

CONCLUSIONS

WE DON'T TAKE RELIGION SERIOUSLY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL curriculum.

We ignore it—not completely, of course, but we do relegate it to distant times and places (in history and literature courses). The curriculum all but completely ignores religion as a *live* way of making sense of the world in the here and now. We trust that over the course of Chapters 3 through 9 this has become graphically clear: in course after course we teach students to think about matters that are religiously controversial in exclusively and uncritically secular ways. The implicit message is that students can learn everything they need to know about whatever they study (other than history and historical literature) without learning anything about religion: religion is irrelevant in the search for truth.

There are many reasons for this: religion is controversial; there are fears about church-state conflicts; teachers are insecure teaching about something they don't understand themselves. But the roots of the problem are largely philosophical, a matter of worldview. Educators have come to adopt the view that our intellectual disciplines must be scientific, or at least secular. We don't teach *subjects* (which might be interpreted in religious as well as secular categories); we teach *disciplines*: we teach students to think about the world in exclusively secular ways. This marginalizes religion intellectually.

It is not the conscious intention of educators to marginalize religion—and there certainly is no conspiracy to undermine the religious convictions of students. Most educators have themselves been illiberally educated. The problem is rooted in the parochial nature of our intellectual life, in our uncritical secularism, in religious naivete.

We have argued that the failure to take religion seriously is problematic for three major reasons. First, it means that public education doesn't take the public seriously; we have educationally disenfranchised members of religious traditions. Second, public education is not religiously neutral as the First Amendment and the courts require it to be. Finally, in failing to take religion seriously we educate our children parochially or illiberally; we uncritically teach them to make sense of the world in exclusively secular ways; indeed, we come close to indoctrinating them.

Religion must be incorporated into the curriculum for three correlative reasons:

1. The civic argument. *Public schools must be built on common ground.* If we are to live together we must take each other seriously; we must respect each other. This certainly doesn't mean that we must agree with each other. It does mean we should listen to each other. The curriculum must be inclusive, teaching students about religious as well as secular ways of living and thinking.

2. The constitutional argument. *Public schools must be religiously neutral—neutral among religions, and neutral between religion and nonreligion.* We have noted that educators no longer think it fair or neutral to ignore black history and women's literature. It should be just as obvious that religious voices must be included in the curriculum. Of course the First Amendment *requires* neutrality in matters of religion—and, as we've argued, neutrality requires fairness. Public schools are not free to ignore religious ways of thinking and living when they teach secular ways of thinking and living that are religiously contested.

3. The educational argument. *Finally, if students are to be liberally educated they must understand a good deal about religion.* We like to think of liberal education as an initiation into a conversation in which students listen to, reflect on, and think critically about the major voices in our world, addressing the most important questions of life. Some of those voices are secular and some are religious. Indeed, students can't think critically about science or their secular studies unless they understand enough about alternative religious worldviews to acquire some critical distance on them.

These civic, constitutional, and educational arguments for including religion in the curriculum are deeply complementary, for the governing virtue of each approach is fairness. It is also worth noting, once again, that although there are religious arguments for taking religion seriously, we haven't appealed to them. Our arguments are secular arguments.

They are also arguments built on the principles that have shaped what we have called the New Consensus and, as such, they constitute a “middle way” through the minefields of our culture wars, one that we believe has the greatest chance for leading to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The New Consensus points beyond the failed models of public education—both the “sacred” public school of our early history, and the “naked” public school of our recent history—to the “civil” public school, where people of all faiths and no faith are treated with fairness and respect. Only when we treat all people with respect, only when we include religious as well as secular voices in the conversation, only when we build public schools on common ground, will we secure the support necessary to sustain public education through the battles in our culture wars.

To many teachers the task of incorporating religion into their courses will be a daunting one. We have argued that religion is relevant to virtually every subject in the curriculum, and often in myriad ways. Indeed, in a book of this length we could, in many cases, just scratch the surface.

There is, of course, a danger in making the task appear too difficult; we would be truly sorry if we discouraged teachers from undertaking it. On the other hand, there is also a danger in failing to acknowledge just how far short most education falls in adequately educating students. We must be aware of the ideal if we are to move in the right direction with an appropriate sense of urgency.

Significant, if incremental, improvements are readily possible. Simply understanding the ground rules—the civic, constitutional, and educational frameworks—is tremendously important, and we trust that our readers will have a good grasp of them after reading this book. Moreover, every teacher can read a few books (in his or her copious free time) to develop a deeper understanding of our religious traditions and their relevance to what is taught.

But, obviously, if we are to approximate the ideal, some significant reforms must take place in our educational system, as we suggested in Chapter 2. Religion is not only controversial, it is complicated, and it is naive to think that we can incorporate it into the curriculum painlessly. *All* teachers need to learn more about religion and its relationship to what they teach—and religious studies needs to be developed as a certifiable field in public education.

Finally, we note that our criticisms and reform proposals are not merely academic (as if “merely academic” meant they were not important in the real world). Religion is important. If God exists there are implications. Of course, we don’t agree about whether God exists or what the implications might be if God does exist. But, we’ve argued, educated folk should think about such things. Unfortunately, religion has become so marginalized in the consciousness of most educators that arguments for including it in the curriculum are often dismissed as the special pleading of yet another special interest group wanting its inevitably marginal slice of space and time in an unhappily overextended curriculum. Such objections are, we suggest, symptoms of the problem. Consider the time and effort we put into athletics, or computers, or, indeed, into mathematics. Can it really be true that it is more important for college-bound students to take 12 years of math and no religion, rather than 11 years of math and 1 year of religion?

Our priorities are skewed. We have lost perspective on what is, perhaps, most important of all: understanding our place in the overall scheme of things. One of the ironies of American life is that for all our religiosity, we simply don’t take religion seriously in our schools.