

National Practices in Teaching *About Religion*

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AS A preliminary step of a larger project to set up evaluative criteria for judging public high school courses which teach about religion, some statistics relating to general practice were gathered as well. In all, 3,414 public high schools were surveyed. This represents the total number of schools which have been accredited by the five regional accrediting associations¹ and which have 1,000 or more students. The survey was administered by postcards with an attached reply and sent to the principals of the high schools. The survey contained eight questions which bear upon the subject of general practices.

Since the objective of the study was somewhat different from earlier surveys, it is difficult to compare the findings. Still the reader may desire to consult Dierenfield's earlier work in this area.² The initial state-

¹ The five regional accrediting associations are: Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools; New England Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, Inc.; North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools; The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools; and Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

² Richard B. Dierenfield. "The Impact of the Supreme Court Decisions on the Public Schools." *Religious Education* 67: 445-51; January-February 1967.

ment of the survey read, "We (do) (do not) have a course which teaches about religion objectively." This set the tone for the questionnaire, which may have been new and unique by excluding those courses which were not aimed at objectivity. Among the 1,780 (52.1%) of the schools which answered the survey, 857 (48.1%) answered that they did, while 923 (51.8%) did not.

The second statement asked whether religion was taught as a separate course or as a unit of a course. In 743 (41.7%) of the schools it was taught as a unit. Those teaching it as a separate course numbered 102 (5.7%), and 10 (.6%) schools taught both units and courses.

Several Categories

The units and courses in religion fell under several headings, and in many schools several categories applied. Of the schools responding, 539 (30.2%) included study about religion in their courses on world history. Those which included units in world literature courses numbered 88 (4.9%).

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Units were included in humanities in 206 (11.6%) of the schools. Another 316 (17.7%) listed the names of their courses about religion under the category "other" which included a list of over 80 different courses.

Concerning the distribution of the courses and units by grades, 177 (9.9%) indicated that the study of religion was found in the 9th grade. In the 10th grade, 529 (29.7%) reported courses or units in religion. In the 11th grade the number of schools was 282 (15.8%); while in the 12th grade it was 463 (26.0%). Since schools were asked to indicate all categories which applied, there was inevitably some overlap.

Faiths Included

With regard to the varieties of Christianity which were included in the course of study, 742 (41.6%) indicated that they treated Catholicism. Mormonism was considered by 470 (26.4%). Units about the

Protestant faith were taught by about 745 (41.8%) of the schools. The number of schools which treated "other" Christian groups was 170 (9.5%).

The variety of non-Christian faiths which were studied was quite large. Buddhism was treated by 718 (40.3%). Hinduism was covered by 710 (39.8%). Judaism was considered by 732 (41.1%). Schools teaching about Islam numbered 730 (41.0%). Shintoism was treated in 526 (29.5%) schools and Taoism in 525 (29.5%). Schools listing "other" world religions numbered 116 (6.5%).

Of the total number of respondents, 243 (13.6%) indicated that they used printed course outlines or curriculum guides in their courses. Considering the total number of schools which teach about religion, this number is rather small.

Among the schools surveyed, 243 (13.6%) reported that they had printed curricular materials. The remaining 1,536 (86.2%) did not. There are several conclusions which may be drawn from the survey about the extent and distribution of study about religion. First, nearly half of all schools claimed to be teaching about religion objectively. Of that number virtually all teach about a wide variety of religions. The difference among those schools which taught about Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam was negligible. In fact, the average school nominally taught about 7.4 religions in more than one course. Ostensibly, this would indicate a conscious effort to give the courses which teach about religion a wide scope.

Another conclusion which may be drawn from the data is that schools consider the study about religion as appropriate for several contexts. This is evidenced by the fact that, on the average, schools which do include study about religion include religion in more than one course.

In sum, it appears that study about religion is widespread and encompasses a wide variety of subjects and course frameworks. Relatively few schools devote an entire course to the subject or have gone so far as to produce written curricular materials.

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