justice Clark. To do so, it will begin with a brief historical overview of the presence of religion in the public schools and some of the developments that led to its elimination from public education. With this context in mind, we can then turn to a consideration of why it is vitally important to include teaching *about* religion in the public classrooms of the United States and how this might be done in a way that both respects the constitutional principles involved and does justice to the educational task we face. There have been some positive developments in this area in recent times, yet there is still much to be done. The modest proposal I offer at the end may be one way to move toward a more satisfactory treatment of religion in the curricula of the public schools in America.

RELIGION AND PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NINETEENTH- AND EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

The earliest forms of education in the American colonies developed under the aegis of religious motivations, especially the need to educate clergy.² The Puritans were most aggressive and ultimately most influential in the creation and spread of educational institutions and instructional materials. Puritans founded the earliest colleges, Harvard and Yale, a fact known to many because of the prominence of these institutions. Less known is the fact that the Puritans also took the lead in developing primary and secondary education, including public education. They were a small part of the general population in the colonies and in the newly formed United States of America, yet their aggressive role in promoting and developing educational materials gave them an influence that far exceeded their numerical strength. As education spread and became public in the early years of the United

¹ *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

² The historical information provided here can be found in a number of texts dealing with the history of religion in the U.S. See, for example, Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), and Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998).

States, then, the Puritan way, including the kinds of materials they used for educating youth, provided the template others followed.

One interesting way to illustrate and trace this influence is through the McGuffey readers, which were widely used throughout the nineteenth century. William Holmes McGuffey, a professor at Miami University of Ohio and a Presbyterian minister, first published a reader in 1836. In earlier days, when he had served as an educator of the young, he had made use of the *New England Primer*, an eighteenth-century Puritan text; and this work clearly influenced his approach to his own “eclectic” reader.³ Some examples will indicate the extent to which Christianity made itself felt in McGuffey’s text and thus on much of public education in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.

In *The Eclectic First Reader for Young Children*, the lessons are sometimes more moral than theological, and adherents of a variety of views would have little or no problem with them.⁴ One lesson teaches the children to be kind to the poor, then adds its theological perspective: it is God who feeds and clothes us.⁵ Even in a pluralistic society such as the United States, the moral lesson would not provoke many objections. Moreover, theists of many varieties would affirm the theological perspective. On the other hand, non-theists (as well as sympathetic theists) would likely take umbrage and point out that, as relatively non-controversial as this reading may seem, it clearly transgresses the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Consider how much more representative of a particular Christian position is a later reading in the same text. It affirms, “God sees and knows all things, for God is every where.” This means that God hears all that we say, so that we should avoid what the text calls “bad words.” To those who do not refrain from such language, the reading concludes with the warning that “God will not love [them].”⁶

The type of Christian influence on nineteenth-century public education was distinctively Protestant, enough so that many Catholic immigrants felt uncomfortable in the public schools (a situation providing one of the primary motivations for the creation of a parochial school system once the Catholic population was large enough to make it feasible). The Protestant ethos pervading the schools was, of course, the reflection of a Protestant culture dominating America during that time. Furthermore, the large majority saw no problem with the

³ See AMcGuffey’s *Reader* (Houghton Mifflin, n.d.), <http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_058200_mcguffeysrea.htm> (accessed May 2, 2005).

⁴ W. H. McGuffey, *The Eclectic First Reader for Young Children Consisting of Progressive Lessons in Reading and Spelling Mostly in Easy Words of One and Two Syllables* (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1838).

⁵ McGuffey, 12-13.

⁶ McGuffey, 15.

presence of religion in the public school curriculum and activities, for it reinforced the wider cultural norms. On the other hand, that there were cracks in this (to some) apparently monolithic culture is evident from the disaffection of minorities such as Catholics and Jews, as well as from the emergence of “nativist” groups and movements, which betrayed a sense of unease about the real strength of white Protestant control.

The efforts of the so-called nativists were directed against an already vigorous growth whose seeds, planted in the time of the American colonies, germinated during the formation of the United States and emerged with an irresistible force in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The unprecedented social arrangement set up by the First Amendment’s disestablishment of religion and the expanding frontier on the western border of the new nation provided the soil and climate for the growth of a number of new flowers, including groups such as the Mormons, the Disciples of Christ/Christian Churches, the Methodists, theosophical groups, and several experiments in communal living (such as the Oneida community). To this we must add the immigration of people who did not conform to the Anglo-Saxon mold imagined and favored by the nativists: Catholics, Jews, and even a few Buddhists from Asia.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, if not earlier, the America envisioned by nativist groups, and often reflected in the public schools, did not exist (in some ways, it never really had). The control of evangelical Protestants was beginning to wane, in part because of the cooperation of a number of so-called mainline Protestants in the redefinition of the nature of American culture. The brief triumph of the Prohibition campaign was the last major success in evangelical Protestantism’s efforts to serve as the primary foundation of American culture. However, even before the failure of Prohibition became apparent, the public reaction to the trial of John Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee, was a serious blow to the belief that evangelical Protestants represented the heart of American society. The end of Prohibition put an exclamation point to what had already become clear for those with eyes to see.

In the decades before Prohibition, the rise of the Social Gospel movement in mainline Protestantism spearheaded a new approach to American culture that was focused on social conditions, especially for those on the edges of society. Even though it retained a hope for Christianizing America, a vision that had animated churches throughout the nineteenth century⁷, the shape of this vision was now quite different. The new vision established a fresh perspective for mainline Protestants that encouraged the recognition of diverse groups in the United States.

One of the primary dynamics for change in twentieth-century America was undoubtedly the struggle for recognition by minority groups themselves, for their critiques and protests raised the awareness of the society as a whole and managed at times to convince much of the public that earlier social arrangements and

⁷ See, for example, Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

practices were inconsistent with some basic moral and constitutional principles. Their problems certainly did not disappear with the advent of a new century, but a new, more inclusive approach to American culture was clearly on the rise. On the other hand, the new inclusiveness only gradually made its way into American consciousness and practices, and still has little influence in some quarters.⁸

THE REMOVAL OF RELIGION FROM PUBLIC EDUCATION

The transformation of the social and legal culture in the United States also had an impact on the nature of education. Some of these changes took place out of the media's limelight, the schools reflecting shifts in public consciousness and behavior that often were more gradual than sudden. The sociologist Will Herberg heralded aspects of this relatively subtle and slow change with his book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, which was first published in 1955 and provided an analysis of a relatively new social reality that made room for these three traditions in the heart of America.⁹ At the same time, other changes were more dramatic and public, especially those that were forced by court decisions, some of which remain contentious rulings even today. Two areas deserve mention in this context: religious rituals (such as prayer or devotional reading of the Bible) in public schools and the influence of religious teachings on curricula.

Recourse to legal remedies occurred in part because the changes in the public schools lagged behind a number of the changes in the public at large. My own personal experience in public schools reflects this lag. A public elementary school I attended in the early 1960s celebrated Christmas with an evening program that included hymns and a reading from the Gospel of Luke. A few years later, I sat through Bible readings and prayers offered in the name of Jesus in my public junior high school. And the teacher in my ninth-grade biology class took the time to read the first verse in Genesis and suggest that there was no contradiction between that and the evolutionary account of life's development. For many in that time these practices posed no problem because they reflected society's attitudes (with the exception of the affirmation of evolution), but for an increasing minority they were an affront. This minority would inevitably raise its voice as it grew in numbers and confidence, and the courts were the most effective venues in which to speak.

The roots of the conflicts over constitutional law pertaining to religion and the schools are deep, reaching in a sense back to the formulation of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,

⁸ The Christian militia groups and the continuing existence of the KKK are clear evidence that contemporary America has communities that remain rigorously exclusive and intolerant of difference.

⁹ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, reprint edition, 1983).

or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” Not until the twentieth century, however, did the courts begin to hand down decisions that unfolded the meaning of this “wall of separation” (Thomas Jefferson’s description of it) for religious practices in public schools. An early, though oblique, approach to this question took place in a 1947 decision addressing the question of whether the state could provide public funds to transport children to church-related schools.¹⁰ The decision of the Court turned on the fact that this provision by the state was for the secular purpose of the education of its children. Since the program in question provided funds for children at other, non-religious educational institutions as well, it passed constitutional muster, in the Court’s view. On the other hand, Justice Hugo Black, author of the majority opinion, expressed a view that had significant consequences for later developments. He opined that:

The 'establishment of religion' clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups and vice versa.

This viewpoint became an important ingredient in later decisions by the Court.

Fifteen years later, the Court took on the issue of prayer in public schools when a challenge to a state-formulated prayer intended for use in New York’s schools came before the justices. For the Court the case was clear-cut (a 6-1 decision, two justices not participating): this was an obvious case of religious establishment. Once again Justice Black wrote the majority opinion, in which he expressed the need to maintain the wall of separation and noted that governmental attempts to sanction certain forms of prayer had historically led to social conflict.¹¹ He also offered a rejoinder to those who argued that the government shows hostility to religion if it does not favor some sort of general, non-sectarian prayer in the schools. Some of those who founded the country and supported the First Amendment were deeply religious, he noted. Furthermore, they saw the dangers *to religion* of any governmentally sponsored religious views or practices. In short, Justice Black once again argued that the First Amendment prohibits the government from promoting religion in any form and added the rationale that, when governments have favored a religion, serious social conflict, including the oppression of particular religious groups, has been the result.

¹⁰ *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Township*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).

¹¹ *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). The particular case Justice Black describes is the conflict in English history over the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The ruling against prayer in public schools was a significant new development in the Court's treatment of religion in the schools and articulated a principle that required more changes than the cessation of prayers. However, it took a few years for the further ramifications of the Court's ruling to become apparent. A year after *Engel v. Vitale*, the Court dealt with a case challenging the practice of reading the Bible devotionally in a public school.¹² The ruling that this practice is unconstitutional (by 8-1) was the only possible outcome at that point, barring a dramatic reversal in the Court's view. There were apparently still some who were uncertain about, or perhaps resistant to, the implications of these rulings, for in 1980 the Court heard a challenge to a law in Kentucky that mandated the posting of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom.¹³ Given the earlier precedents, it is predictable that the Courts ruled that this, too, is contrary to the First Amendment (though the 5-4 margin is perhaps a surprise).

Another series of court clashes dealt with the question of whether religious convictions can legally influence a school's curriculum. It is clearly unconstitutional to teach religious doctrines in a public school. By the mid-twentieth century, texts were at least not as blatant in promoting religious beliefs and values as they had been in the nineteenth. On the other hand, there were still entanglements between religion and public education that ceased only when challenges brought them before the Supreme Court. In 1948 the Court ruled on a case dealing with the use of part of the school day and school facilities for religious lessons, taught by people who came from local religious communities.¹⁴ This practice in Champaign, Illinois, made allowance for students who did not wish to receive religious instruction by sending them to another part of the school to engage in secular studies. Nevertheless, the Court determined that this arrangement did not pass constitutional muster since it used tax-supported facilities for religious purposes and involved close cooperation between the schools and religious institutions. The public schools were supporting religion classes even if they were not directly providing religious instruction.

The most contentious issue pertaining to religious influence on the curriculum of public schools lay elsewhere, however. The sphere of controversy was what would be taught in biology classes, and the precise focus was the theory of evolution. This legal battle has older roots than the conflict over prayer, going back to the 1925 trial of John Scopes in the small town of Dayton, Tennessee. That widely publicized trial was an initial skirmish in a much longer legal war over the influence of religion on a school's science curriculum, a war that continues still in local skirmishes that break out from time to time. Those who, on religious grounds, wish to oppose the teaching of evolution or modify such instruction by

¹² *Abington School District v. Schempp*.

¹³ *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980).

¹⁴ *McCollum v. Board of Education*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948).

mandating that teachers also introduce other ideas about the origin of life, must now look for ingenious (or devious) ways to proceed, for the stance of the Supreme Court has been clear since its first entry into the conflict.

The first time the Court took on this issue was 1968, in connection with a law in Arkansas that forbade teachers in public schools (including universities) from teaching that evolution is true, or even using textbooks that do so.¹⁵ The Court had no doubt that this statute was intended to protect and promote a particular religious conception of the origin of life and hence violated the First Amendment's disestablishment clause.¹⁶ Its decision thus closed one avenue for those who would influence the biology curriculum in a public school; but the anti-evolution forces were not deterred from trying another approach: a law dictating what teachers must include in their curriculum rather than what they must not include.

Louisiana tried this approach in the early 1980s when it enacted a law stipulating that anyone who teaches evolution in the public schools must also present the views of so-called "creation science." The challenge to this law made its way to the Supreme Court in late 1986, and the Court issued its ruling in mid-1987. By a 7-2 majority, the Court rejected Louisiana's law, noting that it was motivated by religious concerns, helped promote a particular religious belief (in a Creator God), and led to excessive entanglements between church and state.¹⁷ This decision seemed to leave few options open to the opponents of evolution, at least at the level of state legislation, and thus helped to dampen much of the energy that had been devoted to influencing science curricula through state laws.

The opponents of evolution have not, however, given up on their efforts to seek ways of subverting the teaching of evolution in public schools. For example, there have been recent attempts to force schools to teach students about the hypothesis of "intelligent design" as a way to cast doubt on evolution. Also, just recently a Georgia school district placed the following statement in science textbooks: "This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully and critically considered."¹⁸ U.S. District Judge Clarence Cooper ruled that the intent of this caveat was to undermine students' confidence in the theory, to the benefit of alternative, religious conceptions of the origin of life, and ordered the removal of the stickers carrying

¹⁵ *Epperson et al. v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1968).

¹⁶ However, two of the justices, Hugo Black and Potter Stewart, rejected the law on the grounds of vagueness rather than on the First Amendment question.

¹⁷ *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578 (1987).

¹⁸ Quoted in "Judge: Evolution Stickers Unconstitutional," *CNN.com*, January 14, 2005, <<http://www.cnn.com/2005/LAW/01/13/evolution.textbooks.ruling/>> (accessed February 24, 2005).

this disclaimer. Other efforts to have an influence on science curricula in public schools still continue at the local level (and in a statewide effort by groups in Texas¹⁹), but the major battles may be over. The courts appear to have effectively blocked attempts by religious groups to influence what public schools teach.

The rulings of the Supreme Court in these areas had an impact on the public school systems in general. Even before the legal conflicts over religion in the schools, educators had become sensitive to the presence of religion in public education; and, after the rulings in the early 1960s, they developed an even greater aversion to contact with matters pertaining to religion. To the degree that this meant that public schools no longer promoted religious beliefs or practices, this is surely a good thing, at least from a constitutional perspective. However, a more problematic dimension of this development was a tendency to avoid teaching *about* religion as well, which meant that people were graduating from high schools with little to no knowledge about a fundamental aspect of human culture and history.

It is not unusual for observers to note that the Supreme Court's decisions contributed to the disappearance of religion from the curricula of public schools. For example, the web site of the American Academy of Religion has a page on "Religion in the Nation's Schools" that notes the absence of religion in the instruction of public schools in the 1970s and 1980s. The report then comments:

There are many reasons for this, but chief among them is the uncertainty that surrounded the issue at that time. Much of the confusion can be traced to a misunderstanding of the Supreme Court's decisions of the early 1960s striking down state-sponsored prayer and devotional Bible reading in public schools. The political rhetoric about those decisions convinced many Americans, including many school administrators, that religion and religious expression had no place in public schools.²⁰

There can be little doubt that the decisions of the Court played a role in the fate of teaching about religion, but I believe this role can be, and often is, over-emphasized. In fact, the Supreme Court's actions simply furthered a development

¹⁹ Texas has a requirement that students should learn "to analyze, review, and critique scientific explanations, including hypotheses and theories, as to their strengths and weaknesses using scientific evidence and information" (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/ch112002.htm>; accessed 2/24/2005). This is part of a solid scientific procedure, yet anti-evolutionary groups have treated it as an opportunity to press for the introduction in classrooms of evidence that putatively undermines the theory of evolution. To see how this requirement functions in the anti-evolution religious community, the following web site is instructive: "Texans for a Better Science Education!" (TBSE, April 14, 2005), <<http://www.strengthsandweaknesses.org/>> (accessed May 2, 2005).

²⁰ "Religion in the Nation's Schools: The AAR's Role in the Future," (AAR, 2003), <<http://www.aarweb.org/about/reports/2003/ristf.asp>> (accessed February 28, 2005).

already well under way by the 1960s, a transformation rooted in a theory that was highly influential in colleges and universities: the secularization thesis.

The secularization thesis, grounded in the positivism of Auguste Comte and in the theories of sociologists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, holds that as societies modernize religions lose their public functions. If so, religions are becoming increasingly otiose and should ultimately fade from the public arena (and largely from human life in general). This view had become influential in Western institutions of higher education by the early part of the twentieth century. In the United States, this theory's influence grew in conjunction with two other important developments, according to American religious historian George Marsden.²¹ First was the increasingly specialized focus on technical fields, to which colleges and universities turned beginning in the late nineteenth century. Pursuit of these specializations required no religious input; indeed, interjection of religious concerns only threatened to impede progress. The second added influence was the growth of pluralism, which rendered divisive any effort to promote a particular religious perspective, or even religion in general. Furthermore, recognition of the increasingly diverse faculties and student bodies seemed to call for an exaggerated move away from Christian perspectives, in light of the historical hegemony of Christianity in American culture. With such dynamics at work in American higher education, most American university and college campuses became thoroughly secularized.

The secularization of American campuses, rationalized and furthered by the secularization thesis, encouraged the academic world to regard religion as either a relic of the past or a hobby best kept to the private sphere. Those societies where religion exercised a significant public function were thought to be pre-modern, meaning that they were still waiting to move into the secularized future that is the *telos* of all cultures. Given this framework, religion has little meaningful place in an education that focuses on preparing students for a new world free from the superstitions of the past. To be sure, one may still want to learn about how religion influenced the past, perhaps in large part to know how much better things are now and to become more vigilant against those who might want to reassert religious power. As a vital component of contemporary and future culture, however, religion was dead. Such attitudes in higher education inevitably trickled down into the earlier stages of education, not only through the general influence of higher education on primary and secondary schools but also through what soon-to-be teachers learned when they were in college.

The extent of secularization's influence on public school curricula calls for more research in the sources than I have been able to undertake, but I can note that my own education in the early 1960s included very little *about* religion (as opposed to sometimes overt promotion of religion). This is anecdotal evidence, to

²¹ George M. Marsden, "The Soul of the American University: an Historical Overview," in *The Secularization of the Academy*, ed. by George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9-32.

be sure, though the fact that widely used textbooks guided our learning and that this was in Bible-belt country (Gainesville, Florida B still a small southern town at the time) gives me some confidence in asserting that this was undoubtedly typical for that time. In short, there is evidence that religion was already fading from the curricula of public schools even before the Supreme Court's decisions in the 1960s had an impact. The reaction to the Court's decisions, then, did more to reinforce an existing trend than to initiate new developments.

Whatever may have been the impact of the Court's decisions in the past, they play an important role in current efforts to make teaching about religion a more substantive part of public education: they provide some reasonable and important limits and guidelines for public schools to follow. Public schools must conform to these decisions, of course, unless the Court reverses itself, a development fervently desired by some in the "Religious Right". Such a reversal would be a dramatic change of direction; it would also be most unwise. The concerns expressed by Justice Black about the possible political and religious consequences of state-sponsored prayer (see above) are even more germane in our present situation, for we are a more diverse population now than when he wrote his opinion. For example, our diversity means a move toward reintroducing religious ritual or instruction in the public schools would inevitably result in serious social conflict, for it would be impossible to fairly represent all possible faiths (and non-faiths). Moreover, the deleterious consequences for religion when it is entangled with the state (also noted by Justice Black) should lead those who truly care about their religious communions to resist such connections. The vision of state sponsorship may have a seductive appeal, but the course of religion in Western Europe should serve as a warning that state support is not a guarantee that religious communities will flourish. Intimate connections with the state may, in fact, serve to poison the life of religious communities. Finally, promotion of religion, even of religion in general, would work against creation of the kind of pluralism for which this paper argues.

THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING ABOUT RELIGIONS

There is evidence that a majority of educators have come to accept that it is important to teach *about* religion, but there does not appear to be as much consensus about exactly *why* it is important.²² It is my suspicion that this lack of

²² The evidence for recognition of the importance of this subject matter is primarily its nearly universal inclusion in curriculum frameworks suggested or mandated by the states. See Susan L. Douglass, *Teaching about Religion in National and State Social Studies Standards* (Council on Islamic Education and First Amendment Center, 2000), 19-85. The evidence for lack of consensus (at least between educators and religious studies scholars) lies especially in the sort of critique that the latter tend to make of the place of study about religion in these frameworks. Again, see Douglass, 86-94. Douglass's study is available on the Internet at the following address: <http://www.cie.org/pdffiles/CIE_Report.pdf>.

consensus has led to differing ideas about the best way to approach teaching about religion in the public schools. In the remainder of the paper, I will explore the reasons that it is vital to teach students in the U.S. about religion and suggest some implications for how the public schools should include such instruction in their curricula.

There are a number of reasons that it is important for people today to know about religion. The most obvious reason is the pivotal roles that religions have played in the formation and development of the world's great civilizations. We cannot understand ancient Egyptian civilization, for example, without knowing about its religion; just as we cannot understand the history and civilization of China without knowing about Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism; or the history and civilization of the Middle East without knowing about Islam (just to name a few cases). This is clearly what Justice Clark had in mind when he wrote that it might be said that a fully educated person needs to know about the role of religions in human history. Educators in general appear to recognize this point if we can judge by what nearly all the states want their schools to include in their curricula.

Another reason that the study of religions is important in our schools today is the resurgence of sometimes violent forms of fundamentalism in many parts of the world during the last couple of decades.²³ In the U.S. this fact is most evident in the activities of some extremist Islamic groups, especially *al Qaeda*. Understanding such groups entails giving attention to a variety of factors in addition to religion, including political and economic conditions and developments. Nevertheless, the religious dimension is a critical component that we cannot ignore. Again, there is evidence that some curriculum frameworks for public schools recognize that this is so, and religion makes an appearance in some classrooms as a factor in contemporary conflicts.

A third reason that the study of religions is vital today is the demographic transformation occurring in many societies, especially in the United States. America has always had religious diversity, yet its early days appear quite homogeneous in comparison to the current situation. Diana Eck has described America as the most religiously diverse nation in the world, and the statistics leave no doubt that she is right.²⁴ She also notes that a primary reason for the recent

²³ The term fundamentalism is somewhat problematic, but no one seems to have found a satisfactory replacement. Furthermore, it is the term used by an important series that examines religious resurgence worldwide, overseen by Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby and published by the University of Chicago Press. Known as The Fundamentalism Project, it comprises six volumes written by a variety of scholars, the first published in 1991 and the most recent in 2002. Whatever term one chooses to use, this series documents the public emergence of religious movements and communities that are often aggressive and sometimes express themselves through violent means. One can find a list of the volumes on the University of Chicago web site at <<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Complete/Series/FP.html>> (accessed May 2, 2005).

²⁴ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the*

increase in new religious communities is the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which enabled significant new immigration from previously restricted areas of the world.²⁵ Asians were allowed to immigrate for the first time since the early twentieth century, leading to a dramatic growth in Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indians, to name only a few nationalities.²⁶ The liberalization of immigration laws led to an influx from other parts of the world as well, creating diversity in American society that can be difficult to imagine. This diversity takes a number of forms, including ethnicity and cultural practices. However, Eck convincingly argues that religion is one of its most important manifestations, for visible religious symbols often serve as primary signs of differences between groups. As a result, religious communities often become targets for those who act out their xenophobia. “Religious difference,” Eck asserts, “often signals whatever difference we most deeply fear.”²⁷

It is easy to find examples that support Eck’s point about xenophobic reactions to religious communities. She cites numerous cases, ranging from problems with governing authorities to vandalism to extreme forms of violence. In 1994, a Muslim woman dressed according to her religious convictions, including a partial veil over her face, was arrested in the Mall of America in Minneapolis. In 2000, a group of Muslims in a Chicago suburb encountered so much opposition to their plans to build a mosque that they decided to accept the \$200,000 offered by the city council to abandon their offer to buy some property. On several occasions vandals have attacked Hindu temples around the country. In one such case, some xenophobic individuals attacked a Hindu-Jain temple in Pittsburgh in 1983, destroying some sacred statues, spreading obscenities on the walls, and painting the word “Leave” on the main altar.²⁸ Such hatred easily inspires even more violent attacks, especially under stressful circumstances. It is not really surprising, then, that, following the terrible attacks on the World Trade Center, someone murdered a Sikh mistaken for a Muslim in Mesa, Arizona.²⁹

The potential for religious and cultural conflict to tear a society apart provides a compelling reason to promote toleration, but Eck makes a strong case that toleration is not enough. To thrive as a society, the U.S. needs to make its diversity a source of strength, a genuine pluralism.³⁰ Pluralism, in this context,

World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

²⁵ Eck, 6-7 and 28-29.

²⁶ Eck, 28, notes that over five million Asians entered the U.S. between 1960 and 1990.

²⁷ Eck, 30.

²⁸ Eck, 299-314.

²⁹ Eck, xv.

³⁰ Eck, 56-77.

refers to “the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences,” not the reduction of everything to a lowest common denominator or “a free-form relativism.”³¹ Such engagements can only happen through increased understanding among America’s diverse communities, a genuine possibility for contemporary American society if we may judge by some events reported by Eck. For example, a Vietnamese Buddhist home temple in Garden Grove, California, initially encountered problems with complaining neighbors and zoning regulations, putting its ability to continue in question. However, through open lines of communication and a willingness of the various sides to work together, the Vietnamese Buddhist community was able to keep its temple. This involved allowances that made it possible for the Buddhists to build a small new temple (completed in 1995) and to use the parking lot of a nearby United Church of Christ when overflow crowds came on festival days. In another case, an unusual set of circumstances in Fremont, California, resulted in Muslims and Methodists buying adjacent plots for their places of worship. This led to a decision to work together in dealing with governmental agencies and to share parking space in order to allow more space for buildings. In these and other small ways they have become good neighbors to each other and an example for the rest of us.³² Indeed, the need to move toward such cooperation and away from misunderstanding and hostility has begun to influence American society in a number of ways. To cite a couple of examples, Chicago has used videos to educate Chicago police officers about the diverse religious communities in their city;³³ and my local newspaper, *The St. Petersburg Times*, frequently runs feature articles highlighting the holy days and special occasions or issues for local religious groups, including Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS TODAY

The public schools show some influence from these contemporary developments, but in a limited way. Recently, the Council on Islamic Education and the First

³¹ Eck 70.

³² Eck, 328-332 and 348-351.

³³ This is one of many news reports provided by the Pluralism Project web site, which draws from news media around the country. This particular report was based on a January 23, 2005, article in *The New York Times*. See “Chicago Police Videos Educate Force about Religious Faiths and Practices,” *Religious Diversity News*, (Pluralism Project, n.d.), <<http://www.pluralism.org/news/index.php?tags=8857&anyall=+%26%26+&terms=chicago+police&fromdate=1997-01-01&todate=2005-05-02&tradition=&keyword=&state=&sort=DESC#headline8857>> (accessed February 15, 2005).

Amendment Center jointly published a thorough analysis of state recommendations for the inclusion of the study of religion in public school curricula, researched and written by Susan L. Douglass.³⁴ The results of her investigation show that religion appears significantly at two points. One is the study of the historical origins of civilizations, and the other is in treating some contemporary social and political conflicts.³⁵ The inclusion of religion at these points certainly provides students with important components of education about religion. On the other hand, it also leaves some pretty large gaps. In particular, this approach tends to treat religions as unchanging deposits that appeared at a certain point in history and helped shape some past cultures, and it mostly ignores the continuing, dynamic vitality of religions in the world today.

These results are both encouraging and discouraging, but they are not surprising if the secularization thesis still holds sway in the world of academe. This thesis acknowledges the past importance of religions for cultural and historical developments. These days, it also cannot fail to recognize that religions are playing a role in some contemporary conflicts. Nevertheless, if religion has largely waned in public influence and is merely dying a slow death, one need not attend to its current manifestations apart from those isolated points at which it has experienced a revival (usually fundamentalist), often resulting in conflict. Hence, if the secularization thesis still dominates the academy, those who wish to argue that people need to know about religions as living traditions that continue to shape lives and even contemporary cultures still have some work to do.³⁶

It is encouraging that the large majority of states have curriculum frameworks that demonstrate an awareness of the need to teach students about the important role religion has played in human life. It is troubling, however, if the students are left with the impression that religion is an essentially unchanging

³⁴ Douglass, *Teaching about Religion in National and State Social Studies*.

³⁵ Her conclusions presuppose that local schools would generally follow their state's recommendations because the pressure created by state administered tests would motivate them to do so. This presupposition strikes me as shaky, since it also assumes that state tests would necessarily include questions about religion. This may be true, but it is necessary to examine the tests themselves to know whether this is in fact the case. In other words, we still cannot speak with great assurance about how widely schools incorporate the study of religions into their curricula, in my estimation.

³⁶ Scholars need a broader appreciation of the multifaceted roles of religions in human life and culture than one often finds in academic disciplines outside of the field of religious studies. Such appreciation could possibly grow out of new, more sophisticated methodologies for analyzing religion and culture. One example of the latter, in my estimation, is the use of the categories of "ordinary religion" and "extraordinary religion" in Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*. Her definition of "ordinary religion" is a bit too broad, perhaps, but with some refinement it might serve as a valuable tool for analyzing an important dimension of social life.

deposit that emerged at particular times, had an impact on past civilizations, and is now largely an historical phenomenon – except for those perplexing cases where an atavistic resurgence has made for violent situations in the world today. This is undoubtedly a caricature of the results of the states’ curriculum frameworks, but it contains enough truth to serve as an indicator of the need to do a better job of recognizing the full range of religion’s presence in the past and the present.

One might wonder whether the public schools can improve, since there are a number of obstacles to achieving even the already-articulated goals. The American Academy of Religion web site noted above listed both opportunities and obstacles facing schools in this area of study.³⁷ It mentions obstacles such as misunderstanding of Supreme Court decisions, fear of controversy, and teachers who know little about religion. An organization calling itself “Religious Tolerance” has a web site that lists what it regards as the “hazards” of teaching about religion in the public schools.³⁸ It is primarily concerned about possible violations of constitutional principles and about controversy, especially objections that might come from parents with conservative religious convictions, from humanists, and from those who are on guard against the infringement of civil liberties. This site also equates teaching about religion with offering courses that focus exclusively on that topic, an idea that we must reject if we are going to develop an adequate approach to this subject.

A WAY FORWARD

The Religious Tolerance organization exhibits no awareness that schools are already doing some teaching about religion, at least to the extent that they are following the state frameworks. The concerns expressed by this organization provide a warning that movement toward a more adequate treatment of the subject undoubtedly does face challenges, including public controversy and possible legal battles. Nevertheless, progress on this front is important, and a number of people have offered suggestions about the best ways to move forward.

The American Academy of Religion recommends bringing its own expertise into the process of formulating educational standards and frameworks for secondary schools, and creating more contact between scholars of religions, those who educate teachers, and the teachers themselves.³⁹ Those who are convinced that public education needs to improve in this area are likely to view these suggestions as sensible moves. However, others could easily construe them as a

³⁷ “Religion in the Nation’s Schools: The AAR’s Role in the Future.”

³⁸ B. A. Robinson, “Teaching Religion and the Bible in U.S. Public Schools,” (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2000 and 2001), <http://www.religioustolerance.org/ps_bibl1.htm> (accessed March 11, 2005).

³⁹ “Religion in the Nation’s Schools: The AAR’s Role in the Future.”

form of self-promotion. One way to deal with such reservations is to find an approach that underlines the importance of learning about religion and brings the subject into the curriculum in a natural way.

Any such approach must not undermine what schools are already doing and should build on what is a part of current curricula. A successful approach should also make the need to teach about religions clear to a wide range of people, regardless of their personal interest in religions. In my estimation, Diana Eck's book, *A New Religious America*, points the way to just such an approach. That is to say, a good place to begin in helping American schools do a better job of teaching about religions is to focus on contemporary American society. One cannot properly understand American diversity without attending to the role that religions play in it, for many immigrants have brought their religions with them and a number of other citizens have turned to new religious expressions as a way to redefine who they are. Once students and teachers turn their attention to the religious dimension of the current scene, they will quickly discover that they cannot truly understand this dimension by simply going back to what they learned about the various religions in their origins; for understanding much that belongs to the current manifestations of these religions will require learning something about the historical development of the traditions, including developments in the American context. Students will also learn that these religions are living traditions functioning in a variety of ways for the communities they shape, only occasionally in ways that cause conflict. Finally, they will also discover that people who have brought their religions into America have frequently found ways to integrate their past with their present, thereby adding to the rich tapestry of American society. In this way, they may gain an appreciation for this diversity and thereby move toward a genuine pluralism that can enrich society as a whole.

Such a study of contemporary American society would fit naturally in an American history course that spent significant time on the current scene. It could undoubtedly also be a part of a number of other courses. Wherever it may be placed, this approach would help to overcome some of the limitations of the current situation in a very natural way. The need to see religions as dynamic traditions would become apparent; as would the fact that religion shapes lives in ways that defy the public-private dichotomy; and the tendency to associate vital contemporary religion almost exclusively with conflict would begin to fade. Some with strong religious convictions may still object to having to learn about other religious perspectives, but the importance of knowing about these religions for understanding contemporary society can help blunt such objections.

CONCLUSION

For a long time, the public schools incorporated religion in ways that frequently violated basic principles in the Constitution of the United States. To the degree religion was taught, the instruction tended to be advocacy of a single religious tradition, Christianity. The influence of the secularization thesis on the academic world and the Supreme Court decisions of the 1960s led to a dramatic shift, so that religion tended to be entirely absent from the curricula of public schools. A clearer delineation of the differences between teaching religion and teaching about religion, along with a growing awareness of the historically important role of religions, has brought religion back into the curricula of many schools. However, the treatment of religion still leaves serious gaps. The schools need to provide better instruction about religions as living traditions shaping communities today, which might happen if educators turn their attention to the importance of preparing their students for the diversity of contemporary American culture.

Could the public schools adopt this approach? We should at least explore the possibility. I believe that the key is whether educators, and those who educate them, become sufficiently aware of the role religions play in the diverse communities that comprise society in the United States today. The work of Diana Eck and the Pluralism Project at Harvard University are making a contribution to this end. They provide some evidence that awareness is already increasing, and are perhaps a sign of where American public education is headed.

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