Religious Minorities: In or Out of the Culturally Pluralistic Curriculum?

A major dimension of any culture is religion. Students have a right to learn of its impact on their own and other cultures and to have their own religion recognized and respected when studying the makeup of this nation and/or the world.

JOSEPH Goldberg, a tenth grade student in world history reads in any of several textbooks about “The Founding of the Church” (the “Church” refers to Christianity). The trial and death of Jesus often reads something like the following:

In the meantime among the Pharisees and Sadducees opposition had developed. Their narrow legalism and their hypocrisy had been condemned by Jesus. The Pharisees and aristocratic Sadducees would lose their authority if the teachings of Jesus were widely accepted. Thus they plotted to kill him.¹

¹ Although newer editions are somewhat improved over this, many students still must use texts with this type of wording. This item is a paraphrase based upon several texts still in use.

Countless millions of Jewish people have been slaughtered in the past twenty centuries. Such loaded, over-generalized, and judgmental words as these have played their part in furthering this ultimate form of discrimination.

A ten year old boy, Donald, quietly remains seated when his class stands to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. His religious beliefs prohibit his participation in this common activity, yet the teacher allows other students to ridicule and tease Don. The teacher adds to the “special focus” on Don by reminding the class that “justice for all” includes “fair treatment for odd-ball religious groups.”

Susan, a senior high school biology student, receives a low grade for the unit on evolution when she refuses to acknowledge this theory to be a fact. Her fundamentalist Christian faith is the cause of a low grade and teacher condemnation.

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William and Jane, a junior and senior in high school would like to participate in football and in marching band for which each is well qualified. They cannot do so because they are Seventh Day Adventists and nearly all games are scheduled on Friday nights—their Sabbath.

What Is the Curriculum?

The curriculum is much more than the courses of study offered by a school district. It consists, in reality, of all the experiences connected with a school—its courses, materials, methods, events, activities, procedures. Each of the preceding examples is a part of the curriculum. Each of the students involved has been "taught" that his/her religious beliefs are less than acceptable.

Certainly one goal of this broadly defined curriculum must be an understanding of culture and an empathetic attitude toward cultures different from one's own. Anything less would not be consistent with our nation's and world's pluralistic reality.

One of the major dimensions of any culture is religion. It influences the art, music, customs, celebrations, government, laws, values, occupations, health practices, diets, and traditions of a people. Students have the right to learn of this impact concerning other cultures and to have their own religion recognized and respected when studying the makeup of this nation and/or the world.

Have We Progressed?

A significant study of the treatment of minorities in social studies textbooks was conducted by Michael B. Kane in 1970 as a follow-up to similar studies in 1949 and 1960. In a preface to the current report, Oscar Cohen states, "It is not unreasonable to expect that, over twenty-one years, the readily admitted shortcomings of social studies textbooks in their treatment of racial, religious, and ethnic groups would have been corrected. But they have not."

Gerald S. Strober of the American Jewish Committee has also researched educational materials and has found these books and the ways in which they have been used to be most disturbing. He contends that our

Photograph courtesy of the author

A thorough study of U.S. textbooks and their treatment of Islam in history reports that 27 of 45 texts examined either have nothing on the Muslim world, are biased, simplistic, and error-filled, or are scanty and not always dependable in their treatment of Islam.
"tradition of teaching produced an anti-
Judaism, which in addition to downgrading
the value of Judaism as a religion, often re-
results in a demeaning of Jews as individuals." 3

Several studies as well as my own obser-
vations indicate that there is less negative
reaction to children’s missing school for reli-
gious reasons than there used to be. How-
ever, ridicule, extra assignments, and teacher
disapproval still occur much too often. Reli-
gious intolerance is in action when eight year
old Patrick is required to do an extra page
of math problems because he attended a spe-
cial mass which was held on a school day.

That fewer negative dimensions are
found now than in the past is heartening.
It does indicate a movement on the contin-
um but a further danger exists if the
curriculum bogs down in a neutral position.
The curriculum of most public schools finds
itself in a neutral position, which usually
results in religion’s being ignored and
avoided. The American Association of School Administrators concluded that . . .

A curriculum which ignored religion
would itself have serious religious implications. It would seem to proclaim that religion has not been as real in men’s lives as health or politics or economics. By omission it would appear to
deny that religion has been and is important
in man’s history—a denial of the obvious. In
day-by-day practice, the topic cannot be avoided.
As an integral part of man’s culture, it must
be included. 4

We still have far to go in developing a
positive and active curriculum in which reli-
gion is recognized and studied in an open
and non-confessional manner.

What About the Court?

The U.S. Supreme Court clearly stated
that “One’s education is not complete without
a study of comparative religion and its rela-
tionship to the advancement of civilization.”

Justice Tom Clark further emphasized,
“Nothing we have said here indicates that
such a study . . . of religion, when presented
objectively as part of a secular program in
education, may not be effected consistent
with the First Amendment.” 5

The schools thus were encouraged to
include religion studies in their curriculum
and to enable students openly and objectively
to study about religion. Such study is needed
in order to understand and appreciate more
fully our own nation’s rich and diverse reli-
gious pluralism as well as that of the world.
The Court’s decision/recommendations
have several significant implications for the
schools and for religious minorities. Both
curricular materials and school/teacher at-
titudes are deeply involved.

Textbooks Limited in Scope

Textbooks and other materials have al-
ways been limited in scope and adequacy of
treatment of religious and other minorities.
The Kane study reports:

Not one world history (book) makes any
overt reference to the presence of people of
Oriental origin in the United States. Of the
thirty American history and American prob-
lems and civics texts analyzed, two histories
and eight problems and civics texts violate the
criterion of inclusion by totally failing to men-
tion this minority group. 6

William J. Griswold, a key investigator
in a thorough study of U.S. textbooks and
their treatment of Islam in history, reports
that 27 of 45 texts examined either have
nothing on the Muslim world, are biased,
simplistic, and error-filled, or are scanty and
not always dependable in their treatment of
Islam. 7

Several bright spots do exist, however.
Both the Allyn and Bacon and the Addison-
Wesley elementary social studies series make

3 Gerald S. Strober. “Inter-Group Images in
Textbooks.” Religious Education 68 (2): 202;
4 American Association of School Adminis-
trators. Religion in the Public Schools. New York:

6 Kane, op. cit., p. 122.
7 William J. Griswold is an Associate Pro-
fessor of History at Colorado State University, Fort
Collins, and a member of the Middle East Studies
Association located at New York University, 50
Washington Square, New York City.
a concerted effort to recognize religious
groups and minorities in our own nation as
well as in the world. For example, one of the
nine families presented for study in *People
in Families* is a Hutterite family in Canada.*

The government text, *American Political
Behavior*, has a section devoted to a study
of the Amish people and their problems with
being a part of the American system of laws.
It is a most sensitive and empathetic presen-
tation. 9

The Harvard Social Studies Project pro-
duced a series of pamphlets for use at the
secondary level. One is entitled, *Religious
Freedom: Minority Faiths and Majority Rule*,
and would help all students to understand
the difficult position in which many people
find themselves. 10

**Attitudes Must Change**

If the curriculum is to be pluralistic
toward religious minorities, then school and
teacher attitudes/practices must change.
Such a basic prerequisite as an environment
for free expression of student beliefs and
ideas when related to the content under dis-
cussion must be developed. Students must
not feel that their religious convictions will
diminish grades, opportunities, status, or re-
spect within the school and classroom.

Instead of receiving “static” for being
absent from school for a religious event, stu-
dents should be encouraged to tell the class
about these special observances—especially
their importance and significance to their
practitioners. This will build respect and
add understanding, both of which are needed
in large quantities.

The scheduling of “extracurricular”
events (music, drama, clubs, athletics) may
need to be examined very closely. Entire

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* Mary Shindelus and Mary Durkin. *People
  in Families*. Menlo Park, California: Addison-

9 Howard D. Mehlinger and John Patrick.
  *American Political Behavior*. Lexington, Massa-

10 Donald Oliver and Fred Newmann. *Reli-
  gious Freedom: Minority Faiths and Majority Rule*.
  Columbus, Ohio: American Education Publications,
  1967.

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states may need to change some of their
governing rules on such matters, for example,
no games after 6 p.m. on the day preceding
a school day which thus forces Friday and
Saturday night schedules.

Special religious programs on Christmas
or even Christmas-Chanukah frequently ig-
nore our pluralistic nature. Philip Jacobson
recommends “the development of reasonable
guidelines to govern the preparation and pre-
sentation of such programs.” Speaking for
the Human Relations Advisory Council of
the National Jewish Committee, he adds:

We ask merely that the public school pro-
tect our children from programs and emphases
that challenge the teachings of our homes. We
ask merely that the public school apply the
Golden Rule at this season of the year, and
recognize that our public schools are part of a
pluralistic society, not the property of any
church. 11

**PERSC**

The Public Education Religion Studies
Center at Wright State University, Dayton,
Ohio, founded in October 1972, already has
established a working relationship with
schools throughout the nation. Through its
free newsletter and its consulting services,
workshops, in-service and research efforts,
PERSC is assisting many districts in their
efforts to provide a culturally pluralistic cur-
criculum which includes religious minorities.
The Center

... supports this commitment to religious
freedom. The academic study of religion can
contribute to the protection of this freedom by
providing information and experiences which
help to dispel the stereotypes that encourage
religious prejudice and discrimination. Such
study can also help develop a sense of human
community and an appreciation of our com-
mon humanity in the midst of our diversi-

ties. 12

11 Philip Jacobson. “Religion and Public Edu-
cation: Issues and Concerns.” *Religious Education*

12 Peter Bracher, James Panoch, Nicholas
Piediscalzi, and James Uphoff. *Public Education
Religion Studies: Questions and Answers.* Dayton,
Ohio: PERSC, Wright State University, 1974. p. v.