

# Religion and Schooling in Contemporary America

*Confronting Our Cultural Pluralism*

Edited by  
Thomas C. Hunt  
James C. Carper

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Thomas C. Hunt dedicates this book to two long-time close friends, Sister Kathleen O'Connell, OP, and Father Ray Runde. Their support and encouragement, during good and difficult times, was constant, consistent, and sometimes vital. He herein publicly and gratefully acknowledges their highly valued friendship.

James C. Carper dedicates the book to those committed to the proposition that parents have the primary right and responsibility to direct their children's education.

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Thomas C. Hunt  
James C. Carper

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# Introduction

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The title of this book, *Religion and Schooling in Contemporary America: Confronting Our Cultural Pluralism*, reflects the editors' view of the book's purpose and what we hope will be its accomplishment. In company with authors like Stephen Carter<sup>1</sup> and Warren Nord,<sup>2</sup> we believe that the United States has become publicly a secular nation, largely devoid of theistic religious influence in its institutions, including its schools. This, despite the fact that most Americans embrace, in diverse ways, a theistic belief system.

We do not advocate government espousal of any confessional interpretation, nor of any combination of them. At the same time, we must voice our protest against the ever-growing tendency to relegate theistic religion to the status of the peripheral and the realm of the private, whether due to ignorance, bias, a fear of controversy, or a combination thereof.

This book is the seventh, the sixth under the auspices of Garland Publishing, on which the editors have collaborated in the last twelve years. This volume contains eight chapters. The first two, both written by Charles Kniker, address questions related to the place of religion in the curriculum and activities of the nation's public schools. The remaining six chapters deal with religious-affiliated schools from a variety of perspectives: their place and role in American culture; a comparative view; their political setting; international perspective; their legal status; and their means of fiscal support. All are authored by scholars widely respected in their fields.

It is well to note at this point that religious-affiliated schooling has a long and rich history in the educational annals in the United States. Prior to the rather well-known "Ould Deluder Satan" Law of Puritan Massachusetts in 1647, there were schools that operated

under Catholic auspices in what is now Florida, Louisiana, and the Southwest.<sup>3</sup> The reader is referred to the 1993 Hunt-Carper book on religious schools for brief historical overviews of the educational endeavors of eleven denominations, plus home-schooling (which counts the majority of its participants as religiously motivated).

Some denominations, as our 1986 book revealed, no longer participate in hosting schools, for a variety of reasons. Those who do counted (in 1993–1994) a total of 20,531 institutions, of which 8,331 were Catholic, with an enrollment of 4,202,194, of which 2,516,130 were in Catholic schools.<sup>4</sup> Thus, using numbers alone as a measuring rod, these schools constitute an important part of the American educational landscape, and deserve our attention.

The editors concluded their 1993 book with an epilogue. While the movement for choice in American schooling has broadened and deepened in the last three years, we still believe little else has changed in that time to cause us to alter our thoughts on the critical challenges facing religious schools in the United States. These three challenges are: (1) keeping them affordable, yet paying a living wage to their personnel; (2) maintaining their religious identities despite the growing numbers of students who are not members of the sponsoring denomination; and (3) keeping their religious uniqueness if public support, e.g., a voucher-like formula, becomes available.<sup>5</sup>

It is our hope that this book will enhance the knowledge of its readers as to pivotal issues involving religion in our schools—both those in the public sector and those sponsored by religious groups. Hopefully, *Religion and Schooling in Contemporary America: Confronting Our Cultural Pluralism* will contribute to a growing dialogue on religion and schooling in our democratic society.

## Notes

1. Stephen L. Carter. *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
2. Warren A. Nord, *Religion & American Education: Rethinking A National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
3. Harold A. Buetow, *Of Singular Benefit: The Story of U.S. Catholic Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), Ch. 1.
4. National Center for Educational Statistics, *Digest of Educational Statistics 1995* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1995), p. 58.
5. Thomas C. Hunt and James C. Carper, eds. *Religious Schools in the United States K–12: A Source Book* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), pp. 445–446.

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# **Religion and Schooling in Contemporary America**

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## Chapter One

# Religious Pluralism in the Public School Curriculum

*Charles R. Kniker*

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Religious pluralism is a reality in the nation's schools today. It affects the formal and informal curriculum in many ways. A Muslim student in California, given a ceremonial knife to indicate his manhood, wears his sheathed blade to school. African American students in St. Louis celebrate Kwanza. A Chicago school sets aside a prayer room for Islamic children. Teachers in a Florida school district are asked by conservative Christians not to observe Halloween. Native American parents at a Southwestern school voice their displeasure over the lack of positive references about tribal leaders in history textbooks. Buddhist families in Iowa provide materials for a "culture kit" developed by a university extension program for schools.<sup>1</sup> These incidents are illustrative of the surprising religious pluralism found in the tapestry of our nation's schools, rural as well as urban.

This diversity has contributed to a growing consensus on the part of religious, civic, and professional education groups of the need to agree on what and how teaching about religion should occur in public education. Such support for guidelines was evident when President William Clinton issued recommendations on religion in the curriculum and religious practices in public schools in July 1995.<sup>2</sup> Not all, however, want to acknowledge or accept the diversity of students in schools; some are opposed to accommodations to turn the "melting pot" into a "round table," where all perspectives are respected and given opportunities for dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

### Overview

The first purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the complex issue of religion in the curriculum, beginning with definitions of religion and pluralism. The second purpose of the chapter is



to provide an historical, legal, and philosophical background to the academic study of religion in public schools, most frequently described as “religion studies” hereafter. More specifically, the background material will include a brief history of religion in the public school curriculum, a review of significant court cases (primarily *Abington v. Schempp*), a recounting of pedagogical issues related to the “objective teaching of religion,” an identification of groups supporting and groups questioning the academic study of religion, and an update of state laws and guidelines. The third and final purpose of the chapter is to survey current teaching practices and resources related to religion in the curriculum. The four curriculum areas to be highlighted are Bible as/in literature, social studies/history, world religions, and others (art, music, health, economics, and science).

### **Definitions of Religion and Pluralism**

The emphasis of this chapter is clearly upon what the U.S. Supreme Court identified in *Abington v. Schempp* as “the objective teaching of religion.”<sup>4</sup> Since 1963, several other expressions have gained more frequent usage—the academic study of religion, teaching about religion, or religion studies. What is meant by “religion”? Generally speaking, religion is defined from a sociological or phenomenological basis; that is, it is a human activity related to a deity, with a founder (who may or may not claim to be God), disciples, a set of beliefs, sacred literature (here understood to be in either oral or written form), and behaviors consistent with the beliefs. Some scholars suggest that broader definitions be used. They argue that some religions do not meet the criteria listed above; some, for example, do not believe in a god but have a reverence for life. Some agree with the theological stance of Paul Tillich, that everyone is religious (because we all value something ultimately).<sup>5</sup> Most curriculum materials are based on the narrow definition rather than the broader one.

Pluralism, for this author, is a descriptive term, referring to the demographics of the country’s different populations, racially, ethnically, linguistically, religiously. It does not have a positive or negative connotation, although it acknowledges that there will be more than one world view, one truth perspective. Others, wanting to differentiate between diversity and pluralism, argue that pluralism is a positive term, implying it is a constructive goal for society to more fully

achieve. While I agree with Warren Nord's observation that religious pluralism made religious liberty necessary and possible, I resist efforts to make it more than descriptive.<sup>6</sup> Multiculturalism, to me, is a curriculum strategy to increase and enrich students' awareness of and appreciation for the contributions made by diverse groups in the nation's history. In practice, the focus in many teacher education multicultural courses is upon information about racial and ethnic groups and improving communication and interaction between members of the dominant culture group (white) and members of the groups studied. While I endorse the goal of multiculturalism, I am aware that some view it negatively, because they have concluded it promotes "one world-ism," which they believe downplays the unique history and role of the United States.<sup>7</sup>

### **Topics Not Covered**

This chapter cannot discuss all topics which relate to religion in the curriculum. Specifically excluded are informal religious studies although some policies, like school-sponsored prayer and observation of religious holidays, will be covered in the next chapter. Censorship of textbooks on religious grounds is also omitted. Religion in the school curriculum of other countries or in the curriculum of parochial and private or independent schools is not covered. Teacher preparation in religion studies is given minimal consideration.

### **Background: Historical, Legal, and Philosophical Perspectives on Religion Studies**

Formal instruction in America from the 1600s to the early 1800s most often was conducted in private schools founded by religious groups; the curriculum in such schools was based on the Bible and denominational doctrines.<sup>8</sup> After the Revolutionary War, a number of the infant nation's political leaders suggested that a new form of education was needed, schools whose primary goals would be promotion of civic values and business-related knowledge and skills. The "common" school movement emerged by the 1830s and 1840s. The leaders of the movement, including Horace Mann of Massachusetts and Henry Barnard of Connecticut, believed that certain types of moral instruction and Bible readings were acceptable in the curriculum, but resisted what they called sectarian textbooks.<sup>9</sup>

The modern assumption that a monolithic Judeo-Christian hegemony existed then can be easily refuted. As early as the 1840s, a court case over the use of public monies for Catholic schools occurred in New York State. At mid-century, Philadelphia was the scene of a bloody riot where Catholics had objected to reading the King James Version of the Bible in the common schools. By the early 1900s, a number of court cases in the Midwest over Bible reading were further indications of the growing diversity of the country. Judges in these cases ended Bible reading in public schools because it too often reflected a pan-Protestant perspective. Even before the onset of the twentieth century, the U.S. Commissioner of Education's reports were filled with articles and letters from administrators and teachers advocating that the Bible could be used for moral guidance, or better yet, as a treasure trove of various types of literary masterpieces.<sup>10</sup>

The most famous textbook series from the mid-1800s to early 1900s was the McGuffey Readers. Originally published in 1836, the editions of the late 1800s had omitted almost all references to God. Moral lessons were abundant, although the Calvinist theological underpinnings were reduced in later editions. Just as textbooks were becoming "less religious," due in part to the growing recognition of the increase of different religious traditions in the schools, so some religious practices were minimized in the nineteenth century. By 1900, only one state had a law requiring prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. That would change. By 1923, twelve states had such laws.<sup>11</sup>

### **Significant Court Cases**

Concerned that too many immigrants were being allowed into the country and that the nation's values would be eroded by involvement in World War I, many states passed legislation which tried to omit private schools. The Court ultimately upheld the right of private and religious schools to exist (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 1925). Until the end of World War II, with the *McColum* decision (1948), local control prevailed; that is, schools reflected the dominant religious ethos of their communities with little state intervention. In the *McColum* decision (1948), the U.S. Supreme Court banned religious instruction within the Champaign, Illinois, public schools

even when taught electively by local clergy. Of note is Justice Robert Jackson's concurring opinion mentioning the importance of religion studies in the curriculum,<sup>12</sup> thereby emphasizing the distinction made between religious instruction and religion studies.

Four years later, the Court (*Zorach v. Clauson* 1952) approved "released time" classes, allowing students to receive religious instruction at their houses of worship during school hours. Shortly before that decision, which seemed to have a minimal impact, the National Education Association issued a report, *Moral and Spiritual Values in the Public Schools*, which endorsed what some might label religion studies. In their view, it was a mistake to link religion studies with moral instruction.<sup>13</sup>

In 1963 (*Abington v. Schempp/Murray v. Curlett*), the Court ruled on two cases, one from suburban Pennsylvania (reading of Bible verses at the start of the school day) and the other from Baltimore, Maryland (prayer), concluding that such practices were unconstitutional if done for a nonacademic purpose. Reporting by the media and reaction by religious groups focused on the negative—the Bible had been "kicked out" of the public schools, prayer was "outlawed." Justice Jackson's sentiments in *McCollum* were echoed in several opinions. Justice Tom Clark, writing the majority opinion, stated:

*It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or of the history of religion and its relation to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.*<sup>14</sup>

A concurring opinion by Justice William Brennan included the following:

*The holding of the Court today plainly does not foreclose teaching about the Holy Scriptures or about the differences between religious sects in classes in literature or history. Indeed, whether or not the Bible is involved, it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion.*

*To what extent, and at what points in the curriculum, religious materials should be cited are matters which the courts ought to entrust very largely to the experienced officials who superintend our Nation's public schools. They are the experts in such matters, and we are not.*<sup>15</sup>

Similar remarks were offered by Justice Arthur Goldberg. “. . . it seems clear to me . . . that the Court would recognize the propriety of . . . teaching *about* religion, as distinguished from the teaching *of* religion in the public schools.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Support and Opposition to Religion Studies**

In the wake of the *Schempp/Murray* decision, some individuals, organizations, and higher education institutions realized that a golden opportunity had been offered. In 1971 the National Council on Religion and Public Education (NCRPE) was formed.<sup>17</sup> A coalition of religious and educational groups which met in Chicago agreed that its sole agenda of advocacy was for teaching about religion in public schools. Professional education groups such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) passed guidelines regarding the study of religion and sponsored sessions at their national meetings on topics related to instructional techniques, philosophical issues, and preparation of teachers. One of the most active organizations was a special interest group of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), which produced several books and monographs. Several institutions, such as Florida State University, Harvard University, Wright State University, Indiana University, and Western Michigan University designed programs in religion studies to prepare teachers for certification, assisted educators in preparing teaching materials, or offered in-service programs and workshops for teachers.<sup>18</sup>

The publication of legal, pedagogical, and policy materials was fostered in the 1980s by the work of several institutions and organizations. The J.M. Dawson Institute for Church-State Studies at Baylor University, directed by James Wood Jr., published the *Journal of Church and State* and sponsored occasional conferences. Charles Kniker of Iowa State University, with the assistance of long-time NCRPE Newsletter Editor, Thayer S. Warshaw of Andover, Massachusetts, founded *Religion & Public Education*. Later, the NCRPE Distribution Center was also begun at Iowa State University, dis-

seminating curricular materials and teacher resources produced by NCRPE and others.<sup>19</sup>

One of the high water marks for the movement for religion studies in public education occurred in July 1988. At a press conference in Washington, D.C., a flyer was released which reflected the consensus of a number of groups regarding what could be taught in public schools about religion. Sixteen groups supported the document; they reflected a wide range of religious perspectives and included many mainline education groups.<sup>20</sup>

The remarkable consensus which emerged led to many statements by other organizations, educational as well as religious; in 1995, the president of the United States and his Secretary of Education summarized their views on religion in the public schools. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), which has a broad-based educational membership, became active in the religion studies area.<sup>21</sup>

There have continued to be some challenges to religion being taught in public schools. The charge most frequently leveled is that textbooks are promoting the "religion" of secular humanism.<sup>22</sup> Most notable were cases from Hawkins County, Tennessee, and Mobile, Alabama. However, it is noteworthy that the plaintiffs did not challenge the concept of the objective teaching of religion. In the 1990s, there has been little organized opposition to religion studies.<sup>23</sup>

### **Pedagogical Issues Involving Religion Studies**

Even the most ardent supporters of religion studies can raise issues and problems which relate to the academic study of religion. They include:

1. **Separating Teaching about Religion and Moral Education.** A common assumption is that to teach about religions is to inculcate students with some specific values and theological doctrines. To do so is to violate what the justices called for—objectivity. Asked another way, can the teacher be descriptive rather than prescriptive? Or, stated in a concrete way, while teachers may realize intellectually they are to present the facts of religious phenomena, can they in practice avoid endorsing the moral imperatives they themselves support or criticizing the explicit or implicit values they reject?

2. **Promoting Neutrality and Avoiding Hostility.** When religion is central in the lives of some persons, they expect discussions in the public schools to reflect their faith; expectations are that teachers will be supporters of the dominant group, including a dash or two of criticism of “minority” traditions. Persons from other traditions may recognize that it is not fair, considering the impressionable natures of the “captive audience,” to present one perspective in the most favorable light and others in less positive terms. Some may be tempted to believe, however, that religion in general could be favored over no religion. The Court has been very clear regarding that matter. School leaders and teachers cannot favor one religion over others, nor can they favor religion over “irreligion.”<sup>24</sup> Warren Nord supports what the Court has done. He advocates what he calls “fairness.”<sup>25</sup> Charles Haynes and others have developed guidelines for teachers. In an article for teachers on how they might accommodate the religious diversity of their students, Charles Kniker developed what he called the “CARTS Checklist.”<sup>26</sup> The guidelines are that they need to be Comprehensive in coverage, Accurate with information, Respectful in attitude, to stress Typical rituals and behaviors, and to be Sensitive to the diversity of students.
3. **Teacher Preparation.** How much do teachers need to know of the religions about which they teach? Are they conscious of their own biases and aware of the religious backgrounds their pupils bring to class? There have been few studies which provide answers to these questions. Various religion professors and several teacher educators have written about the need for better preparation of teachers. In this area, there are some skills as well as knowledge which should be mastered prior to teaching about religion. Some states have developed certification areas and, as indicated earlier, several university programs have been created in religious studies.<sup>27</sup>
4. **Content and Materials for Teaching about Religion.** There are some pedagogical questions to be answered. When studied academically, should religion be offered as a separate course or “naturally included” as units within classes in geography, literature, history, or science? What about methodology? Should there be a direct comparison of various beliefs and practices from world