Multiculturalism and the Academic Study of Religion in the Schools

Keith Naylor, Occidental College

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D. Keith Naylor, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Occidental College

Spotlight on Teaching about Religion in the Schools

Bruce Grelle and D. Keith Naylor, Guest Editors

MULTICULTURALISM remains a highly debated topic in academic circles, but much of that debate ignores religion as an important feature of the world’s cultures. However elusive and controversial, the definition of multiculturalism, as a curricular matter, it involves at minimum the study of diverse cultures and their meaning in human history. Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, noted recently in Diversity Digest that the academy is convinced, “that citizens now need to acquire significant knowl-
edge both of cultures other than their own and of disparate cultures’ struggles for recognition and equity.” The academic study of religion is an integral part of such knowledge. My work assisting teachers in learning how to teach about religion in the schools has convinced me that the study of religion has much to contribute to the emphasis on multiculturalism throughout our educational system.

Over the last five years, I have worked with secondary school teachers in Southern California through the California 3Rs Project (Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect), a project helping teachers to teach about religion in a way that is constitutionally permissible and educationally sound. My role has been to offer workshops on teaching about American religious history, helping teachers to identify places in their established curricula where they can develop study units on religion. In the absence of inclination and space in most secondary programs to offer separate courses in religious studies, my goal has been to encourage teachers to pay attention to religion in American history.

In working with teachers, I have been concerned especially with noting the presence and influence of religion in American history beyond the Puritan colonies, and the California missions, both of which seem to be stopping places, liter-
ally. For instance, to have teachers study the succession of the founders’ religious liberty generation by the 19th century evangelical b分数线 break with its agencies and reforms would be a break-
through, to have them explore the efforts of the U.S. Roman Catholic lead-

ship to establish parochial schools in answer to Protestantism in public schools in the same period would be a major success. An examination of the forging of independent black churches as touchstones of identity and power for blacks in that period would be a further advance in learning. As we study the presence and participation of the many cultural groups in American history, so too must we study religious traditions in plural, including the world’s religions that have “immigrated” to America.

The teachers I have worked with have been invariably bright, energetic, and committed to education, but few of them have had any formal exposure to the academic study of religion. Those who have responded to the state education standards mandating the study of religion can be considered as not only dedicated, but heroic. They operate under conditions of anxiety and are sometimes pressured by suspicion regarding religion from superintendents, principals, colleagues, parents, and stu-
dents. They work in settings where reli-
gion is a highly charged subject even as it is largely absent as a curricular subject. Their classrooms reflect the great racial, ethnic, class, cultural, and religious diversity of Southern California, and indeed of the world. How can we pro-
fessors of religious studies help to help teachers in the classroom?

Clearly, teachers need many resources to teach about religion. They need textbooks, such as the Oxford University Press series, Religion in American Life, to which our fellow professors have contributed. They need audio-visual materi-
als, such as On Common Ground: World Religions in America (by Diana Eck and
Religious Studies News, AAR Edition

Guidelines on Religion in Public Schools: An Historic Moment

Marcia Beauthamp

Marcia Beauthamp holds a master's degree in theological studies and secondary education from Harvard Divinity School and has experienced teaching at both the high school and college levels. Most recently she has worked as Religious Freedom Programs Coordinator for The Forum Freedom First Amendment Center where her duties included coordination of the activities of the California 3 Rs Project (Rights, Responsibilities, Respect), the largest of the state education projects sponsored by the First Amendment Center. She is a member of the AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force.

Before September 11, 2001, the need to address religion and religious perspectives in the curriculum and throughout the school day was not high on the educational agenda of many schools. Perhaps now that will change.

The tragic events of that day are a clear reminder that religion matters. It matters in a world torn by conflict over religious differences. And it matters in our society, the most religiously diverse place on Earth. From the sublime examples of abiding faith found in the stories of suffering families to the ugly attacks on American Muslims, and others mistaken for Muslims, religion is suddenly front and center in America's public square.

Of course, it shouldn't take a national crisis or outbreak of hate and ignorance to get educators to notice how poorly religion is addressed in America's public and private schools. We have known about our failure to include religion in the curriculum for more than a decade through multiple textbook studies, and periodic reports from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Council for the Social Studies, and others. Only in the last few years have textbooks and schools even begun to address religion, while most schools of education continue to ignore it altogether. We have also known for some time that our diverse student populations have many religious needs and requirements that schools must do more to accommodate.

On December 17, 1999, President Clinton used his radio address to announce that the US Department of Education would send religious liberty guidelines to every public school in the nation.1 Although largely ignored by the media, the action by the president is nothing less than historic. For the first time in American history, every school will have guidelines on the religious-liberty rights of students, the appropriate role for religion in the curriculum, and partnerships between faith communities and public schools.

A Growing Concern

The packet of guidelines from the US Department of Education represents the culmination of 15 years of hard work by many religious and educational groups, representing a broad spectrum of religious and non-religious beliefs. It is the most important and comprehensive step to date in the effort to get beyond the controversy and conflict that has characterized the "religion and schools" debate for many years. Much of the confusion about these issues may be traced to a mis-understanding and misapplication of the Supreme Court's decisions of the early 1960's, striking down state-sponsored prayer and devotional Bible reading in public schools.2 The political rhetoric surrounding these decisions convinced many Americans, including many school administrators, that religion and religious expression had no place in public schools. Fear of controversy also led many textbook publishers to ignore the teaching of religion in history and other subjects.

By the mid-1980's, however, the tide began to turn. Textbook studies by both liberal and conservative groups, as well as textbook trials in Alabama and Tennessee, highlighted the need for schools to take religion more seriously. Lawsuits proliferated on both sides of the debate. From the right, conservative Christians challenged school policies they believed unconstitutionally banned student religious speech during the school day. From the left, civil libertarians and separationists complained about school practices (particularly in the rural South), they saw as continuing to involve school officials in promoting religion.

Political pressure to address the problem of public schools as "religion-free zones" led to the passage of the Equal Access Act in 1984, which was upheld as constitutional by the US Supreme Court in 1990.3 For many conservatives, this legislation represented a major breakthrough in the effort to allow for student religious expression in public schools.4 While the Equal Access Act opened the door to student religious expression, it did not answer the many other questions about religious liberty rights of students, and it did nothing to address the question of religion in the curriculum.

Building A New Consensus

In the wake of the textbook studies and controversies, a collection of diverse religious and educational groups decided we could do better in teaching about religion in the public schools. In an effort to move us beyond the fights of the past, this group of organizations met to develop guidelines regarding some unresolved issues.5

In an effort to demonstrate that consensus already existed on the many ways to address religion in the schools, several important pamphlets were produced by this coalition, Building A New Paradigm for Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers, Religious Holidays in the Public Schools, and Equal Access and the Public Schools: Questions and Answers are all products of this diverse coalition's work together.

The way in which these documents were created is as important as what they say.

MULTICULTURALISM, From p.1

the Pluralism Project at Harvard), a series with tremendous multimedia capability for teaching and learning. Teachers need online news updates that reinforce the currency and liveliness of the world's religions. But I think the most urgent need among teachers is knowledge about how to approach the study of religion. The most important thing we can offer is exposure to the various methods of religious studies, articulation of the interdisciplinarity of the field, and some understanding of the cautions and debates surrounding those methods, including the unsettled issue of what constitutes religion. Through pre-service education school courses, in-service training, and enrichment seminars, we can work with teachers to strengthen their expertise and their confidence in teaching religious studies. As they gain a better picture of the academic study of religion, they can begin to uncover the connections between history, culture, and religion in material that they already know. As we share with teachers our dilemmas in teaching difficult themes of religious conflict, for instance, they can learn from our approaches and gain confidence in doing the same.

Sharing our experience of studying religion as a complex topic can be highly valuable to teachers. I remember, for example, the first time I presented the late Ninian Smart's "dimensions of religion" to a group of teachers. They felt almost a sense of revelation concerning the multifaceted nature of religion as a topic for study, and felt released from dwelling on religion as only a "system of belief." Thinking about the dimensions of religion gave them a chance to occupy the religion as it exists in the world. These questions were clearly part of a larger conception of religion. The teachers were free to explore religion as it exists in culture, to explore religion as it is experienced in groups, and to explore religion as it occurs in other contexts. This is a key feature of multiculturalism. As religious studies professors, we have had to study a topic whose actual definition eludes our agreement, and we have produced important knowledge because of our topic of study can help to create new narratives about religion. The scholars who are making a contribution to our understanding of religion, and we raise new questions about

GUIDELINES, p.4

of us entered the field precisely because of our commitment to the study of religion and culture, and with the varied nature of religion. We nurture in our classroom sensitivity toward this diversity of traditions over time. We have wrestled with the enigmatic issues of secularization and modernity, both of which are relevant to multiculturalism. As religious studies professors, we have had to study a topic whose actual definition eludes our agreement, and we have produced important knowledge because of our topic of study can help to create new narratives about religion. We have produced important knowledge because of our topic of study can help to create new narratives about religion. Many religious studies scholars have experience in teaching about religion and culture, with multiple traditions, and multiple dimensions of traditions over time. We take seriously both correspondence and distinctiveness of religious traditions around the world. In our efforts to understand the intersections of culture and religion, we are present and past, we continue to explore the field. We reinvigorate religious studies. We create new narratives about religion, and we raise new questions about

Narrative itself. In researching what we may be called "multicultural religion," we extend our own imaginativeness in remaking scholarship. It is this dynamism that informs our teaching and scholarly work. Teachers will know how to translate what they learn from these resources into age and grade-appropriate instruction. What they need more from religious studies professors is access to our experience in teaching about religion.

In order to map out the territory of religious studies for teachers, to point out the main roads and interesting side paths, the cliffs and canyons, the badlands and oases, we need to be in some regular contact with them. Others in this edition of Spotlight have addressed the question of public service and public spiritedness. The fact remains that the coming together of religious studies scholars and secondary teachers will yield benefits for both, and for our entire educational system, especially as it comes to terms with multiculturalism. In the spirit of the 3 Rs Project (Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect) we have begun to bring the two groups together. But there is still room for individual initiative. As a religious studies scholar, you can reach out to teachers in your district to advance the academic study of religion in the schools, and thus to advance the field.

Background

The Lee County Bible Curriculum

In March, 1996, the Lee County School Board (Ft. Myers) authorized the teaching of a two-semester Bible history sequence, Bible History: Old Testament, and Bible History: New Testament. Both courses were listed in the state curriculum as social studies electives. Since the state provided only general guidelines and specific curriculum decisions were left to local school boards, a 15-member “Bible Curriculum Committee” was formed to develop a curriculum to be submitted to a vote of the five member School Board.

After a year and a half of contentious committee meetings focusing on both legal and content issues, the school board voted 3-2 in August, 1997, to adopt a Bible History I (Old Testament) curriculum. A Bible History II (New Testament) curriculum was adopted by the same margin in October. The first course was scheduled to begin in January, 1998, and the second in March. Opponents of the two courses, among whom were the ACLU and the People for the American Way, then sued the school board in Federal District Court, seeking a preliminary injunction to keep the courses from being taught. Among those supporting the school board were the conservative American Center for Law and Justice, and the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools.

The judge ruled in January that the Old Testament course could be offered, but should be monitored closely (area texts) by the plaintiffs to insure that it “be taught in a permissibly objective manner” and not as a “veiled attempt to promote Christianity in the guise of teaching history.” She granted the injunction against the teaching of the New Testament course, which, against the advice of the school board’s attorney, was based entirely on the curriculum of the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools. The board agreed to settle the case by adopting a curriculum for both courses based on an introductory college-level textbook. The school district required those planning to teach the course to take an intensive course given by Mitchell Reddick, of Stetson University, one of the authors of the textbook.

People for the American Way: “The Good Book Taught Wrong”

The request to review the guidelines for the Bible History courses came to our department chair, John Kelsay, from the Florida Department of Education in January, 2000, shortly after the People for the American Way released a 60 page report severely critical of the way Bible History courses were being taught throughout the state.

The report entitled, The Good Book Taught Wrong: ‘Bible History Classes in Florida Public Schools,’ was based on instructional materials reviewed by the Florida Public Records Act from 14 of the 15 school districts that had taught one or both of the Bible History courses during the academic years 1996-97, 1997-98, and 1998-1999. The request included, “lesson plans, exams, reading lists and assignments, as well as all instructional materials, and everything else given to or shown to students.”

The report argued that, “the courses are framed and taught from Christian perspectives”; the Bible is used as a history textbook; students are assumed to be Christian and the Bible is taught accordingly; “the Bible is used to promote Christian belief formation and religious values and lessons”; and “Sunday school and other religious training exercises are used to indoctrinate students in Bible content.”

While recognizing the appropriateness of teaching about the Bible from a non-sectarian perspective, especially as a work of literature and in the context of comparative religion classes, the report recommended the removal of both Bible History courses from the state-approved course list.

Developing New Guidelines

Citing state statutes that permit school districts to offer courses dealing with the objective study of the Bible and religion, the General Council for the Department of Education asked the FSU Religion Department to review and make suggestions regarding “the title, subject area and substantive content” of the 1992 state course descriptions that serve as the guidelines for the courses developed by individual school districts.

The task was assigned to my colleague Shannon Burkes and me, the two members of the department who have the primary responsibility for teaching our introductory Bible courses, Robert Spivey, a former Religion Department chair, Dean of Arts and Sciences, and Executive Director of the American Academy of Religion, who had recently returned to the FSU administration, joined us. He brought his expertise as the co-author of a widely used New Testament textbook, and as a former director of a national project for teaching about religion in the public schools, which was developed at FSU in the early 70s.

At our first of several meetings with representatives from the Department of Education, there was general agreement that the 1992 curriculum frameworks needed revision. The guidelines for the two courses were brief and general, consisting of a single-sentence course description and short lists of contents and “intended outcomes.” The primary emphasis on “understanding the Bible as a historical document” demanded more training than the teachers were likely to have. To the extent that this was intended as evaluating the historical status of the biblical accounts ("archaeological evidence and Biblical studies" is listed among the short list of topics for both courses), it introduced one of the most complex and debated aspects of contemporary biblical scholarship: one which could easily lead to attempts to prove or disprove particular religious claims.

We quickly agreed that emphasizing literary rather than historical issues made the most sense for high school teachers and students. Such a suggestion was also made in the report of the People for the American Way, and in The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide, a pamphlet published by the National Bible Association and the First Amendment Center and endorsed by a wide range of organizations from a variety of political perspectives including Islamic Education, Anti-Defamation League, National Association of Evangelicals, the Christian Legal Society, the People for the American Way Foundation.” What neither of these documents points out, however, is that a focus on literary and historical issues can, quite definitely and intentionally do not include evaluation of the historicity of specific events, however.

In order to signal the move from a more historical to a more literary approach, we recommended that the courses be moved from social studies to humanities. While language arts would also have been a possible home for the Bible courses, we thought that placing them in the humanities area would suggest the interdisciplinary nature of such a course, which would bring in material and approaches from history and the fine arts as well as literature.

The name of the courses was controversial, as “Old Testament” and “New Testament” were clearly Christian categories. “Bible History,” or “Bible Scripture” was not precise enough, since it would not include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books. Our suggestion that courses be designated Bible I: Literature of Ancient Israel, and Bible II: Literature of Early Christianity, was evidently seen as too clumsy or pedantic, so the Department of Education decided to use simply Introduction to the Bible I, and Introduction to the Bible II.

Announcement of New Guidelines

Tom Gallagher, the then Commissioner of Education, announced the new guidelines at a press conference on March, 16, 2000. Pointing to a large chart listing the concerns and the specific response by the Department of
Simultaneous with these efforts to reach consensus, the Williamsburg Charter Foundation brought together a diverse group of citizens to affirm American commitment to the common framework provided by the Religious Liberty Clauses of the First Amendment. In 1988, 200 national leaders, including representatives of America’s major faiths, public schools, and scholars, signed the Williamsburg Charter, rededicating American citizens to the principles of religious freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. This charter articulates the fundamental principles underlying religious freedom: religious liberty or freedom of conscience as an inalienable right; a commitment to take seriously the civic duties such citizens have toward that right for all citizens, including those with whom we disagree; and a commitment to debate our deep differences with civility and respect.

In more recent years, significant consensus has emerged on what the law says about religion in public schools. This led to the April, 1995 publication of the Joint Statement of Current Law. A group of 12 religious and civil rights organizations — chaired by the American Jewish Congress, and including the Christian Legal Society and the American Civil Liberties Union — drafted the Statement, with 23 additional organizations endowing it. The Joint Statement of Current Law became the foundation for the growing consensus on the law that has followed. This pamphlet covers issues such as religious expression rights. It also serves as a model for municipalities and schools.


“Public schools may not inculcate nor inhibit religion. They must be places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect. Public schools uphold the First Amendment when they protect the religious liberty rights of students of all faiths or none. Schools demonstrate fairness when they ensure that the curriculum includes study about religion, where appropriate, as an important part of a complete education.

This vision, endorsed by 24 religious and educational organizations — including the Christian Coalition and the National Association of Evangelicals, People for the American Way and the Anti-Defamation League — indicates how far we have come in finding common ground on religion in the public schools.  

Spreading the Word

In spite of the consensus that has developed, many school districts are still afraid to address the issues, and must have not taken active steps to address the issues are still without effective policies, and in almost every case the curriculum still largely ignores religion.

In various school districts however, there are now some very successful efforts to translate the new consensus into real change. Taking the principles of rights, responsibilities, and respect, articulated in the Williamsburg Charter, the First Amendment Center’s Religious Freedom Projects have partnered with state educational organizations and departments to create 3 Rs Projects across the country. The most fully developed projects exist in California, in partnership with the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, and in Utah, with the Utah State Office of Education. The 3 Rs Projects are designed to help schools and communities find common ground on educational philosophy, school reform, and the meaning of religious freedom and values in public schools through workshops, institutes, and forums. Other communities, such as Richardson, Texas, Tuscaloosa, Oklahoma, and Bay Shore, New York, have also embraced these principles and put them into policies, training for teachers and administrators, and workshops on teaching about religion in the public schools.

These efforts were aided when, in 1995, President Clinton directed Secretary of Education Richard Riley to develop and distribute to every public school superintendent guidelines for religious expression in the public schools. The President’s guidelines were based upon the earlier Joint Statement of Current Law and consultation with experts in the field. With very slight alteration, these guidelines were re-released to superintendents again in 1998.

Responding to a request by the Secretary of Education, a version was added to the President’s guidelines that would be suitable for parents, the First Amendment Center, in partnership with the National PTA, published A Parent’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools. It was also released in 1995, and distributed widely by both organizations.

In December of 1999, when President Clinton asked the Secretary of Education to send out another mailing, a new strategy was employed. This time, the mailing would be a comprehensive set of guidelines, to be used by principals in every public school in the nation. A complete packet of guidelines addressing many of the current issues in public education is now in the hands of every public school principal in the nation.

The five publications included in the mailing were:

• Religious Expression in the Public Schools

Provides a statement of principles for the US Secretary of Education that addresses the extent to which religious expression and activity are permitted in US public schools.

• A Parent’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools

Provides general information based on the First Amendment concerning religious expression and practices in schools. This booklet uses a question and answer format and addresses issues such as how to find common ground, student religious expression, student prayer, teaching about religious holidays, student religious clubs, and character education. It contains a list of free-speech resource organizations and information on how to obtain a more in-depth guide to religion in public schools.

• A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools

Provides general information for teachers and administrators on the subject of religion in public schools. This guide answers questions such as, is it constitutionally acceptable to teach about religion? May I pray or otherwise practice my faith at school? And May students express religious views in public schools?

• School and Religious Communities: A First Amendment Guide

Focuses on arrangements between public schools and religious institutions, given the constitutional implications of those relationships. Addresses such issues as crisis counseling, religious programs, and use of school facilities.

• How Faith Communities Support Children Learning in Public Schools

Provides examples of ways in which faith communities can answer questions on public schools and faith-based communities. This booklet also summarizes the dos and don’ts for partnerships between faith-based communities and public schools that were first developed in Religious Expression in Public Schools.

Also to the packet was a “Things to Do” checklist for partnerships involving public schools and faith-based communities. This checklist was published to the consternation of one civil liberty group who believed there should be more guidance and caution as schools and religious communities work out these partnerships.

This Department of Education mailing provides an historic opportunity to translate the consensus on religious expression in schools to a new level. In spite of the guidelines and some good examples in communities across the nation, some school districts still impose religion, and some ignore or are hostile to it. Everywhere, the causes for this problem fail to take religion seriously. The fact that every school now has these guidelines means that schools in every community can develop policies on religion and religious expression in their schools confidently, ensuring that students of all faiths or none are treated with fairness and respect. Textbooks and classrooms can and should begin to reflect the shared vision for the role of religion in the curriculum. Where there will be disagreements, they can be debated civilly in an environment dedicated to the common good. Where and communities no longer have any excuse for thinking that religion should be ignored or imposed, since there now exists a widely agreed upon third model.

Remaining Challenges

While the broad-based consensus achieved is real, and the distribution of these materials to schools across the nation is historic in its impact, there is much more to be done. Not every challenge faced by public schools is solved by the law or courts and common good guidelines need to be supplemented with hands-on assistance.

On issues where we still have deep and abiding differences, such as creationism and evolution, and sexuality and sex education, developing policies for debating our differences with respect and finding some common ground is crucial. School districts struggling with these and other “hot button” issues should be encouraged to reach out to organizations like the ones listed at the back of the Department of Education’s guidelines for assistance (see List of Organizations on this page).

See GUIDELINES II, p. 10.
I use the 3Rs model as a classroom management tool for teaching about religion. In approaching the study of deeply held beliefs and traditions, issues such as civility, equality, diversity, justice, and the common good, all come into play. I seek to develop responsible young people and to serve as a role model for them. On the second day of the term, we begin discussing fair treatment, lack of harassment, and we create together a Classroom Bill of Rights, which we all sign. This sets up our responsibilities to one another in the learning process. Before we get to religion we discuss issues such as core democratic values and living with difference.

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

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

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

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

Ball: We had no resources in the 1980's. There was a Time-Life series on religion in the library. I began doing research on my own. In the mid-90's, I started the Oxford Series on Religion in American Life, the Pluralism Project CD-ROM with sounds of religious rituals, which really draw students in. There's also a Holt, Rinehart, and Winston video series. I use the religion curriculum materials of the First Amendment Center, such as Fiscal and Common Ground, and the In American History — What to Teach and How. One of our current projects is charting the religious landscape of Utah, there by creating another resource for students in our state.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ball: Ray Briscoe, our first Director of the 3Rs project, started by getting...
The Program in Religion and Secondary Education at Harvard Divinity School

Diane L. Moore, Director

Diane L. Moore is the Director of the Program in Religion and Secondary Education at Harvard Divinity School. She is also on the faculty at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where she teaches in the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department. Her current research interests are in religion and public policy in education.

In addition to their education toward licensure, the PRSE and the RPERC offer curriculum guides and sample lessons in several subject areas. For administrators, school board members, members of the legal profession and interested members of the public, the Center provides brochures, background statements, bibliographies of resources, and reprints of pertinent articles. The Center also lists resources available for purchase from other organizations and agencies.

The Religion and Public Education Resource Center

Dr. Bruce Grellle, Director

The Religion and Public Education Resource Center (RPERC) at California State University, Chico, was established in 1995. It is the home of a program formerly housed at the National Council on Religion and Public Education (NCRPE) Distribution Center (Indiana University, Pennsylvania). The RPERC seeks to foster a greater understanding of First Amendment education and to develop curriculum resources that incorporate religion and religious worldviews within their fields of expertise. Students may also study constitutional issues, including what is and is not legal to teach in public school settings. In this regard, the PRSE is a specialized training program. It provides the explicit opportunity for teachers to explore the ways in which the study of religion can contribute to and enhance policy and content disclosures across the educational spectrum.

Foundations

At the core of the PRSE is the notion of education as vocation: the conviction that one teaches because partnership in the shaping of young lives is work that matters. From this perspective, the qualities emphasized in the preparation for teaching available through PRSE are passion for a subject, a genuine concern for youth, competence, and personal commitment.

Through courses at the Divinity School and the 17 students in the PRSE are specifically prepared to teach the study of religion and to develop curriculum resources that incorporate religion and religious worldviews within their fields of expertise. Students may also study constitutional issues, including what is and is not legal to teach in public school settings. In this regard, the PRSE is a specialized training program. It provides the explicit opportunity for teachers to explore the ways in which the study of religion can contribute to and enhance policy and content disclosures across the educational spectrum.

The Religion and Public Education Resource Center (RPERC) serves both as a deposito- 

T HE RELIGION and Public Education Resource Center (RPERC) at Harvard Divinity School is designed for people who wish to pursue a secondary school teaching career in conjunction with their theological studies. The PRSE is within the context of either the Master of Theological Studies or the Master of Divinity degree program, in partnership with cooperating secondary schools. In addition to earning their master's degree, PRSE students earn middle or secondary school teacher licensure in English, history or political science/political philosophy from the Massachusetts Department of Education.

The certification obtained is valid in nearly forty states, and represents the closest equiva- 

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Dr. Bruce Grellle, Director

Department of Religious Studies
California State University, Chico
Chico, CA 95929-0740
E-MAIL: bgrellle@csuchico.edu

different immigrant group. Focusing on the religious experience and sensibility of different immigrant group. Focusing on the religious experience and sensibility of teenage immigrants across time, space, and country of origin had the added effect of high literature the similarities rather than the differences among them.

I also made a point of paying close attention to religious living, to the tension between religious ideals and everyday life thinking that might appeal to young read- ers too. Incorporating numerous instances of such tension into the text, I described New England women who, hiding behind their oversized church bonnets, dozed off during the sermon while their men folk gathered outside to talk about farming. In the eyes of God, pastors who despaired of their congregants, and congregants who, despairing of their pastors, preferred to play basketball on Sunday rather than attend church. I made sure to make room for human foibles, frailties, and idiosyn- crises. I felt that this material, the stuff of history, had a far greater chance of engag- ing adolescents than a dutiful recitation of dates, places, and grand theories.

Em energized by my mandate to make the past come alive, to introduce teenagers to the joys of history, and to suggest some- thing of the complexity and vibrancy of America's religious landscape, I never felt I was in danger of compromising my schol- arly integrity or of making short shrift of my academic training. On the contrary. Whether the subject at hand was the development of the American Catholic Church, the experience of Chinese immi- grants in 19th century California, or the emergence of an Islamic American community at the end of the 20th, writing Immigration and American Religion called on my interpretive skills at every turn. Unable to assume any knowledge whatsoever on the part of my audience, I had to explain everything (succinctly, no less) while also placing a premium on clarity and liveliness. Sustaining the interest of my readers as they made their way from the 17th century to contemporary times brought into play every one of my class- room skills.

In other words, writing this book was far from easy. It was hard to avoid the temper- atures that the narrative with interpretive asides, to pole on the detail, to lead with theory rather than incident and, above all, to footnote. Finding the right phrases (e.g., the term ‘braindeath’ between the language of the academy and the language of the street), striking the right note (neither lofty nor overly familiar), and knowing when to step in and when to step out also brought into play every one of my class- room skills.

Eventually, after many false starts and long hours spent staring at the screen, I found my bearings, much as the subjects of this book — the Bradford brothers and the Freys, the Kellys and the Cohens, the Hoogs and the Ioss, the Rodriguezes and the Kassams — ultimately found theirs, by transforming the United States in the process.
One teacher — one of very few about whom the report said anything positive — was particularly incensed. She felt she had spent an inordinate amount of time developing an academically responsible Bible elective course (including attending seminars at various Bible-related organizations), and was rewarded with finding herself criticized in the report and harassed byreporters.

She had a point. The report cites her repeatedly, listing the group of two axes of the Bible History thesis: "as the history that happened during Bible times" and "the history of how we got the Bible," and then suggests that the first "school-type task" as asking students to list the 27 books of the New Testament in correct order are cited. This is a part of a general criticism that runs through the report: that the exercies emphasize the rote memorization rather than critical thinking or analysis skills are indicative of a Sunday School approach and are therefore inappropriate. 

While the report sometimes does go too far in pressing its case, it should not be forgotten that the People for the American Way Foundation has played an invaluable role in highlighting the questionable legal and constitutional issues and practices, and supplying the legal resources to prevent abuses. The literature could also devote more time to teaching New Testament at FSU. We spent half a day on the literary analysis of the Gospels of Mark, with some discussion of how an understanding of the literary structure and religious themes of each gospel. 

When the Department of Education first raised the topic of the two summer institutes, I had significant doubts. I was concerned that they would prove to be a superficial substitute for the sort of minimal training that would be required around teaching the Bible in the public schools. Reflecting on the past two summer institutes, however, I have a much more positive view of what they can accomplish. Nothing, of course, can substitute for a series of semester-long advanced undergraduate and graduate courses. A few of the teachers had done that sort of training. While most did not, they still were able to learn in a few intense days, including a careful exploration of the methods and substantive issues than I would have thought possible. A number of them could explain the use of the methods, after a training, and were motivated to learn as much as possible, both to satisfy their intellectual curiosity and to acquire the analytical skills and information to bring to the classroom.

While I am confident that most of the teachers who attended the institute wanted to teach the Bible courses because of their commitment to the Bible as a source of truth, and because they felt that they would receive genuine and helpful feedback. Some teachers from intervened by biblical scholars. They were highly motivated to learn as much as possible, both to satisfy their intellectual curiosity and to acquire the analytical skills and information to bring to the classroom.

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From p.3

Education (e.g. "taught as history?" / "teach as humanities"), he stated, "By law, school districts have the right to teach the objective study of the Bible. The Department of Education has taken steps to ensure that right."

The last of the four major concerns listed was "lack of teacher training," to which the response was the creation of a "Technical Assistance Summer Institute." Summer Institutes

Clearly, the greatest problem associated with teaching about the Bible in the public schools is the lack of teachers trained in the academic study of the Bible. The Plan to provide summer institutes is at best a stop-gap measure while specific standards are being established which must include at least some work in Bible at the College level. While we suggested that the first summer be spent planning a full-scale institute for the next summer, the Department of Education wanted some teacher training in both legal and content issues to be offered during the summer of 2000. The FSU Religion Department, Department of Education, Center for Professional Development, and Florida Department of Education sponsored the Technical Assistance Workshop for 30 teachers and administrators in July.

July 13-14, 2000

The first day of the institute was taken up with an overview of the directions of the teachers. While I had had some experience in Florida in a panel of administrators discussed issues connected with the implementation of the plan. A panel of legal experts was organized by Joseph Beckal, chair of the FSU Department of Educational Leadership and the co-author of A Legal Guide for Florida Teachers. The panel on legal issues included a lengthy discussion of the Lee County case. It was presented by Keith Martin, the lawyer for the School Board, who during the law suit found himself in the uncomfortable position of defending the actions of the Board while he had and had not worked in the classroom. This would also give us an opportunity to learn about their own training, interests, and needs.

Shannon Burkes and I led an informal discussion with the teachers on the evening of the first day, and spent the entire day of the second one with them. The main problem was the curriculum, and by their teaching experience, to consider the discussion.

The following concluding reflections on several key questions addressed in both The Bible in Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide and The Bible in the Classroom Wrong are meant to serve as examples of how the perspective of those who spend their lives teaching the Bible in public schools, in addition to professional resources, can be addressed using a straightforward approach that can be easily accessible to high school students.

Which Bible?

Among the most prominent problems identified in the content of public school Bible courses are questions of canon, translation, and the selection of "what Bible should or should not be taught are meant to serve as exams-

A survey of the most important docu-

ments in the history of canon formation, and a description and comparison of the canons of contemporary communities, should be provoked by the report. But the report did not support the state Department of Education. They felt that they had worked hard to develop a serious but workable plan that the report gave them no credit for this, and unfairly used a few egregious examples to paint all of them as religious bigots.

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An adolescent’s understanding of faith is deceptively simple. Ask almost any 15-year-old to define his or her faith system, and you will likely hear a long, bland, tacitly accepted, stock answer. Teenagers filter their encountered world through a simplistically understood system. Daily interactions with new people, ideas, cultures, and other faith traditions stretch their fragile conceptual web. Furthermore, in today’s schools students hang suspended between an Enlightenment paradigm and an epicenter of moral discourse. This does not mean, however, that these basic beliefs should be scrutinized in secondary schools. Simply put, there is enough to be gained by exposure to alien traditions without asking adolescents to evaluate critically the arguments of their own faith traditions.

Not everyone agrees with this position. For example, Nel Noddings, after providing some beneficial ideas for teaching about existential issues, writes:

You [fundamentalists, and here she means Christian; Noddings is fundamentalist: ] are free to practice your religion as you see fit, but when you enter the public arena, your commitment must be subjects will be subjected to the methods of intelligence. The public school is committed to these methods, and your children will necessarily encounter them.

While Noddings tempers this edict at other places in her work, taking such an approach will only alienate a large segment of American parents. It is, in my opinion, anoinsexhaustible viewpoint of how to teach fundamentalists — Christian or other— Noddings might consider that, whether students worship God, gods, or are waiting for Allah to return, everyone is essentially, is a ‘fundamentalist.’

The premise that all adolescents have an unshakable need for an unshakable God” (however they might define “God,”) delimits the curriculum and pedagogical means of religious studies instruction. A useful methodology for engaging the topic of religion is tostratify lessons into three different, yet interconnected layers: historical, philosophical, and hermeneutical. In the first layer, students explore questions of historical context. For example, if teaching about the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, teachers might discuss that the Cyrus Edict was issued ca. 559 B.C.E., that power shifted from the Babylonians to the Persians, that the returning Israelites eventually built a new temple, and that they forged their right-kneed community out of fear of religious assimilation. Teachers must exercise caution when excavating this layer, differentiating between historical context (what, when, where, and why), and history (whether something really happened). The majority of instructional time and effort is devoted to familiarizing students with this type of background knowledge. Note, of course, that teachers must not overemphasize rote learning of facts, or intellectualizing the subject matter. Engaging the emotional side of religion and of religious adherents is an enormously important facet of teaching this subject.10

In the second layer, questions of meaning are discussed. For example, what do Zen Buddhists believe about meditation, or why do Sufis practice dhikr, the act of remembering Allah? Or, continuing with our example from Ezra and Nehemiah, why do some Jews and Christians believe that they must live apart from peoples of other faiths? Philosophical questions are concerned with current existential meaning. Teachers should address these discussions through attribution, that is, the analysis of first person accounts. For example: Do the first person accounts of those who believe in Christ, or in the Quran, believe they are right? Do Sufis believe in Allah, and do Muslims believe in Allah? If so, how do they believe in Allah, and how do they differ from Christians?

The third portion, the hermeneutical section, addresses issues of modern-day relevance. Here the purpose is to attempt to understand issues beyond the, “philosophical,” “religious,” “historical,” or “political” contexts. This layer is concerned with the practical and possible remedies or segregation and xenophobia in the US, and the possibilities for linking religious studies with other courses are innumerable. With so many instructional ties available, the fact that most school districts place religious studies in the “null” curriculum is an educational tragedy.

The historical development of American schools has, unfortunately, yielded very few useful instructional materials in the academic study of religion. In short, public schools moved from promoting Protestantism (1840s – 1900s) to becoming altogether silent on the topic of religion (1960s – present).11 The need for teachers to select only from an ample supply of Sunday School lessons or a library of textbooks that superficially mention religion. There have been few attempts to develop appropriate religious studies materials for public secondary schools.

Admittedly, writing religious studies curricula for secondary schools is enormously challenging. Creating appropriate materials for adolescents addresses the unmet needs of non-governmental organizations, and business. All of these organizations have significant educational missions and impact many people in their workplace.

We invite articles from diverse methodological approaches, theoretical and ideological perspectives. Readers from a variety of faith traditions and worldviews can expect to find a discussion of ideas represented. It is the intent of the editors to present material that, though challenging and provocative, is undertaken with scholarly care. Some articles are invited, but unsolicited articles are also encouraged. The Journal’s Web site (www.uni.edu/jrae) contains more information, including related links, submission guidelines, editorial board, and subscription information.

Michael D. Waggoner, Editor
Religion and Education
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0604
TEL: (319) 273-2605
FAX: (319) 273-5175
E-MAIL: Mike.Waggoner@uni.edu

Michael D. Waggoner earned a master’s degree in theological studies from Eumyri University and a master’s degree in religious studies with a minor in education from the University of Georgia. He has taught in both high school and college settings. He recently developed a curriculum on the Hebrew Scriptures for public secondary schools (available spring 2002), and is now writing a volume on Christian New Testament (available summer 2002).
Moses Who? Literacy, Citizenship, and the Academic Study of Religion in the Schools

Bruce Grelle, Department of Religious Studies
California State University, Chico

with photographs of Michelangelo’s famous sculpture, could not recall having ever seen or heard the African-American spiritual, “Go Down Moses,” nor having ever watched television re-runs of The Ten Commandments, with Charlton Heston in the role of Moses. (Neither one of us had seen Disney’s 1998 rendition of the story, Prince of Egypt). This young woman had been born and raised in the United States. She was not a poor student. She came to class regularly, completed her reading assignments, turned in her written work, and passed exams. Nonetheless, she had completed twelve years of schooling and three years of college before she “heard” of Moses.

What is even more disheartening about this story is that this young woman was preparing to become a high school teacher. In the course in which she was enrolled as my student is entitled, Teaching About Religions in American Public Schools. This course is populated by social science majors who plan to apply to a single-subject credential program and become elementary school teachers. While my student was more candid than many Americans about the degree of her cultural and historical illiteracy, she is by no means alone among her peers when it comes to gaps in knowledge about the world’s religions.

On the first day, one girl mentioned that she had four brothers and sisters. “Oh,” a Mormon “asked another girl, who I knew was a Mormon herself. The first girl, should have replied, “No, I don’t have any brothers and sisters.” She thought Mormonism was the same as Menoninites, and the only thing she knew about either religion is that Menoninites don’t, in her opinion, “dress normal.”

My friends, ever curious about Judaism, asked me about everything from our basic theology to food preferences. “How come, if Jesus was a Jew, aren’t Christians? My Catholic roommate asked me in all seriousness. Brought up in a small Wisconsin town, she had never met a Jew before, nor had she met people from most other “strange” religions. She knew about the Catholic and mainstream Protestant. Many of the other kids were the same way.

Recently, I administered an informal multiple-choice questionnaire to students at the beginning of the semester in order to assess their familiarity with some basic facts about the world’s religions. Among students enrolled in one section of my Teaching About Religions course, 57% thought that Christians had originated more recently than Islam, and 40.7% defined “Nirvana” as the “continuing cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth in many differing forms and conditions of existence.” Fully 37% thought that Muslims believe Muhammad to be the messiah, while 29.6% thought that Muslims believe that Jesus was a Jew, Jews aren’t Christians. My Catholic roommate asked me in all seriousness. Brought up in a small Wisconsin town, she had never met a Jew before, nor had she met people from most other “strange” religions. She knew about the Catholic and mainstream Protestant. Many of the other kids were the same way.

Do you still practice animal sacrifices? asked a girl from a small town in Minnesota asked me once. I said no, laughed and pointed out that this was the twentieth century, but she had been absolutely serious. The only Jews she knew were the ones from the Bible.

According to Chan, “Nobody was deliberately rude or anti-Semitic, but I got the feeling that I was representing a strange Jewish people through my actions.” She winced at the thought of many of her new friends would go home to their small schools believing that all Jews like those in Dynasty, the Whirling Dervishes, or Dizzy Queen Blizzard’s and grilled cheese sandwiches, were true of all the Jews they knew in most cases, Chan herself and the one other Jewish student enrolled in the summer program.

The most awful thing for me, however, was not the badgering confusion of our friends. Our biology professor had taken us on a field trip to the EPA field site where he worked, and he was telling us about the project he was working on. He said that they had to make sure the EPA got its money’s worth from the study — “the wouldn’t want them to get Jewed.”

Chan recounts her astonishment that this professor who, “had a doctorate, various other degrees and seemed to be a very intelligent man, apparently hadn’t read a book where he had just made an anti-Semitic remark.” She and the other Jewish girl in the group wrestled with the question of whether the professor was saying something to him about Jews. They agreed that they would confront him, but neither of them ever did. No doubt Chan speaks for countless students of all ages and grade levels from around the country when she writes, “For a high-school student to tell a professor who taught her class that he was a bigot seemed out of place to me, even if he was one.”

As Chan Schoenberger goes on to explain, she had always been under the impression that in America we are expected to “respect each other’s traditions.” Yet, “as correctly observed by others, it is simply not possible to define a world religious outlook in a way that is meaningful to everyone.” Clearly, without such knowledge it becomes too all too easy to caricature and trivialize the religious beliefs and practices of fellow citizens who belong to religious, racial, or ethnic communities different from our own. How long can a civil society survive in such a climate of ignorance and misunderstanding?

Religion in the Curriculum and Teacher Education

It comes as no surprise that, as a professor of religious studies, I am convinced that the academic study of religion is the only indispensable contribution to historical and cultural literacy. It is impossible to achieve an adequate understanding of historical and cultural (literature, art, music, philosophy, law, ethics, politics), without knowing something about the role that religious ideas, practices, and institutions have played and continue to play in human life. One does not have to subscribe to E.D. Hirsch’s theories of cultural literacy in order to recognize the irreducible role that the study of religion plays in the professional education of future teachers — to know that has been lived before, or that Muslims do not believe that Muhammad was the incarnation of Allah.

Along with Chan Schoenberger, I am convinced that knowledge about the world’s religions is an integral part of education for citizenship in a pluralistic society. While there may be good reason to be disheartened by evidence of widespread ignorance regarding the world’s religions, there really is no good reason to be surprised.

Until quite recently, the academic study of the world’s religions (as contrasted with formal and informal school sponsorship of the religious activities of particular students in the dominant religious groups in various localities) has been all but absent from the public school curriculum. Despite the fact that religious diversity is nowhere more apparent than in public school classrooms, the professional preparation of public school teachers and administrators typically includes no systematic attention to the ethical, legal, and pedagogical issues that arise in connection with the topic of religion in the schools.

While there are many reasons for this lack of attention to religion, among the most significant of these is the widespread misunderstanding of Supreme Court decisions regarding the First Amendment. Governmental agencies such as public schools are prohibited from relying on themselves in the organization, promotion, or sponsorship of such religious activities. Many Americans — supporters and opponents of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Governmental agencies such as public schools are prohibited from relying on themselves in the organization, promotion, or sponsorship of such religious activities. Many Americans — supporters and opponents of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Governmental agencies such as public schools are prohibited from relying on themselves in the organization, promotion, or sponsorship of such religious activities. Many Americans — supporters and opponents of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Governmental agencies such as public schools are prohibited from relying on themselves in the organization, promotion, or sponsorship of such religious activities. Many Americans — supporters and opponents of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Governmental agencies such as public schools are prohibited from relying on themselves in the organization, promotion, or sponsorship of such religious activities. Many Americans — supporters and opponents of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Governmental agencies such as public schools are prohibited from relying on themselves in the organization, promotion, or sponsorship of such religious activities. Many Americans — supporters and opponents of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Governmental agencies such as public schools are prohibited from relying on themselves in the organization, promotion, or sponsorship of such religious activities. Many Americans — supporters and opponents of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Governmental agencies such as public schools are prohibited from relying on themselves in the organization, promotion, or sponsorship of such religious activities. Many Americans — supporters and opponents of the established clause of the First Amendment.
LEVENSON, B. from p.7

interesting class projects, for which there are abundant and inexpensive video and Web resources.

The question of which translation to use need not be as controversial as most of those writing on this subject seem to think. Comparison of a variety of translations is an obvious and essential class project, simplified considerably by Web resources. As long as students have discussed questions of canon and text, have understood the fact that the content and order of the books differ among various communities, and have compared the same selections from different translations, there need not be a great problem if one particular translation is used by most students. After all, it is differences in translation philosophy (e.g. "dynamic equivalence" versus "formal equivalent" translations), rather than in theology that account for all but a very few of the differences among modern translations.

The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide suggests that, “a biblical sequence is most appropriate for each...of the major Bibles or an anthology of various translations” might be better than...an "approved" single Bible. "While such a book would be a valuable resource, the selection process, in effect, creates another canon." Perhaps more significantly, it also limits the possibility of the sort of wide-ranging comparison among texts from different parts of the Bible that is essential for any literary or hermeneutic exercise. It is easier to recognize the problem with the use of the term, "Old Testament," than it is to come up with a convenient alternative. "Hebrew Bible," "Jewish Scriptures," and "Tanahki" are all problematic in that they are not the names used by most Reformed, Deuterocanonical books. The important point to explain is the introduction and incorporation of the terms used by the different communities, rather than to insist that only one term be used.

Whose Interpretation?

The Bible in Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide states that, "[b]ecause there are many ways to interpret the Bible — religious and secular — public school teachers should expose students to a variety of interpretations. Interpreting various readings of the same text can be problematic. As the document goes on to say, this is especially fraught if teachers, after allowing "students to encounter the text directly...draw on the perspectives of different religious and secular interpretative traditions for understanding it."

Most public school teachers and, in fact, many biblical scholars, are not adequately prepared to explain how various religious traditions might interpret a biblical text. Generalizing about "Jewish" or "Christian" interpretations of particular passages, for example, could easily lead to a distorting impression and encourage students to attack or defend an interpretation based on religious commitments. I found particular readings of the Old Testament Corinne Parrot made during last summer’s institute. She proposed that instead of referring to Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or Jewish interpretations, teachers should introduce the history of the biblical interpretation by using specific examples and attributing them to specific individuals or texts. A comparative religious class seems to be a much better place for the extensive discussion of how different traditions might interpret the Bible, since the interpretation can be placed within the context of particular communalities, beliefs, practices and institutions.

Literary and Historical Approaches

While historical background, history of interpretation and the role the Bible has played in Western culture should be discussed at some point, surely the main goal of a Bible course should be to read the text closely and carefully. For this, literary and historical approaches are the best approach.

Discussions of plot, characterization, generic conventions, and so on, can provide contextual distance that allows students from a number of different religious or non-religious perspectives to read the text together. The introduction of some historical context, however, is particularly helpful in encouraging students to imagine how ancient Israelites or early Christians might have read the text. Such historical material also offers the possibility of a critical distance that does not demand or privilege specific religious commitments. Asking what a particular New Testament text might have meant to first-century Christians is one way of providing equitable interpretive access to Christian and non-Christian students alike.

While discussion of the historicity of particular events might easily be avoided by focusing on literary structures and the range of possible answers at particular points of question, date and context, and sources are bound to arise. Here it is important to provide students with a range of opinions and some sense of the evidence on which they are based. Dogmatic assertions should be avoided, not only because they might offend the religious sensibilities of some students, but also because the evidence for most of these questions is hardly conclusive, and the most controversial questions are not easy to access at all high school students or their teachers.

BALL from p.5

approval from the State Office of Education to bring Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas (of the First Amendment Center) to meet with school superintendents. They spent a whole day raising awareness about the potential of the expanded framework, and the civic framework. Then we brought in principals and assistant principals, other district officials and superintendents. After two months, we did a follow-up meeting with all involved. It is always important to involve administrators: they’re the ones who get the phone call!

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

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

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

Ball: It has kept me in education; I was ready to leave. I was sick of the disrespect. I had been offered money to administrate a grant. Then I went to Charles Haynes’ conference. He said teachers are our hope and our heroes. This work has restored my vocation, my commitment to education. Teaching about religion helps me realize why I went into education in the first place; it was the most important, for I am helping to develop strong citizens.

GUIDELINES II, from p.4

If religion and religious conviction are to be treated fairly and with respect in our public schools, then teaching about religion must be taken more seriously.

...if public schools “may not inculcate nor exhort” religion, as that term is used in the First Amendment, then the curricular must include religion as well as secular ways of understanding the world.

In order to teach about religion in an objective way, appropriate to a public school education, teachers must themselves learn about religion. They must know something about the world’s religions generally, and something about the religious traditions of their own area of expertise. This is not currently a part of what teachers are expected to know when they complete their teacher training programs, but it must be included if students are to receive a complete education.

Similarly, in order to promote a civil environment in our schools where all the members of the public school are treated with respect, teachers must understand their role as representatives of our common compact as Americans. In a significant way, “we the people” are represented by public school employees. Their role carries with it a responsibility to be neutral in religious matters, and to protect the freedom of conscience of each student in the school.

These issues still present challenges to us that are only magnified by our increasing pluralism. We now have an unprecedented opportunity to ring the challenge to apply fully and fairly the principles and ideals in our Constitution and Bill of Rights. Not to some Americans, but to all. Our public schools are the obvious place to begin.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in Religion and Education:27:1, Fall, 2000.
This issue of quite clear that society, and culture, and they have made it. Moreover, the courts have acknowledged the student-related student activities, however, officials apply to other student activities. So religious literature, and to form religious traditions of each time and place. Students must become familiar with the basic religion in human history and states, explicitly calls for more attention to be history-social science curriculum that values and encourages teaching about religion, when presented objectively worthy of study for its literary and historical roles of religious ideas, texts, and institutions. It is one thing to say that more attention should be given to the topic of religion in the public schools. It is another thing to prepare teachers and administrators to understand of their ethical and moral commitments. By reading the texts that people revere, we gain important insights into their thinking. The study of religious beliefs and other ideological commitments helps explain both cultural conformity and cultural conflict.

The newly adopted California History-Social Science Content Standards further ensure that knowledge about religion and religious activity will be part of what students are expected to know when they are tested. Because of their specificity, the standards will encourage teachers to delve more deeply into the social and historical roles of religious ideas, texts, values, and institutions. It is one thing to say that more attention should be given to the topic of religion in the public schools. It is another thing to prepare teachers and administrators to deal knowledgeably and responsibly with the range of historical, cultural, legal, and pedagogical questions that arise in connection with the topic of religion and public education. The responsible integration of the study of religion into the public school curriculum requires teachers to have substantive knowledge of the religious histories and traditions about which they will now be expected to teach. For example, California, for world history curriculum for seventh and tenth grades deals explicitly with the religion of India, the Middle East, and the Other grade levels deal with the role of religion in American history and society. Some general knowledge of world religions is also a necessary background for understanding many of the "current events" that are discussed throughout the K-12 curriculum. Teachers must also be prepared to deal with religion as it arises in the lives of many of the students in their classrooms. Academic knowledge of the world’s religions will not only help teachers to teach more effectively about ancient civilizations or the history of the United States, but also help them to better understand and communicate with students and parents who may be Jehovah’s Witnesses, Sikhs, Muslims, evangelical Christians, or traditional Hindu. The fact still is, however, that most teachers have never taken a basic course in the world’s religions as a part of their professional preparation. It is in this connection that religion scholars can play an important role.

Religion Scholars as Public Intellectuals in Teacher Education and the Schools

Among the ways in which religion scholars can contribute to the responsible integration of the academic study of religion into the public school curriculum are the following:

1. Familiarizing teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, and students themselves with the historical background and First Amendment principles that provide the framework for thinking about religion and public education. Important venues for this activity are provided by 3 Rs Projects, Rights, Responsibilities, Respect: a program for finding common ground for faith and reason in schools. The 3Rs projects are sponsored by the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center in collaboration with 17 states. For example, with schools in several states including California, Utah, Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, and Pennsylvania.

2. Providing in-service teacher education regarding the world’s religions. Working with local school districts, subject matter project teams, and grant-making agencies, religion scholars can offer workshops for teachers, mentors, and institutes on the study of religion as part of teachers’ ongoing professional development activities.

3. Providing pre-service teacher education regarding issues of content and pedagogy that arise in the context of the academic study of religion. Religion scholars can work with faculty from departments and schools of education to integrate the academic study of religion into teacher education and credentialing programs.

4. Developing curriculum materials that are useful to teachers and accessible to elementary and secondary school students. Notable recent accomplishments in this area include the new Religion in America Life series published by Oxford University Press, and America’s Religion: An Educator’s Guide to Belief and Practice. In addition to introductory textbooks and audio-visual resources on the world’s religions, there is a special need for self-contained lessons or "religion modules" that can be integrated into other larger units in the history, social studies, and language arts curricula.

Why do religion scholars not have more influence in a role as "public intellectuals" in teacher education and in schools? Russell Jacoby’s well-known book Intellectuals in the Age of Apartheid provides part of the answer. According to Jacoby and other critics of over-specialization in contemporary intellectual life, academics have become accustomed to writing, thinking, and speaking about and for one another rather than for a broader audience of fellow citizens. Campuses are their homes; colleagues their audience; monographs and specialized journals their media . . . Academic essays write for professional journals, that . . . create insular societies . . . The professors share an image and a discipline. Gathering at annual conferences to compare notes, they constitute their own universe . . . As intellectuals became academics, they lost not only the need to write in a public prose, they did not, and finally they could not.

Of course, individual scholars are constrained by the institutions in which they work, and choices about what activities are deemed worthy of pursuit are not entirely up to them. A professor’s job, salary, and opportunities for advancement depend on the evaluation of specialists, and this inevitably affects the issues discussed and the language employed. As mentioned earlier, systems of tenure and reward faculty who extend their own expertise through specialized publication directed toward and recognized by their peers rather than by the wider public. Even in instances, the barriers are of a more self-imposed nature, as when scholars in the humanities and social sciences complain about a lack of attention to content on the part of their colleagues in education departments, and education professors express doubt about the pedagogical value and historical relevance of their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences. The exact character of these mutual suspicions varies widely. Some university colleagues believe that it is hard to suggest a generic strategy for overcoming them. The campus politics of a top-down manner setting must be taken into account.

Even so, there is some indication that the gulf between the various camps is beginning to be bridged. The National Network for Education Reform (NNER), for example, has sponsored a series of projects in several states where teams of university arts and sciences faculty, teacher educators, and school teachers and administrators have met to address the part of the American Academy of Religion in this arena, the AAR has not only established a "Religion in the Schools" task force, but it also has included several rounds on religion and social change. Some recent developments indicate a growing recognition and acceptance among religion scholars of an enlarged conception of scholarship that includes activities outside the conventional activities about religions in the schools. In addition to the publication for young readers of the Oxford University Press series, this work, these developments include increased attention to religion and schools issues on the part of the American Academy of Religion as well.

Increasingly, institutions of higher education are making gestures that signal "scholarship of discovery," — which comes closest to what is meant when academics speak of "research" — but also what Boyer calls the scholarship of "integration of new research with those of practice of teaching," and of "teaching." Some recent developments indicate a growing recognition and acceptance among religion scholars of an enlarged conception of scholarship that includes activities outside the conventional activities about religions in the schools.
Notable challenges face secondary religious studies teachers, the final rewards far surpass the obstacles. Knowing that you fostered a new sense of awareness and empathy in a student is a satisfying accomplishment. When students state, “I understand, but I disagree,” deferring probing questions for democratic citizenship is taking place. When, in the same class, an Islamic student identifies yourself as a Muslim in your discussion, Baptist is certain of your Christian faith, a comfortable feeling arises in knowing that you have provided academically sound, religiously informed instruction on the subject. These students have grown intellectually, and their faith foundations have remained intact.


11 There is a danger that religion teachers allowed to discuss their own religious views on human history and society. The course that I mentioned at the outset of this essay, Teaching About Religions in American Public Schools, was originally designed to help meet this requirement by preparing future teachers to approach the study of religion in an academically and constitutionally appropriate fashion.

Conclusion

More than any other single American institution, the public school places are where people of all different faiths and denominations have been and continue to be brought together on a regular and sustained basis. Religion and public education is perhaps the most observable and significant feature at which the academic agendas and civic responsibilities of religion scholars intersect. By attending to the academic study of religion in secondary and elementary schools, there is an enormous opportunity for religion scholars to contribute to the education of their fellow citizens outside the classroom. There is also opportunity to contribute to the consolidation of the standing of religious studies as an academic discipline both in the university and in American public life more generally.

12 Jacoby, 6.


15 For a discussion of similar efforts in other parts of California, see the works of the California School Instructors in Teaching about Religion, “Exchanges: Newsletter of the California State University System Institute for Teaching and Learning,” 7:1 (Winter, 1996).

16 See James W. Hunter, especially 5-7, 4-5, for discussion of appropriate and inappropriate ways of teaching about religion in a public school setting.


