Teaching about Religion in Public Schools

BY TODD C. REAM

Teachers face the challenge of teaching about religion in a manner that respects the diverse religious identities of their students. Can public school teachers legitimately reveal their own religious commitments in their classrooms, and, if so, how?

Is it possible to teach public school students about religion without indoctrinating them? Religion is a subject of considerable interest and importance to students, because their understanding of religion and their relationship to it—as much as their understanding of gender, race, or social class—is central to their identity as human beings. Furthermore, their understanding of religion is constantly being shaped in subtle yet significant ways as they interact with others in the larger society, but especially in the classrooms where they spend so much of their early years. So, if students necessarily will be learning something about religion in their classrooms, the question becomes, "Can we teach them well?"

Public schools, of course, are much different today than they were a few generations ago. Religion, which was once the established framework for public school educational efforts in the United States, was replaced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by competing frameworks such as scientific naturalism. More recently, in what some call the postmodern age, a rapidly diversifying student population has forced educators to pay more careful attention to the protections in the United States Constitution of individual rights in regard to religious belief and practice.

How, then, should public education appreciate and inform the developing religious identity of students while respecting constitutional guarantees of the free exercise of religion? Can teachers be trained to teach about reli-

gion in a manner that respects both the diversity among their students and their own identities as religious adherents? Can teachers legitimately reveal their own religious commitments in their classrooms, and, if so, how? The three books reviewed here can help us think carefully about such questions.

Kent Greenawalt's *Does God Belong in Public Schools?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, 272 pp., $19.95) offers an accessible yet detailed understanding of how interpretations of the Constitution changed over the course of the twentieth century. Through "a mixture of constitutional law and educational judgment" (p. 9), Greenawalt seeks to provide educators and other interested parties "with bases on which to make judgments of their own that go deeper than visceral like or dislike of competing positions or groups" (p. 5). He acknowledges that the identity of students has changed. Yet, when public schools fail to mention matters of religion in any way, they fail to educate students well: religious students are left wondering about the significance of their own faith, and students who are not religious are left without any real education about the religious beliefs and practices around them.

Greenawalt believes that Supreme Court decisions dating back to 1962 and 1963 indicate "schools could teach *about* religion but not attempt to indoctrinate" (p. 8). In order to define the line between instruction about religion and indoctrination, Greenawalt reviews the bearing that relevant Supreme Court decisions have on various practices in public education, including moments of silence, usage of facilities, and teaching about religion in various disciplines. Perhaps the most significant case that he identifies is *Abington Township v. Schempp*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that a student's education is not complete unless it includes various lessons about religion. According to the *Schempp* decision, such lessons are to be "presented objectively as part of a secular program of education" (p. 19). Greenawalt contends that public schools are more likely to evade their responsibility to provide their students with complete educations than they are to offer religious indoctrination.

However, what happens when we no longer think of teachers as being objective or neutral in regard to religious commitment? Robert Kunzman addresses this question in *Grappling with the Good: Talking about Religion and Morality in Public Schools* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006, 168 pp., $23.95). Building on the constitutional understanding identified by Greenawalt and others concerning the need to teach religion in public schools, Kunzman argues that "we can and should help students learn

how to talk about religion and morality, learn how to discuss disagreements that are influenced by religious and other ethical perspectives—not because we can 'solve' them, but because this grappling is the responsibility of informed, respectful citizenship" (p. 2).

Kunzman commends a pedagogical approach, "Ethical Dialogue," that embodies this form of grappling. Grounded in a Kantian understanding of mutual respect, Ethical Dialogue involves imaginative engagement and civic deliberation. These two practices, which Kunzman follows in the high school classrooms he leads, are far from being abstract: imaginative engagement includes "role-plays, field experiences, and art and stories" (p. 68), and civic deliberation involves vibrant discussion and debate. He concludes by describing in some detail how these twin practices informed a conversation among his students concerning religion's rightful role in the development of laws and public policies dealing with euthanasia and the death penalty.

While Ethical Dialogue marks a significant improvement on the pedagogical efforts of a previous era when both teachers and students acted as if education had little to do with their religious identities, Kunzman's approach continues to restrict teachers to objectively arbitrating the variety of religious identities of their students. Thus, he goes to great lengths to extol the merits of teacher neutrality. I wonder if, in time, this too will prove to be insufficient. Surely teachers will yearn to enjoy the same advantages they afford to their students: they will yearn to stop relegating their religious identity to the privacy of their devotional lives and the seclusion of their houses of worship.

If Kunzman's Ethical Dialogue offers a pedagogical approach to the teaching of religion, Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes offer a justification for the place of religion in the curriculum of public schools. In *Taking Religion Seriously across the Curriculum* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998, 221 pp., $5.95), Nord and Haynes contend that in recent years a new consensus has emerged concerning the place of religion in the public school curriculum. Because religion is a powerful force in both history and the contemporary world, if students are going to be prepared to live in this world then "religion is relevant to virtually all subjects of the curriculum" (p. 37). Nord and Haynes also acknowledge that part of this relevance is driven by the fact that the world is increasingly defined by a sense of religious diversity. As a result, "it is important for students to understand a variety of religions, not just their own" (p. 37).

Nord and Haynes explore how the current shortage of religious dialogue in the classroom can be addressed within a host of disciplines ranging from history, economics, and the sciences to world religions. However, their volume is framed by a possible contradiction. On one hand, they claim that

this new consensus is defined by the understanding that "we are born into cultures defined by languages and institutions, ideas and ideals, and we know who we are only when we have some sense of our inheritance" (p. 39). Public schools are thus charged with the responsibility of preserving and protecting this inheritance. Instead of denying that this dimension exists in the lives of the students they serve, public schools can accelerate this awareness for the sake of the fabric of liberal democracy. On the other hand, Nord and Haynes claim that adequately trained teachers are ones prepared to "teach about a variety of religions with fairness and objectivity" (p. 31). To their credit, Nord and Haynes do not see "fairness and objectivity" as one in the same as neutrality; rather they believe that "while neutrality requires fairness, fairness does not require neutrality" (p. 44). However, one wonders if this distinction is clear and precise enough to prevent the religious identity of teachers from being relegated to the private spheres of their lives.

Greenawalt and Kunzman lobby for objectivity. Nord and Haynes's understanding of fairness comes closer to allowing a place for the religious identity of teachers in the classroom, but it is unclear that their position allows teachers more freedom than the objectivity view does. Drawing from the language of the *Schempp* case, all four scholars offer promises and warn of perils for teaching religion in the public school classroom. The promises come from recognizing that *Schempp* allows for instruction about religion. The perils come in terms of the objective instruction teachers are called to offer.

The language of *Schempp* reflects the spirit of the modern age, one defined by the power of objectivity. However, in postmodernity our confidence in that power is waning. Postmodernity calls us to see that human identity is more complex. As a result, teachers, like their students, cannot check their religious identity at the door to their classrooms. Even if such an option were possible, it would contradict the very education that Greenawalt and Kunzman (and perhaps Nord and Haynes) urge us to offer students. Teachers cannot help students appreciate their own religious identity and the religious identity of the larger world in which they live if the religious identity of the teachers needs to be relegated to their private lives.

What if teachers were encouraged to maintain their own religious identity as a means of modeling a charitable spirit toward others' religious identities, and of cultivating such a spirit in their students? Persons with a charitable spirit consistently seek to understand how and why others believe and act the ways they do. They try to understand such beliefs and actions on the terms of others—not on terms externally imposed upon them.

Charity, in this sense, might be cultivated among teachers through professional development programs based on case studies and readings from

the new Faith and Globalization Initiative led by Miroslav Volf. This initiative, housed within Yale Divinity School and Yale School of Management, addresses pressing topics such as "faith and the dynamics of economic development," "faith and violence," "persons of faith who are publicly engaged," "faith and human rights," "the public role of faith in a liberal democracy," and "secularization, religious resurgence, and multiple modernities." It is driven by the belief that "Intentional and sustained reflection on the crucial issues of faith and globalization can lead to the kind of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence that life in the 21st century demands."† Such reflection begins with a deep appreciation of one's own religious particularity, which then fosters a charitable appreciation for the faiths of others. For instance, reflection within the larger Abrahamic tradition—which includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—can propel adherents to reach out to others in peace and love.

Relegating religious identity to the private sphere fails both teachers and students. Developing a charitable spirit toward others' religious identities is necessary not only for a deep understanding of religion in the world today, but also for achieving the goals of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

NOTE

† "Introduction to Yale's Faith and Globalization Initiative," online at *http://faithandglobalization.yale.edu*, accessed March 18, 2009.

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