

Unless steps are taken to stem their flow, two currents in contemporary schooling have the potential for an ill-advised merger. One current, the "back to basics" movement, seems to be growing in strength and prominence. The other current, religion studies in the public schools, possesses deeper historical roots but far less prominence. I contend that the necessarily liberal nature of religion studies cannot be merged with the thoroughgoing conservatism of the "back to basics" movement. Such a merger would inhibit attainment of a culturally and constitutionally sound place for the study of religion in the public schools.

The Background

The primary responsibility for religious education in our nation rests with the home and the church. However, religion in the public schools, when "presented objectively as part of a secular program of education,"¹ provides an exciting possibility for religious education of a different nature and for different purposes. This brief guideline, enunciated by the Supreme Court of the United States in the *Abington* decision, gives clear indication of the unique nature of religious education in school as contrasted to that of home and church. The catch phrase is that this must be "teaching about" religion—a phrase taken from the concurring opinion of Justice Brennan in the *Abington* decision²—as opposed to the "teaching of" religion. Many authorities view the "teaching about" religious education as a necessary element of the public school curriculum. As Justice Jackson said in his concurring opinion in *McCullum*, "The fact is that, for good or ill, nearly everything in our culture worth transmitting, everything which gives meaning to life, is saturated with religious influences. . . ."³ Jackson believed that many of the subjects in the public school curriculum cannot be fully understood in the absence of a proper presentation of the influence of religion on that area of study. That opinion is shared by professionals in both religion and education. In contrast to

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RELIGION STUDIES AND "BACK TO BASICS" —FRIENDS OR FOES?

Teaching traditional religious values is incompatible with the goals of religion studies in the public schools.

the religious education normally found in home and church, this is a different kind of religious education, undertaken for different purposes, and, in the public context, represents a truly exciting opportunity.

At one time in our nation's history, religious instruction in the public schools was accepted practice. Township schools of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the forebears of our present public schools, were expected to provide religious education. In keeping with Protestant theory and Puritan practice, children were taught to read in order that they might understand Scripture and thereby manage their own salvation. However, our youthful experiment in republican government made it necessary for all citizens to have a general education. This need gave rise to the conviction that *public* schools could not be instruments of sectarian religious instruction.

Under the leadership of many prominent educators, prodded by political ferment for education of the potential voter, and pressured by public opinion, the states began to provide public education in the nineteenth century, most notably in the latter half of that century. Many diverse religious faiths were represented in the constituency of these public schools, and the religious sects struggled for control. This struggle and the presence of sectarian religious teaching in the schools hindered the state in achieving its aims with

the institution it had sponsored for political and social concerns. Moreover, as the society became increasingly pluralistic, the democratic ideal of protecting individual religious beliefs from manipulation by government took on increasing social significance. As a result, the religiously-oriented curriculum materials of the earlier public grammar schools were slowly replaced with secular curriculum materials. While religious influence through the curriculum was curtailed, religious influence through devotional activity continued.

It was not until the beginning of the second half of the present century that the constitutionality of these devotional practices was challenged in the Supreme Court of the United States. The key decisions were *Engel v. Vitale*⁴ and *Abington v. Schempp*. It was the consensus of these decisions that the official opening of the public school day could not include the recitation of any state-sponsored prayer or reading from the Bible as such practices were clearly violations of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Considering the ruling of the Court in *McCullum* and the decision announced in *Zorach v. Clauson*,⁵ both addressing issues related to early school release for religious purposes, it would seem that the Court had set the major constitutional benchmarks for the participation of the public schools in religion and religious education.

The issue of the place of religion in the public schools, however, was not settled in the public arena. Public reaction to the *Engel* and *Abington* decisions was mixed but strong. Some hailed the decisions as landmark pronouncements in the quest for religious liberty. Many, on the other hand, charged that these decisions climaxing a century-long process of removing sectarian religion from the public schools had made those schools "godless." The controversy continues today with calls for constitutional amendments to legalize prayer in the public schools. Attempts to further test the legality of various devotional exercises in the public schools, such as the 1973 Massachusetts law requiring a moment for silent meditation or prayer at the beginning of each school day,⁶ move through the litigation process. Public school curriculum materials are under attack as alleged violators of the religious beliefs of certain sectors of the tax-paying public.⁷ Moreover, as indicated by R. B. Dierenfield's most recent study, religion in various forms remains in many public schools.⁸ Some of this presence is constitutional while some would appear to be in violation of the Constitution.

"Back to Basics"

The fact is that the official presence or absence of religion in public education, either educationally or devotionally, is by no means a settled issue in the forum of public opinion. In this context those who wish to provide constitutionally sound religious study in the public schools must be concerned about a current situation. In an atmosphere of continuing debate marked by heated charge and countercharge and motivated by deeply held emotional commitments, the proponents of "teaching about" religion must beware of the "back to basics" movement because the movement provides a ready vehicle for re-introduction of the sectarian religion so eagerly sought by a large segment of the population. "Back to basics" must be distinguished from basic education, which has to do with teaching children and young people the basic intellectual skills necessary for participation in contemporary society. Both educational liberals and conservatives agree about the importance of basic education. The flash point of the controversy occurs when

". . . if teaching about religion in public education is to be constitutionally sound, students cannot be told what to think or believe."

one attempts to say precisely what pedagogical form it should take.

Looking for specifics about the nature of the "back to basics" movement, Ben Brodinsky found that:

- The movement expresses a strong call for emphasis on the traditional academic subjects in the elementary and secondary schools.
- Textbooks that do not violate traditional values are to be used in teaching these academic subjects.
- The classroom is to be teacher-centered and teacher-controlled at all levels of public schooling.
- Drill, recitation, homework, and testing are the methodologies to be employed.
- Strict discipline is to be the order of the day, with corporal punishment an easy recourse for the teacher whose classroom rules have been violated by the recalcitrant student.
- Promotion at all levels must be based solely upon demonstrated mastery of the subject matter as evidenced by test performance.
- Educational frills and experimentation must be eliminated and students put through a progression of tightly structured required courses of study.
- Innovative teaching techniques and curriculum designs are to be eschewed in favor of tried and true teaching methods and curriculum materials.
- It is a common affirmation that every attempt will be made to "Put patriotism back in the schools. And

love of one's country. *And for God.*"⁹ (italics added)

A reader reasonably familiar with conservative educational philosophy, whether it is called classical or traditional, essentialist or perennialist, will immediately recognize the fundamental tenets of that philosophy in this picture.

One "back to basics" enthusiast is quoted as follows: "We have defined a traditional school as a place dedicated to the concept of scholarship, patriotism, courtesy, respect, responsibility, and citizenship. A traditional school strives to develop in its students the highest possible competence in fundamental skills; it strives to develop strong citizenship, based on *commonly accepted spiritual values* and strong moral fiber"¹⁰ (italics added). The "back to basics" movement, whatever else it may be, is a growing and forceful assertion of staunchly conservative educational philosophy and practice with strong moral and religious overtones. Religion will occupy an important place in the "back to basics" approach to schooling. It is this emphasis upon religion that is a concern because the religion to be stressed is traditional Christianity.

Historically, American public education, as an institution of the state, has undergone a long and often painful attempt to build a positive relationship with religion as an experienced phenomenon, as a force in the development of culture and society, and as a structure of values commanding deep commitment among its constituency. Currently, through the potential presented by the study of religion in public schools, this positive and constructive relationship seems, at long last, to be a viable possibility. With the emergence of the "back to basics" movement and its emphasis upon "love . . . for God" and "commonly accepted spiritual values," the way seems all the more clear for full realization of a positive relationship—if only those concerned with religion studies in public education will unite with the "back to basics" advocates. However tempting in terms of goal-attainment, the proponents of constitutionally sound religious instruction in the public schools must not opt for this union.

If religion is to be "taught about"

in the public schools through curriculum infusion or courses of study, such study must not be undertaken in the conservative mold. Conservative education professes possession of the right answers, the correct insights, the proper value structures, and the moral and spiritual codes to be followed. The student is expected to accept and retain these answers, insights, structures, and codes. This is the nature of conservative education and philosophy. However, if teaching about religion in public education is to be constitutionally sound, students cannot be told what to think or believe. The pluralism of our society and the constitutional protection of individual religious beliefs will not permit such teaching.

However much one may abhor labels and wish to avoid stereotyping, religion studies in the public school setting, from a philosophical perspective, must be truly "liberal" education. Such study must raise penetrating and meaningful questions, search for all appropriate alternative solutions, and leave the student free to think for himself/herself in the selection of a tentative solution that will be put to the test of experience. Facts will play no less a part in the study of religion than in any subject studied in the public schools, but, in such studies, a "process" or a phenomenological understanding is a far more important goal than is accumulation of facts. Indeed, in keeping with the liberal nature of this approach, process and content so merge as to become all but indistinguishable in the teaching-learning process.¹¹

A study of the rulings of the Supreme Court identifies the fundamental guidelines that study of religion in the public schools must follow. Specifically, such study must be undertaken from an objective point of view and part of a program of secular (rather than religious) education.¹² The simplicity of this guideline is deceptive, but a brief analysis of the objectivity called for will give some idea of the antithesis between "teaching about" religion in the public schools and a "back to basics" conservatism, or "teaching of" religion. Furthermore, such an analysis will demonstrate that a liberal approach to religion studies is legally demanded.

The guideline of objectivity is a

difficult one. One problem in understanding this concept lies in the common juxtaposition of objectivity with subjectivity in popular discussion. For many persons, objectivity is identified with the objectivity of pure science and, therefore, connotes lack of involvement, absence of personal feeling or commitment, and a kind of insular distance between the scientist and the subject of the study. However, a comparison of the "science" of pragmatism with the "science" of the new technological philosophy of education¹³ will demonstrate that science and scientific investigation do not have narrow and restrictive definitions.

Moreover, as existential philosophy has demonstrated, there is no such thing as pure objectivity because objectivity is based upon the intentionality of a subject—subjectivity is the very foundation of objectivity. As the current humanistic movement in education puts it, the human being fully attends only to that which has meaning to him or her; therefore, personal involvement is necessary in any learning process, whether it be study of religion or chemistry. Scientific objectivity may provide a fruitful approach for scientific investigation, but it is a poor technique in the teaching-learning process.

David E. Engel correctly interpreted the objectivity demanded by the Court when he wrote: "... it seems to me that objectivity in religion study has less to do with neutrality than with free inquiry and thorough scholarship."¹⁴ Religion studies must be dedicated to free and open inquiry into matters of personal importance. It is an approach which stresses the method of raising proper questions and searching for their potential solutions rather than emphasizing the nature of the answers found; of attempting to see things as they are apart from preconceived notions and commitments. Such study provides a way to "get inside" ideas and affirmations other than our own and thereby grow in understanding. Understanding the religious beliefs of others is possibly the rationale for such study in the public setting. As Philip H. Phenix has written: "Objectivity . . . means . . . involvement in the interests of others and commitment to the community of persons who endeavor to understand the na-

ture of things as they are and not for purposes of group propaganda and advantage."¹⁵ Objectivity demands an open approach to education—open ended and open minded. Objectivity in education specifically precludes any predetermined limits upon thought or a priori answers that must be accepted. The resulting educational process is not, by any stretch of the imagination, compatible with a "back to basics" conservative education and its philosophy. The crucial difference is between "teaching about" and "teaching of" and, while the phrases may be trite given the complexity of the problem, that difference must not be compromised. ■

¹ *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Edward Lewis Schemp*. 374 U.S., 225.

² *Abington v. Schemp*. 300.

³ *People of State of Illinois ex rel. McCollum v. Board of Education of School Dist. No. 71, Champaign County, Ill.* 333 U.S., 236.

⁴ *Steven I. Engel v. William J. Vitale*. 370 U.S., 421 (1962).

⁵ *Zorach v. Clauson*. 343 U.S., 306 (1952).

⁶ Thomas J. Flygare, "Schools and the Law," *Phi Delta Kappan* 58 (December 1976): 354-355.

⁷ Peter B. Dow, "MACOS: Social Studies in Crisis," *Educational Leadership* 34 (October 1976): 35-39.

⁸ R. B. Dierenfield, "Religion in Public Schools: Its Current Status," *Religious Education* LXVIII (January-February 1973): 96-114.

⁹ Ben Brodinsky, "Back to the Basics: The Movement and Its Meaning," *Phi Delta Kappan* 58 (March 1977): 522-527.

¹⁰ David L. Martin, "What Your Bosses Have in Store for You," *Learning* 6 (August/September 1977): 47.

¹¹ See J. Cecil Parker and Louis J. Rubin, *Process as Content*. (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1966).

¹² *Abington v. Schemp*, 347 U.S., 225.

¹³ See Van Cleve Morris and Young Pai, "Education as Behavior Engineering: A Technological Model," *Philosophy and the American School*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), pp. 302-350.

¹⁴ David E. Engel, "Objectivity in the Teaching of Religion Studies in Public Schools," *Religious Education* LXXI (January-February 1976): 85.

¹⁵ Philip H. Phenix, "The Role of Religion," *Foundations of Education*, ed. by George F. Kneller, 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1971), pp. 169-170.

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