

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

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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 Cohen² 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

² Oscar Cohen. “Preface.” In: Michael B. Kane. *Minorities in Textbooks*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970. p. i.



Photographs 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 results in a demeaning of Jews as individuals."³

Several studies as well as my own observations indicate that there is less negative reaction to children's missing school for religious reasons than there used to be. However, ridicule, extra assignments, and teacher disapproval still occur much too often. Religious intolerance is in action when eight year old Patrick is required to do an extra page of math problems because he attended a special 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 continuum 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 religion 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 relationship to the advancement of civilization."

³ Gerald S. Strober. "Inter-Group Images in Textbooks." *Religious Education* 68 (2): 202; March-April 1973.

⁴ American Association of School Administrators. *Religion in the Public Schools*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964. pp. 53-55.

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 religious 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 attitudes are deeply involved.

Textbooks Limited in Scope

Textbooks and other materials have always 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 problems and civics texts analyzed, two histories and eight problems and civics texts violate the criterion of inclusion by totally failing to mention 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

⁵ *Schempp*, 374 U.S. 225 (1963).

⁶ *Kane, op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁷ William J. Griswold is an Associate Professor 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.⁸

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 presentation.⁹

The Harvard Social Studies Project produced 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 discussion must be developed. Students must not feel that their religious convictions will diminish grades, opportunities, status, or respect within the school and classroom.

Instead of receiving "static" for being absent from school for a religious event, students 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

⁸ Mary Shindelus and Mary Durkin. *People in Families*. Menlo Park, California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1972. pp. 66-79.

⁹ Howard D. Mehlinger and John Patrick. *American Political Behavior*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Ginn and Co., 1972.

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

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 ignore our pluralistic nature. Philip Jacobson recommends "the development of reasonable guidelines to govern the preparation and presentation of such programs." Speaking for the Human Relations Advisory Council of the National Jewish Committee, he adds:

We ask merely that the public school protect 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 curriculum 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 common humanity in the midst of our diversities.¹² □

¹¹ Philip Jacobson. "Religion and Public Education: Issues and Concerns." *Religious Education* 68 (2): 207-209, March-April 1973.

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.

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