# Taking Religion Seriously

## Religious Neutrality and Our Schools

The last century has seen a purging of both religious influence and information from our classrooms. For many, this seems only natural and proper. They would argue that the Supreme Court has determined that government schools must be neutral regarding religion. Since the landmark Everson v. Board of Education case in 1947, the law of the land has been that "Neither a state nor the Federal government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another."{1} However, writing for the majority, Justice Hugo Black added that the state must be neutral in matters of religion in two specific ways. First, it must be neutral among the different religions, but it must also be neutral in how it treats religious belief and non-belief.{2}

This question of neutrality is at the heart of my thoughts in this article. We are investigating whether or not our schools are taking religion seriously; at least seriously enough to be considered neutral in the sense of Supreme Court decisions. Excluding the topic of religion from our schools is not neutrality; it violates the second sense of neutrality given by Justice Black. And if our schools are not neutral regarding religion, they are privileging those who claim to have no religion. We will argue that this kind of education is actually a form of indoctrination into a secular perspective, or what is often called the worldview of naturalism.

There is an additional reason to ask the question, are schools taking religion seriously enough? It can be argued that without sufficient information regarding religion a person cannot be said to be truly educated. Religious ideas and perspectives permeate art and literature. Without knowledge of

Christianity and the Bible, students will miss the meaning of key ideas embedded in both stories and pictures. They will only have a secular framework of interpretation for understanding literature and art.

Religion is also a crucial variable for understanding international affairs. Current relations between nations and between culture groups are often incomprehensible unless one understands the religious imperatives driving the people within them. To know little or nothing about the various religions of the world leaves one with a skewed view of why things happen and what might occur next.

Does religion still matter? To answer this question, we will look at the current state of teaching on religion in our schools and address possible changes that might need to be made. Finally, we will consider questions and concerns that arise if our proposed changes were implemented.

## Religion Still Matters

Religion still matters in our society, at least enough to make it an important topic in our schools. Numerous surveys indicate that the vast majority of Americans still claim belief in God. Only about 5% of Americans label themselves atheist or agnostic. Another 10% to 15% either refuse to answer the question or are indifferent to the topic; this leaves between 85% and 90% who still claim belief in a God of some kind.{3} Belief is also high among our well educated; a 2006 Gallop poll found that 77% of those with a postgraduate degree have little doubt that God exists.{4}

A large majority of us claim that the Bible is the inspired Word of God (77%), that there is a heaven (63%), and that religion is very important in their lives (57%).{5} Close to 80% of Americans still identify with a specific religious tradition, and 40% claim to attend religious services weekly.

In 2005 they gave $93.2 billion to religious organizations.

By any measure, America remains far more religious than its European neighbors. In his book *Does God Make a Difference?,* Warren Nord documents the considerable difference between our two cultures. According to a 2005 survey, only 52% of Europeans claim belief in God, although 27% believe in some sort of spirit or life force. Eighteen percent are atheist or agnostic. In a number of European countries fewer than 10% of the people attend church weekly.{6}

The rest of the world is closer to the U.S. than to Europe in its beliefs. About 85% identify with a religious tradition and there has been rapid recent growth in evangelical Protestantism in the Third World. Although it has been popular in recent years for academics to promote the thesis that the world is going through rapid secularization, it now appears that Europe is not necessarily the model for the future. That said, there does appear to be a trend in both the U.S. and Europe towards claiming to be spiritual "apart from churches, dogma and tradition."{7}

So what does this mean? It tells us that a large majority of people in this country interpret reality through a religious lens. Whether it's economics, ethics, science or art, many Americans continue to make sense of their world and make important decisions based on their religious faith.

The twentieth century experienced a relentless assault on religion from governments (Russia and its satellites and China) and ideologies (Marxism, psychoanalytic theory, existentialism), but considering its continued influence in the U.S. and the rest of the world, it still seems prudent to teach our students about it.

## Religion Removed

According to Warren Nord, students in American schools and universities learn very little about God and religion. His book reflects his study of national academic standards and high school textbooks in our public schools for history, economics, and science. Let's look at his results for history.

Information on religion makes up only about 10% of the *world* history standards and less than 5% of the *American* history standards.{8} History textbooks tend to do somewhat better, but Dr. Nord's conclusion is that both fall dramatically short of what should be included. To begin with, not enough material is presented for students to actually make sense of any particular religion, and most of what is found predates the seventeenth century. The topic of religion simply disappears after that. Information about the twentieth century tends to show religion in an unfavorable manner, often connecting it to violence and warfare.

Another deficiency is the tendency to freeze theological thinking in the past by neglecting to show how religious traditions have responded to modernity. The rise of influential theologians, religious movements, or the science-faith dialogue of the last hundred years are missing. When religious topics are covered in the material they are viewed through a secular framework or lens. Thinking about history through a religious lens is never considered. For instance, most texts mention that our dating system is dependent on Jesus Christ's birth date, but they fail to say why. None of them include Christianity's claim that Jesus was God incarnate.

Finally, all students are to learn eleven long-term patterns in world history. Not surprisingly, none of the patterns are religious ones. Unfortunately, the other academic fields fare even worse. For instance, the National Science Education Standards contains no discussion of the relationship of

science and religion in its 262 pages.

How about religion in our universities? Nord estimates that "about 10 percent of undergraduates in public universities take a course in which religious ways of making sense of the world are taken seriously."{9} He goes on to write that "for the great majority of American students in secondary schools and universities, less than 1 percent of the content of their education will deal with religion."{10}

As a result he concludes that, "They will not be taught that God doesn't exist, but they will inevitably learn to interpret whatever they study in secular categories."{11} He adds that textbooks, the official curriculum, and the governing purposes of public education have become almost completely secular.

## Real Education

Dr. Nord, who taught philosophy of religion and education at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, makes his case with a completely secular argument. Let's start with his statement of the problem and then look at some of the specifics. Dr. Nord writes, "Public education leaves students religiously illiterate, it falls far short of religious neutrality, and it borders on secular indoctrination (if only unintended)." He adds that "schools and universities teach students to accept secular ways of making sense of the world as a matter of faith."{12}

Nord comes to this conclusion as part of his discovery that we no longer provide students with what has traditionally been called a liberal education. The word "liberal" here is not used in a political sense but rather as a label for a set of generally agreed upon educational goals. He argues that an essential aspect of a liberal education "requires that students be initiated into an ongoing discussion about how to make sense of the world—one in which religious voices must be

included as live options."

According to Dr. Nord there are four critical dimensions to a liberal education. First, education must be broad rather than narrow or highly specialized. Too narrow of a focus tends to end up more like indoctrination than like an education. Students need to consider alternate ways of interpreting the world if they are to be able to think critically about the problems that face us. Next, in order to understand different cultures and traditions students must have the opportunity to get inside them. In other words, they must hear arguments for a given position from people who actually believe them, not through a filter that merely reinforces our society's current biases.

Another component of a liberal education is that it deals with things that really matter, issues that go to the core of one's worldview. It should consider questions like, what is ultimate reality, what is our nature as human beings, and how does one know right from wrong?

Finally, all of this should be introduced to students in the form of a conversation about making sense of contending points of view. Our current form of instruction is mostly a series of narrowly focused monologues with little attempt to tie them together to other courses much less other cultures and traditions. It removes much of the conflict inherent in the discussion.

Nord argues that theology should be at the core of this conversation. The university should be a place where students are introduced to conflict, the most fundamental being moral and theological.

## Concerns and Suggestions

Nord sums up his concern this way: "Education is now deeply biased against religion. Indeed, it is unconstitutional."{13}

When it is suggested that we take steps to remediate this situation, a number of concerns come to mind. The poor preparation of most teachers to handle the subject is most apparent. Often teachers are unaware of both their freedoms to teach the subject as well as legal limitations regarding how that teaching is carried out. This can be overcome by proper training.

Some have argued that religion is not intellectually respectable enough to warrant a place in the curriculum. Psychologist Steven Pinker argued against adding a "Faith and Reason" component to Harvard's curriculum, writing that religion "is an American anachronism in an era in which the rest of the West is moving beyond it."{14} This kind of thinking reflects what is sometimes called the secularization thesis that has come under much criticism of late. In fact, a good argument can be made that religion is actually becoming more important in much of the world.

Pinker and others argue that the need to understand religion has been replaced by the overwhelming need to think scientifically. In their view, the Enlightenment and modern science have settled the case against considering a religious perspective of reality. However, this is not totally accurate. As Nord writes, "[U]niversities don't impose scientific standards of respectability on philosophy, ethics, politics, literature, or art." He adds, "What must be avoided is granting modern science the authority to define what is reasonable and respectable across the curriculum."{15}

So what can we do about the current bias against knowledge of religions in our schools? In his book *Does God Make a Difference?* Warren Nord argues that every high school student and undergraduate should be required to take a year-long course in religious studies. Preferably, this would consist of one semester on the Bible and another on world religions. He would also require that all classes dealing with topics impacted by religious thought such as ethics, politics,

philosophy, and art commit 5% of textbook space and class time to understanding the conflicts caused by different religious worldviews. Each perspective should be taught as a live option and represented by writings from people who actually believe in it.

The goal of these classes cannot be to indoctrinate or proselytize, but they could help to challenge the current monopoly that materialistic naturalism has on our curriculum.

**Notes**

1. Warren A. Nord, *Does God Make A Difference?* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 156.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 20.
4. Ibid., 22.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 21.
8. Ibid., 43.
9. Ibid., 59.
10. Ibid., 60.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 99.
13. Ibid., 188.
14. Ibid., 117.
15. Ibid., 118.

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