

Issues of Culture in the U.S.A Elementary Public School Curriculum

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Abstract—The article reviews culture in the U.S.A public school curriculum. we mainly discuss the role of religion in elementary education. We draw out some implications: given our frameworks, given the major issues, given the different points of view, when and how should the curriculum or particular courses incorporate the study of religion. We also present the cultural studies approach to teaching religion.

Index Terms—Culture, religion, public school curriculum, elementary education.

I. INTRODUCTION

You might think there to be a lot of literature that deals with the role of religion in the public school curriculum of U.S.A. After all, battles over religion and schooling often take place in the public square; our subject would appear to be both timely and important. And yet, with only a very few exceptions, scholars and schools of education have ignored our subject. So it should not be surprising that the proper role of religion in the K–12 curriculum is poorly understood, and the importance of what is at stake is not sufficiently appreciated, among educators. We will argue that public education fails to take religion seriously, and we will argue on what we regard as powerful civic, constitutional, and educational grounds that the study of religion must be much more fully integrated into the curriculum than is now. Our subject calls to mind the rhetoric and images of a culture war. Much of the public debate is framed in terms of the combat between two polarized groups: those religious conservatives who would restore prayer to school activities, add creationism to the curriculum, and drop sex education from it; and those liberals who would keep prayer out of schools, keep religion out of the curriculum, and keep sex education in it. Battles in this culture war are fought regularly in courtrooms, direct-mail campaigns, local school board elections, and national politics. Journalistic dispatches from the front typically frame the conflict in its most dramatic and polarized terms. We intend in this paper to provide a more nuanced account of what is at issue, articulate a set of civic and educational principles that we might use for adjudicating our differences, and stake out common ground on which we might stand together in discussing the role of religion in the

curriculum. Indeed, although our differences are deep, we believe that our subject need not be nearly so controversial as it now appears to be.

II. THE PROBLEM

The United States is a religious nation. About 90% of Americans claim to believe in God, and almost 80% say that religion is an important part of their lives. Still, for a great many Americans, religion makes a profound difference in how they live their lives and how they think about the world. After all, religious traditions carry with them implications for all of life; they shape their most fundamental beliefs and values. Indeed, a vast religious literature, contemporary as well as historical, deals with economics, psychology, sexuality, nature, history, morality, politics, and the arts—in every subject in the curriculum. This being the case, it is striking that, apart from history courses, the curriculum all but ignores religion. The conventional wisdom of educators appears to be that students can learn everything they need to know about whatever they study without learning anything about religion. If religion was once pervasive, it now appears to be irrelevant. In the deeply religious culture this development has not gone unnoticed. Indeed, many religious conservatives are outraged by it; they take the absence of religion to imply a hostility to religion. This has fueled our culture wars and has driven many to private schools and to support the voucher movement. No doubt most educators have come to take the growing political power of the “Religious Right” seriously. Unhappily, most discussion of the role of religion in public education has focused almost exclusively on politics rather than on the underlying educational and intellectual issues. We will argue that questions about the role of religion in the curriculum are much more important, than conventional educational wisdom would have it.

A. *Why Is Religion Absent from the Curriculum*

Three reasons are often given to this question. First, some educators continue to believe that the constitutional “separation of church and state” means that the curriculum cannot include religion. True, it is unconstitutional to practice religion in public schools; it is unconstitutional to proselytize or indoctrinate students. But it is not unconstitutional to teach students about religion—if it is done properly. No Supreme Court justice has ever held that students can’t study the Bible or be taught about religion. Of course, what it means to teach about religion properly is not always clear or uncontroversial. Secondly, many educators and textbook publishers believe that including religion in textbooks and the curriculum is too

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controversial. But, of course, it is also controversial to leave religion out of the curriculum. Indeed, textbooks and the curriculum already include much that is controversial—sex education, multiculturalism, feminism, and evolution, for example. Why not religion?

We will argue that religion need not be nearly so controversial as is often thought. In fact, there now exists widespread agreement—what we will call the New Consensus—about the role of religion in the curriculum among representatives of most major religious and educational organizations at the national level. Unfortunately, word of this consensus has yet to reach many of the combatants in the trenches. Thirdly, religious conservatives often argue that public education has been taken over by intellectuals promoting the “religion” of secular humanism. What secular humanism is, and whether it might function as a religion, are matters of some complexity and controversy. Although much more needs to be said in response to this charge, we note two things. It is clear that the great majority of educators do not intend to undermine religion, and surely no “conspiracy” of secular humanists is out to destroy the faiths of our children. And yet we must acknowledge that public schools do teach students to think about virtually all aspects of life in secular rather than religious ways, as if God were irrelevant and those secular ways of making sense of the world were sufficient.

So, why did religion disappear from the curriculum? Quite simply, public education reflects the dominant ideas and ideals of our culture, and as American culture and intellectual life have become more secular, so has public education. The extraordinary success of modern science in making sense of the world led to a devaluation of traditional religion. Physicists and biologists saw no need to appeal to God in explaining the workings of nature, nor did psychologists or economists find the evidence of Scripture relevant in explaining human nature or the economy. As a result, by the end of the 19th century, 50 years before the Supreme Court first addressed the place of religion in public schools, religion had largely disappeared from textbooks and the curriculum. True, a ceremonial husk of religion—school prayers, devotionals, and Bible reading—survived in some places (and occasionally until the present day). Still, religion has long been gone from the heart of education, from the understanding of life and the world conveyed in textbooks and the curriculum.

Of course, the almost complete secularization of education does not accurately reflect our culture. As we have noted, most Americans are religious; religion retains a good deal of vitality. What we must conclude, therefore, is that education mirrors only what have come to be the dominant ideas and ideals of modern culture and especially of intellectuals. We disagree about the significance and truth of religious claims. What then should be the role of religious ideas and ideals in the public school curriculum when our culture is deeply divided about religion? How do we live with our deepest differences?

B. Why Religion Should Be Included In Public School Education And Taking Religion Seriously

One of the greatest ironies of their intellectual life in the

United States is that though they are the world's most religiously diverse nation they are also its most religiously illiterate. Because the two primary sources of information about religion are the media and people's own faith traditions, relatively few people possess even a basic understanding of the tenets of the world's religious traditions, let alone an understanding of the complex ways that religion influences and is influenced by social, cultural, and historical forces. Public debates about religion are often painfully misguided and/or superficial because relatively few people possess the knowledge to critically assess sectarian claims or to intelligently challenge those who dismiss religion altogether as the product of blind naiveté or fanaticism. The quotes cited at the beginning of this chapter are typical of students, friends, and professional colleagues (outside of religious studies). Very few (if any) of the authors of these statements would make similarly unqualified pronouncements about any other topic, yet when engaging issues related to religion they speak with unfettered confidence as though their assertions were self-evident.

There are several reasons why the study of religion should be included in public school curricula across the K-12 spectrum. The most fundamental and comprehensive is that religion has always been and continues to function as a powerful dimension of human experience. Religious beliefs, expressions, and worldviews have inspired and affected the full spectrum of human agency in artistic, philosophical, ethical, political, scientific, and economic arenas. Attempts to “extract” religion from experience or to ignore its influences are not only futile but also misguided. Such an approach leads to subjects of inquiry being presented in a fragmented light and understanding is therefore significantly diminished if not altogether thwarted. In this way, religion is similar to race, ethnicity, gender, and class. For example, just as it is impossible to understand and interpret the founding documents of U.S. history accurately without acknowledging that all women, men of color, and poor white men were originally excluded from citizenship rights, it is equally impossible to adequately comprehend these documents without an understanding of the religious context out of which they were forged. Increasing our collective understanding of that context would both deepen our appreciation of the complexity of those early years of the Republic while simultaneously giving students the tools to critically engage current debates regarding the ideological foundations of the nation and the proper role of religion in American public life. In truth, religious influences have always been and continue to be intimately woven into the fabric of human cultures and have therefore impacted human experiences in ways that include but go well beyond individual expressions of belief. When the religious dimensions of experience are recognized, then rich avenues of exploration are revealed and the intellectual enterprise across the curriculum can be significantly enhanced.

A second reason why the study of religion should be incorporated into curricula is that it invites students to identify and question underlying foundations of assumption in ways that inspire engaged reflection and critical thinking. This dimension of understanding includes both the “why” of

human agency as well as the “why” of existence itself.⁵ The answers to these questions are, of course, as varied as humanity itself and include both religious and nonreligious motivations and claims. The Holocaust provides a helpful lens to illustrate this critical aspect of the educational enterprise.

Though it is possible to study the Holocaust as a compilation of facts and figures, it would be a shallow and arguably an extremely troubling endeavor if “why” questions were not also engaged. The study of the Holocaust is the study of human capacity in its extremes where ordinary people sometimes acted in extraordinary ways as agents of both heinous cruelty and nearly unfathomable courage and compassion. How does one make sense of this spectrum in relationship to larger questions of meaning? Answers to this question are widely varied, including assertions that it is impossible to affirm “meaning” in the face of this horror[1] to speculative claims of meaning found through suffering[2] to justifications of extermination and repression represented in overt and covert beliefs that victims deserved their fate.[3] What motivated the Nazis to act in the ways that they did and what rationales did they employ to justify their actions? What assumptions about human nature were these rationales based upon and how were they represented and justified? How did “ordinary” citizens respond? How did those who survived sustain themselves against tremendous odds? What motivated rescuers and resisters? Religion plays an important role in pondering these questions; a role that includes but goes well beyond the fact that the majority of the victims of the Holocaust were Jews and the majority of perpetrators were Christian. An example of this kind of complex thinking is Irving Greenberg’s classic essay “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire” in which he offers a searing indictment of pre-Holocaust Judaism, Christianity, and Enlightenment secularism as failed systems that actually helped give rise to the “legitimization” of the Nazi state. He challenges the simplistic dichotomy between “secular” and “religious” and calls instead for a “postmodern faith” that can speak meaningfully to the specter of the crematorium. “Neither classical theism nor atheism is adequate to incorporate the incommensurability of the Holocaust; neither produced a consistently proper response; neither is credible alone—in the presence of the burning children.” [4] Whether one finds Greenberg’s specific assertions compelling or not, he offers an example of someone who articulates and engages important questions that need to be considered if we are to take the study of human experience seriously. The failure to include the religious dimensions of these experiences and questions impoverishes understanding and diminishes opportunities for critical thinking and reflection.

A third reason why the study of religion should be incorporated more fully into curricula is that ignorance about religion itself and the world’s religious traditions promotes misunderstanding that diminishes respect for diversity. As noted in the “Introduction” , following 9/11 hate crimes against Muslims, Sikhs, and those perceived to be of Middle Eastern or South Asian descents were widely publicized and still persist. Similarly, the patriotism of non-Christians and especially nonbelievers is sometimes questioned while,

conversely, many who profess no religious faith equate religion with right-wing fanaticism and/or ignorance, irrationality, and arrogant self-righteousness. Stereotypes abound and are easily perpetuated in the face of widespread ignorance and misrepresentation. Consider the following examples of what can happen when there is ignorance of the world’s religious traditions and their appropriate expressions.

We will argue there are two fundamental reasons for including religion in the curriculum, for taking it seriously. First, there are civic reasons. The American experiment in liberty is built on the conviction that it is possible to find common ground in spite of our deep religious differences. It is rooted in the civic agreement we share as citizens, in our principled commitment to respect one another. Properly understood, this means that we not exclude religious voices from the public square or from public education, but that we take one another seriously. For much of our history, Protestantism enjoyed a favored status in the ceremony, rhetoric, and often in the curriculum and textbooks of public schools. That was unjust; it meant that education didn’t take others of different religious convictions seriously. In the 20th century the curriculum has often excluded religion. In public schools this is unjust; it means that we don’t take religious people seriously. All sides need to recognize that we cannot resolve the current battles either by promoting a particular religion or by excluding all religion from the curriculum.

For more than 50 years, ever since it first applied the First Amendment to the states, the Supreme Court has held that government, and therefore public schools, must be neutral in matters of religion—neutral among religions, and neutral between religion and nonreligion. It is not proper for public schools to take sides on religiously contested questions. We will argue that if schools are to be truly neutral they must be truly fair—and this means including in the curriculum religious as well as secular ways of making sense of the world when we disagree. Government can no more inhibit religion than promote it.

Second, there are educational reasons for taking religion seriously. A good liberal education should expose students to the major ways humanity has developed for making sense of the world—and some of those ways of understanding the world are religious. An exclusively secular education is an illiberal education. Indeed, we cannot systematically exclude the religious voices in our cultural conversation without conveying the implication that religion is irrelevant, that religious views have no claim on the truth. By conveying a limited (secular) range of views that students must, in effect, accept on authority for want of any understanding of the alternatives, we place them at a deep disadvantage in thinking critically about where the truth might lie. These are not arguments for promoting religion or for indoctrinating students. They are arguments for including religion in the curricular discussion, for taking it seriously.

C. *The New Consensus*

Given the heated nature of our culture wars, it may come as something of a surprise to many that over the last decade a fairly broad consensus about the role of religion in public schools has developed at the national level among the leadership of many religious and educational organizations.

Now we simply outline the three major principles that form the foundation of the consensus. First, as the Supreme Court has made clear, the study of religion in public schools is constitutional. Second, the study of religion is tremendously important if students are to be educated about our history and culture. Third, public schools must teach about religion objectively or neutrally; their purpose must be to educate students about a variety of religious traditions, not to indoctrinate them into any particular tradition.

This New Consensus doesn't solve all the problems. Not everyone is part of it. Many people—indeed, many educators—haven't heard of it. We believe that the great majority of Americans would accept the basic principles underlying the consensus on reflection if they understood them, but, alas, all too many don't. And, of course, we are not so naive as to believe that everyone would accept the principles defining the New Consensus.

Moreover, the basic principles are open to varying interpretations. Just how important is religion? Important enough to bump other subjects from textbooks or the curriculum? Important enough to warrant classes in religious studies with certified teachers? And what does it mean to teach about religion “neutrally” or “objectively”—especially when we disagree deeply about the truth and meaning of religious claims? Obviously, more needs to be said.

In what follows, we approach the role of religion in the curriculum from the perspective of the New Consensus. It is our intention to build on the principles that ground the consensus and draw out their implications for the curriculum, giving them substance, specificity, and relevance. Of course, not all advocates of the New Consensus will agree with our interpretation or application of the principles.

III. RELIGION IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

In this part we discuss the role of religion in elementary education. To provide some understanding of the conventional wisdom regarding religion in schools, we briefly review the new national education standards for what they say about religion if anything, and we draw on our own study of textbooks to see how religion figures into them. We recognize, of course, that most schools don't follow the standards and that good teachers don't just teach the texts. We say something about what we take to be the major issues in each discipline, paying particular attention to what is religiously controversial. Finally, we draw out the educational implications: given our frameworks, given the major issues, given the different points of view, when and how should the curriculum or particular courses incorporate the study of religion.

The presence of religion often triggers controversy on the elementary school level. Frequently the fight centers on the perennial “December dilemma”—the Christmas play, the visits by Santa in the classroom, and other holiday activities. As lamentable as they are, Christmas conflicts could provide schools with a valuable opportunity to rethink how they treat religion in the curriculum throughout the year. That rarely happens. Faced with a crisis, most schools take the path of least resistance. Christmas becomes “winter holidays.”

Teachers continue holiday activities in December but carefully avoid mentioning Jesus. Such tortured efforts to keep Christmas without Christ lead to some very odd overreactions by teachers. It would be funny if it weren't so painfully revealing about the confusion surrounding religion in many elementary school classrooms. Fortunately some school districts now recognize that it is wrong to either promote or ignore religion in the elementary schools. They have found another approach—one that is both just and constitutional.

In Williamsville, New York, for example, the district turned a conflict about holidays into an opportunity to involve the community in developing a policy on the place of religion in the curriculum. As a result, the elementary school teachers have learned how to take religion seriously without violating the First Amendment. Walk into a Williamsville elementary school just before Christmas and you will probably find students learning about what Christians actually believe about Christmas. At other times during the year, you will hear teachers and students discussing other religious traditions in ways that are accurate and fair.

In elementary schools these discussions of religion focus on the generally agreed upon meanings of the holidays, customs, basic beliefs, and histories of the major religions. Only as children become more mature should teachers ask them to think more critically about differences among religions and within religions—and, of course, the tensions between religious and secular ways of understanding the world. But as Williamsville discovered, even the most basic teaching about religion in elementary schools is hard work. When young, impressionable children are involved, it is easy to understand why parents—and courts for that matter—have a heightened concern about religious issues. Nevertheless, the results in Williamsville and elsewhere have been worth the effort. Community support for the schools is stronger, parents have more trust in teachers to handle religious issues, and students are getting a better education. In this chapter we will argue that all school districts should do what Williamsville is doing. We begin with a discussion of why religion belongs in the elementary grades and then suggest how school districts might include study of religion without stirring a fight.

A. *The Case for Religion in the Elementary Curriculum*

When a crisis hits, communities like Williamsville discover that objections to the inclusion of religion are loudest if elementary schools are involved. This is particularly true in the primary grades, although many parents and educators are nervous about the ability of even upper elementary students to handle discussions of religion. Leave religion to the family and faith communities, goes the familiar argument, and wait until students are older to discuss the role of religion in history and society.

Of course, we agree that formation of faith is the job of families and religious communities. But, as we have already discussed at length, learning about religion is not the same as religious indoctrination. Far from being a way to usurp the role of parents or clergy, study of religion in the elementary grades is part of the core of the schools' mission to provide a good education and to prepare students to live in a

democratic society. Properly considered, the study of family, community, various cultures, the nation, and other key themes and topics important in the early grades all require some discussion of religion. At the same time, the fear of religious indoctrination is not without foundation. There are teachers today, as there have been in the past, who may use their position to promote their own faith or to be hostile to religion. That is why we urge that teacher education include more exposure to the First Amendment as well as to the study of religion. But the fact that it isn't easy to achieve a fair and balanced elementary curriculum is no reason not to try. Silence about religion can also be a form of indoctrination—however unintentional. The notion that individuals can understand all of human life and history without reference to religion is itself a view of life that is antithetical and hostile to religious claims.

B. The New Consensus and Standards

The New Consensus concerning religion in the curriculum should help to dispel fears among educators about dealing with religion in the early grades. Religious and educational groups from across the religious and political spectrum have agreed that there are many opportunities on the elementary level for study about religion. This view is also reflected, at least in principle, in the Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies issued by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The standards mention religion in 2 of the 10 thematic strands that “form the framework of the social studies standards” [5].

These kinds of statements give permission for more mention of religion, but whether they will encourage serious treatment of religion in the elementary curriculum remains to be seen. The NCSS standards, for example, fail to do more than make a passing reference to religion. When the standards spell out what is meant by teaching “Culture” in the early grades, they do not explicitly mention religion. They emphasize “culture and cultural diversity.” They tell us that students should explore the ways “groups, societies, and cultures address similar human needs and concerns,” and “describe ways in which language, stories, folktales, music, and artistic creations serve as expressions of culture and influence behavior of people living in a particular culture”. Much in the study of cultures, of course, could very well involve teaching about religious practices and beliefs. But none of the sample classroom activities for teaching this theme, or any other theme, in the early grades deal with religion. This is odd, given the centrality of religion in most cultures. Perhaps the authors of the standards assume that religion will come up naturally. In our experience, however, if religion is ignored in the framework or the textbook, it will be ignored in most classrooms. On balance, however, the NCSS standards are a potential step forward for the study of religion in elementary schools because they encourage the study of different cultures, the development of chronological thinking, and the inclusion of primary sources and historical narratives in the early grades. The same might be said of the National Standards for History. Although the K–4 history standards include only a couple of brief mentions of religion, there are many opportunities to include religion in the study of various cultures and historical narratives. The history

standards explicitly encourage inclusion of religious ideas and events in the upper elementary grades.

C. The California Example

According to the traditional model of elementary education—a model widely adopted until very recently—young children are not ready for history, much less religious events and people in history. In this view, the child's focus should be on immediate surroundings and the present-day world of family, school, neighborhood, and community. As it is usually practiced, this approach leaves little room for religion beyond mentioning a few symbols and places of worship. Fortunately, in the last decade educators and developmental psychologists have successfully challenged these assumptions about children's learning [6]. Like the standards just discussed, some state frameworks, notably the History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, now encourage considerable discussion of history in the early grades. Again, this opens the door for study of religion. In California, beginning in kindergarten, students “reach out to times past,” and in grades 1, 2, and 3 they learn about various cultures and read stories about historical figures. Students tackle California history in grade 4, begin American history in grade 5, and study ancient civilizations in grade 6. On all levels, the framework offers many opportunities, some stated and some implied, for study of religion (California Department of Education History-Social Science Curriculum Framework and Criteria Committee, 1987, 1997). This is no accident. The drafters of the California framework intend a history-enriched primary curriculum and history-centered upper elementary curriculum to encourage more study of religion. We have found that in practice the framework has led to more discussion of religion in California classrooms, particularly in 6th grade. Sixth grade students are studying Hebrew religion (including passages from Hebrew Scripture), the origins and spread of Buddhism, Confucian teachings and influence in China, and the teachings of Jesus and the rise of the Christian church. Charlotte Crabtree, a leader in the California effort and a member of the influential Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, summarizes the case for religion this way: Elementary school studies of U.S. and world history, necessarily centered on the lives of people in order to motivate and sustain children's interest, also provide fruitful opportunities to explore with children the important role of ideas, religion, and the arts in shaping individual behavior and group culture, and in instituting or restricting change. No adequate understanding of human history is possible, we believe, without examining people's most dearly held religious and secular beliefs and the influences of those beliefs upon their ethical and moral commitments and choices, and upon their actions in political, economic, and social life. [7] We agree. Study of human society and history, including religious society and history, should begin in the earliest grades. Elementary education provides the foundation—the basic knowledge and skills—for the more complex and challenging discussions that come later. Leaving religion out not only gives a distorted and false view of the world and human nature, it deprives students of the tools they will need for further study in middle and high

school.

D. The Major Issues

No matter how persuasive the argument or how good the curriculum, including study of religion in the elementary grades will not be easy. Even as this chapter was being written, a call for help came from a Nashville elementary school that had recently introduced the Core Knowledge curriculum. An angry parent objected to the use of the Bible by her child's 6th grade teacher when teaching about the ancient Hebrews. The teacher was using the Bible appropriately and following the curriculum guidelines of the school, but the parent couldn't understand why the Bible is allowed in a public school. Parents are understandably nervous about how teachers will present religion to their children. Will they promote one religion over others? Are they prepared to teach about various faiths fairly and accurately? When the Nashville schools first adopted Core Knowledge, the district did much too little to prepare teachers to teach about the many religious ideas, symbols, individuals, and history required by the curriculum. Some teachers worked hard to prepare themselves. Others weren't sure how to handle religion. Faced with explaining the idea of covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures, one well-intentioned, but slightly confused teacher finally blurted out to her 6th graders that God "made a deal" with Abraham. Fear of controversy (or poor teaching) should not deter public schools from dealing with religion in the curriculum. It can be done, but it takes work. Parents have the right to expect that teachers will receive appropriate staff development and curriculum resources. In places where this is done, the vast majority of elementary teachers report strong parental support for religious literacy, including biblical literacy. Most of them begin each year by informing parents about what they will be doing in the study of religion and why. In their experience (and ours) parents overwhelmingly favor including religion once they understand the constitutional and educational rationales for doing so[8-9].

IV. HOW TO TEACH ABOUT RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS

There were two important and related Supreme Court rulings in the 1960s that were pivotal in defining the role of religion in public education. In *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) it was decided that government should not sponsor prayers in public schools. In *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) the Supreme Court ruled that the government should not sponsor Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools. The banned activities were symbols of the lingering Protestant Christian hegemony in public education and these decisions were thus met with both scorn and praise for what they represented. While many hailed these rulings as a strong endorsement of the separation of church and state and thus an affirmation of pluralism, others felt that they signaled the demise of a common moral foundation that served to unite all Americans amidst our diversity. These same tensions persist today and many trace the roots of the current culture wars to these rulings.[10]

Though the heart of these decisions addressed what was not permissible in public education, there was an important

affirmation in *Abington v. Schempp* regarding what was allowed in the intersection of religion and the schools.

It 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. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.[11]

This important articulation has been overlooked in the history of how the separation of church and state in the schools has been interpreted. Though there has been a slight shift over the past decade, most Americans since the 1960s believe that the separation of church and state that is affirmed in the rulings cited above meant that religion in all forms was banned. As Justice Clark's comments above clearly indicate, this is not at all the case. Indeed, some have argued that it may be a violation of the First Amendment when the study of religion is not included in public school curricula.[7] Though it is clear that teaching about religion is acceptable, how to do so is a more complex undertaking. This is the challenge I engage in this section.

I will begin by reviewing the guidelines regarding religion and education that have come to be widely accepted in our contemporary U.S. context. I will then consider different representations of multiculturalism and will close with an articulation of a seventh method that I call the cultural studies approach. This approach situates the study of religion within the broader discourses of multiculturalism and democratic education. I will argue that this is the best vehicle through which to promote religious literacy because 1) it is the most accurate in depicting the complexity of religion and its influences in historical and contemporary contexts; 2) it emphasizes the diversity within traditions as well as between them; and 3) it represents a method of inquiry rather than content knowledge alone.

A. Guidelines for Teaching About Religion

I draw first on the important work of the First Amendment Center⁵ which has been pivotal in helping to promote the study of religion in the schools in the United States. It has published useful guidebooks for educators regarding the distinction between an academic and devotional approach to religion. An especially relevant resource for our study is one entitled *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* that contains some pedagogical guidelines regarding how to teach about religion within the parameters of the First Amendment.⁶ These guidelines have been distributed to all public schools by the U.S. Department of Education:

The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional.

The school strives for student awareness of religions, but does not press for student acceptance of any religion.

The school sponsors study about religion, not the practice of religion.

The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view.

The school educates about all religions, it does not

promote or denigrate religion.

The school informs students about various beliefs; it does not seek to conform students to any particular belief.[12]

These guidelines appropriately assume the distinction between teaching about religion from an academic perspective versus teaching religion from a devotional lens. As such, they provide a useful thumbnail sketch to guide educators in the public school context. Indeed, they have been very helpful in alerting teachers and administrators to the fact that there is a distinction between an academic and devotional approach. One of the manifestations of widespread religious illiteracy is the equation of religion with devotional practice.

The guidelines are, however, limited in that they assume a certain neutral objectivity that an academic approach supposedly represents. Education is never neutral, and neither are the tools of academic inquiry that are employed in all educational contexts. This observation does not undermine the validity of the distinctions articulated above. There is, for example, a significant difference between learning about the Bible from a particular sectarian belief and studying the Bible from the perspective of a secular history, religious studies, or linguistics. My point is that it would be wrong to assume that the secular historical approach is somehow “objective” in contrast to the seemingly more “subjective” approach of the believer. All knowledge claims are subjective in that they inevitably represent particular perspectives that are shaped by myriad personal, social, cultural, intellectual, and historical factors too complex to (ever) fully name. Historian of science Donna Haraway calls these “situated knowledges” and contrasts this understanding of epistemology to the “god-trick” of presumed objective universality.⁸ I will elaborate upon the implications of this insight more fully later, but for now it is important to note that recognizing the subjective nature of all knowledge claims gives credence to conservatives who rightly identify “secularism” as a value-laden ideology. Conservatives and secularists are also right to recognize that the academic approach to teaching about religion in the schools is not neutral. Secularists recognize that the approach gives credibility to religion itself as a valid field of inquiry while conservatives note that the study of religion assumes the legitimacy of multiple religious perspectives that by definition challenge those who believe that their convictions represent an exclusive truth.

As noted in the previous chapter, the argument for why public schools should be secular is not because a secular foundation is neutral. It is because a secular approach is the strongest philosophical foundation to promote nonrepression and nondiscrimination in the service of democracy: the conscious social reproduction of society in its most inclusive form. This understanding, in turn, complicates the relationship between religion and education in light of the guidelines outlined above. The very enterprise is predicated upon assumptions that promote certain religious perspectives over others (e.g., acceptance of pluralism over exclusivity.) This does not mean that the enterprise itself is flawed, but it does mean that the pretense of neutrality must be abandoned so that the values that are being promoted will be more

transparent and given the justification they need in the context of our multicultural democracy.

B. *Achieving Religious Literacy*

The following definition constitutes what I believe is the minimal standard necessary for achieving religious literacy:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts, beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.[13]

In our own context, citizens should be well versed in a cultural studies approach to Christianity and its specific manifestations in the United States as well as the complex role that religion has played in the cultural, intellectual, and political life of the continent from before colonization to the present. This understanding of religious literacy emphasizes a method of inquiry more than specific content knowledge, though familiarity with the world’s religious traditions and their central texts in their social/historical manifestations is an important foundation for understanding the intersections of religion with other dimensions of human social life. It is this form of religious literacy that I believe is best suited to promote the aims of democratic education in ways that I will further elaborate upon below when I discuss the cultural studies approach. Before doing so, however, it is important to review how religion is currently being taught in the nation’s schools.

The Cultural Studies Approach to Teaching Religion

The field of cultural studies can be best defined as an amalgam of disciplines that combines sociology, social theory, literary theory, film/video studies, the creative and fine arts, and cultural anthropology to study cultural phenomena in historical and contemporary societies. Cultural studies researchers often concentrate on how a particular phenomenon is ideologically interpreted in relation to race, social class, and/or gender and thus its affinity with multicultural studies is clear and well established. More broadly, cultural studies theorists aim to examine their subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power. The objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms as expressions of the social and political contexts in which culture manifests itself.[14]

In the following section I will outline my own conception of cultural studies as it pertains to the study of religion in schools. Though much of what follows has been deeply informed by cultural studies theorists, my articulations may or may not be fully in keeping with various self-definitions of the field in its current iterations. Indeed, cultural studies are notoriously difficult to define due to its multivalent representations. In spite of this definitional ambiguity I have chosen to retain the descriptor cultural studies because it best represents the multiple dimensions of my project here. In addition, one of the field’s earliest proponents describes the

inception of cultural studies in ways that are very much in keeping with my approach.

The essential features of my definition of cultural studies include but are by no means limited to the following:

1. A cultural studies approach to teaching about religion is multidisciplinary in that it assumes that religion is deeply imbedded in all dimensions of human experience and therefore requires multiple lenses through which to understand its multivalent social/cultural influences.

2. Cultural studies challenges the legitimacy of the assumption that human experience can be studied accurately through discrete disciplinary lenses (e.g., political, economic, cultural, social, etc.) and instead posits an approach that recognizes how these lenses are fundamentally entwined. Cultural studies are also inclusive of other forms of expression heretofore ignored in academic discourse, such as “popular” culture and media. Specifically, this approach would assume, for example, that political dimensions of human experience cannot be adequately understood without considering the religious and other influences that define the cultural context out of which political actions and motivations arise. Similarly, cultural expressions (including popular and religious ones) are influenced by and, in turn, influence political life. In this way, the term “cultural” is widely inclusive of all dimensions of human experience.

3. Cultural studies recognizes that all knowledge claims are “situated” claims in that they arise out of certain social/historical/cultural/personal contexts and therefore represent particular and necessarily partial perspectives. This assertion is represented in contrast to claims that “objective” forms of knowledge exist that are equated with “unbiased” perspectives that are considered universally credible. Donna Haraway calls the latter presumption a “god-trick” that assumes the ability to “see everything from nowhere” as opposed to the “situated knowledges” that more accurately define the human endeavor of interpretation. This recognition of partial or situated knowledges is not, however, a form of relativism where all positions are considered equally credible. Indeed, Haraway asserts that relativism is the mirror-twin of totalizing theories and is therefore another representation of the god-trick. Instead, she posits that the recognition of all knowledge claims as “situated” offers the firmest ground upon which to make objective claims that are defined not by their detachment but rather by their specificity, transparency, and capacity for accountability.

The alternative to relativism is not totalization and single vision, which is always finally the unmarked category whose power depends on systematic narrowing and obscuring. The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The “equality” of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical enquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well. Relativism and totalization are both “god-tricks” promising vision from everywhere and

nowhere equally and fully, common myths in rhetorics surrounding science. But it is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective enquiry rests.[15]

This assertion that all knowledge claims are “situated” will be familiar to students of history, the social sciences, languages and literature, but less so for students new to science and theology. For all their differences, the latter two fields are associated with providing “totalizing” theories of “truth” from their respective foundations. (This is, of course, one reason why the debates regarding creationism, intelligent design and evolution remain so heated.) It is no accident that Haraway employs the language of the god-trick in her endeavor to challenge the supposedly objective (read unbiased, impartial, universal) nature of the scientific enterprise.

Contrary to popular belief, it is important to note here that most practicing scientists and theologians are also comfortable with the notion of situated knowledges. Haraway, for example, claims that “no practitioner of the high scientific arts would be caught dead acting on the textbook versions [of unbiased objectivity] . . . The only people who end up actually believing and . . . acting on the ideological doctrines of disembodied scientific objectivity enshrined in elementary textbooks and technoscience booster literature are non-scientists, including a few very trusting philosophers.”[16] Similarly, I would argue that most theologians also recognize the “situated knowledges” of their own perspectives and, indeed, most world religions have internal “checks” against the temptations for humans to claim understanding of “God” or ultimacy such as this expression: “A god understood, a god comprehended is no God.” [17] In spite of these acknowledgments by scientists and theologians regarding the situated knowledges that define their respective enterprises, science and theology are still associated with totalizing theories of representation that are exploited in the marketplace of social discourse. A sophisticated understanding of how all knowledge claims are situated should be a focus of the educational enterprise as one way to challenge any claims that are aimed at closing further legitimate democratic inquiry.

Before moving on, it is important to reiterate that the acknowledgment that all knowledge claims are situated (including scientific and theological ones) does neither undermine their credibility nor the larger credibility of the intellectual enterprise itself. Indeed, as Haraway persuasively argues, by locating knowledge claims in their particularity they are more transparent, accountable, and therefore potentially credible when evaluated in relationship to the larger value claims being promoted. This is why Haraway rightly argues that epistemological claims are ultimately claims about particular ethical, political (and I would add religious) ideologies that need to be exposed and defended.

In relationship to the study of religion itself, a cultural studies approach that affirms all knowledge claims as situated provides an especially useful foundation upon which to study religion in a way that exposes both the internal complexity of any given tradition as well as the multiple

ways that religion is woven into the fabric of human experience and utilized to justify a full range of ideological convictions. For example, god-tricks that claim there is one legitimate interpretation of Christianity or Islam or any religious worldview will be exposed as particular or situated representations that arise out of specific historical/cultural contexts. In this way, such depictions will more accurately be represented as one set of interpretations/representations among many others that are all recognized as “legitimate” theological expressions from an academic lens. A cultural studies approach provides the mechanism for studying the diversity of theological expressions within a tradition by locating them within the historical/cultural contexts out of which they arise. This also allows for competing claims to be represented and acknowledged, even if those claims are not the most politically prominent or persuasive.

4. Fourth, a cultural studies approach recognizes that the lens of the interpreter is also one that is situated and therefore partial, biased, and particular. This is always the case, so the aim is to become as conscious as possible regarding the assumptions that inform and define one’s perspective. We have already encountered examples of how uninterrogated conscious assumptions (and unacknowledged unconscious ones) can thwart learning. Troublesome conscious and unconscious assumptions about religion in our culture are especially prevalent and deeply rooted. Awareness alone will not overcome biases, but it will help the interpreter negotiate the terrain of inquiry from a more informed and transparent understanding.

5. Fifth, a cultural studies approach explicitly addresses issues related to power and powerlessness. It provides a framework to ask the following types of questions: What worldviews or perspectives are prominent in particular contexts and what social mechanisms are in place that give legitimacy to certain views over others? What perspectives are missing or marginalized and why? In relationship to any perspective, who benefits from the adoption of particular representations over others? By asking these and other similar types of questions, the complexity of the cultural construction of value claims can be understood more fully and positions scrutinized in light of the democratic values being promoted.

6. Finally, as indicated in the opening paragraphs of this section, a cultural studies approach self-consciously affirms the political dimensions of the educational enterprise. Learning is never a neutral activity and all knowledges are formed in the service of (sometimes multiple) ideological claims. Again, this acknowledgment is not an indictment against the legitimacy of the educational enterprise as hopelessly biased and therefore suspect (as various critics of education have claimed over the decades). It is, rather, an overt recognition that neutrality in education is an impossible and (I would argue) ultimately undesirable goal. Issues as broad as how the educational enterprise is structured and as focused as how an individual teacher assesses a particular student’s assignment are all rooted in certain sets of assumptions that are ideologically laden. In relation to our subject, whether (and if so how) one teaches about religion has ideological implications. A cultural studies approach

recognizes this and requires that these implications be transparent and defensible.

In summary, the key to a cultural studies approach is the employment of multiple lenses to understand the subject at hand, including an awareness of the lenses of the interpreters (authors, writers, artists who are being studied) inquirers (students), and teachers who set the larger context for the inquiry itself.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

An elementary school curriculum that ignores religion gives students the false message that religion doesn’t matter to people—that we live in a religion-free world. This is neither fair nor accurate. Silence about religion also denies students the promise of a good education. If they are to understand the world they live in, they must be exposed at an early age to the religious dimensions of society, history, literature, art, and music. Without this foundation, they will be unprepared for the more complex and critical study of the upper grades. Finally, students must begin in the primary grades to learn about the rights and responsibilities of religious liberty, the fundamental principles that sustain our nation across deep and abiding differences.

Despite what we believe to be a strong case for including religion in the elementary curriculum, we have tried to emphasize just how difficult it is to take religion seriously when young and impressionable children are involved. Nowhere in public schools do teachers need to be more cognizant of the power of their example than in the early grades. That is why the First Amendment framework must be clearly and firmly in place in the elementary school. And that is also why staff development programs and academically sound resources focused on teaching about religions must be made available to all elementary teachers. We began our discussion by invoking the example of Williamsville, New York.

We could add Ramona, California; South Orangetown, New York; and many other places that are now working to take religion more seriously in their schools. No, it isn’t easy. But the renewed trust between parents and teachers, the broad community support for doing the right thing, and the enrichment of the curriculum are some of the very important reasons why the effort is worthwhile—and vital to the future of public education.

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