

## Religious Education as a Civic Problem

Two facts about the United States are widely acknowledged: First, on any scale of national religiosity (belief in God, prayer, attendance at religious services), the United States ranks near the top; second, there is a scandalous ignorance of religion, both an individual's own religion and the religion of others.<sup>1</sup> This combination is dangerous in relation to public policy. For example, a president could plunge the country into war under the cover of religious rhetoric. Carey McWilliams has written: "In an era when religion and morals are less a matter of habits and givens, religious education is a critical part of civic education; secularity calls for schooling in the sacred."<sup>2</sup>

### The Problem

A major part of the problem is that a comprehensive religious education does not exist. Furthermore, there is no discussion of religious education in the public arena. When religious education is referred to, it is assumed to be the task of church, synagogue, mosque, and temple, but those institutions do not use "religious education" for the formation of their members. Each of the religions has its own intramural language of education. This focus of religious groups on the beliefs and practices of their own members is understandable. But where then are the other key elements of education in religious matters that today's enlightened citizen needs? The logical answer would seem obvious: schools that are called public.

The immediate reaction to this suggestion is likely to be that religious education in state schools is unconstitutional. But the Supreme Court has never addressed the topic of religious education. While some elements of religious education do not belong in state schools, the same is true of education in most of the important areas of life. The public school cannot and should not try to be the sole educator in politics, sex, morals, economics, and much else. Cooperation

between the school and other educational agencies, starting with the family, is indispensable. The classroom is only a part of education but it is a crucial part for today's citizenry.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many leading educators and politicians recognized the need for something new: religious education. It would encompass the several major religions of the United States. Equally important, it was to include public education along with education by religious institutions. The impressive gathering of four hundred national leaders in 1903 included forty-five university presidents, prominent politicians, many public school administrators, and religious officials. The ambitious project of the Religious Education Association was "to inspire the educational forces of our country with the religious ideal; to inspire the religious forces of our country with the educational ideal."<sup>3</sup>

For a variety of reasons this religious education has remained an unrealized ideal. At its earliest stage of development, the Religious Education Association absorbed the assumptions of liberal Protestantism, something that tended to drive away Roman Catholics, Jews, and conservative Protestants. Later, it was the economic depression in the 1930s that undermined hopes for the "professionalization" of religious education in both church and public schools. And then the reaction against liberal theology which hit the United States after World War II all but ended the movement.

For the past sixty years, as the need for a religiously intelligent citizenry has become increasingly evident, there simply has been no discussion of religious education within which the public school would have its appropriate role of academic instruction in religion.

#### A Comprehensive Religious Education

Religious education is probably the best single place to test the adequacy of a comprehensive meaning of "teach." And conversely, religious education can only truly exist if

the full range of teaching languages is recognized. The twentieth-century project to establish religious education ran into numerous obstacles. I concentrate on the meaning of teach/teaching as one manifestation of the problem of the relation of religion and education, and, more generally, the relation of religion and the contemporary world.

From the beginning of the Enlightenment the expectation was that religion would soon disappear. Rationality would dissolve religious myth. That assumption held true even up to the 1960s when many scholars were convinced that the secularization of the world was almost complete.<sup>4</sup> That opinion is no longer common in the twenty-first century. Even the recent books on atheism are an acknowledgment of religion's continuing influence. The denunciation of religion or attacks on its logical consistency have little effect on its practice. The alternative, which has not yet been tried, is education from within particular religious groups, combined with an education from outside the group. The outsider's perspective would include both the challenge of other religious groups than one's own and the world of secular education. Such a comprehensive religious education is indispensable for future world peace.

Our contemporary idea of teaching suffers from a dichotomy that accompanied the revolt against religion in the Enlightenment. The word teaching (doctrine) was closely associated with religion, especially Christianity. The emerging secular world tried to shake itself free of "magisterial" authority, traditional beliefs, and every kind of teaching other than rational explanation. Clearing away ignorance and superstition was a healthy step forward but a world built exclusively on rational propositions was not an adequate alternative. In H.G. Gadamer's clever formula, "the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment was the prejudice against prejudice."<sup>5</sup>

On the religious side, the intramural language of religious groups was not subjected to critical challenge from the outside. In the short run, a religious group can thrive by turning its back on the tools of secular education. But unless the group wishes to secede from the modern world, its own vitality needs the challenge of rational criticism.

On the secular side, the forms of teaching-learning have suffered from the overly rationalistic reaction in modern education. Even the assumption that teaching happens primarily if not exclusively in schools reflects an anti-religious bias. Religious life has subsisted across the generations with only minor help from the classroom. It has relied on the influence of family in early childhood, followed by a caring attitude and good example within the religious community. The verbal teaching has typically been through story and song, set within a ritual that binds together centuries of practice. Within the ritual or liturgy, preaching exhorts the members to live up to what they have promised. A coherent universe sustains the members in their joys and sorrows. Rational explanations within the religious group do not claim to be more than a clarifying of lived mysteries.

A modern secular world was skeptical of every one of those forms of teaching. These forms did not disappear but they were not given much attention in modern education. Religious teaching is most often dismissed as “indoctrination.” If rational explanation is the only recognized form of teaching, then these strange religious groups must be using an inverted rationality. Indoctrination is a despair of other kinds of teaching; it does affect religious groups but it is also found in secular ideologies. Secular educators who dismiss religious teaching as indoctrination are in danger of missing the main forms of teaching that have sustained the human race.

I indicated above that the encounter of religious groups and secular education is mediated by the religious groups encountering each other. In the past, there were occasional meetings of two religious groups; violent conflict was the most common result. Today for the first time in history, a regular and worldwide interaction of religions is occurring. The only choice now is between violence and a degree of mutual understanding. If, for example, Muslims and Christians are to live peacefully in the same country, city, or neighborhood, the capacity to take the view of the outsider is a necessity for members of both communities.

“Religious education” is a term that connotes more than one religion; it is not the first language of any religious group. That is a present weakness but it also a possible future strength. Each group has its own educational language. Even within Christianity, a world of Roman Catholic catechetics seldom meets the Protestant world of Christian education. A Jewish way of forming its members mainly through family practices, holy day rituals, and dietary laws is almost unrecognizable to most Christians. Even more puzzling would be Muslim, Buddhist, or Sikh languages of teaching-learning.

A religious group, for its own well-being, needs the perspective from the outside. Meeting other religious groups can be a context for that to happen. So also the schooling that a group offers to its own members provides another perspective. Unless all the books are in-house apologetics, the students get to test their religious stance in relation to a larger world. The composition of the student body and faculty, however, tends to limit the view, not because the teacher intends to exclude other views but because of the absence of people having other views. Nevertheless, there are schools under Jewish or Christian auspices where serious academic instruction occurs, where Jewish or Christian religions are studied with the aid of scholarly history and social analysis.

Despite the best efforts of these teachers, “religious education” is still inadequate when the only perspective is from within one religious group. We need in addition educational settings where religion and religions are seriously attended to and not just explained away. The teacher need not be a practicing member of any religious group but he or she needs an open attitude to religion and sensitivity for its many forms of teaching. Emile Durkheim wrote: “What I ask of the free thinker is that he should confront religion in the same mental state as the believer...He who does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment cannot speak about it. He is like a blind man trying to talk about color.”<sup>6</sup> We need in the public arena teachers who know the language and logic of a particular religion in relation to the larger world of religion and the world of secular education. That means the teaching of religion in the state school.

#### Legal Issues

Before I look specifically at the school and religion, I must briefly mention a topic that has obstructed discussion of religion in its relations to religious institutions, the public arena, federal and state governments, and the individual citizen. These many issues are constantly subsumed under a doctrine called the “separation of church and state.” I would argue that this language of church and state has always been an inappropriate metaphor for the United States. For discussing the teaching of religion in the public school, the doctrine is irrelevant. We do need some careful distinctions concerning what is appropriate in the public school. I am not at all siding with religious groups who want to put (their) religious practices into the schools. Religious practices are rightly banned from state-sponsored schools, although the doctrine of church-state is no help in explaining why. The issue of teaching religion in the public school is an educational and curriculum question.

Despite its inappropriateness, separation of church and state has become deeply embedded in the national consciousness since the 1940s. Even people who should know better refer to this doctrine as if it were in the U.S. Constitution and as if it has always been the framework within which the country has operated.

The European language of church and state was inadequate – and was avoided – in the eighteenth century when the United States was founded. It is patently inadequate in the twenty-first century. However, I have no illusions about the phrase disappearing. Even when its inadequacies are acknowledged, there is usually reluctance to simply stop using the phrase. Martha Nussbaum in her careful study of religion and public life argues that “separation of church and state should be seen as posterior to ideas of equality and liberty.”<sup>7</sup> She retains the church-state metaphor, even while pointing out its inadequacy in numerous court cases.

The United States in its founding document attempted something new: it tried to remove the federal government from involvement in people’s practice of their religion. For establishing a legal framework, the authors used two clauses in the first amendment referring to religion. Both clauses are negative: no “establishment of religion” and no prohibition of “the free exercise” of religion.

The wording is far too cryptic. Perhaps the authors simply wished to provide flexibility so that future generations would have room to maneuver. The language, however, is not so much flexible as confusing and inconsistent. The regular references today to the “establishment clause” and the “free exercise” clause only further obscure the confusion built into the amendment’s language.

The intention of the authors, it seems, was to create a tension between what is asserted in the two clauses. A logical tension would have required a clear meaning of religion in each clause. As

I will presently trace, “religion” has two almost opposite meanings and it is not clear in the first clause which meaning of religion is intended. The second clause in the amendment does not even use the word religion; it simply refers to “the exercise thereof”.

James Madison had originally proposed for the first clause that “there should be no national church.”<sup>8</sup> That would have been clear though then the second clause’s reference to “free exercise thereof” would be unintelligible. Instead, the word “church” was avoided. Did they in the final wording simply mean “church and other similar religious bodies”? Perhaps they had that in mind but, if so, saying “religion” instead of *a* religion was a peculiar choice. If, as some people argue today, they meant that government should not prefer religion over non-religion, the retention of “establishment” (as in “established church”) was peculiar. In any case, “establishment of religion” was and is a peculiar phrase. When “free exercise thereof” is paired with it, the result is not clear at all.

Madison seemed to think that the first clause referred to religious institutions. He acknowledged “that it may not be easy, in every possible case, to trace the line of separation between the rights of religion and the civil authority, with such distinctions, as to avoid collisions and doubts on unessential points.”<sup>9</sup> For negotiating the relation of civil authorities and religious institutions, Madison’s “tracing of a line” would have been a more helpful metaphor than the one that Thomas Jefferson provided.

Jefferson, in an 1801 letter, translated the first amendment by re-introducing the word church. And Jefferson added another layer to the metaphor of “church and state,” saying that the purpose of the founders was to erect “a wall of separation between church and state.” The Baptists of Danbury Connecticut had asked Jefferson’s opinion about the state of Connecticut paying the salaries of Protestant ministers. Jefferson’s letter to the Baptists was “a statement

delimiting the legitimate jurisdiction of the federal and state governments on matters pertaining to religion.”<sup>10</sup> Jefferson was mainly concerned with the state of Connecticut; in Jefferson’s view, the federal government had no jurisdiction in the matter. Interestingly, the Baptists never published the letter. Jefferson’s “wall of separation between church and state” did not seem destined to have a future.

A “wall of separation between church and state” only got its legs in the 1870s. The language emerged in relation to the Catholic school system. The underlying meaning of the doctrine, Nussbaum notes, was “don’t let the Pope take over our government and schools.”<sup>11</sup> The doctrine seemed ready-made to keep the Catholic Church from receiving aid for its schools. At the same time, it did not touch Bible reading in the public schools because that was the work of “people” rather than a church. This contrast was made explicit in the Blaine Amendment, which was defeated at the national level but adopted by several states. It prohibited any kind of aid to religious schools while encouraging Bible reading in public schools.<sup>12</sup>

If the reference for “church” was not clear in the late nineteenth century, it certainly was in the 1940s when a national system of Catholic schools lobbied for various kinds of aid, including bus transportation for the students. At that point, the language of church and state entered into Supreme Court decisions. Opponents of the Catholic Church, such as Paul Blanshard and “Protestants and Others United for the Separation of Church and State,” celebrated the limiting of the Catholic Church’s power.<sup>13</sup>

Many of the people who were delighted by the separation of church and state were stunned in the 1960s when the Supreme Court interpreted the doctrine as prohibiting prayer and Bible reading in the public school. Their surprise was understandable. History and logic were on their

side. There was no church involved. Of course, a metaphor can have indefinite extension but the Court has continued to extend a metaphor that was inappropriate from the beginning.

There is usually recognition that “wall” is a metaphor. Arguments that then ensue are all about the wall: can it be lowered or raised? Is the wall being breached? Should the wall be permeable? and other metaphorical questions. In an influential Supreme Court decision, Justice Warren Burger said that the relation of church and state “far from being a ‘wall’ is a blurred, indistinct, and variable barrier depending on all the circumstances of a particular relationship.”<sup>14</sup> What gets lost in such discussions is that the governing metaphor is not “wall of separation” but “wall of separation between church and state.” A wall that separates makes no sense unless church and state make sense.

What are supposedly separated are two entities: state and church. The term state in the United States has a built-in ambiguity. It would be clearer to refer to civil authorities or governments of various kinds. But the ambiguity of “state” is completely overshadowed by the misleading use of “church.” Obviously, “church” only includes Christian bodies; there are hundreds of religious institutions in the United States that are not included. Jews, for example, are content with talking about church and state; it does not affect them except by a metaphorical stretch.

Even among Christians, the reference for “church” is not always clear. Protestants most often use the term for a local congregation, which is not the locus for church-state talk. Jefferson did not write his letter to the Baptist church (there is no such state or national institution) but to a Baptist association. When right-wing religious groups have engaged in political lobbying, they have been accused of violating the separation of church and state. Their logical response has been: we are not a church.

During the past forty years the Court has continued to try to extend the metaphor of church-state beyond all logic. The concerns of Jews, Muslim, or Buddhists cannot be addressed as “church-state” issues. Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist made this point in no uncertain terms: “The ‘wall of separation between church and state’ is a metaphor based on bad history, a metaphor which has proved useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned.”<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that Rehnquist properly refers to the whole metaphor, not the wall of separation but the wall of separation between church and state. It is also noteworthy that this firm assertion by a Chief Justice is seldom quoted compared to some seemingly casual statements by judges that are quoted as dogmas.

#### The Legal Issue: Religious Education

The idea of religious education was still alive in the 1940s, as evidenced by a report from the American Council on Education. The Committee on Religion and Education, made up of a distinguished group of educators, was chaired by F. Ernest Johnson. He was the primary author of the report, “The Relation of Religion to Public Education.” Published in 1947, the report formulated the issue quite well: “One must either accept the patent inference that religious education is relatively unimportant and a marginal interest or assume that religion is a matter so remote from life that it admits of no integration with the general educational program.”<sup>16</sup>

At that time, the metaphor of “wall of separation between church and state” was finding legal definition but the report insisted that “this doctrine may not be invoked to prevent public education from determining on its merits how the religious phases of the culture shall be recognized in the school program.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, that is just what happened as legal jargon edged out genuine educational discussion.

A Supreme Court decision in 1948 forbade religious instruction that was given by various religious groups in public school buildings. In the decision and in two of the opinions, the term “religious education” is used to refer to this practice. Justice Robert Jackson admitted that the Supreme Court was in no position to solve the overall relation of religion and public education. He worried that the Court would become entangled in endless local disputes. While siding with the majority in this case, Jackson said: “One can hardly respect a system of education that would leave the student wholly ignorant of the currents of religious thought that move the world society for a part in which he is being prepared.”<sup>18</sup>

Jackson’s rhetoric here seems to echo the report from the American Council on Education.<sup>19</sup> An even clearer connection to that report is found in the key decision of *Abington School District v. Schempp* in 1963.<sup>20</sup> That decision, along with *Engel v. Vitale* in the previous year, set the direction for future discussions of religion and public education. *Abington* forbade reading the Bible and saying the Our Father in the public school. *Engel* outlawed a state-mandated prayer that the New York State Regents had recommended for public schools: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon thee and we beg thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers, and our country.”<sup>21</sup> These two decisions angered many Protestant groups who had never dreamed that the metaphor of church-state separation could apply to the Our Father and the reading of scripture and even to an innocuous prayer composed by committee. A cartoon by Herblock showed a man angrily throwing down a newspaper and shouting: “What do they expect us to do, pray at home”? Yes, that was pretty much the general idea.

In some regions of the United States, the Court’s decisions were simply disregarded. In other places, there began an endless series of court cases concerning what does and does not count as a religious practice. Is a moment of silence constitutional? When there is no clear intent

of the state to sneak prayer in, silence is allowed. In an Alabama case, however, a moment of silence was found unconstitutional.<sup>22</sup> Debate and controversy in this area are inevitable in this most litigious of countries. However, the courts, including the Supreme Court, do not have a clear idea of “religion” or any idea of religious education.

Efforts have been made in the Congress to go around *Engel* and *Abington* with a Constitutional Prayer Amendment. In November, 1971, it narrowly missed the needed two-thirds majority. Interestingly, the opposition that time was led by Father Robert Drinan.<sup>23</sup> When the same issue resurfaced in 1984, the opposition was lead by another clergyman, Senator John Danforth, who said: “Prayer should not be cheapened. It must not be trivialized....To many religious people God is not dependent on the Supreme Court or the Congress. Objects may be kept out of the classroom, chewing gum for example. God is not chewing gum. He is the Creator of Heaven and Earth.”<sup>24</sup>

A practice that has concerned the courts during the last decade has been the “posting of the ten commandments” in public places, especially in public schools.<sup>25</sup> The school shooting at Columbine gave impetus to this movement. Liberals pushed for stricter gun control laws; conservative Christian groups seemed to think that a list of ten commandments on school property would dissuade shooters.

Both the local supporters of the postings and the American Civil Liberties Union, their regular opponent in court, assume remarkable educational effect from what is posted on a school wall. The Supreme Court has attempted to make distinctions regarding when and how the Ten Commandments may be posted. In 2005, the Supreme Court allowed a posting of the Ten Commandments in Austin, Texas, where the display was one of seventeen monuments and twenty-one historical markers that surround the state capitol. On the same day, the Court struck

down the display of the Ten Commandments in Kentucky courthouses because it promoted religion. The New York Times editorial hailed the twin decisions under the title: The Court Affirms Separation of Church and State.<sup>26</sup>

This legal hair-splitting might make sense within a clear framework of religion and religious education, but that is what is lacking. Congress has stayed up all night debating prayer in school. What it has never discussed and lacks the language to raise the question, is the issue of the school doing with religion what schools are for, namely, to teach it.

### The Meanings of Religion

For a meaning of religious education that would include teaching religion in state schools, one has to recognize the ambiguity of the term “religion.” The problem cannot be cured by a definition. Nietzsche said that any word that has a history cannot be defined. That is, no definition can cover the historical shifts in the meaning of such terms. The result of those shifts is often sharply divergent meanings within a single term.

“Religion” is a term coined by Cicero who boasted concerning the Romans that “in religion and the worship of the gods we are pre-eminent.”<sup>27</sup> The Christian Church took over the term, reshaping Cicero’s meaning. Augustine describes religion as existing from the beginning of the world and finding fulfillment in the “true religion” of the Christian Church.<sup>28</sup> This meaning of religion, genuine devotion, held the field until the sixteenth century. Thomas Aquinas treats religion under the virtue of justice. Martin Luther and John Calvin still used *religio* for practices or devotions directed toward God.<sup>29</sup>

A different meaning of “religion” emerged when “the Christian religion” (true devotion) was rocked by division, and opposing groups claimed to be the possessors of true religion. The first hint of tolerance after the Reformation is found when there is a reference to the “Catholic

and Protestant religions.” Rather quickly, these two religions were folded into the “Christian religion” but “religion” used this way was now available to refer to Judaism, Islam, and, more doubtfully, to other groups. “Religion” has a western (or even Christian) bias but it is the best available word to try to encompass the beliefs, rituals, and codes of the institutions studied by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists.

This second meaning of “religion” has obvious roots in the first but there are stark oppositions as well. In the ancient meaning, religion was singular; genuine devotion was opposed to false. The modern meaning necessarily implies diversity even when used in the singular. A reference to “the Christian religion” today, unlike its use in the fifteenth century, carries comparison of one religion to others in its class.

This sketch of the history of “religion” might be merely a curiosity except that the two meanings continue to appear in the present. As regularly happens with other important old words, the second meaning did not replace the first but instead created a word of rich ambiguity.<sup>30</sup> The two meanings mix together uneasily in the First Amendment. As I pointed out earlier, the first clause seems to be referring to religions in the modern meaning of the term; if so, “establishment of *a* religion” would have been clearer. The second clause seems to refer to beliefs and practices of a religious nature but “free exercise *thereof*” was hardly a clear way of putting the matter.

In discussions of religion and public education today, the two meanings are regularly conflated leading to endless confusion. The ancient meaning of “religion” lives on in referring to devotions and practices in a generalized way, even though no one practices religion; people follow the gospel, observe Passover, pray facing Mecca, and so forth. “Religion” can also refer to the historical systems that include but are not limited to acts of religious devotion. Religion(s)

in this sense cries out for intellectual inquiry so as to relate religion(s) to other important aspects of the world.

The subject matter for academic curricula is any human phenomenon that has a tradition of rational inquiry and a universe of discourse. “Religion” in the second sense has better academic credentials than many other subjects. “Sociology,” for example, was coined in the 1840s; psychology, as an estranged relative of philosophy, is mainly a twentieth-century product. It is true that “religion” cannot shake off its ambiguity. Religion as meaning practices of a particular religion should be barred from the public school. Religion, referring to the many religions that now more than ever are in contact with each other, deserves intellectual inquiry.

Ambiguity in the meaning of religion as an academic subject is similar to many other subjects, especially those that do not end in –ology. “Theology,” at least as used in the United States, does not substitute for an “objective” study of religion. “Religiology” has seemed too clumsy. “Religion” is a word comparable in ambiguity to art, history, mathematics, or ethics. “History,” can be the name for actual events in the past. That does not prevent the word history from being used for the academic study of those events. Of course, “religion” raises suspicions that “history” does not.

The discussion of religion in state schools continues to be a confusing mess. The periodic headline “Does God belong in the classroom?” is a silly if not blasphemous question. As Danforth said in the above quotation, a discussion based on that question trivializes both meanings of religion. In a Supreme Court decision of 2004, allowing “under God” to remain in the pledge of allegiance, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor defended the phrase on the basis that it is “ceremonial Deism” which “cannot be seen as a serious invocation of God.”<sup>31</sup> Justice O’Connor was cautioning the Court not to try removing all religious language. But approval of “ceremonial

deism” is not what the classroom needs. What the classroom is suited for is a serious intellectual encounter with religion(s). The Supreme Court has allowed “under God” to be part of a classroom ritual of saluting the flag. But in what course can the question be raised of whether the pledge of allegiance is itself a piece of religious idolatry.

As I indicated above, religious education has to include formation in the practice of a particular religion (or a personal choice to abstain from such practice) and some minimum competence in understanding the phenomenon of religion, comparing the religion closest to home with other religions. The first element of religious education does not belong in the state school; the second element is needed there. Without a language of religious education, including recognition of religion as a subject for intellectual inquiry, discussions of religion in state schools become bogged down either in fighting over devotional practices or by including religion in ways that avoid teaching an understanding of it.

In recent years there has been considerable enthusiasm for “religious literacy.” There is little opposition to the idea but little success in achieving literacy. Even Richard Dawkins in his assault on religion bemoans the fact that students cannot recognize biblical references in Shakespeare.<sup>32</sup> Stephen Prothero in *Religious Literacy* has ninety pages of religious references that citizens should be able to recognize.<sup>33</sup> Such factual knowledge might be desirable but it is not likely to come from piling up facts about religion.

Surveying all the religions of the world can be a way to avoid actually inquiring into the complexity of the logic and history of a particular religion or understanding the relation between different religions. Prothero, like other writers on the topic, repeatedly says that the Supreme Court has pronounced the teaching of religion in state schools to be unconstitutional. That

assumption has been the unchallenged legal dogma that prevents an educational discussion of teaching religion in state schools.

### Teach and Teach About

The supposed proscription of teaching religion is derived from the Supreme Court's ruling in *Abington v. Schempp*. Two key passages from that ruling, one by Justice Arthur Goldberg and one by Justice Tom Clark, are cited in almost every discussion of religion and public education. The two passages result in a confusing combination of a call to put religion into the curriculum and at the same time the insistence that religion cannot be taught. It is no wonder that only a small group of people feel at home in the convoluted language that is used.

Stephen Prothero's book, *Religious Literacy*, embodies the logical conflict. He says that "many states and school districts now have standards and policies that at least in theory carve out a place for religion in public school curricula."<sup>34</sup> At the same time, he insists that the teacher cannot legally teach this curricular subject. There is confusion, he says, "about the crucial distinction between theology and religious studies – between what the Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg called the "teaching of religion" (which is unconstitutional) and the "teaching about religion (which is not)."<sup>35</sup> Prothero here equates teaching religion and teaching theology, which would be news to professors of religion in universities. What one must do with religion, according to Prothero, is "teach about" it, but not teach it. Not surprisingly, most school administrators and school teachers find this contrast an unworkable puzzle which they prefer to avoid.

The strange dichotomy of teach religion versus teach about religion is lifted from a comment in Justice Goldberg's concurring opinion in *Abington v. Schempp*. What Goldberg said was: "It seems clear to me that the court would recognize the propriety of teaching about religion as

distinguished from the teaching of religion in the public school.” That statement is not exactly a firm and definitive ruling by the Supreme Court. This one justice says that he thinks the “court would recognize the propriety” of one but not the other of his contrasts. In Martha Nussbaum’s comprehensive study of first amendment cases on religion, she does not mention this comment of Goldberg’s. It would not seem to have much importance except that it was seized upon and has become unchallengeable doctrine in literature on the public school and religion.

Goldberg expressed a tentative opinion that the court would find propriety in teaching about religion. He need not have been so tentative on that point. A teacher can teach about anything that happens to show up in the course of teaching his or her subject in the curriculum. One can teach about mass murder in sociology, sadomasochism in psychology, or cannibalism in anthropology. Religion shows up in all those places and many others, and then, obviously, one has to teach about it.

The problem is not an approval of teaching about religion. It is that Goldberg contrasted that to the teaching of religion. The affirming of the first was connected to the negating of the second. Ever since then, it has usually been assumed that this distinction is a neat and clear dichotomy. Instead of challenging or at least questioning this legal formula, educators set out to put religion into the curriculum while avoiding teaching it. Pennsylvania and Florida worked at early projects that soon met with obstacles.<sup>36</sup> States continue to work within impossible restrictions and with nervous insistence on words such as secular, neutral, objective, and equal.

In California, “Guidelines for Teaching about Religion” say that a teacher can instruct about religion but can emphasize no particular religion. Apparently, every time a teacher mentions one religion he or she must refer to every other religion. But a teacher cannot seriously examine religion without examining a particular religion. A course on sixteenth-century European history

would presumably have to emphasize what happened to the Christian religion. In one California case, the teacher, Stephen Williams, used disputed material that highlighted the role of Christians in the nation's founding.<sup>37</sup> The lawyer from the Alliance Defense Fund reasonably noted that "You're not going to find a lot of Muslim Founding Fathers."<sup>38</sup>

From what was published about this California case, I think that the teacher was in fact proselytizing. He made some good points about the illogic of the state's guidelines but that does not prove that his own position was academically sound. As a recently converted Evangelical Christian, Stephen Williams used "supplementary material" that was skewed toward making the case for Christianity. Some people inclined to be evangelical preachers are attracted to programs for "teaching about religion." They figure that they can get their message across while going about and around religion.<sup>39</sup> If states exclude on principle teachers professionally prepared to teach religion in an academically sound manner, the field is left open to people who see the classroom as a pulpit.

Where did Goldberg's strange but catchy contrast come from? Most likely it was directly or indirectly from F. Ernest Johnson. In the 1947 report, "The Relation of Religion to Public Education," Johnson made reference to teaching about religion. *Time Magazine*, summarized that document as saying: "The committee proposed to teach about religion, but not to teach religion itself in the schools."<sup>40</sup> Actually, that contrast is not explicit in the document but was deduced by *Time*. Their insertion of the word "itself" is to make clear that religion should not be the subject of inquiry. In 1951, a report from the Educational Policies Commission, *Moral and Spiritual Values in the Public Schools*, says: "The public school can teach objectively about religion without advocating or teaching any religious creed."<sup>41</sup> What "teaching objectively" means can be

debated at length but one cannot quarrel with the prohibition of “advocating a religious creed” in the public schools.

Johnson used the distinction of “teach” and “teach about” in other essays and books. In responding to the question of whether “studying about religion is not studying religion,” he says that is true but “studying about is the beginning of study.”<sup>42</sup> That is, Johnson made a distinction within a single process: the way into understanding something is to become acquainted with some external facts about it. Unintentionally, Johnson’s description of steps in the process of understanding may have helped to create a dichotomy of teach religion versus teach about religion.

In addition to confusion about the meaning of religion, the misunderstanding of “teach religion,” is based on a stereotype of teaching. In this country, learning and studying are effusively praised but teaching is suspect. Not many people go so far as Ivan Illich’s formula that to teach is to corrupt.<sup>43</sup> But there are authors who, while having no experience in academic teaching, assume that school teachers are big people telling little people what to think. The Hollywood image of a school teacher is a man standing on a desk and giving an impassioned sermon on the meaning of life to students who sit in rapt attention. The actual work of classroom teaching is more prosaic, trying to provoke people to think carefully about something they have read for that day’s meeting.

The insistence on “teach about” instead of “teach” is to keep school teachers from telling students what to believe. Teach when applied to religion is assumed to mean indoctrinating children into the particular beliefs of the teacher. That assumption makes one wonder what people assume is being done when teachers teach history, economics, or literature? Does teaching economics mean indoctrinating students into one school of thought? Do teachers tell

students what to think about literature rather than help them to understand particular poems? Statements that are routinely made about teaching religion are a slander on the profession of school teaching.

### Study but Not Teach

The uneasiness with “teach” leads authors to talk about “studying religion” instead of “teaching religion.” Students are allowed to study religion; teachers are not allowed to teach religion. This way of speaking shows up in Supreme Court decisions and in the literature of the last forty years. The use of “study” to avoid “teach” is found in the widely quoted passage in *Abington* by Justice Tom Clark: “Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education may not be effected consistently with the first amendment.”<sup>44</sup>

In saying that that religion should be presented objectively, Justice Clark sounds like he is talking about teaching. But he studiously avoids the term teaching and refers to the study of religion. Actually, it is easy enough to imagine students studying religion or anything else they fancy. The question is whether teachers can teach religion. On that point, Justice Clark slides around the issue, leaving to Justice Goldberg the opinion that the teachers cannot teach religion. The opinion of the Court, therefore, is that in state schools studying religion is constitutional but teaching religion is not. Religion should be in the curriculum, presented objectively, but it cannot be taught.

In 1987, a document with great promise was published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. The document’s title is “Religion in the Curriculum” and its contents include excellent historical and religious material. But despite advocating that religion be put in the curriculum the report cannot draw the obvious conclusion that religion should be

taught. It is tied to the Supreme Court phrase that undermines the whole discussion. In the sixth chapter, a section headed “including religion in the curriculum” begins: “The proper role of religion in the school is the study of religion for its educational value. The task is to teach about religions and their impact in history, literature, art, music, and morality.”<sup>45</sup> Religion should be studied for its educational value but it cannot be taught. It is difficult to see how one can understand the impact of religion on all those areas without understanding religion itself.

The American Council of Education report was one source but not the sole source of the Clark-Goldberg contrast and its use since then. However, what is noteworthy about the Council report on this point was that the authors were clearly aware of why people say “study” rather than “teach.” They address directly the nature of academic teaching, something actually rare in educational literature. Their advocacy of religion in the curriculum clearly entails that the teacher would teach it. But in the end they back away from defending what they know to be the correct position.

A paragraph in the Conclusion of the document embodies their inconsistency. The first sentence reads: “Fundamental to the proposals we have set forth is an interpreting of ‘teaching’ which distinguishes it from indoctrination in the ordinary sense of that word.”<sup>46</sup> Their distinction between “teach” and “indoctrinate” is certainly acceptable, although apparently to some people it is not obvious.

But if the Committee’s use of “teaching” is fundamental to what they are proposing, they should have vigorously defended it. Indeed, in defense of every school teacher in the public and private schools of this country, their distinction should have been insisted upon. However, the last sentence of the same paragraph says: “We have frequently used the phrase ‘the study of

religion' instead of 'teaching religion' because the latter so commonly implies indoctrination."<sup>47</sup>  
That is precisely why they should have insisted on what they have said in the first sentence.

Using "study of religion" for "teaching of religion" is not the substitution of a synonym; it is giving in to the stereotype which they know is the obstacle to their proposals being heard. The committee failed to stand by their convictions and became part of the confusion that swirls about the issue of teaching religion.

### Toward Worldwide Religious Education

Any attempt to revivify the twentieth-century project of religious education may seem to be a hopeless undertaking. However, just as the term religious education was falling out of a public use in the United States, it was being given a legal meaning in the United Kingdom. Religious education in England and Wales was to include religious instruction in every state and county school.<sup>48</sup> For reasons quite different from those in the United States, religious education in the U.K. has not lived up to the hopes of those who coined the term in 1944 (probably borrowed from the United States).<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, it has retained its meaning to include state schools and there is a substantial body of literature on religious education in the state school.

Today there is some fairly serious discussion of religious education within the European Union and especially within the Council of Europe. One of England's leading religious educators writes: "Issues about the study of religion in public education are being discussed internationally as never before. The discussions include specialists in religion, but also many outside the professional field of religious education – politicians, civil servants, NGOs and other groups within civil society as well as educators concerned with fields such as citizenship and intercultural education."<sup>50</sup> In other words, the Council of Europe is engaged in a project similar to what the United States started in 1903.

One weakness of the British usage of “religious education” had been that not only was it allowed in the state school but that was the only place it applied. In British usage, especially after the 1960s, religious education became the name of an academic subject. The result was that the work of church, synagogue, mosque, and temple was excluded from the meaning of religious education. That usage was almost a mirror image of language in the United States.

By locating religious education in the state school the British were following modern educational language. That is, if the question is understanding math, then mathematical education in the school is the answer. If you want to understand religion, you put religious education in the school. The analogy does not hold all the way. Religion is more like politics, morality, or sex than math, physics, or chemistry. The school has a crucial job of providing understanding of religion, morality, politics, or sex but it cannot provide the whole of education in those areas. The family begins the education to which the school can contribute. For receiving a fuller education, a person’s engagement in politics or religion is necessary.

The British way of speaking is now challenged by assumptions in the usage of other European nations and Asian countries.<sup>51</sup> In some countries the state has a very limited role and in other places the state has a lot to say about religion in the state schools. Many countries continue to force the religion of the majority on minorities in their schools.<sup>52</sup> No country offers an ideal solution that the United States can follow but that is a reason for dialogue.

The United Nations has expressed concern with religious education. Unfortunately, the U.N. has only dealt with religious education under the rubric of parental rights.<sup>53</sup> Eventually, the U.N. may have to see itself as a religious educator. That is, the U.N. constantly finds itself trying to mediate conflicts in which the misunderstandings of religion play a key role. In such

international clashes, the alternative to violent conflict is an educational approach that produces some understanding of cultural and religious differences.

Worldwide religious education is still in its formative stage.<sup>54</sup> The United States, given its religious diversity and its commitment to schools, should be a leading participant in these discussions but it is absent. Ironically, the impetus for European discussion of religious education was the attack on the United States in September, 2001. The question now is whether the United States will join the rest of the world in developing adequate programs of religious education. For the country to confront its political, ecological, and economic problems, the academic examination of religion is a needed part of education.

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