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Religious Freedom: Teach It or Lose It

Support for separation of church and state is eroding because our heritage of religious freedom is not being taught in the nation's schools.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . ."

The opening clauses of the First Amendment may be the most widely accepted but least understood words in the Bill of Rights. During the next five years, as we celebrate 200 years of constitutional government, educators have a unique opportunity, as well as a responsibility, to focus attention on America's ongoing struggle to preserve religious freedom. Current battles in the public schools over textbook censorship,

teaching "creation science," state-sponsored religious exercises, and other controversial practices show that many Americans are either ignorant or confused about the meaning and significance of "no establishment" and "free exercise." These battles also show that we face a rising tide of religious intolerance and a serious erosion of support for the separation of religion and government.

Causes of Ignorance and Confusion About Constitutional Guarantee

Why are so many people confused about the meaning of our first free-

dom? Many educators blame the ambiguities of recent Supreme Court rulings, the cries by the religious right for adherence to their version of Christianity, and the media treatment of religious issues. The root of our problem, however, may be closer to home—in the classroom.

Four recent textbook studies, including one of my own, conclude that widely used social studies texts largely ignore the role of religions and, consequently, the story of religious freedom, in American history and society.¹ From this, we can also conclude that our heritage of religious freedom is not being adequately taught in the nation's schools. This lack of educa-

tion about a vital dimension of our heritage must surely be a major contributor to the sad fact that many Americans neither fully understand nor accept the principles of religious liberty embodied in the First Amendment.

These four studies provide irrefutable evidence that religion is badly neglected and poorly treated in social studies texts. This conclusion is a common ground shared by people on different sides of the debate about the role of religion in the schools. For example, the best known of the studies, a National Institute of Education report by Paul Vitz, represents the conservative Christian perspective that decries neglect of "traditional values," including religion, in the curriculum. Vitz views the poor representation of religion in textbooks as part of a deliberate secularization of the schools by, among others, textbook writers with a "liberal bent." Vitz's ideology, however, does not invalidate his basic finding about the absence of religion in the texts. The study, sponsored by a liberal advocacy group, People for the American Way, while denying a secular conspiracy, arrives at the same conclusion.²

Because religion is not discussed in the schools, students learn little about the history of religious freedom. My own textbook study, reinforced by meetings with teachers and students in schools throughout the nation, shows a shocking absence of religious freedom education in social studies curriculums. Beginning with U.S. history texts, I found, in agreement with Robert Bryan's study for LEARN, Inc., that consideration of religion and religious freedom is usually confined to the colonial period. Moreover, even that discussion is frequently superficial and misleading.

In most U.S. history texts, religion virtually disappears after the Revolution, and the story of religious freedom ends with the passage of the First Amendment in 1789. Readers of these books learn practically nothing about the several great religious "awakenings" that influenced the direction of our history. The proliferation of religious movements, the struggles of their members for liberty, and the *de*

facto Protestant establishment during much of our history are a few of the more obvious areas of neglect. The story of religious liberty, perhaps the greatest American contribution to world civilization, is not told in U.S. history textbooks.

Most government and civics textbooks are equally deficient. The principle of church-state separation, one of the most remarkable achievements in history, is almost completely ignored

Supplementary Resources for Teachers

Until better texts are written, teachers must rely on supplementary materials to integrate religious freedom issues into history, government, and civics courses.

To put needed materials into teachers' hands, I have compiled *Religious Freedom in America: A Teacher's Guide*, published by Americans United Research Foundation (900 Silver Spring Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20910; send \$2 for postage and handling). We have already sent over 25,000 complimentary copies to teachers throughout the United States. It contains descriptions of nearly 50 audiovisual and printed resources for use in high schools, plus an annotated bibliography and lists of field trips and helpful organizations.

The bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution has inspired a few new teaching resources that give an adequate presentation of the First Amendment's religion clauses. One of the better efforts is *The Constitution: Evolution of a Government*, published by the National Archives and Social Issues Resource Series, Inc. (Social Issues Resource Series, P.O. Box 2507, Boca Raton, FL 33427; 800-327-0513).

Of the films available, several reflect the educational community's general reluctance to discuss religious issues. Two of my favorite examples are one about the Leo Frank case that ignores anti-Semitism and one about the Mormon conflicts in the nineteenth century that ignores the religious beliefs of both the Mormons and their neighbors.

On the other hand, a number of films do fine jobs of presenting religious freedom issues. Three good ones are *In Search of Tolerance* (McGraw-Hill, P.O. Box 641, Del Mar, CA 92014); *The Schempp Case* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 425 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60645); and *The Bill of Rights in Action: Freedom of Religion* (Barr Films, P.O. Box 5667, 3490 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107). These films are available for rental or purchase.

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in the texts I examined. “Good citizenship” is presented with little or no reference to the religious pluralism of our society or to the meaning of religious liberty and toleration. The evolution and workings of our government are explained without reference to the implications of the religion clauses for our constitutional system. These findings show why many Americans are bewildered by current church-state battles and fall prey to the many distorted interpretations of the First Amendment popular in the United States today.

Educators and Publishers Fear Controversy

In recent years, the fear of controversy appears to have played a major role in the decision by textbook publishers to neglect religion. In this respect, publishers mirror the reluctance of many teachers and administrators to risk community conflict by mentioning religion in the classroom. Moreover, many educators hold the mistaken notion that teaching about religion is unconstitutional, despite the fact that, in school prayer and Bible reading decisions, the Supreme Court strongly encouraged objective study of religions in the public schools.¹

Ironically, the avoidance of religious questions has itself created controversy! The neglect of religion in textbooks and in social studies courses, whether inadvertent or deliberate, has invited charges of “censorship by omission” and “a secular humanist conspiracy.”²

The best answer to such charges is to offer textbooks that objectively and accurately portray the religious dimensions of American life and history. Such texts will help students to understand the significance and meaning of our long struggle to maintain religious freedom. And this understanding will, in turn, promote religious toleration and a full appreciation of America’s religious diversity. This may not be what school critics, especially those on the religious right, have in mind, but it is the only constitutionally acceptable and educationally sound way to teach students about religion and religious freedom.

A balanced presentation of religions in history and government texts will

not be easy, given our religious diversity and the complexity of the issues involved. Nevertheless, the difficulty of the task must not deter us from doing what must be done to give students a full and accurate education.

For nearly two centuries, the religion clauses of the First Amendment charted a course in freedom unparalleled in human history. The United States remains a nation where government and religion are separate and hundreds of religious groups flourish. We must ensure that the present generation of Americans receives the tools necessary to preserve and protect this freedom for the next 200 years and beyond. □

1. Robert Bryan, *Pseudo-History, Anti-History: How Public School Textbooks Treat Religion* (Washington, D.C.: LEARN, Inc., 1985). Paul C. Vitz, “Equity in Values Education: Do the Values Education Aspects of Public School Curricula Deal Fairly With Diverse Belief Systems?” National Institute of Education Grant: NIE-G-84-0012 (Project No. 2-0099) Final Report, 15 July 1985, 1-4. Charles C. Haynes, “Teaching About Religious Freedom in American Secondary Schools,” Typescript. Americans United Research Foundation Religious Liberty Education Project Study I, 15 December 1985. O. L. Davis, Jr., Gerald Ponder, Lynn M. Burlbaw, Maria Garza-Lubeck, and Alfred Moss, *Looking at History: A Review of Major U.S. History Textbooks* (Washington, D.C.: People for the American Way, 1986).

2. For a summary of the four studies see John W. McDermott, Jr., “The Treatment of Religion in School Textbooks: A Political Analysis and A Modest Proposal,” *Religion and Public Education* 13 (Fall 1986): 62-77.

3. For an overview of this topic see Charles R. Kniker, *Teaching About Religion in the Public Schools* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappan Educational Foundation, 1985).

4. For a brief, provocative discussion of these charges see Richard John Neuhaus, “Belief Is in the Eye of the Believer,” *The Religion and Society Report* 3, 8 (August, 1986): 1-2.

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