INTRODUCTION

IT IS ALL BUT INEVITABLE THAT OUR SUBJECT CALLS TO MIND the rhetoric and images of a culture war. Much of the public debate is framed in terms of the combat between two polarized groups: those religious conservatives who would restore prayer to school activities, add creationism to the curriculum, and drop sex education from it; and those liberals who would keep prayer out of schools, keep religion out of the curriculum, and keep sex education in it. Battles in this culture war are fought regularly in courtrooms, direct-mail campaigns, local school board elections, and national politics. Journalistic dispatches from the front typically frame the conflict in its most dramatic and polarized terms.

We intend in this book to provide a more nuanced account of what is at issue, articulate a set of civic and educational principles that we might use for adjudicating our differences, and stake out common ground on which we might stand together in discussing the role of religion in the curriculum. Indeed, although our differences are deep, we believe that our subject need not be nearly so controversial as it now appears to be.

The Problem

The United States is a religious nation. About 90 percent of Americans claim to believe in God, and almost 80 percent say that religion is an important part of their lives. Seventy percent of Americans pray and 40 percent attend religious services and read the Bible each week. No doubt much belief is nominal and much religious practice is perfunctory. Still, for a great many Americans, religion makes a profound difference in how they live their lives and how they think about the world. After all, religious traditions carry with them implications for all of life; they shape our most fundamental beliefs and values. Indeed, a vast religious literature, contemporary as well as historical, deals with economics, psychology, sexuality, nature, history, morality, politics, and the arts—in every subject in the curriculum.

This being the case, it is striking that, apart from history courses (and some historical literature read in English courses), the curriculum all but ignores religion. The conventional wisdom of educators appears to be that students can learn everything they need to know about whatever they study (other than history or historical literature) without learning anything about religion. If religion was once pervasive, it now appears to be irrelevant.

In our deeply religious culture this development has not gone unnoticed. Indeed, many religious conservatives are outraged by it; they take the absence of religion to imply a hostility to religion. This has fueled our culture wars and has driven many to private schools and to support the voucher movement.

No doubt most educators have come to take the growing political power of the “Religious Right” seriously. Unhappily, most discussion of the role of religion in public education has focused almost exclusively on politics rather than on the underlying educational and intellectual issues. We will argue that questions about the role of religion in the curriculum are much more important, and cut much deeper, than conventional educational wisdom would have it.

What Is Religion?

We often assume that religion must be defined in terms of God. _But, of course, what counts as God (Nirvana, Brahman, the Tao, the Transcendent) differs considerably from religion to religion. Indeed, some religions—the oldest forms of Buddhism, for example—make no claims about any god, and much religion places rather more emphasis on tradition, community, and how we live, than on belief in God.

In defining religion for the purposes of determining whether an applicant for conscientious objector status was religious, Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark noted that

> over 250 sects inhabit our land. Some believe in a purely personal God, some in a supernatural deity; others think _of religion as a way of life envisioning, as its ultimate goal, the day when all men can live together in perfect understanding and peace. There are those who think of God _as the depth of our being; others, such as the Buddhists, strive for a state of lasting rest through self-denial and inner purification.

After citing a host of theologians, Clark rather tentatively suggested that religion is grounded in a “power or being, or upon a faith, to which all else is subordinate or upon which all else is dependent.”[1] That is, it makes sense constitutionally to talk about religion apart from God.

Paul Tillich was one of the theologians whom Justice Clark cited. In his very influential interpretation of religion, Tillich argued that the object of faith is what *concerns us ultimately* (1957, pp. 1–29). Historically, the great religions have nurtured and shaped people’s ultimate concerns and commitments but, he argued, people can and sometimes do direct their faith—their religious commitments—toward what is not *truly* ultimate but idolatrous. For Tillich, living in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, Nazism was an all too common form of “religious” idolatry.

Similarly, social scientists have often discussed *functional religions*—those comprehensive ideologies and symbol systems that (although they needn’t involve God) define ultimate reality in ways that give meaning and direction to people’s lives: nationalism, communism, psychoanalysis, humanism, even, perhaps, science (or scientism). Like traditional religions, they too can define people’s ultimate hopes, values, and convictions and be grounded in a faith to which all else is subordinated.

And then there is *spirituality*, an awareness of the presence of the divine in nature and in our lives that isn’t linked to particular religions, orthodox doctrines, or institutional structures. Because it is “nonsectarian,” educators sometimes believe that it isn’t religion and encourage spiritual practices (such as meditation and visualization exercises) in the classroom. Not surprisingly, many religious conservatives object to such practices, seeing in them the practice of a New Age Religion that conflicts with their own.

In the end, we suggest, no hard and fast lines can be drawn between spirituality, traditional religion, and those functional “secular” religions that shape the thinking and lives of so many people. As we proceed we will see, from time to time, that the conventional sharp dichotomy between the sacred and the secular gets in the way of our ability to think clearly about religion. It isn’t always clear when religious claims are being made, and we must keep in mind the rich-_ness and relevance of a spectrum of possibilities. Ordinarily, however, when we talk about religion in the chapters that follow, we mean the traditional major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, for example.

We will not attempt any further effort at defining religion here—other than to suggest three generalizations about these major world religions that will be relevant to our discussion.

1. Each of them discerns a *richer reality* than does modern science. Ultimate Reality (be it God or Brahman or Nirvana or the Tao) can’t be grasped in scientific categories, expressed in scientific language, or analyzed in scientific laboratories.
2. From within each tradition, religion can’t be *compartmentalized*; it isn’t simply a matter of what one affirms or does on Friday evening or Sunday morning. The implications of God’s existence extend to all of life—to how we act the rest of the week, and to how we make sense of the world.
3. And, of course, religion is *important*. Religions deal, as Tillich argued, with matters of ultimate concern. People are not free to ignore God. Religion is a matter of concern not just to scholars and antiquarians.

Religion and America’s Culture Wars

Historically, religion has played three somewhat different roles in America’s culture wars.

In the 17th century the most fundamental conflicts in America and Western Europe were between different religions—particularly Catholicism and Protestantism. Of course, the hostility among Protestants could be fairly intense without bringing "Papists" into the picture: the Massachusetts Puritans found it necessary to hang a few Quakers, for example. Religious discrimination has not disappeared in America, and these conflicts continue to be violent elsewhere in the world where, tragically, Catholics and Protestants, Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Sikhs, continue to kill one another.

By the end of the 18th century the first skirmishes in a new culture war had been fought—this one between theologians and the growing number of secular intellectuals committed to the Enlightenment and modern science. Over the last century many of the major battles in this war have been fought over evolution, but continuing conflicts between secular and religious interpretations of the world take place in all domains of our cultural and intellectual life (and, as we shall see, in all areas of the curriculum).

By the end of the 19th century deep divisions had appeared within Christianity and Judaism between "conservatives" who wished to maintain theological orthodoxies grounded in Scripture or tradition, and "liberals" who believed that religion could be progressive as theologians used modern scholarship to rethink and reform their own traditions. So, for example, the liberal theologians who shaped the mainline Protestant denominations and Reform Judaism came rather quickly to accept evolution and historical criticism of the Bible. Many conservatives, in response, reasserted their belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and the authority of tradition, and their opposition to evolution.

In his very influential book *Culture Wars* (1991), James Davison Hunter argued that battles of this third culture war are most prominent in contemporary America. On most moral, political, and educational questions a wide measure of agreement links liberal Jews, Catholics, and Protestants on the one hand—as it does their conservative counterparts on the other. These distinctions can be overdrawn; there is an evangelical Left, for example, and some religious liberals are political and moral conservatives. Still, the culture war between conservatives and liberals has submerged denominational differences to a striking extent.

Consequently, in our discussions of neutrality and liberal education we must keep in mind three distinct sets of tensions—tensions between religious and secular interpretations of reality, among different religions, and tensions between liberals and conservatives within each of those religions.

Why Is Religion Absent _from the Curriculum?

Three (ultimately inadequate) reasons are often given to this question. First, some educators continue to believe that the constitutional "separation of church and state" means that the curriculum cannot include religion. True, it *is* unconstitutional to *practice* religion in public schools; it is unconstitutional to *proselytize* or *indoctrinate* students. But it is *not* unconstitutional to *teach students about religion*—if it is done properly. No Supreme Court justice has ever held that students can't study the Bible or be taught about religion. Of course, what it means to teach about religion *properly* is not always clear or uncontroversial.

Second, many educators and textbook publishers believe that including religion in textbooks and the curriculum is too controversial. But, of course, it is also controversial to leave religion out of the curriculum. Indeed, textbooks and the curriculum already include much that is controversial—sex education, multiculturalism, feminism, and evolution, for example. Why not religion?

We will argue that religion need not be nearly so controversial as is often thought. In fact, there now exists widespread agreement—what we will call the New Consensus—about the role of religion in the curriculum among representatives of most major religious and educational organizations at the national level. (More about this shortly.) Unfortunately, word of this consensus has yet to reach many of the combatants in the trenches.

Third, religious conservatives often argue that public education has been taken over by intellectuals promoting the "religion" of secular humanism. What secular humanism is, and whether it might function as a religion, are matters of some complexity and controversy. Although much more needs to be said in response to this charge, we note two things. It is clear that the great majority of educators do not *intend* to undermine religion, and surely no “conspiracy” of secular humanists is out to destroy the faiths of our children. And yet we must acknowledge that public schools do teach students to think about virtually all aspects of life in secular rather than religious ways, *as if* God were irrelevant and those secular ways of making sense of the world were sufficient. (More on this matter in Chapter 2.)

So, why did religion disappear from the curriculum? Quite simply, public education reflects the dominant ideas and ideals of our culture, and as American culture and intellectual life have become more secular, so has public education. We can see this in at least three ways.

1. *If the controversial nature of religion isn’t an adequate explanation for the absence of religion from the curriculum, it is part of the explanation nonetheless.* The Framers of our Constitution believed that, in the pluralistic culture of the new United States, government must be built on common ground; the divisiveness of religion was one reason they chose to disestablish religion. Similarly, it was the task of the early public, or *common,* schools of the 19th century to unite an increasingly individualistic and pluralistic culture; schools should teach what we hold in common, not what divides us. Because religion was divisive, schools began to marginalize it—not in one fell swoop, certainly, but gradually. “Americanism,” by contrast, would unite us, and in an immigrant nation educators assigned it many of the tasks given to religion in earlier times and in more homogeneous cultures.

2. *Our civilization—and our educational institutions—grew _more secular as the goals of life shifted to material wealth and happiness in this world rather than salvation in a world to come.* By the end of the 19th century the purposes of schooling (and of higher education) had become in large part economic: to pass on that practical knowledge that would enable individuals and the country to thrive economically.

3. *The extraordinary success of modern science in making sense of the world led to a devaluation of traditional religion.* Physicists and biologists saw no need to appeal to God in explaining the workings of nature, nor did psychologists or economists find the evidence of Scripture relevant in explaining human nature or the economy.

As a result, by the end of the 19th century, 50 years before the Supreme Court first addressed the place of religion in public schools, religion had largely disappeared from textbooks and the curriculum. True, a ceremonial husk of religion—school prayers, devotionals, and Bible reading—survived in some places (and occasionally until the present day). Still, religion has long been gone from the heart of education, from the understanding of life and the world conveyed in textbooks and the curriculum (Nord, 1995, chap. 2).

Of course, the almost complete secularization of education does not accurately reflect our culture. As we have noted, most Americans are (in varying degrees) religious; religion retains a good deal of vitality. What we must conclude, therefore, is that education mirrors only what have come to be the *dominant* ideas and ideals of modern culture and especially of intellectuals. We *disagree* about the significance and truth of religious claims.

What then should be the role of religious ideas and ideals in the public school curriculum when our culture is deeply divided about religion? How do we live with our deepest differences?

Taking Religion Seriously

We will argue there are two fundamental reasons—or families of reasons—for including religion in the curriculum, for taking it seriously. First, there are *civic* reasons. The American experiment in liberty is built on the conviction that it is possible to find common ground in spite of our deep religious differences. It is rooted in the civic agreement we share as citizens, in our principled commitment to respect one another. Properly understood, this means that we not exclude religious voices from the public square or from public education, but that we take one another seriously. For much of our history, Protestantism enjoyed a favored status in the ceremony, rhetoric, and often in the curriculum and textbooks of public schools. That was unjust; it meant that education didn’t take others of different (or no) religious convictions seriously. In the 20th century the curriculum has often excluded religion. In *public* schools this is unjust; it means that we don’t take religious people seriously. All sides need to recognize that we cannot resolve the current battles either by promoting a particular religion or by excluding all religion from the curriculum.

This civic framework is embodied in the religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution. For more than 50 years, ever since it first applied the First Amendment to the states, the Supreme Court has held that government, and therefore public schools, must be *neutral* in matters of religion—neutral among religions, *and* neutral between religion and nonreligion. It is not proper for public schools to take sides on religiously contested questions. We will argue that if schools are to be truly neutral they must be truly *fair*—and this means including in the curriculum religious as well as secular ways of making sense of the world when we disagree. Government can no more inhibit religion than promote it.

Second, there are *educational* reasons for taking religion seriously. A good *liberal* education should expose students to the major ways humanity has developed for making sense of the world—and some of those ways of understanding the world are religious. An _exclusively secular education is an illiberal education. Indeed, we _cannot systematically exclude the religious voices in our cultural conversation without conveying the implication that religion is irrelevant, that religious views have no claim on the truth. By conveying a limited (secular) range of views that students must, in effect, accept on authority for want of any understanding of the alternatives, we place them at a deep disadvantage in thinking critically about where the truth might lie.

These are not arguments for promoting religion or for indoctrinating students. They are arguments for including religion in the curricular discussion, for taking it seriously.

The New Consensus

Given the heated nature of our culture wars, it may come as something of a surprise to many that over the last decade a fairly broad consensus about the role of religion in public schools has developed at the national level among the leadership of many religious and educational organizations. This New Consensus has been articulated in a number of documents that we will discuss in Chapters 1 and 2. For now we simply outline the three major principles that form the foundation of the consensus. First, as the Supreme Court has made clear, the study of religion in public schools is constitutional. Second, the study of religion is tremendously important if students are to be educated about our history and culture. Third, public schools must teach about religion objectively or neutrally; their purpose must be to educate students about a variety of religious traditions, not to indoctrinate them into any particular tradition.

This New Consensus doesn’t solve all the problems. Not everyone is part of it. Many people—indeed, many educators—haven’t heard of it. We believe that the great majority of Americans would accept the basic principles underlying the consensus on reflection if they understood them, but, alas, all too many don’t. And, of course, we are not so naive as to believe that *everyone* would accept the principles defining the New Consensus.

Moreover, the basic principles are open to varying interpretations. Just how important is religion? Important enough to bump other subjects from textbooks or the curriculum? Important enough to warrant classes in religious studies with certified teachers? And what does it mean to teach about religion “neutrally” or “objectively”—especially when we disagree deeply about the truth and meaning of religious claims? Obviously, more needs to be said.

In what follows, we approach the role of religion in the curriculum from the perspective of the New Consensus. It is our intention to build on the principles that ground the consensus and draw out their (sometimes surprising) implications for the curriculum, giving them substance, specificity, and relevance. Of course, not all advocates of the New Consensus will agree with our interpretation or application of the principles.

***

In Part One of our book we outline the basic civic, constitutional, and educational frameworks that we believe should govern the role of religion in the curriculum. In Part Two we discuss the role of religion in elementary education, moral education, and secondary school courses in history, civics, economics, literature and the arts, and the sciences. We also devote a chapter to religion courses; indeed, we hope that all teachers who deal with the Bible or world religions, whatever their subject, will read that chapter.

To provide some understanding of the conventional wisdom regarding religion in schools, we briefly review the new national education standards for what they say about religion (if anything), and we draw on our own study of textbooks to see how religion figures into them. (We recognize, of course, that most schools don't follow the standards and that good teachers don't just teach the texts.) We say something about what we take to be the major issues in each discipline, paying particular attention to what is religiously controversial. Finally, we draw out the educational implications: given our frameworks, given the major issues, given the different points of view, when and how should the curriculum or particular courses incorporate the study of religion?

Suggested Readings _and Resources

Our statement of the problem, and our account of the secularization of public education, are developed at considerably greater length in the In-_troduction and first two chapters of Warren A. Nord's *Religion and _American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (1995). The best general history of religion and public schooling is Robert Michaelsen's *Piety in the Public School* (1970).

In *The Myth of the Common Schools* (1987) Charles Glenn provides a good historical study of the role of religion in the common school movement of the 19th century, and in *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (1964) Ruth Miller Elson shows in detail how religion gradually disappeared from textbooks over the course of that crucial century. Although religion is not their primary subject, David Tyack and Elizabeth Hanson provide valuable perspective in their account of the professionalization of American education in *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America* (1982).

Three recent books on American higher education warrant mention, for to some considerable extent it is the academy that defines what is intellectually respectable and sets the curricular agenda for public schooling; each details the secularization of higher education in the United States. See George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (1994); Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge* (1994); and Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University* (1996). For James Davison Hunter's influential interpretation of our culture wars, see his *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991).