

# Religion in the Curriculum

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**I**F THINGS are important in inverse ratio to the ease with which they may be defined, religion must be very important indeed; for no one can define it in a way acceptable to everyone. This may be seen as a bit of a handicap to those proposing to study religion, whatever it is.

Importance aside, it is only recently—since the 1963 Supreme Court ruling on devotional Bible reading—that the schools have become sure of the propriety of the study of religion in public institutions. Since then such study has dramatically increased, the lack of definition being reflected in the variety of the projects. In the light of the success of these projects, it now seems absurd that religion was so neglected for so long.

Of course, the importance of religion does not hinge on its definition. Religion has significantly influenced man's history and literature. One does not have to be a Toynbee to recognize the pervasive influence, for good and for bad, of religion in history. The same is true in literature: not only does a good deal of modern and traditional literature deal with religious themes ("Religion and Literature"), not only does literature use the Bible ("Bible and Literature"), but also much of the sacred writings of the world's religions has literary merit itself ("Religious Literature").

Other approaches could be differentiated, but these three represent the basic ways religion affects the literature curriculum. Most current projects are limited to the latter two, and of these most deal with the Bible. The projects discussed in this article represent only a sampling of the activities under way.

More information on these, and a host of others, is available from the Religious Instruction Association, a clearinghouse on methods and materials for the study of religion in public education (P. O. Box 533, Fort Wayne, Ind. 46801).

## Religious Literature

● In 1965 the legislature of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania passed an act to amend its public school code to permit the addition of "courses in the literature of the Bible and other religious writings" to be introduced as literature electives.<sup>1</sup> Nearly a year later the Department of Public Instruc-

<sup>1</sup> Act No. 442 of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1965.

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tion announced a contract with Pennsylvania State University's Department of Religious Studies to develop such a course. A course was prepared which studied the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly called the Old Testament), New Testament, Rabbinic Writings, and the Qur'an. The course was projected for completion in June 1967. This proved to be a somewhat optimistic projection.

After the material was taught in 31 high schools in the 1967-68 school year, it was decided that the course needed substantial revision. More teaching, more revision, more teaching. . . . The material is now scheduled for release by Augsburg Press in the fall of 1971—more than four years after the original projection.

There is a good explanation for the delay. This material has the somewhat dubious distinction of being attacked by such diverse groups as the American Council of Christian Churches and the American Civil Liberties Union; even some of the original consultants to the project have attacked it.

There are at least three basic reasons for all this difficulty. First, it confronts those difficulties any new curriculum faces. New sex education curricula have faced similar problems; so would the history curricula if this were the first time we taught about politics. Second, Pennsylvania proceeded to develop the material in a rather secretive manner.

Copies of the experimental materials were not widely available and were not circulated for criticism until they had been taught and found wanting. (Of course, both the ACCC and the ACLU had obtained copies from loyal followers.) This procedure not only aroused fears, but also cut off a valuable flow of information from others who had worked on similar projects.

Third, and most important, the course was built upon an inadequate definition of objectivity, one that fails to appreciate the public schools' position (in a pluralistic democracy) in handling religion. One of the authors of the course described objectivity as the "reconciliation of the various subjective attitudes." This is precisely the *opposite* of the kind of objectivity required of the school.

Objectivity does not demand reconciliation, but rather explanation of divergencies.

The objective use of interpretation relates to the plurality of possible patterns of interpretation. Since every element of knowledge falls within the framework of presuppositions that are generally not unique, practically coercive, or universally accepted, more than one interpretation is always possible. A test of objectivity is the acknowledgement that there are possible alternative patterns of interpretation. Teaching is not objective when an interpretation is presented as though it were absolute and unquestioned fact and as though no alternative interpretations were possible or admissible.<sup>2</sup>

The public school as a consensus-making institution has proved untenable in our pluralistic society, and any material which aims at such consensus is bound to have difficulties. In this regard the project's theory was better than its practice. Goals included such worthy concepts as "be aware that there are various interpretive approaches to the teaching of religious literature."

If any one thing saved the project from utter disaster, it was the educational methodology which was employed. Normal procedure was to read a selected portion of one of the religious writings plus a section of commentary from the student's manual; class time was basically a discussion, rather than a lecture period. In talking with teachers who participated in the pilot tests, I found that this allowed for the interjection of the necessary divergent viewpoints so that the course was generally better than one would expect merely by viewing the material.

It remains to be seen whether successive revisions have succeeded in satisfying those opposed to the original material. Though certain biases are still evident, the revised material shows an active concern for pluralistic approaches. It is not an exaggeration to call it the best resource currently available to any teacher desiring to study the religious literature of the West. Teachers may order copies from Augsburg Publishing House (426 S. Fifth St., Minneapolis, Minn. 55415).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Phenix. "Religion in American Public Schools." In: Donald A. Giannella, editor. *Religion and the Public Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. p. 89.

## Bible and Literature

● The Nebraska situation developed quite differently. A unit on religious literature called "The God and Man Narratives," one section of which is "The Ancient Hebrew Religious Narratives," comes in the regular English curriculum at the seventh grade level. This unit is only a small part of a total K-12 English curriculum developed through the University of Nebraska. The material was prepared through "intense collaboration between teachers and scholars," with representation from a "broad spectrum of theistic and non-theistic points of view."<sup>3</sup>

The methodology for the course relies more on a closely guided student examination of the text than it does on commentaries. It is basically a literary examination of material that happens to be religious. This analysis, while not shallow or superficial, avoids the pitfalls of "consensus thinking" and at the same time appears to be acceptable to the humanist and the religious, the Jew and the Christian, the conservative and the liberal.

The concept of objectivity employed, though not spelled out, seems to be similar to that of Phenix, since divergent points of view are studied without taking sides. Students are asked to recognize the schools' limitations in this regard. The material is published and generally accepted. Teachers may order copies from the University of Nebraska Press (901 N. 17th St., Lincoln, Neb. 68508).

## Religion in the Social Studies

Two basic approaches are needed in the social studies: one may be called the history of religions, the other referred to as the religions in history. The latter concerns itself with religious institutions, movements, people, and ideas only as they impinge upon the general history being considered. The former seeks to study the great religions directly through their literature and history. Although

<sup>3</sup> *A Curriculum for English: Grade 7 Teachers Manual*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. pp. iv, xix.

several small projects are springing up, no major project attempts to study the history of religions at this time. So I will briefly examine two projects which attempt to integrate the study of religion into the total social studies curriculum.

● The Florida project grew out of the concern of a special committee which sought and received foundation support for a two-year project to prepare material to supplement the normal social studies texts, which contain very little study of religion. A top scholar was enlisted to head the project, which was housed at Florida State University.

A series of units has resulted, 10 units in American Culture, 10 in Western Civilization, and 10 in World Cultures. Only the units in American Culture are near completion. Each unit is scheduled to last from 3 to 15 days and is organized around diverse primary source material which presents both sides of controversial issues. Topics covered include: motivations for coming to the New World, the problem of religious establishment in the colonies, the churches on the frontier, the Negro in the church, science and religion, and the problems of pluralism. Students are asked to read primary sources and are led to examine them through a skilled use of the inquiry method.

The material has had good reception both in Florida and elsewhere;<sup>4</sup> teachers may order copies from the Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. (Reading, Mass. 01867).

● The last material, which we can only mention, is part of a total K-12 social studies curriculum prepared by the Educational Research Council of America (Rockefeller Bldg., Cleveland, Ohio 44113). Religion is used as one of a half-dozen integrating themes throughout the material. For example, Grade 5, Unit 2 is entitled "Four World Views." Students are led to examine the Confucian, Buddhist, Judaic, and Greek views of the world.

Objectivity is here induced in two ways: first by the multiplicity of viewpoints studied,

<sup>4</sup> Progress Report on the Religion-Social Studies Curriculum Project. Florida State University, Spring 1971.

each in a factual and sympathetic manner; and second by not using Christianity as a "standard" by which to measure others. Christianity is studied later when it comes up in the history of the Roman Empire.

Though the material is at times oversimplified, and perhaps at times misleading, the obviously open and pluralistic attitude that prevails has prevented any significant problems. In addition, some of the material is outstanding. For example, a Muslim group asked permission to reprint the section on Islam because they thought it a good description of their religion.

The material is now being published by Allyn and Bacon (Rockleigh, N.J. 07647).

In summary, we have at hand four newly developed curricula that are sufficiently different to allow wide-ranging experimentation with the objective teaching of religion in the upper grades. Though they are not perfect, a wise use of these materials could greatly enhance the present curriculum, which is largely devoid of any serious consideration of religion.

In addition, the following two hypotheses are advanced on the basis of this analysis: First, from a strategic point of view, materials which treat religion as part of the existing curriculum have caused fewer problems than those which treat religion separately. This does not mean that separate courses in religion should not be offered, only that they will be more difficult. Also, from the theoretical point of view, the study of religion that is integrated into the regular courses tends to show religion as one aspect of human life, not as a separate and unrelated phenomenon. The whole movement toward core curriculum and humanities courses at the high school level reinforces this conclusion.

Thus, schools are more likely to undertake a study of the religions in history than they are to undertake the study of the history of religions. They are more likely to study the Bible as literature or literature and religion than they are to study religion directly or to study the religion of the Bible. In this way high schools will not be offering a lower-

level "college type" treatment of religion, but will be making a unique contribution to the child's education.

Second, materials must aim at an objectivity that incorporates divergent points of view. A lot of nonsense is spoken under the title of a discussion of objectivity. Such obvious factors as the impossibility of obtaining perfect objectivity and the seeming inability of some people to obtain any objectivity are endlessly repeated. Conceding such points, there is still a practical objectivity which must be maintained in the public schools' treatment of religion.<sup>3</sup>

At the very least, objectivity means the presentation of possible alternative interpretations. Religious beliefs, no less than political persuasions, are complex and require the coordination of many lines of evidence. Conclusions about their rightness or wrongness are not usually self-evident except to partisans. Community consensus (and even scholarly consensus) should not be presented as the only option available. There are after all other communities (and other scholars).

The role of the scholar is not to predetermine answers to controversial issues, but rather to ensure that all the relevant data are considered, to prevent oversimplification and misrepresentation, and to provide the critical tools necessary for the student to do his own thinking and arrive at his own conclusions. Materials that have failed to use religion scholars in this way have shown themselves unsatisfactory in varying degrees. The scholar too must remain objective.

As schools seek to revise their curricula, they dare not avoid the inclusion of significant treatments of religion where it is germane to the existing subject matter. They would do well to consider these four new sets of materials: learn from their mistakes, take advantage of their insights, and use their content to improve the present program. If we cannot define religion, at least we can try to understand it. □

<sup>3</sup> See Section 1 of the book, *Religion and Public Education*. Theodore Sizer, editor. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967. See especially Walterstorff's treatment of "Affirmative Impartiality" and LaNoue's discussion of "The Conditions of Public School Neutrality."

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