

## Chapter 2

### The Educational Framework

One can't be an *educated* human being without understanding a good deal about religion. Just as there are civic and constitutional reasons for including religion in the curriculum, so there are educational reasons. And, just as those civic and constitutional reasons provide a framework for dealing with religion, so there is an educational framework that shapes how educators should deal with religion in the curriculum and in the classroom. Happily, these frameworks complement one another, for each is grounded in respect and the obligation to be *fair*. Fairness is, as we shall see, a virtue of considerable importance in the practice of *liberal* education, an education that enables students to think in an informed and critical way about the world.

We begin this chapter by describing the New Consensus about religion and the curriculum that has developed over the last decade. Although the influence of religion in history and its relevance to history courses are well accepted, the relevance of religion to other parts of the curriculum is much more controversial — and will require a good deal of our attention. We will explain why the study of religion is much more important than is usually recognized, discuss where in the curriculum it should be located, and provide guidelines for how to teach about religion in the classroom.

Much of our discussion in this chapter focuses on the role of religion in the liberal education that should characterize the upper grades. In Chapter 3 we will explore the more limited role of religion in elementary education.

### The New Consensus

Our educational framework is grounded in the New Consensus that has developed over the course of the last decade. In 1988 a group of major religious and educational organizations — including the American Jewish Congress, the Islamic Society of North America, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, the American Association of School Administrators, the National School Boards Association, AFT, NEA, and ASCD — endorsed a statement of principles entitled "Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers," which describes the importance of religion in the curriculum in this way:

Because religion plays significant roles in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. Omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant. Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices, and concepts of the various religions makes much of history, literature, art, and contemporary life unintelligible.

Study about religion is also important if students are to value religious liberty, the first freedom guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Moreover, knowledge of the roles of religion in the past and present promotes crosscultural understanding essential to democracy and world peace. (1988/1994, chap. 6, pp. 2–3)

In its report *Religion in the Curriculum*, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development concluded: "Clearly, decisive action is needed to end the current curricular silence on religion" (1988, p. 35). It recommended that textbook selection committees at all levels require the treatment of religion "in all curricular materials." The task is to "provide adequate treatment of diverse religions" and "their impact in history, literature, art, music, and morality" (ASCD Panel, 1988, pp. 35, 27). Teacher educators must ensure that teachers acquire the "substantive knowledge required to teach about religion in society," and all educators "should explore ways to foster public support for the teaching of rigorous, intellectually demanding accounts of religion in society" (ASCD, 1988, p. 40).

According to the National Council for the Social Studies, "knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person, but is also absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity." Hence, the study of religion "should be an essential part of the social studies curriculum." Such study should encourage "a comprehensive and balanced examination of the entire spectrum of ideas and attitudes pertaining to religion as a component of human culture" and should stress the influence of religion on history and on contemporary issues, "including its relation to economic, political, and social institutions as well as its relation to the arts, language, and literature" (1990, p. 310).

What do we conclude from these (and other) statements of the New Consensus?

- *First*, because of the powerful influence of religion on our history and culture it is essential — and not optional — to include religion in the curriculum.
- *Second*, the influence of religion is not limited to history; students must understand the relevance of religion to contemporary life.
- *Third*, religion is relevant to virtually all subjects of the curriculum.
- *Finally*, it is important for students to understand a variety of religions, not just their own.

## Education, Religion, and the Search for Meaning

The fact that we often use the adjective *academic* (as in "that's academic") as a synonym for what is technical, trivial, and irrelevant, is telling. Too often educators (and students) lose sight of the forest for all the trees. Obviously a *good* education should provide students with *perspective*, with some sense of what is truly important. Education should initiate students — at least older students in the upper grades — into a conversation about what makes life meaningful.

Of course we disagree about what makes life meaningful, so let us put it this way. There appear to be *questions* that any reasonably thoughtful person must ask. What is the meaning of love — and what is the difference between sexuality and love? What does justice require of me — and of my country? When am I obligated to sacrifice my own good for that of someone else? What are the deepest sources of joy in life? How did the world begin? What sense can we make of suffering and of death? Is there progress in human affairs — and if so why? Is there a God? And how do I know any of this?

Many educators are tempted to leave some (if not all) of these questions to parents and religious communities. But, of course, *every* educated human being should have some grasp of the answers that people have given to these questions; these questions are not for religious folk only.

In any case, education can't avoid these questions. Much of the literature that students read in English courses revolves around them; in economics courses students are taught about human nature and values; in science courses students learn about how scientists understand the origins of the universe and of life. Of course most of the answers students encounter will be secular.

But there are both secular *and* religious ways of asking, reflecting on, and answering these unavoidable "existential" questions. An *educated* person should have some understanding of the major ways of thinking about them, and the resultant answers. Whether or not we think the various answers that religious traditions have given to these existential questions are reasonable, we must acknowledge the profundity of the attempts, their powerful influence on people's thinking and lives, and the universality of the concerns they address. It is truly extraordinary to think that we can claim to educate students while ignoring religious approaches to the deepest questions of human existence.

## Religion and History

Of course, we don't ignore religion completely. We agree that students must learn about religion in their study of history.

And for good reason. Until the last several hundred years in the West, the dominant answers to these inescapable existential questions were religious. Indeed, for most of history the sacred and the secular were pervasively entwined, and religion pervaded all of life: from birth to death the sustaining rituals of life were religious; religion shaped and informed people's understanding of politics, war, economics, justice, literature, art, philosophy, science, psychology, history, morality, and their hopes for a life to come. If students are to understand *history* they must understand *religion*. This is not controversial.

Of course, the study of history is important, in part, because it locates us in "communities of memory" (to use Robert Bellah's [1985, pp. 153–155] fine phrase) that give definition to our identities. We are not simply individuals, ahistorical social atoms; we are born into cultures defined by languages and institutions, ideas and ideals, and we know who we are only when we have some sense of our inheritance. Whether or not we are religious, the religious past of our culture has played a powerful role in shaping us, and to be ignorant of this past is a little like being an amnesiac — choosing one's future without any sense of who one has been. History roots us in the past; it provides *cultural ballast*.

The study of history also provides us with critical distance from the present; it *liberates* students from parochial "present-mindedness." Indeed, by revealing the religious roots of our ideals and institutions, history gives students some sense of just how secular our civilization has become.

There is another reason why the study of religion's role in history is tremendously important. If history is replete with examples of ways in which religion has ennobled humanity and enabled people to flourish, it is also all too filled with examples of religious warfare and persecution. This makes the story of religious liberty, particularly as it is embodied in our constitutional tradition, important for students to understand.

The importance of studying history and one's place in it can't be overestimated — and we can't understand history without understanding religion.

## Religion and Liberal Education

Of course, religion retains a good deal of vitality in our culture. Indeed, because many intellectuals continue to give religious answers to the profound existential questions of life, there is a vast *contemporary* religious literature that explores the implications of religion for virtually every subject in the curriculum: politics and economics, nature and psychology, literature and the arts, sexuality and morality. Our question now is this: What obligation do educators have to take seriously *live* religious ways of making sense of all of those areas of the curriculum that conventionally exclude religion from the discussion?

## Worldviews

The astronomer Arthur Eddington once told a parable about a fisherman who used a net with a three-inch mesh. After a lifetime of fishing he concluded there were no fish shorter than three inches. Eddington's moral is that just as one's fishing net determines what one catches, so it is with conceptual nets: what we find in the ocean of reality depends on the conceptual net we bring to our investigation.

For example, the modern scientific conceptual net — or scientific method — allows scientists to catch only replicable events; the results of any experiment that cannot be replicated are not allowed to stand. This means that miracles, which are by definition singular events, can't be caught; scientists cannot ask God to replicate the miracle for the sake of a controlled experiment. Or, to take another example, scientific method requires that evidence for knowledge claims be grounded in sense experience — the kinds of experience that instruments can measure. But this rules out religious experience as a source of knowledge about the world.

Theologians, by contrast, have constructed different kinds of conceptual nets for catching dimensions of reality that, they claim, escape scientific nets. People within all religious traditions believe moral and religious experiences provide knowledge of a transcendent dimension of reality — of God. The Western religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — have made sense of the world not in terms of universal causal laws, but narratives: events become intelligible not because they are lawlike, but because they fit in the plot of a story (as miracles might). Theologians take Scripture to be a source of knowledge (though liberals and conservatives read it in quite different ways).

In fact, how reasonable or "objective" a claim is — indeed, whether it makes sense at all — depends on the conceptual net we bring to the discussion. There is more to a *worldview* than the conceptual nets (or methodology) used by scientists or theologians or philosophers; still, we might say that worldviews are what is at issue.

For most of history, the governing worldviews of civilization have been religious; but over the course of the last several centuries in the West, modern science has come to provide the dominant worldview of our civilization and, as a result, shape our educational system. In the process, what counts as reasonable (and what counts as a matter of faith) has changed. True, if we *assume* the adequacy of the modern scientific worldview, religion is likely to appear as a matter of faith or even superstition; but why *should* we assume it?<sup>1</sup>

## Subjects and Disciplines

The usual rhetoric notwithstanding, public schools don't teach *subjects*. Subjects are open to various interpretations — to the use of different conceptual nets for making sense of them. Instead, students are taught *disciplines*; they are taught to use particular conceptual nets to make sense of their subjects. They learn to interpret history as secular historians do; they learn to understand nature as secular scientists do; they learn to understand economics as secular social scientists do. In fact, they learn to make sense of every subject in the curriculum in terms of disciplines defined by secular (usually scientific) conceptual nets.

When students do, on occasion, study religion (in a history course, for example), they are taught to interpret its historical meaning in secular categories; they will not learn to interpret history in religious categories. This goes without saying. Indeed, nowhere in the curriculum is any effort made to justify the use of secular rather than religious categories and conceptual nets. Their adequacy is *assumed* and they are used *uncritically* — in spite of the fact that their adequacy is deeply controversial.

This is the core of truth in the claim that schools teach students the (functional) *religion of secular humanism* (Nord, 1995, chap. 5). The problem isn't so much the specific facts or beliefs or theories that are or aren't taught, it is that public education nurtures a secular mentality. It assumes a secular, largely scientific worldview, and teaches students to make sense of their lives and the world in terms of that worldview. By providing students with secular conceptual nets only, by ignoring religion (except in a safely historical context), the curriculum conveys the idea that secular nets are adequate for catching all of reality and that religion is irrelevant to the search for the truth. As a result, religion is intellectually and culturally marginalized. No doubt most

educators don't intend to do this, yet this is the result. (In Part II we will put flesh on the skeleton of this argument as we work through the various areas of the curriculum.)

## Education and Indoctrination

As we saw in Chapter 1, there are civic and constitutional reasons of fairness for requiring that religion be included in the curriculum. It should be clear now that fairness is also required for *educational* reasons.

Philosophers often draw a distinction between education on the one hand, and socialization, training, and indoctrination on the other. Soldiers are trained to march and are socialized to follow the orders of their officers. Children are toilet-trained (rather than educated in toiletry), and, with some luck, they are socialized to obey their parents. In each of these cases, learning is more a matter of drill, discipline, and habit than of critical thinking. In matters of morality, politics, and religion we often use the word *indoctrination* rather than *training* or *socialization*. We indoctrinate children (or adults) when we teach (or socialize) them to accept doctrines, or a point of view, *uncritically*. By contrast, we educate children when we provide them with a measure of critical distance on their subjects, enabling them to think in informed and reflective ways about alternatives.

Public schools inevitably and properly train and socialize children: learning the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, for example, is largely a matter of training and drill; learning to be honest and on time is largely a matter of socialization.

With older children, however, the goal should be largely educational. We don't want to socialize or indoctrinate them into accepting positions on contested issues — issues about which we disagree. People in the United States, for example, are deeply divided between the Republican and Democratic parties. A *public* school has no business indoctrinating students into accepting the policies of either political party. Students can only think and act reasonably when they know something about the alternatives; indeed, we usually believe that the truth is most likely to be found when we hear both sides of the story, not one side only.

As students mature and proceed through the grades, the extent to which they are trained and socialized should diminish, while their education, properly conceived, should take root and grow. Education is the initiation of students into a discussion in which they are taught to understand, to take seriously, and to think critically about the contending voices in our world. This is often called *liberal* education — though "liberal education" is redundant, just as "liberal training" would be an oxymoron. A "liberal education," as we use the term, is not the kind of education advocated by the left wing of the Democratic Party; it is, rather, an education that requires students to learn something about the major ways humankind has developed for understanding their lives and the world.

It is not enough to teach the truth as one party in the disagreement understands it; if we teach only that view, students will not have the critical resources to make educated judgments about it. It is one thing to believe (what one takes to be) the truth; it is another thing to be *educated* to make reasonable judgments about it. Students will not be liberally educated, they will not be able to make reflective and critical judgments about anything that is religiously contested, unless they are taught about religious as well as secular ways of making sense of whatever is at issue. When we systematically and uncritically teach students secular ways of thinking about *all* "subjects" in the curriculum, we are in real danger of indoctrinating them (Nord, 1995, chap. 5).

Of course, one could argue in response that educators have an obligation to guide the thinking of students and that modern secular scholarship provides the most reasonable way of proceeding.

But we *disagree* about what is reasonable when it comes to sexuality and politics and economics and the origins of the world — and much of the disagreement is related to religion.

In fact, what appears to be a secular consensus among scholars is artificial and misleading, for theologians aren't allowed to vote; they aren't allowed into the main quad of the academy (much less into public schools) but are exiled to divinity schools and seminaries and think tanks and religious bureaucracies.

Our argument is that when we disagree, at least when the disagreements cut deep, educators are obligated to give students some sense of what is at issue. If students are to be educated, if they are to think critically, then we must include religious voices in our curricular conversations.

To be clear we should say that this is an argument for fairness, not for neutrality; there is a difference. Just as a judge might be fair to the opposing parties in a lawsuit before passing judgment, so teachers might be fair to contending points of view before passing judgment. That is, while neutrality requires fairness, fairness doesn't require neutrality. Indeed, we believe that other things being equal educators have an obligation to guide the thinking of their students. But other things aren't equal when religion is at issue: *both* fairness *and* neutrality are required for the civic and constitutional reasons we gave in Chapter 1.

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that it is often not at all *obvious* where the truth lies — and quite apart from these civic and constitutional constraints educators should show some humility in dealing with complicated and controversial questions. When fundamentally different worldviews shape the disagreements, it is not easy to say what the truth is.

## Locating Religion in the Curriculum

If we are to take religion seriously, should we include it in existing courses, or do we need (new) courses in religious studies: religion in courses, or courses in religion? Our answer? Both.

In part because of the difficulty of creating new courses, advocates of the New Consensus usually argue for "natural inclusion" in existing courses: teachers should discuss religion wherever it "naturally" comes up. Of course, the study of religion has an established place in history courses and in English courses in which students read historical literature; but, arguably, they should also discuss religion in economics or biology or sex education courses when religious ideas, ideals, and influences in our culture shape the public discussion of justice or nature or sexuality — when it is "natural" to discuss them.

Natural inclusion presents two major problems. First, because teachers are trained to teach disciplines rather than subjects, religious ways of thinking don't come "naturally" to most economics, biology, or sex education teachers or textbook authors in their professional lives (no matter how religious they are in their personal lives). Indeed, they often explicitly reject such inclusion. The major science organizations have made it clear, for example, that science courses have no room for creationism. If discussions of creationism or religious interpretations of nature are to occur at all, they must take place elsewhere — most likely in history classes. Of course, history teachers aren't likely to view creation as part of their domain; it doesn't naturally come up there either.

The second problem with natural inclusion stems from the importance and complexity of religion. Given the amount of material that authors must cram into a history textbook, religion is apt to find little room even if its relevance is acknowledged. Making sense of religion requires some breadth of exposure, some sensitivity to competing worldviews, some grounding in theology. (Imagine if we tried to teach biology or economics by including them in history textbooks.) Of course, the variety of religious traditions and the complexity of religious language, symbolism, and theology

make religion even more difficult for the typical (religiously illiterate) student to understand than those secular disciplines on which we lavish much more time and resources.

If we are to take religion seriously, if we are to acknowledge its importance and complexity, then we need to carve out space in the curriculum for courses in religion — or "religious studies" (which has become the term of choice in higher education). And just as we require science teachers to be certified in science, so religious studies should become a certifiable field for teachers of religion. Some schools do offer courses in religion — typically in the Bible or world religions, but these courses are inevitably electives and a very small minority of students ever take them. Our cultural priorities being what they are, this is not likely to change — though we might justifiably wonder why it is more important for a college-bound student to take 12 years of mathematics and no religion rather than 11 years of math and 1 year of religious studies.

We believe that high school students should be *required* to take at least one yearlong course in religious studies. Religion is too important and too complex to be handled adequately by natural inclusion; indeed, given the power of the secular disciplines in shaping the curriculum (and students' thinking about the world), we must grant religion at least a foothold in the curriculum to ensure a measure of critical perspective on secular education.

This, we believe, must be the ideal. But because we are not so naive as to think that our recommendation will gain wide acceptance, we suggest what may be a more realistic, two-pronged approach. First, we must emphasize natural inclusion. Teachers and textbooks must make clear that there are religious alternatives to secular ways of thinking. A *minimal fairness* would require that a first chapter in textbooks and an opening lecture or two in courses include some discussion of religious ways of thinking, perhaps in the context of a historical and philosophical overview of the subject at hand. Ideally, teachers and students would discuss those religious perspectives again at a later time, at critical points in the course. But second, to make possible a *robust fairness*, schools must begin to offer more *elective* courses in religious studies, especially as certified teachers become available and as students and their parents come to appreciate the importance of religion in the curriculum. A few communities might even consider requiring courses in religious studies.

## How to Teach About Religion

The New Consensus is grounded in the Supreme Court's 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* decision in which, as we saw in Chapter 1, the Court affirmed the constitutionality of teaching about religion in public schools when done "objectively as part of a secular program of education."

According to "Religion and the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers" (the statement endorsed by 17 national religious and education organizations), the school's approach to religion should be "academic, not devotional." Schools "may sponsor study about religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion." They "may educate about all religions, but may not promote or denigrate any religion" (1988, chap. 6, p. 2).

The guidelines of the National Council for the Social Studies require that the study of religion be "objective" and "academic in nature," and stress "student awareness and understanding, not acceptance and/or conformity." Such study should be "descriptive, non-confessional, and conducted in an environment free of advocacy." It should "involve a range of materials that provide a balanced and fair treatment of the subject" and be conducted with "sensitivity and empathy for differing religious points of view," investigating a "broad range" of "religious beliefs, practices, and values" (1990, p. 310).

ASCD puts it this way: "The central purposes of public schools are intellectual and civic...not religious. Religious education, or teaching *of* religion, is the job of parents and religious

institutions, but teaching *about* religion is a legitimate purpose of public schools" (1988, p. 16). "The job of education is to educate, not to instill religious devotion" (p. 21).

The New Consensus, then, draws a sharp distinction between (unconstitutional) advocacy, indoctrination, proselytizing, and the *practice* of religion on the one hand, and, on the other, (constitutional) *teaching about* religion that is objective, nonjudgmental, nonsectarian, neutral, balanced, and fair.

It is worth pausing for a moment over the word *objective* because this is the word the Supreme Court used. Of course, what it means to be objective is not uncontroversial. Some scholars have concluded that there is no such thing as objectivity. Others equate objectivity with science. But both accounts of objectivity are controversial — not least among theologians.

It is fairly clear what the Court meant by "objectivity," however, for Justice Clark, in his majority opinion, and Justices Brennan and Goldberg in their concurring opinions, each made *neutrality* the touchstone of their decisions (as the Court has usually done in adjudicating Establishment Clause cases). *We* have argued, in turn, that neutrality requires both fairness and refraining from judgment. When we disagree on religious grounds, we can achieve neutrality only by including everyone in the discussion. On this reading, "objectivity" means being fair rather than being prejudiced — rather than *prejudging* conclusions by not taking everyone seriously.

Some educators believe that schools can maintain neutrality by not explicitly affirming or denying a point of view, in effect, by ignoring it. But this is naive. Consider an analogy. Traditional textbooks and curriculums that ignored the role of blacks or women in history and literature were neither neutral nor objective but, as we now recognize, deeply prejudiced. Similarly, to ignore religious voices is not neutral; rather, it marginalizes those voices, conveying implicitly their irrelevance to the search for the truth.

## Diversity and Fairness

To be educated about religion is to understand something of religions, of religion in its diversity, just as to be educated about politics is to understand more than one's own political party. But, of course, not all religions can be included in the discussion; after all the school day consists of limited hours, and texts have only so many pages. We obviously cannot use the truth of a religion as our criterion for whether to include it, for we cannot assume judgments about truth if we are to be neutral. A more plausible, and less controversial, criterion is influence; in deed, in virtually all courses it is the influential ideas and ideals, theories and movements, that are considered. Almost inevitably the *major* religious traditions will make the greatest claim for inclusion because of their influence.

No doubt this is as it must be — though we would add the following caveats:

1. If teachers give the major religions the lion's share of time and space, they should include some discussion of "minor" or minority religions. Neutrality requires that educators not convey the sense that the major traditions are "normative" and that belonging to a minor (relatively uninfluential and seldom discussed) religion is either foolish or undeserving of respect.
2. In choosing among the less influential religions, it is wise and just to give attention to those that are practiced locally to give all children the sense that their traditions are taken seriously.

Must each major religion receive equal time in the curriculum? A great deal depends on context. In a course on American history it would be foolish to give equal time to Christianity and

Confucianism because the *influence* of Christianity on America has been so much greater. A course on world religions that dealt exclusively or even primarily with Christianity and ignored Eastern religions would be deeply flawed.

If particular courses will inevitably take some religions more seriously than others because of relative influence, the curriculum must reflect some overall balance. We no longer believe that it is educationally sound to teach American or Western history only; and just as students must know something of world cultures, so they must know something of world religions if they are to be educated.

In some contexts efforts to provide a diversity of views and a balance between them have been deeply controversial. In the early 1980s, for example, several states passed "balanced treatment" laws requiring that "creation-science" be taught whenever evolution is taught. It *is* important for students to learn that there are diverse ways of thinking about the origins of life and humankind — religious as well as scientific. It is *also* important for students to learn that the vast majority of biologists and paleontologists reject creation-science as unscientific. We do not propose the quixotic position that science courses cease to be science courses. Religious accounts of nature — and a robust fairness — must be provided elsewhere in the curriculum and by teachers better educated about theology than most biology teachers are (though we shall also argue that biology texts and courses are obligated to be minimally fair).

In such cases we appeal to what we call the "Principle of Cultural Location and Weight." Teachers and texts are obligated to locate their positions on the map of alternatives, indicating what weight their views carry in their own disciplines and in the larger culture. Good teachers and texts should not convey to students the idea that there is only one way of thinking about a subject, when in fact there are many. Nor should they simply provide an array of alternatives without giving students some sense of which views are mainstream and which aren't, and for whom. Who believes what, for what reasons, and with what force?

It is important, then, that we avoid two quite different problems. First, educators must take diversity seriously. They should include all the major voices in the discussion. But, second, they need not accomplish this by means of a crude "balanced treatment" or "equal time" provision in particular courses; it is the overall curriculum that must be balanced and fair. In later chapters we will work through these issues in a number of contexts (including evolution and creationism) in much more detail.

## The Many Dimensions of Religion

The great scholar of world religions Ninian Smart has distinguished seven *dimensions* of religion: doctrines (e.g., the Trinity, reincarnation); sacred narratives (e.g., the story of the Buddha, the story of the Exodus); ethics (e.g., the Torah, the Shari'a, the Sermon on the Mount); ritual (e.g., the Mass, daily Muslim prayer); religious experience (e.g., conversion experiences, mystical experiences); social institutions (e.g., monastic orders, the Temple in Jerusalem); and art and material culture (e.g., icons, temples) (1996).

These dimensions interpenetrate; cumulatively they define a worldview. While each dimension can be found in every religion, different traditions give different weight to them. Judaism, for example, has typically emphasized the social and ethical dimensions of religion; to be a Jew is to belong to a tradition, a community, and keep the Law. Jews have never defined themselves by creeds or doctrine; indeed, it is often held that one need not believe in God to be a good Jew. Christianity, by contrast, has historically been a creedal religion — requiring orthodox belief in "God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth" — and conservative Protestants often hold that salvation hinges on belief. As a result, we often describe people as *practicing* Jews and *believing* Christians. Islam falls closer to Judaism than to Christianity in this regard. Yet again,

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism have often emphasized the *experiential* and *ritual* dimensions of religion. These distinctions are, of course, largely matters of degree — and, of course, there may be different emphases within different denominations or movements in a tradition.

Because so many teachers are Protestants, it is crucial that they recognize that other religious traditions are often unlike their own in placing much less emphasis on belief and doctrine — what the history texts often call the "basic teachings."

## Understanding Religion from the Inside

If texts and teachers are to take religion seriously, if they are to be *fair* to members of a tradition, they must let the advocates of that religion speak for themselves, using the cultural and conceptual resources of their own traditions. The point is not to strain their world through our conceptual nets, but to hear what they say and see what they do in the context of their own beliefs, experiences, motives, and worldview — from *the inside*, as it were. Ninian Smart has called this *informed empathy* — using the symbols and narratives, the art and the rituals, the institutions and traditions of a religious culture to get inside the hearts and minds of people (1987, chap. 1).

(It is important to keep in mind that there is a huge difference between empathy and sympathy. Empathy is thinking or feeling *with* someone; sympathy is feeling *for* someone. Empathy is a matter of understanding and is, in a sense, morally neutral. Sympathy requires judgment; it is the feeling that someone merits our support. The point is not for students to sympathize with a religion, but understand it.)

Understanding a religion is not a matter of knowing a few *facts* about it, or being able to recite its core *beliefs*; it is more a matter of being able to make sense of the world in a particular religious way. It requires a different *gestalt* or consciousness, an appreciation of how the different dimensions of that religion shape a worldview.

Needless to say, it is not easy for students to think their way inside the hearts and minds of people in a culture or religion different from their own, and because most religious traditions make sense of the world in ways that are foreign to the conventional secular thinking of most students we can't expect a few paragraphs in a history text to accomplish the task.

Sensitivity to the different dimensions of religion is important in addressing the temptation to reduce religion to some set of beliefs. Consider an analogy. In educating students about music we are not content to have them read about the beliefs of composers and musicians, nor is it sufficient for them to scan sheets of musical notation or study acoustics. It is in *listening* to music — or better yet, in *performing* it — that students can *grasp from the inside* what music is all about. They make sense of music by experiencing it and, in the process, learning a new musical vocabulary, a set of categories that shape their developing appreciation for music. Similarly, scientists often claim that it is only in *doing science* that students can learn what science is.

For any number of reasons we can't require students to practice religion, but they can acquire some imaginative and vicarious sense of what it means to experience the world religiously from autobiographies and, even better, from literature, drama, film, and art. Indeed, because religious experience is often claimed to be *ineffable*, impossible to put into language, religions often function symbolically. Their natural language is poetry and symbol and metaphors that *point to* or imaginatively convey truths that cannot be said literally. Of course, the extent to which religious language is to be taken symbolically or literally is a major theological question. On almost any account, however, religion requires a different sensibility from science, and it is surely dangerous to assume that the skills of scientific thinking carry over to religion. The difficulty of conveying to

students some understanding of religion is, as we've said, a powerful reason for requiring them to take a course in religion, studying it in some depth.

## Understanding Religion from the Outside

Education isn't simply a matter of immersing students in several religious traditions so that they can grasp each, in turn, from the inside. It is also important that teachers and texts approach religion *from the outside* in several senses.

A good liberal education will map the relationships of alternative ways of thinking about the subjects of the curriculum — and the world more generally. The point isn't to habituate students to living on a variety of unrelated islands of the mind, each defined by its own worldview, but rather to initiate them into a discussion about how different disciplines, different ways of making sense of the world, relate to one another. If understanding different religions from the inside is the necessary first step, the second step should be a *step back* from each of those religions to discuss how they relate to one another *and* to the secular ways of thinking about the world that pervade the curriculum. The point is to nurture some small measure of critical thinking.

It is, of course, interesting and important to consider what is *common* to religions — and what may distinguish all religions from secular ways of understanding the world. It is also important to understand the *deep differences* among religions; indeed, there may be little that religions have in common, shaped as they each are by their respective revelations, their different cultural and intellectual traditions.

It is also important to use the resources of modern secular scholarship to provide linguistic, historical, and cultural contexts for understanding religions. Sometimes this is a fairly straightforward matter of using nonreligious documents to help chart the development of a religious tradition, or understanding how language was used in ancient nonscriptural texts to throw light on what is meant in Scriptural texts. Of course, theologians and artists and the authors of Scriptural texts don't just work *within* enclosed religious traditions; they employ the conceptual resources of their cultures and respond to developments in the larger world. Religious texts and traditions are shaped, in part, by their cultural contexts so that understanding their contexts can often throw considerable light on religious texts and traditions.

Secular scholarship can also be used to *question* religious claims and undermine religion — and it cannot be the purpose of public education to immunize religion from criticism. A liberal education, as we have said, should initiate students into a discussion among advocates of *all* of the major points of view. But education must be structured so that this discussion is conducted openly and fairly, without coercion or prejudice, taking the contending points of view seriously.

## Primary and Secondary Sources

John Stuart Mill once argued that it is not enough for students to hear the arguments of adversaries from their own teachers. Rather, according to Mill, students must hear the arguments

from persons who actually believe them...in their most plausible and persuasive form...Ninety-nine in a hundred of what are called educated men...have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them...and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profane. (1859/1965, p. 287)

It is both simple justice and good education to let people speak for themselves.

This practice is especially true regarding religion, for the differences between religious and secular ways of talking about the world cut so deep that we are rightly wary, in our secular times, of the ability of textbook authors and teachers to say what is at issue religiously. Of course, the

importance of art and literature in imaginatively and symbolically conveying religious ways of experiencing the world makes the use of primary sources essential.

Nonetheless, textbooks and secondary sources have their place as well. For younger students the coherence of a textbook may be as important as the encounter with contending points of view is for older students; it takes considerable intellectual maturity to work through the often confusing mix of voices found in anthologies of primary sources. And, as we've argued, secular scholarship and secondary sources have their place in the study of religion as well. As we see it, then, some kind of balance between primary and secondary sources is wise, but the use of primary sources — Scriptures, theology, art, autobiography, and literature — is essential.

## Pluralism and Relativism

Many times, in dealing with controversial topics, we've heard teachers say, "There is no right answer." Sometimes, in their concern to be tolerant, teachers will say that all religions are fundamentally the same beneath their outward differences. Much of the multicultural movement emphasizes the (equal) respect due all traditions. And, as we have argued, for educational and constitutional reasons public schools, texts, and teachers must remain neutral on matters of religion.

Not surprisingly, many religious folks interpret all of this as relativism — the idea that no religion (or point of view generally) is any better or truer than any other. One of the most difficult tasks teachers have is to convey to students the difference between pluralism (and a tolerance or respect for people holding different views) on the one hand, and relativism on the other.

It is important to remember — and to remind students — that the disagreements among different religious and secular traditions are about *what the truth is*. If students come to believe that choosing a religious (or a political or scientific) position is like choosing what to eat from a buffet line, they will have misunderstood the nature of religion (and science) badly. From within each tradition, some foods are poisonous; others are healthy; and individuals certainly should not choose them on the basis of appearances or taste.

Of course, some religious traditions have historically been much more ecumenical than others. Hindus have often accorded divine status to Jesus and Muhammad and held that there are many paths to the truth (though not *all* paths lead there, by any means). Christianity, by contrast, has often been exclusivistic: none come to God but through Christ. There are religious liberals who believe that all religious traditions have some truth in them. There are secularists who believe that no religious tradition conveys the truth about anything of importance. And there are relativists and postmodernists who believe there is no such thing as truth.

Because of the civic ground rules of our democracy, and because public schools should be committed to a liberal education that takes seriously the various participants in our cultural conversation, we properly teach students *respect* for the rights of people in different religious and secular traditions. Indeed, teaching students to talk civilly about our differences is a tremendously important task of schools. But teachers must not take this to mean — and must not convey to students — that all religious traditions are equally true or equally false. That is another thing entirely.

As we noted in the last chapter, the constitutional requirement that schools and teachers be religiously neutral does not mean that teachers cannot express their own judgments in classes where students are mature enough to appreciate the difference between the unofficial "personal" view of the teacher and the official neutrality of the course. But this must be done with considerable care.

More important, students must learn how different religious and secular traditions criticize each other. Why do Muslims believe Islam to be superior to Christianity — and how do Christians argue otherwise? How do neo-Darwinians and various kinds of theologians criticize one another's positions? The point of a liberal education is not simply to expose students to an array of positions, but to initiate them into a continuing discussion about where the truth is to be found. But it cannot be the task of public school teachers to draw any official conclusions about such things.

## Competence

Many members of minority traditions who might accept our educational framework in principle will also believe that in practice it is dangerous to include religion in the curriculum because teachers, no matter how well intentioned, will inevitably display their ignorance and prejudices. In a predominantly Christian culture, alternatives to Christianity won't receive knowledgeable or fair treatment, and teachers will end up advocating Christianity, even if subtly or indirectly.

This is a justifiable concern. The great majority of teachers are not prepared to teach about religion. Many know little about religious traditions other than their own — if they have one. We have articulated what we take to be *the ideal toward which we should be working*. That it is an ideal makes it no less important; if we want to improve, we aim at the ideal.

In any case, what is the alternative? We can't simply stop taking sides on religiously contested matters. After all, in teaching the secular disciplines teachers give (sometimes controversial) secular answers to religiously contested questions. And, of course, religion does surface here and there in textbooks now; it is unavoidable. Moreover, some teachers express their prejudices in class now, and some textbooks contain distorted and inadequate accounts of minority religions now. The solution cannot be to leave "well enough" alone, but to make teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum planners self-conscious and better informed about what they are doing.

## Teacher Education

Working with teachers we have been struck, over and over again, by their desire to do what is right; and we have found that a very little consciousness-raising about the First Amendment and sensitivity to students from minority traditions can go a long way. Nonetheless, major reforms in teacher education are necessary.

- Teacher education institutions must teach all prospective teachers the civic and educational frameworks in their Foundations and Teaching Methods courses. Unfortunately, most teacher educators have little understanding of the frameworks; most schools of education simply do not take religion seriously.
- Every teacher education institution should offer an elective course for prospective teachers on religion and education (perhaps jointly planned and taught by faculty in the department of religious studies and the school of education) that deals in some depth with the issues discussed in this book.
- All teachers who deal with religiously contested matters should know something about the relationship of religion to their particular subjects and disciplines. Ideally, they should be required, as part of their certification, to take at least one course relating religion to their subject (Religion and Science, Religion and American History, Religion and Literature, etc.). Whether

required or not, departments of religious studies should make such courses available as electives.

- While awaiting these reforms, universities and school systems should address these topics in a variety of summer seminars and inservice workshops.
- If there are to be courses in the Bible or world religions, there must be teachers competent to teach them. Religious studies must become a certifiable field, requiring at least an undergraduate minor. Schools *must not* phase in courses in religion until there are competent teachers.
- State departments of education should set certification requirements and review curriculums, setting standards for the inclusion of religion at appropriate places in the curriculum.
- Administrators must understand the civic and educational ground rules if teachers are to feel safe teaching about religion. Coursework for administrators must include study of the relationship of religion and education.
- Neither teachers nor administrators will feel safe unless school boards adopt religion policies that make it clear that religion is an appropriate and important part of the curriculum. These policies should emphasize that religion is included for educational reasons, not for proselytizing. The development of these policies should be exercises in defining common ground in which representatives of various local constituencies work together to establish ground rules within the constraints of the Constitution.
- To do the job well, teachers must have good textbooks and resource materials. A good deal of material already exists in some areas of the curriculum (history, literature, and social studies, for example), but there is very little material elsewhere (the sciences, economics, and religious studies itself). To address this need publishers must be convinced there is a market for such material; states need to create such markets.

## Conclusions

It is important to recognize the harmony between our civic and educational frameworks. Just as we are obligated for civic reasons to treat people and subcultures with respect by taking their religious traditions seriously, and just as the Establishment Clause of the Constitution requires fairness to religious ways of thinking for the sake of a true neutrality between religion and nonreligion, so a properly liberal education requires that religious voices be included in the curricular conversation.

Second, we would point out that although there are religious arguments for taking religion seriously in schools, we haven't appealed to them. Our civic, constitutional, and educational frameworks, and the arguments for using them, are fully secular. It is not the task of public schools to proselytize or promote any particular religion — or religion generally. Their task is to educate students about various religions, fairly.

Finally, we note once again that what is at issue is a matter of considerable importance. To teach students only secular ways of thinking about the world risks indoctrination. The point of a liberal education is to initiate students in a critical discussion of the major ways of making sense of the world so that they are in some position to responsibly judge what is true and good all things considered. If students are to be liberally educated, they must learn a good deal about religion — and if this is to happen, significant reforms are necessary.

Having developed our civic and educational frameworks, we now go on in the following chapters to apply the frameworks to various areas of the curriculum. This chapter has emphasized liberal education and critical thinking — concerns primarily of the upper grades; the next chapter looks at elementary education and reviews what (more limited) role there might be for religion there.

## Suggested Readings and Resources

The argument of this chapter is developed at considerably greater length in Chapters 5–7 of Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Re-thinking a National Dilemma* (1995). In developing our framework, we have drawn on the work of Ninian Smart: see especially Chapter 1 in *Religion and the Western Mind* (1987). *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education*, cited earlier, is an excellent anthology of documents and essays dealing with religion and public education.

Elmer John Theissen's *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (1993) is an insightful and sophisticated study of religion and indoctrination. *School Wars: Resolving Our Conflicts over Religion and Values* (1996) by Barbara Gaddy, T. William Hall, and Robert J. Marzano, comes close to the position we have taken but without appreciating how deep the problems cut. Nel Noddings's *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (1993) is a provocative exploration of some of these issues.

In *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education* (1989), David Purpel explores his theme insightfully from the perspective of liberation theology and the Cultural Left. *Curriculum, Religion, and Public Education: Conversations for Enlarging the Public Square* (1998), edited by James T. Sears with James C. Carper, includes a wealth of essays addressing these issues from a variety of perspectives. Richard McMillan's *Religion in the Public Schools: An Introduction* (1984) provides helpful perspective.

Finally, two older anthologies are still worth reading: *Religion and Public Education* (1967), edited by Theodore R.Sizer, and *Public Education Religion Studies: An Overview* (1981), edited by Paul Will, Nicholas Piediscalzi, and Barbara DeMartino Swyhart.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>The cultural authority of modern science is being challenged by more and more *secular* intellectuals who argue that we are entering a *postmodern* period in history. (The *modern* period is often dated from the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, when science began to replace religion as the arbiter of rationality and truth.) Postmodernism means different things to different scholars, but we might define it in the most general terms as the conviction that there are no *objective foundations* for knowledge-claims. It is impossible to jettison the particularities of our cultural contexts; our understandings of the world are invariably shaped by our gender, ethnicity, class, language, unconscious minds, and ideological commitments. Postmodernism is suspicious of all "metanarratives" or overarching accounts of reality — including that of modern science, which postmodernists see as just one among many narratives about how the world works, no truer or more reasonable (in any objective sense) than others. More about postmodernism as we proceed; our point for now is that in the postmodern world it is particularly naive to *assume* that science is the arbiter of rationality and truth. Or so many *secular* intellectuals now argue.