Encounter Over the Curriculum

Summary: *Schools attempting to teach about religion face challenges when preparing the tone and perspectives of their materials. For some American public schools, which were non-sectarian but Protestant through the mid-19th century, recognizing and addressing religious bias in curricular materials has been a centuries-long effort that intensified in the 1980s, when schools began to offer classes on religion as a subject. There remains no clear consensus among politicians, educators, and religious organizations over religion's representation in the schools.*

What is taught in the public schools? Since the 1990s, intense "multicultural education" debates have provided one of the most direct indicators of the American identity crisis: What exactly does the "we" mean in "We the people"? In one state after another, boards of education have grappled with the challenges of rethinking school curricula in order to provide an education that is relevant to both global and American realities. In today's world, why would a student not study Islam and the civilizations it has shaped? When students study the American colonial struggle for religious freedom, would it not be instructive for them to have some basic grounding in the energies and visions of Protestant Christianity? When studying the American frontier, is there not much to gain from learning about the Chinese communities of frontier Montana, the Buddhist temples in Helena and Butte, and something about Buddhism as a religious tradition?

This debate is not a new one. In the 19th century, public education was said to be "non-sectarian," and while it did not favor one Protestant denomination over another, it was still firmly Protestant in perspective. Bible reading and prayer were commonplace in public schools. The arrival of substantial numbers of Catholics and Jews brought the first changes to an implicitly Protestant school system. Catholic Bishop John Hughes of New York led one of the first challenges to the Protestant hegemony in the "common schools" in the 1840s. Within a decade, public schools began to secularize, and Catholics began to develop a private parochial school system.

Jews also objected to the Protestant bias in schools. In 1843 the Jewish community registered a complaint about textbooks that "are derived from the New Testament and inculcate the general principles of Christianity." While some private Jewish schools were established, the Jewish community still preferred to participate in public education as a way for Jewish immigrants to assimilate into American life. Even so, a century later, in 1948, the Anti-Defamation League still found that "textbooks contained little to offset the stereotypes of Jews which abound in contemporary social thinking." Three-

fourths of the references to Jews were to events before 70 CE, while "references to Jews after the Biblical period, and mention of Jewish holidays, institutions and customs are virtually non-existent. The delicate subject of the crucifixion is often dealt with imprudently, in a fashion that tends to stimulate prejudice."

Two landmark Supreme Court decisions of the 1960s, *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963), dislodged the predominantly and tacitly Protestant ethos of the public schools. The first, in New York, made clear that a generic school prayer written by the Board of Regents was unconstitutional. The second struck down a Pennsylvania law requiring that "at least ten verses from the Holy Bible… be read without comment, at the opening of each public school on each school day." The Bible reading was then to be followed by the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. The Supreme Court ruled that Bible reading for devotional purposes in school was unconstitutional, but made clear, however, that the Bible could still be studied as part of the academic curriculum. In handing down these decisions, the judges also articulated the educational importance of the non-sectarian, secular study of religion.

The controversies over these critical court decisions, however, suggested to many nervous administrators and teachers that the subject of religion was just too volatile to address; as a result, many avoided the issue. Many took Jefferson's phrase, a "wall of separation" between church and state so literally as to halt any curricular mention of religion, religious motivation, religious vision, or religious institutions in the shaping of events. To a great extent, textbooks were drained of the serious discussion of religious ideas in favor of merely citing dates and events. But many in both religious and scholarly communities saw this scrupulous skirting of religion in the curriculum as a distortion of the study of history, literature, and culture. Many parents, especially conservative Christians, began to complain that God had been taken out of school altogether, and attacked the schools for effectively establishing the "religion of secularism."

The debate over the curriculum has focused on many issues. Some parents, including both conservative Christians and Muslims, argue that topics such as sex education or AIDS awareness have no place in school, since teaching these subjects is a violation of their religious values. Many conservative groups have opposed bilingual education programs. In the view of the Eagle Forum, for instance, "Schools should not impose on children courses in explicit sex or alternate lifestyles, profane or immoral fiction

or videos, New Age practices, anti-Biblical materials, or 'Politically Correct' liberal attitudes about social and economic issues."

Conservative Christians have also raised the "creationism" debate, insisting that a scientific, Darwinian view of how the world began should be balanced by a Biblical, religious version. This debate involves especially interesting questions in the context of today's new religious landscape. Should such a "creationist" view be taught as science or religion? If the study of religion were to be introduced into the curriculum, should it not be the wider, comparative study of religion? In such a study, should students explore not one, but many religious views of the origin of the creation? In addition to the religious vision of Genesis, should students have the opportunity to study the view of creation found in Qur'an, or the Zuni's divine story of creation, or the belief taught in the Hindu scriptures that the world came from a lotus, sprung from the very body of God?

In the 1980s, a new movement to integrate the study of religion into the public school curriculum emerged. In this spirit, various states have developed new programs that are specific to their own heritage. In Wisconsin, for example, an American Indian studies program is required as part of the social studies curriculum. It was prepared for use in the fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades by a consortium of representatives of the Wisconsin American Indian nations, curriculum specialists, and teachers. In Hawaii, a Hawaiian Studies Curriculum has been developed by the Office of Instructional Services. In Hawaiian classrooms, the beliefs, customs, and values of the state's native peoples are studied.

In 1988, the state of California issued a new framework for teaching history and social science, adopting the motto of the Republic, E Pluribus Unum, "Out of Many, One" as its own. The framework sees this motto as dynamic and ongoing—not an already-accomplished ideal, but one that must be claimed anew as the nation faces new challenges. "The framework embodies the understanding that the national identity, the national heritage, and the national creed are pluralistic and that our national history is the complex story of many peoples and one nation, of e pluribus unum [sic], and of an unfinished struggle to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution."

As part of the mandate for a social studies curriculum, the California State Board of Education includes religion. "This framework acknowledges the importance of religion in human history," the board stated. "When studying world history, students must become familiar with the basic ideas of the major religions

and the ethical traditions of each time and place. Students are expected to learn about the role of religion in the founding of this country because many of our political institutions have their antecedents in religious beliefs. Students should understand the intense religious passions that have produced fanaticism and war as well as the political arrangements developed (such as separation of church and state) that allow different religious groups to live amicably in a pluralistic society."

However, the California framework was not without controversy. In the early 1990s, when Houghton-Mifflin presented a set of social studies texts that responded to California's new framework, the public discussion in California was intense. For almost the first time in history, there was widespread, many-sided public debate about the curriculum. The Commission on Public Education of the Jewish Community Council argued that "The text's relentless and unbalanced contrasting of Christian teachings of love and faith with Jewish obedience and ritual, while excluding Judaism's rich ethical heritage, has created a text that is an advocate for Christianity." The Muslim community also participated in the debate, offering critiques of the text's portrayal of various aspects of Islam. The Buddhist community made known its view of the sections of text on Buddhism. Scholars of religion were asked to critique sections as well. California's debate on the school curriculum was an example of the new complexity of America's multireligious public square. In 2005, two Hindu organizations made a complaint to the California Curriculum Commission protesting aspects of the presentation of the Hindu tradition in textbooks.

In New York, a commission was established by the Commissioner of Education to review the social studies curriculum. Its report, "One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence," was released in 1991 amidst both excitement and dissent. The committee's debate, and the public debate that ensued, was over the very idea of America. The commission as a whole insisted that the many peoples who now compose the fabric of the American nation should not be expected to shed their cultural identity as they embrace the freedom and the democratic ideals of their new country. The public schools, it contended, should not be simply the agents of Americanization as was expected in early periods of American history.

The commission concluded that it would be inaccurate to insist on "one officially sanctioned story" of America's history and culture. Perspectives on America's history are many: those of the Native Americans, the Africans brought as slaves, the Chinese immigrants, and numerous other groups. The

ability to look critically at America's controversies as well as its continuities should be seen as the core of education. From the dissenting side were those, like historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who insisted that the commission's emphasis on the *pluribus* neglected the *unum.* Similarly, historian Kenneth Jackson insisted on the British roots of culture, law, and ideals that drew people to America: "The people of the United States will recognize, even if this committee does not, that every viable nation has to have a common culture to survive in peace."

More recently, Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center has offered another curriculum plan called "Living with Our Deepest Differences." Its aim is to introduce the serious discussion of religion in the classroom through an investigation and discussion of American traditions of religious liberty. In its introduction, this curriculum states: "At this crucial time in our history, educating students about the principles of religious liberty is a matter of great urgency. Expanding pluralism in the United States has dramatically increased our religious and ethnic diversity… At issue is a simple but profound question that runs through the modern experience: How do we live with our deepest differences?" One of its goals is "to deepen each student's appreciation of the principles of religious liberty for peoples of all faiths or none, and to establish a strong civic commitment to the ground rules by which all citizens can contend robustly but civilly over religious differences in public life."

In 2010, the American Academy of Religion issued "Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States." In explaining the need for the document, the guidelines emphasize that "1) the study of religion is already present in public schools, 2) there are no content and skill guidelines for educators about religion itself that are constructed by religious studies scholars, and 3) educators and school boards are often confused about how to teach about religion in constitutionally sound and intellectually responsible ways." Produced by a special task force including both scholars of religion and K-12 educators, the guidelines discuss the rationale for the academic study of religion in schools, legal principles governing the study of religion, different pedagogical approaches to the study of religion, and appropriate teacher preparation. With respect to pedagogy, the guidelines recommend an approach that presents religions as "internally diverse," "dynamic," and "embedded in culture."