Teaching About Religion

Where Schools Sometimes Go Wrong is Ignoring That Little Word 'About'

Susan Black

Susan Black, an *ASBJ* contributing editor, is an education research consultant in Hammondsport, N.Y.

"One can hardly respect a system of education that would leave the student wholly ignorant of the currents of religious thought that move the world society."

So said Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson in the 1948 case of *Illinois ex rel. McCollum v. Board of Education*. And 15 years later, Justice Tom Clark echoed that thought in the high court's majority opinion in School District of *Abington v. Schempp* (1963). "One's education is not complete," Justice Clark wrote, "without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization."

But teaching about "the currents of religious thought" or about religion's "relationship to the advancement of civilization" is one thing; providing religious instruction is quite another, and that's where some schools have come to grief.

The Supreme Court's interpretation of the First Amendment says the government—and public schools, by extension—must remain neutral toward religion. But maintaining neutrality can be a challenge for teachers. In a November 2002 publication advising teachers how to navigate the subject of religion in their classrooms, the National Education Association says teachers must teach every lesson about religion without bias. At the same time, they must honor their students' personal views on religion and hold and observe their own beliefs privately.

Teachers also need to know which topics are permissible in classroom study of religion, and they need to know which instructional techniques may be used to convey these topics. That means school leaders need to provide guidance and support to teachers who cover curriculum topics related to religion—and they need to be certain that, when it comes to teaching *about* religion, the district abides by the letter of the law.

WHAT'S PERMISSIBLE

According to "Federal Guidelines for Religious Expression in Public Schools," issued in 1995 by then-Secretary of Education Richard Riley, teachers may include the Bible or other scripture in lessons about religion, and they may cover such topics as the history of religion, comparative religions, and the influence of religion on art, music, and literature.

Teachers may also teach about religious holidays, and they may celebrate secular aspects of holidays with their students, but they may not observe holidays as religious events or promote such observances by students. In addition, teachers may teach civic values and virtues—including those held by various religious groups—but the guidelines specify that such lessons should reinforce "the moral code that holds us together as a community."

In turn—according to the new guidelines and the 1995 document alike—students may express their beliefs about religion in the form of homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments. When students exercise this right,

teachers must treat students without discrimination, and they must judge students' work by academic standards of substance and relevance, as well as other standards set by the school.

Most scholars recognize that religion has a legitimate place in history and civics courses. Indiana University's C. Frederick Risinger, a specialist in social studies curriculum and instruction, says students should understand the religious ideas associated with such topics as nationalism, imperialism, anticolonialism, slavery and antislavery, freedom of conscience, capitalism, and environmentalism.

The study of the conflict in Bosnia, for example, requires understanding the historical enmity among Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims in the Balkan region. Similarly, studying Northern Ireland's political history requires understanding the roots of the ongoing dissension between Protestants and Catholics.

To uphold constitutionally approved teaching about religion (and refrain from unconstitutional religious indoctrination), Risinger advises schools to (1) adopt an approach that is academic, not devotional; (2) strive for students' awareness of religions without pressuring students to accept any one favored religion; (3) expose students to a diversity of religious views without imposing viewpoints on students; and (4) educate students about all religions.

The Washington, D.C.-based Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) holds a similar position. Interpreting the federal government's guidelines, AU says the history of religion and comparative religion are permissible subjects, providing the instructional approach is objective and serves a legitimate educational purpose.

AU also says that it's permissible for students to study the role of religion in U.S. history, and they may study historic documents (such as the Declaration of Independence) that contain references to God, provided teachers do not use such documents to promote a religious viewpoint.

GETTING IT WRONG

But reality isn't always in accord with these recommendations. In *Abington v. Schempp,* the Supreme Court held that teaching about the Bible in a public school must be done "objectively as part of a secular program of education." But the People For the American Way Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group, says several schools violate this ruling by teaching the Bible from a sectarian perspective, as historical fact, and to support certain religious faiths.

In a report titled "The Good Book Taught Wrong: Bible History Classes in Florida Public Schools," the foundation describes findings from a yearlong investigation of Bible history courses taught in Florida high schools. Examples of "unconstitutional instruction" include:

- Assuming that all students are Christians.
- Teaching about religion from a Christian perspective without regard for other faiths.
- Treating Biblical events as universally held factual historical events.
- Requiring students to define their personal relationship to God and Jesus.
- Asking students, on a final exam, to use scripture to write essays about "God's Directions for Righteous Living," "God's Plan for the Family," and "Living a Victorious Life in the World Which is So Dark."
- Using Bibles and other resources that represent only one religious translation, usually the Protestant King James translation.
- Assigning students to memorize Bible verses.

In the 1998 case of *Gibson v. Lee County School Board of Florida,* the foundation successfully challenged these unconstitutional practices, and in March 2000, the Florida Department of Education removed two Bible history courses—taught mainly in a Protestant "Sunday School style"—from its approved course list. Beginning with the 2000–01 school year, the department approved two new academic and secular courses that approach the Bible from a literary perspective and allow different interpretations of the text.

A PLACE IN THE CURRICULUM

A 2000 study titled "Teaching About Religion in National and State Social Studies Standards," a joint venture by the Council on Islamic Education and the First Amendment Center, found much to commend and much to correct in the ways most schools currently teach about religion.

After reviewing state curriculum standards and frameworks and documents from national organizations, Susan Douglass, the study's principal researcher, found widespread support for teaching about religion in the social studies curriculum. Her study reveals a number of significant trends. For example:

- Teaching about religion is included, to some degree, in all national and state standards.
- Teaching about religion is an established curriculum topic in most public schools.

- Teaching about religion mainly occurs in U.S. history and world history, geography, or cultural studies courses.
- Teaching about religion is more deliberate in middle schools and high schools than in elementary schools.
- Teaching about religion is often included in lessons on exploration and colonization, slavery, and 19th century reform movements; religion in American life is seldom mentioned in 20th century studies.
- Teaching about religion is more in-depth in elective courses than in required courses.

Douglass concludes, optimistically, that "a place has been made in the curriculum" for teaching about religion in the nation's schools. By the time students have completed 10th grade, she says, most have been exposed to major world religions and ethnic groups and cultures. And, she notes, most high school students have some knowledge of the role of religion in the origin of U.S. democracy and in society.

But she also finds that teaching about religion tends to be uneven and superficial. In elementary grades, for instance, teaching about religion is often a small component included in larger studies of holidays and ethnic customs. In U.S. history courses, in elementary and secondary schools alike, lessons about religions taper off after the colonial period and appear infrequently after the Civil War period. In upper-level courses, students often get mere "thumbnail sketches" of religions and societies.

Lack of teacher training is a major barrier to expert teaching and learning about religion, Douglass concludes. Teachers typically lack the knowledge and training to expand and elaborate on the thumbnail sketches of world religions presented in most national and state standards and curriculum frameworks. Many teachers, she reports, are still "very uncomfortable" with the topic of religion and prefer to gloss over, if not wholly ignore, this component of their curriculum.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

How can school districts address the issue? Gary Dei Rossi, superintendent of the San Joaquin County Office of Education in Stockton, Calif., advises school leaders to "get out in front" and be proactive about including the topic of religion in their school's curriculum. Speaking as a representative of the 3Rs Project Steering Committee, which helps school districts and communities find common ground in regard to teaching about religion, Dei Rossi says board members, superintendents, and principals must see to it that schools stand for democratic values and allow all religions and ethnic groups to have a voice in a diverse society.

I'd like to add a few more responsibilities for school officials to the list: First, make sure that curriculum committees and others who develop instruction in your district understand and apply federal laws and guidelines that define and describe what's legal and what's not legal in terms of teaching about religion. Second, don't let special interest groups influence schools to promote their beliefs. Third, make sure that students' beliefs—especially the beliefs of those who are not religious or are otherwise in the minority—are never shortchanged or silenced in studies about religion. And finally, provide top-notch training for teachers before expecting them to teach *about* religion.

A BIAS TOWARD RELIGION?

If public schools are permitted to teach about religion, does that mean they are obligated to teach about nonreligion? Some say the answer is "yes." They rest their case on the so-called neutrality concept, which was set forth more than 50 years ago by the U.S. Supreme Court and continues to define the relationship of religion to government and the public schools.

In its 1947 decision in *Everson v. Board of Education,* the Court determined that "public schools are not to privilege one religion over another. Neither are they to privilege religion generally over nonreligion."

Two decades later, in a majority opinion in *Epperson v. Arkansas*, Justice Abe Fortas wrote, "The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion."

A group called Objectivity, Accuracy, and Balance in Teaching about Religion (OABITAR) says many schools show a "manifest bias" for religion and against nonreligion in the curriculum. Public schools that teach about religion, the group said in a May 2002 position statement, must recognize that there is "no single normative culture or religion for all students to accept."

Instead, OABITAR urges schools to teach about religion in a "spirit of fairness and inclusiveness" and to respect every student's freedom to hold a religious worldview or a nonreligious worldview." In a civil public school, the group says, students of every faith—and no faith—must be treated with fairness and respect.

OABITAR has developed an instructional module, titled "Different Drummers: Nonconforming Thinkers in History," and a Web site to help teachers create curriculum and instruction "with a view to diversity." Both resources provide teachers with instructional strategies that ensure "religious neutrality" in their presentations and explanations of religious and nonreligious worldviews.—S.B.

NEW GUIDELINES ADD TO PRAYER CONFUSION

Students who want to express religious beliefs and views during assemblies and graduation will not be prevented from doing so under new guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Education.

Under the guidelines, schools risk losing federal funds if they don't allow students to pray outside class or let teachers hold "prayer or Bible study" before school or after lunch. School staff members cannot pray with students or act in their "official capacities" when participating in a religious activity on campus.

"Public schools should not be hostile to the religious rights of their students and their families," Secretary of Education Rod Paige said in a letter sent to school districts in early February. "At the same time, school officials may not compel students to participate in prayer or other religious activities."

The guidelines mirror many of the same directions outlined by the Clinton administration in 1995, and Paige said they reflect the "current state of the law" under the No Child Left Behind Act. Under NCLB, schools must certify that they are complying with the guidelines or face the loss of federal funding.

But, cautions Julie Underwood of the National School Boards Association, the guidelines also fail to acknowledge a split among circuit courts on the issue of prayer at graduation ceremonies and other types of school functions.

"The difference," says Underwood, NSBA's general counsel, "is that in situations where there is still a split in the circuits, the department appears to have taken the side of the more conservative right. Our concern is that school boards will continue to be faced with legal challenges from both conservative religious and liberal sectors of their communities."

Matthew Staver, president of the Liberty Council, an organization that promotes religious expression, told the Associated Press that the guidelines will be used "actively in dealing with schools, and we'll use them in cases we're litigating as well."

"These guidelines assert that students can lead prayers or give sermons at some school functions," says Barry Lynn, executive director of the Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a Washington, D.C.-based group that promotes church-state separation. "The Supreme Court has never allowed that. If the administration tries to cut off federal funding to any school on the basis of these guidelines, that action will surely be challenged in court."—*Glenn Cook, Managing Editor*

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