

# *Should Religion Be Taught in the Public School?*

DANIEL WILLIAM O'CONNOR\*

**T**HERE appears to be a growing interest in the subject of religion on the part of educators, school systems, and students. Therefore, the question is relevant: "Should religion be taught in the public schools?" The answer which immediately comes to mind is "yes" and "no."

Before a definite answer to this general and complex question can be given, several preliminary questions must be considered which involve a number of stipulations and qualifications:

1. *Why* is the study of religion a relevant and proper element in the curriculum of the public schools today?
2. *What* is meant by religion in this context; what precisely is to be taught under the label of religion?
3. *Who* would teach such a course or courses?
4. *When* should this subject be introduced into the curriculum?

Obviously, the reason that religion has not been offered in the public schools heretofore is that many have believed that such teaching is incompatible with the constitutional separation of church and state. And this would be a fact *if* the subject were taught by certain people, presenting what most people think of uncritically as religion. On the contrary, the teaching of the subject academically, following definite and well-

considered guidelines which would ensure that a presentation of the subject would violate neither the spirit nor the letter of the Constitution, is not difficult to imagine.

We will proceed to consider briefly the preliminary questions.

● *Why should religion be taught in the public school system?*

a. The subject helps us understand many of the events in the development of our nation and the presuppositions and thought patterns of the men and women who determined the course of these events.

b. Theories and concepts proper to the study of religion since the beginning of civilization have interested and deeply challenged the intellect and profoundly stirred the emotions of man.

c. Contemporary society has as much sustained interest in this subject as in others which are properly and without question included in the public school curriculum.

d. The student has a "right to know" in relation to this academic area as he does in relation to others. To deny the student this right unreasonably limits his intellectual horizons and concomitantly reveals the

\* Daniel William O'Connor, Professor, Department of Religion, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York

school's lack of understanding of the importance and relevance of the subject.

Interestingly, among those who would challenge the inclusion of religion in the curriculum are many who know very little concerning the academic aspects of the subject. Fear and emotional negative responses to the possibility of inclusion of the subject often betray a lack of understanding and appreciation of the fact that this subject can be taught with the same degree of objectivity and lack of prejudice as geography, economics, or history.

● *What is meant by religion in this context?*

a. What is meant here by religion is not dogmatics or evangelism or the defense of the system of belief or polity of any particular faith or denomination. These emphases, proper to the program of a religious institution, would be completely improper in the context of the public school. Equally improper would be the exclusive description or presentation, no matter how objective, of any one faith or even the major faiths of the Western world.

In addition, dogmatics, exclusiveness, or evangelism in any form could easily be eliminated from all such teaching (as they can and should be in the teaching of psychology, political science, economics, and history) without *in the least* affecting, but rather enhancing, both the academic value and common interest in the subject.

b. The following list of courses proper for inclusion in the public school curriculum is not exhaustive and does not include a full description of content which would be helpful to the general argument presented here. However, space in a brief article is limited.

(1) General Introduction to Religion—a definition and description of the religious experience through its manifestations in primitive, ancient, and modern religions, etc.

(2) World Religions: a descriptive, historical, positive, and appreciative discussion of the major faiths of the contemporary world: Hinduism, Buddhism, the traditional religions of China and Japan, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity

(3) The Literature of the Judeo-Christian Tradition:

(a) Presented as history—emphasizing religion as an important force in determining the course of development of the Western world, and pivotally important in the understanding of the history of ideas of Western man

(b) Presented as literature—including examples of important early historical, poetic, legal, and wisdom writing—even as containing prototypes of the literature of doubt and protest

(4) The History of Religions in America—presented as a valuable complement and supplement to the study of American history, with an emphasis upon the contributions of the several faiths to the areas of development of our nation

(5) Religion in Contemporary Literature—a course which is designed to demonstrate the religious dimension so greatly and deeply present in much of contemporary fictional and nonfictional writing.

● *Who should teach religion in the public school?*

Axiomatically, and for obvious reasons, the teacher should *not* be chosen from those who professionally represent any particular religious tradition within the community. Such personnel would seem to be most obvious, the best trained, the most easily available on a part-time basis, and thus the most economically attractive. Such teachers, however, would be the very ones who might find the most obvious "conflict of interest" in the presentation of religion as defined and described here.

A second temptation would be to have a teacher in the humanities or social sciences presently employed in the school system be responsible for teaching the subject. This also would be a mistake. Religion has been, is, and will always be a very complicated and sensitive subject. And the average person is all too often overconfident that anyone can present it, given a certain amount of reading after a visit with a local clergyman. Such lack of adequate preparation would be

inexcusable in physics, chemistry, or language, and it would be equally inadequate in the teaching of religion.

Teachers of religion in the public school should have received training in the subject as an undergraduate major in a college certified by a rating body such as the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges. Such teachers should have received the usual training in teaching techniques and (where it is offered by a college or university) the professional semester, as all other students preparing to instruct in other subjects. A master's degree in the subject would, of course, be very desirable.

An administrator may, while accepting the central thesis of this article, immediately reject the possibility as unrealistic in terms of faculty salary expense. Courses in religion likely would not be in sufficient demand, at least initially, to rationalize an addition to the staff. Such a teacher, however, could be made available through the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to two or three schools in a given area without placing a serious economic strain on an already overburdened budget.

● *When should the study of religion be introduced into the public school?*

The teaching of religion, as defined and described here, would require in some courses frequent consideration of the philosophical and the abstract. In other courses, such teaching would presuppose some knowl-

edge of world geography and history, or the history of the United States. Therefore, I would *not* suggest the presentation of the subject in the elementary or the first two years in the middle school. The offering of an *elective* in religion might well begin in the eighth or ninth grade.

In summary, I believe that the teaching of religion as limited, defined, and briefly described here:

1. Cannot be properly considered as violating either the letter or the spirit of the constitutional provision concerning the separation of church and state, and

2. Is a completely appropriate study to be included as an elective subject in the curriculum of the public school *if*:

a. The subject matter is judiciously chosen;

b. The material is presented in a manner which is historical, descriptive, positive, and nondogmatic;

c. Those who are chosen to teach the subject have been adequately trained in the academic study of religion and educational theory, practices, and techniques; and

d. The teaching of this subject begins when the student is of an age that the subject matter can be presented without that type of oversimplification which may easily result in misconception and misunderstanding, and may lead to a later disregard for the academic respectability and contemporary relevance of what is in fact a most demanding, relevant, interesting, and valuable academic discipline. □

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