

RELIGION: NOT BUT

THE "taboo" against the study of religion in American public education has been imposed largely by educators themselves. This fact has grown out of confusion about what is legal and what is not according to state and federal courts. It also arises through pressures applied by certain religious groups and individuals whose sincerity and good intentions are not under question. However, it should be made clear that teaching *about* religion has never been expressly forbidden to public schools.

It is, rather, religious exercises of Bible reading, prayer, and other activities of a sectarian nature along with kerygmatic and doxological instruction in our schools that have been rejected by our courts. Nevertheless, misunderstandings about these decisions have erected until recently the "taboo" that erroneously excluded the academic study of religion.

It would appear now that the controversial 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* decision written by Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark may be the "open sesame" for certain kinds of Biblical and religious study in our schools. Justice Clark specifically pointed out in the decision the following often-quoted guidelines:

It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relation to the advancement of civilization. It certainly

may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. 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.* (Italics added.)

Concurring statements were made by Justices Brennan and Goldberg. Those by Brennan follow:

The holding of the Court today plainly does not foreclose teaching about Holy Scriptures or the differences between religious sects in classes of literature or history. . . . *To what extent, and at what points in the curriculum, religious materials should be cited are matters which the courts ought to entrust very largely to the experienced officials who superintend our Nation's public schools. They are the experts in such matters, and we are not.* (Italics added.)

These opinions were tested in 1970 when the Supreme Court upheld (by refusing to rehear) the state supreme court ruling that the University of Washington did not violate the First Amendment in offering and teaching an elective course, "English 309: The Bible as Literature" (*Calvary Bible Presbyterian Church v. Board of Regents of the University of Washington*).

Since the *Abington-Schempp* decision cleared away legal doubts about the objective use of the Bible and religion as academic study, many school boards, administrators,

"TEACHING" "TEACHING ABOUT"

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and teachers around the nation have become active in implementing such study in their schools. They have acted upon their belief that a truly complete and effective education must include the study of religion.

Why Teach About Religion?

Several common arguments support the belief that good education demands knowledge of religions. First, although our Constitution guarantees religious pluralism, the vital role that Judeo-Christian traditions have played in the historical and cultural development of our nation must be recognized. School systems are charged with a major responsibility to transmit those elements of the philosophy, the ideals, and the knowledge of America's past that remain pertinent to America's future.

Second, the student's understanding of Western and non-Western historical movements and societies is in ratio to his educational acquaintance with the religious beliefs, practices, and institutions which formed and influenced those movements and societies.

Third, the student's appreciation of his experiences in literature, art, music, drama, and the dance is significantly enhanced by an understanding of the allusions and references to the sacred writings and themes as well as to the theological nuances he encounters in these art forms. Furthermore,

the Bible and other religious writings are themselves worthy of study for their own intrinsic literary merit.

A fourth argument for the urgency of classroom study about religion bears on the traditional view that public education is the major civic agent for imparting the "purer morality" (Horace Mann) and for the shaping of habits of positive service in the moral conduct of life for America's youthful citizenry (John Dewey). That the United States today faces a crisis in the realm of morality and values is more than a rumor. That increasing numbers of American youth are cynically rejecting the religions, mores, and values of their fathers is widely acknowledged. And that we are all now engaged in a fifth psychological crisis should be cause for serious concern to thoughtful Americans and all men.

According to some psychologists, four congenitally received, narcissistic assaults have been made upon the human psyche, and these assaults have had great impact upon Western man's system of morals and values. These four blows to man's ego were dealt by Copernicus, Darwin, Freud, and Nietzsche, challenging man's image of his place in the universe, his superiority in Creation, his mas-

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tery of Self in a limited life, and his relationship with God.

The fifth assault, however, is not related to a single man but is the product of our time. It might well be called the "technological wound." Hiroshima, Nagasaki, nuclear overkill, environmental pollution and waste, and drug abuse are indeed manifestations of man's drive to self-destruct.

The Individual's Search for Values

Can an objective study of religion heal these wounds? Probably not. Nor do we suggest that the study of religion in public education be therapy. Nevertheless, the study of the religious traditions that once structured and nourished the American value system can provide the student with a basis for developing, ordering, and clarifying his own set of values. In contrast to years past when educators feared that the teaching of values in the school all too frequently was unsystematic and superficial, they have in recent years approached the problem of values orientation in more successful ways, especially in the departments of social studies and English.

Stress has been placed on the student's determining his own value concepts and standards by the use of a process called "value clarification," which is an exploration of the harmony between one's attitude and one's conduct. Of the many stunning examples of value clarification in the Bible, the Book of Job is but one that speaks to students most profoundly about values. Other sacred writings have their own unique examples too.

The educator who wishes to initiate courses about religion in his school must be concerned about the *how*, *who*, and *what*. The *how* was mandated by Justice Clark when he stipulated that (a) *objectivity* is the only acceptable approach to teaching about religion in public schools, and that (b) such study must be a *part* of a secular program of education. It is essential not only that *objectivity* be clearly defined by the administrators and the course instructor(s), but also that input be encouraged from the community.

There are two popular definitions of objectivity. One would require that there be a plurality in the presentation of interpretations, attitudes, and materials; that the free pursuit of related information be encouraged; and that reciprocal respect be maintained for contrary positions. The other would require a strict adherence to the teaching of facts and skills, with classroom activities consisting of the reading and limited analysis of religious writings as independent literary materials, and that methodology be restricted to student discussion rather than teacher lecture. Whatever definition of objectivity is found acceptable, that definition is the key to the structure of the course, the selection of the teacher(s), and the selection of materials.

That the study of religion be a *part* of the secular program is interpreted by many educators to mean that it be integrated into existing academic departments, notably social studies, English, and the humanities. For the many schools offering multiple elective programs in these three departments, this is no problem. Courses with such titles as "The History of Religions," "Comparative Religions," "Religions of the Western World," "The Bible as Literature," "The Bible in Literature," and "Man's Search for a Deity" are already being taught within these departments. But schools having conventional curricula need not rule out the study of religion. For example, units of selected study from the Bible are appropriate corollaries to the study of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to the study of the uses of language in advertising and propaganda, and in many other instances when sacred writings may be used as reference materials when studying secular subjects.

Teachers and Resources

Needless to say, selection of the teacher is of extreme importance. He must, of course, be a certified teacher, be committed to objectivity in the classroom, and be knowledgeable in the history of religions and their sacred writings. Many classroom teachers do not qualify and some do not even want to qualify. For those who want to qualify but

who lack sufficient scholarship, special in-service training could be offered locally; or, better still, more summer institutes at universities and colleges (such as the one offered at Indiana University and directed by James Ackerman and Thayer Warshaw) could be made available to teachers.

Although a few state boards of education have considered granting minor certification in elementary and secondary education for "academic study of religions," as Michigan did in 1970, they have not gone beyond the discussion stage. However, this is the direction that teacher preparation may take.

Equally serious to the success of any program dealing with study of religions is the matter of instructional materials. If the course is focused on the sacred writings themselves, then seeking reliable and readable translations is the responsibility of the teacher and/or department head. For those schools needing materials, the following information may be helpful:

A pluralistic approach to the study of the religious literature of the West; developed by the Department of Religious Studies, Pennsylvania State University; available from Augsburg Publishing House, 426 South Fifth Street, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55415.

Units on religious literature, "God and Man Narratives," for seventh grade; developed by the University of Nebraska; available from University of Nebraska Press, 901 North 17th Street, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508.

A series of social studies units on the history of religions and religions in history; developed by Florida State University; available from Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, Massachusetts 01867.

A K-12 social studies program with religion as one of the themes studied from alternative points of view; developed by the Educational

Research Council of America; available from Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Rockleigh, New Jersey 07647.

Teacher's references, *On Teaching the Bible as Literature: A Guide to Selected Biblical Narratives for Secondary Schools*, and *Teaching the Old Testament in English Classes* (and a collection of courses of study on the Bible as Literature and the Bible in Literature written by teachers attending the 1970 Institute on the Teaching of the Bible in Secondary English, in preparation); developed by Indiana University English Curriculum Study Center; available from Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

Two texts for students (*The Garden and the Wilderness*, and *The Temple and the Ruin*) correlating themes of selected religious narratives with secular materials (part of the *Literature: Uses of the Imagination* series and supervised by Northrop Frye); available from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 757 Third Avenue, New York City 10017.

A student text with prose translations of Bible selections organized by literary genre: *The Bible as Literature*, edited by Alton Capps; available from McGraw-Hill Book Company, Webster Division, Manchester Road, Manchester, Missouri 63011.

Ten years after Justice Clark's advice in the Abington-Schempp ruling that public schools may properly use the objective study of religion where appropriate to the secular curriculum, the taboo surrounding such study has largely been lifted in the secondary school. Study about religion, however, has not sifted down to the elementary school in any significant degree, and there the taboo seems to linger. Whether such study can be properly taught or should even be attempted is a matter for future exploration by educators, the religious community, and the community at large. □

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