

America the Beautiful, Diverse, and Religiously Ignorant: The Importance of Teaching World Religions in American Public Schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a diversified and growing America, education for our youth is considered one of the main keys to success for the future.¹ Included mandatory in that education should be a worldly understanding of other viewpoints and ideas than those of our own.² With growing tension between many religious groups throughout the world and America, it is imperative that America's youth be educated in world religions.³ If more religion is taught in public schools, students can grow to become culturally literate and understanding of our neighbors around the world and in our very own backyards.⁴ This article will first consider the misconceptions of teaching religion in schools and ignorance of religious knowledge amongst the population. It will then analyze various arguments for why teaching world religions to our students is important and essential to our country's wellbeing. The article will also review any counter arguments and possible negatives to teaching world religions in American schools. Finally it will examine any programs that are already in place in various schools, as well as any proposals pending to bring culturally dynamic world religions class to schools. With technology and communication racing forward creating a global economy we are all entering, it only makes sense that our students are

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¹ Michael J. Frank, *The Evolving Establishment Clause Jurisprudence and School Vouchers*, 51 DePaul L. Rev. 997, 1039-40 (2002).

² Linda K. Wertheimer, *Public schools shouldn't preach. But they should teach kids about religion*, THE WASHINGTON POST (September 8, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/09/08/schools-shouldnt-preach-but-they-should-teach-about-religion/>.

³ Stephen Prothero, *It's time to teach religion in schools*, USA TODAY (October 3, 2010), http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2010-10-04-column04_ST_N.htm.

⁴ EMILE LESTER & PATRICK S. ROBERTS, *LEARNING ABOUT WORLD RELIGIONS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: THE IMPACT ON STUDENT ATTITUDES AND COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE IN MODESTO, CALIF.* 3 (First Amendment Center 2006).

equipped with a baseline understanding of other people and their views, leading to impactful and peaceful interactions.

II. PRELIMINARY MISCONCEPTIONS

Although not surprising, many people incorrectly view religion in school as a prohibited subject.⁵ According to a 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center, more than half of those polled thought teachers were prohibited from offering a class on world religions.⁶ Only 36 percent of those polled correctly thought it was legal to offer such courses.⁷ The fact of the matter is that America is one of the most religiously diverse countries on Earth, but remains dangerously ignorant about religion.⁸ On top of a general ignorance of other religions, most religious believers have only a cursory knowledge of even their own faith.⁹ Journalist Richard Schiffman wrote in a 2012 article, “America today is a nation of religious illiterates. Even many who attend worship services and profess to be devout may never have thought deeply about the tenets of their faith”.¹⁰

The biggest reason for this issue begins with the ignorance around the legality of teaching religion in public schools.¹¹ It is a widespread myth that public schools have banned religion.¹²

⁵ Linda K. Werthheimer, *7 Reasons We Should Teach More Religion in Public Schools*, FAITH STREET (August 19, 2015), <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2015/08/19/7-reasons-we-should-teach-more-religion-in-public-schools/37665>.

⁶ *Id.* (see *US Religious Knowledge Survey*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (September 28, 2010), <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/28/u-s-religious-knowledge-survey/>).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Joseph Laycock, *Should world religion be taught in school?*, CARING MAGAZINE (last visited April 21, 2016), <http://www.caringmagazine.org/should-world-religion-be-taught-in-schools/>.

⁹ Richard Schiffman, *Why We Need to Start Teaching About Religions in School*, HUFFINGTON POST (April 3, 2012), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-schiffman/why-we-need-to-teach-religion-in-school_b_1394060.html.

¹⁰ *Id.* (In answering why religion has become a force that divide us, he answers, “[I]f we had to boil it down to one word, that word would be ignorance – a condition shared by believers and nonbelievers alike”).

¹¹ Joseph Laycock, *If we don't teach religion in schools, American will never understand the rest of the world*, QUARTZ (April 15, 2015), <http://qz.com/383348/if-we-dont-teach-religion-in-schools-us-kids-wont-understand-the-rest-of-the-world/>.

¹² Laycock, *supra* note 8.

This stems from a misunderstanding and misreading of the establishment clause.¹³ While the First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”, many do not understand the nuances of the clause and schools unfortunately choose to act as a religion free zone.¹⁴

Yet put simply, teaching religion in schools is not against the First Amendment.¹⁵ Many states have standards for world history to include a basic understanding of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.¹⁶ But in reality these state mandated standards are frequently ignored or downplayed in public schools.¹⁷ Yet again, the reason for overlooking these standards or teaching them adequately is a fear of consequences for teaching religion in public schools.¹⁸

If educators and administrators at schools can get over the misconceptions that teaching religion in school is not legal, they can work to bring a dynamic and inclusive environment to the classroom surrounded around proper religious instruction.¹⁹ In properly understanding the First Amendment, public schools can prepare students to live and work together as citizens of one nation with people of many faiths or no faith.²⁰

III. A RELIGIOUSLY LITERATE COUNTRY READY TO TACKLE THE WORLD’S PROBLEMS

The level of religious literacy of Americans is alarmingly low and must be addressed by mandated world religion classes. In his undergraduate course on world religions, Joseph

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* (Stating that this nation committed to religious liberty in fact does the exact opposite).

¹⁵ *Religious Tolerance; Religion in public schools, libraries, etc. Legal Considerations*, RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE.ORG (last visited April 25, 2016), http://www.religioustolerance.org/ps_bibl.htm.

¹⁶ Laycock, *supra* note 11.

¹⁷ *Id.* (“Indeed many state standards for language arts require students to analyze Biblical themes and references . . . but all too often they are too ignored).

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Charles C. Haynes, *God goes back to school*, FAITH STREET (September 4, 2012), <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2012/09/04/god-goes-back-to-school/11162>.

²⁰ *Id.*

Laycock gives his students a “fill-in-the-blank” card relating to eight major religions.²¹ Students can give any response they want to prompts such as, “Muslims are...” or “Christians are...”.²² As imagined, the responses are wildly inaccurate but give Joseph Laycock a baseline for the religious literacy of the class for how he must approach the level of illiteracy.²³ His students have responded in the past with their inaccurate statements such as Hindus make a pilgrimage to Mecca, that Daoists worship Winnie the Pooh, and that Judaism is an odd sect within Christianity.²⁴ This alone is an example of the level of misinformation and lack of education that our students and future contributors to society bring with them to the college level in regards to religious understandings.

In order to combat this, our grade and high schools must begin with teaching students about world religions and making them culturally literate. For starters, the United States is a “melting pot” that is made up of many different religions and cultures.²⁵ Between 2007-2014, the Christian population in America declined from 80-71 percent, while the percentage of people from other faiths and the unaffiliated rose.²⁶ Amongst the other faiths, the percentage of Muslims and Hindus in America are rising the most.²⁷ To compare that to overall numbers of students in public schools, America’s school age population and enrollment continues to increase.²⁸ Total public school enrollment is projected to set new records from 2009 through 2018, reaching an estimated 53.9 million students in 2018.²⁹ And as public schools experience

²¹ Laycock, *supra* note 11.

²² *Id.* (Responses are anonymous and students are encouraged to be as candid as they want to be).

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Wertheimer, *supra* note 5.

²⁶ *Id.* (research showing these trends to continue in their respective paths)

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ Lauren Cooley, *Accommodating Diversity: Teaching About Religion In Public Schools*, 12 Rutgers J. L. 7 Religion 347, 349 (2011).

²⁹ *Id.* (“It is estimated that in 2018, 38.2 million students will be enrolled in pre-kindergarten through grade eight and 15.8 million students will be enrolled in grades nine through twelve”).

an increase in enrollment, they experience an increase in ethnic and cultural diversity amongst its students . . . this includes a corresponding increase in religious diversity among students as well.³⁰

These numbers alone show the significance of raising religious literacy amongst our students. Amongst many practical reasons, is the fact that religion plays a role in history, literature, and current events.³¹ Religious conflict between different religions or branches of the same faith are in everyday news and politics.³² Such as understanding the difference between Shi'a and Sunni Islam in order to better form opinions about the Middle East and conflicts that dominate CNN and Fox News in skewed manners.³³ Or knowing the difference between Sikhism and Hinduism, since those are the respective religions of the last two prime ministers of India, the world's largest democracy.³⁴ Even a historical perspective on the differences between Catholicism and Protestant denominations.³⁵ Books such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* would be difficult to comprehend without discussion about the Puritans, or Elie Wiesel's *Night* would be out of context without learning about Judaism and the Holocaust.³⁶

Through this comparative study education model students can be allowed to cultivate an ethical and moral compass along with their core education skills.³⁷ Empowering students to think big and ask the big questions brings productive thought and in turn creates a thoughtful,

³⁰ *Id.* (Combined enrollment of Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Native American students generally have increased as a percentage of total enrollment in all regions between 1987-2007).

³¹ Wertheimer, *supra* note 5.

³² *Id.* (Linda K. Wertheimer asks, "How can anyone understand what's happening in the world without basic knowledge of world religions?").

³³ Wertheimer, *supra* note 2.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.* (For example in preparation for when the Pope makes a visit to America and various American cities).

³⁶ Wertheimer, *supra* note 5.

³⁷ Joseph Laycock, *We Must Teach about Religion in High Schools*, RELIGION & POLITICS (January 7, 2014), <http://religionandpolitics.org/2014/01/07/we-must-teach-about-religion-in-high-schools/>.

creative, and passionate population.³⁸ In a high school in Tennessee an elective was taught for a decade that covered five traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.³⁹ One alumnus spoke about that world studies class saying, “[it] was really the one and only class that allowed for such an open dialogue of faith and religion”.⁴⁰ This shows first hand students’ attraction to a thought provoking class based in either faith or simply reflective thought.

Another convincing reason for teaching world religions to our students is surrounded around the bullying and type of discrimination that can arise towards those in a minority religion. In a religiously plural society, public schools can be places where those in a religious minority can be urged to conform to the beliefs and practices of the dominant culture.⁴¹ In a recent incident that culminated to the ACLU bringing charges against a school, a teacher repeatedly told a Buddhist student of Thai descent that Buddhism is stupid and that he should become a Christian.⁴² In other examples, a young Sikh man recalled his first week in kindergarten and how his peers tore off his patka (the religious head covering he wore) and stood by his locker asking, “Hey, is there a bomb in your locker?”.⁴³ Or Jewish children talking about how in middle school their peers would throw pennies at them to jab at a stereotype about Jews and money, or another high school student being asked if her family belonged to a cult simply because they were Jehovah’s Witnesses.⁴⁴ Sadly this bullying stems directly from ignorance not only from the schools curriculum but also from a society that teaches these young children certain stereotypes and negative connotations of their fellow classmates; simply based on their

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* (Hendersonville High School in Hendersonville, Tennessee).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Laycock, *supra* note 8.

⁴² Carol Kuruvilla, *ACLU sues Bible Belt school for allegedly bullying Buddhist student*, NEW YORK DAILY NEWS (January 24, 2014), <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/aclu-sues-bible-belt-school-allegedly-bullying-buddhist-student-article-1.1590578>.

⁴³ Wertheimer, *supra* note 5.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

religion. A world religions class would be a starting part for nipping these misconceived notions in the bud and progressing to a more understanding America.

Another important and practical reason for educating our youth in the world's many different faiths is the global impact that we all will have one day entering an ever-growing global market. Joseph Laycock describes very succinctly in *Caring Magazine*,

Religion is not a discrete and ahistorical phenomenon. The world's religious traditions are woven into the very fabric of human history and culture. Not only are religiously illiterate students ill equipped to compete in a global marketplace, they are deprived of the cultural heritage that is their birthright as human beings. Without some understanding of the world's religions, students will not know the traditions and values of their neighbors and coworkers, understand literary and cultural references, or be able to interpret claims about religion made by politicians and the media.⁴⁵

Religious illiteracy would make for an uninformed public, which produces students who are less equipped to compete in global marketplace.⁴⁶ With an ill-equipped workforce, we cannot respectfully and efficiently interact with the world markets and competitors even in our backyard. On top of the general public not being equipped for the future, much of America's military consist of high school graduates who are typically taught close to nothing about world religions.⁴⁷ Yet these are the young men and women sent into foreign countries all over the world as not only our defenses but also America's representatives.⁴⁸ If we continue to send these service men and women into countries where religion is a core aspect of the community, it will continue to lead to misunderstandings and disrespect between our representatives and the world's people.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Laycock, *supra* note 8.

⁴⁶ Laycock, *supra* note 37.

⁴⁷ W. Cole Durham & Robert Smith, *Teaching about religion in public schools*, 3 *Religious Organizations and the Law* §12:21 (2013).

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

While by no means is this an exhaustive list for the arguments for why world religions should be taught, it gives an idea that religious literacy is not only good for individuals, but for the country as a whole. In a growing market, where we send businesswomen and soldiers alike across seas, an understanding of world religions from an early age will everyone work peacefully and efficiently.

IV. ARGUMENTS AGAINST TEACHING WORLD RELIGIONS

Understandably, being a widely discussed and highly controversial issue for many years now, this argument does not fail to meet opposition. The late Senator Phillip A. Hart from Michigan was quoted saying, “I’m a Catholic and I hope a devout one, but I think that the public school classroom is not place for me to try and impose my world formula for prayer on children who don’t share it, and for what very reason I don’t want my children in a public classroom to be exposed to someone else’s religion or formula”.⁵⁰ Other arguments against religion come from a controversy standpoint.⁵¹ Some argue that many public school officials will not know enough about other religions, and in turn students will begin to “shop” for a new belief system. Furthermore some argue that teaching about every religion is simply impossible.⁵²

Nevertheless these arguments on how to approach teaching religion in schools fail. As to the argument that any controversy is wrong and would make a classroom uncomfortable, we must remember that education requires students and teachers to go outside of their comfort zone and think big about the pressing issues and concerns of history and our present day.⁵³ In teaching an understanding about world religions students will not be prompted to “shop” for a

⁵⁰ ROBERT MURRAY THOMAS, *GOD IN THE CLASSROOM: RELIGION AND AMERICA’S PUBLIC SCHOOLS* 125 (Greenwood Publishing Group 2007).

⁵¹ *Id.* (“The second argument is that religion is far too controversial a subject to be brought into public schools); Olivia Godfrey, *Why religion should not be taught in public schools*, *THE KNIGHTLY HERALD* (September 23, 2013), <http://knightlyherald.com/why-religion-should-not-be-taught-in-public-schools-olivia-godfrey/>.

⁵² *Id.* (“These points all lead to the conclusion that allowing religion to be taught in public schools will only create even more problems and issues than were present before”).

⁵³ Laycock, *supra* note 11.

new one.⁵⁴ The purpose of religious literacy is to empower students with the knowledge about the world in which they live, and in turn make informed decisions about how their personal belief system coexists with others.⁵⁵ Also just because a teacher is Jewish, Christian, or Muslim does not mean they are not knowledgeable in other faiths.⁵⁶ It depends on the teacher, the administration, and the policies and curriculum in place to help nurture an environment of learning and education, just like math or science in many ways.⁵⁷ Any argument that there is not enough time to effectively teach all religions must be rejected because it is predicated on the assumption that courses are a marketplace in which students select which religions they feel like learning about.⁵⁸ Through the curriculum and teachers and schools' decisions on which religions should be taught, world religions can be a flexible and changing class that addresses the needs of the time and geographical situation.

A final interesting argument for why world religions should not be taught in public schools is an idea that if students are able to learn about religion and different creation stories, we will have a population that believes in “fable” and not be equipped to compete on the world market scale.⁵⁹ Yet that assertion could not be further from the truth. No one claims that teaching world religions will all of sudden make students refuse to believe science or any other theories presented to them. Instead study about religions in schools increase tolerance and

⁵⁴ Laycock, *supra* note 8.

⁵⁵ *Id.* (Failing to provide any practical knowledge about Islam to a generation of students shaped by 9/11 and continuous wars in the Middle East would be detrimental to understanding how to coexist).

⁵⁶ Melinda D. Anderson, *The Misplaced Fear of Religion in Classrooms*, THE ATLANTIC (October 19, 2015), <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/the-misplaced-fear-of-religion-in-classrooms/411094/>.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ Laycock, *supra* note 37.

⁵⁹ Annie Laurie Gaylor, *The Dangers of Religious Instruction in Public Schools*, RELIGION & POLITICS (January 7, 2014), <http://religionandpolitics.org/2014/01/07/the-dangers-of-religious-instruction-in-public-schools/> (posing the question, “How can a scientifically illiterate nation compete in global market? What does it mean for our future when half our population rejects fact and accepts fable?”).

understanding among people of different faiths and beliefs.⁶⁰ According to a study by Emile Lester and Patrick Roberts in 2006, high school students in fact increased their support for the rights of others after taking a course in world religions.⁶¹ With a world religions class, students would in fact leave with a greater understanding of the major world religions and a “fuller appreciation of the moral values shared” across many peoples and theories; whether creation based or not.⁶²

V. PAST EXAMPLES, SUPPORT AND THE “HOW TO” MANUAL

Richard Schiffman candidly poses the appropriate question in regard to teaching world religions in public schools, “What is the alternative?”⁶³ He answers the question, “The alternative to learning about religions is remaining in ignorance, as we largely are today . . . [a]nd ignorance is a breeding ground for prejudice, stereotype and mutual suspicion”.⁶⁴ This is the exact reason many groups have taken a stance and looked to promote and defend religious teachings in public schools.⁶⁵ In a joint statement produced by the American Civil Liberties Union, over 30 religious and civil liberties organizations signed on in support of the current laws on religious education in public schools and clarifications on why it can be taught in our schools.⁶⁶ Groups such as the American Jewish Committee, the American Muslim Council, or the Baptist Joint Committee, to the Church of Scientology International, the B’nai B’rith group, the National Sikh Center, and even the Americans United for Separation of Church and State all signed on in a show of solidarity of a message to bring more impactful religious teachings to

⁶⁰ Charles C. Haynes, *Paying the price for religious literacy*, FAITH STREET (October 3, 2012), <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2012/10/03/paying-the-price-for-religious-illiteracy/12056>.

⁶¹ Lester & Roberts, *supra* note 4 at 6.

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ Schiffman, *supra* note 9.

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ ACLU, *Joint Statement of Current Law on Religion in the Public Schools* (Last visited April 27, 2016), <https://www.aclu.org/joint-statement-current-law-religion-public-schools>.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

schools.⁶⁷ In this joint statement they explain that amongst the many positives to teaching world religions in schools, is the secular interest of teaching values.⁶⁸ Schools can teach civic virtues like honesty, good citizenship, sportsmanship, courage, respect for persons and their rights, and tolerance and hard work all through the many different understandings of other religions and faiths.⁶⁹

With this support and understanding public schools across America have instituted different policies and classes to attempt to bring a world religions class to their schools . . . many of them succeeding in many ways. Teachers in Wellesley, Massachusetts spend half the school year teaching 11 and 12 year old sixth graders major figures, holidays, geography and beliefs central to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.⁷⁰ In an elementary school in Wichita, Kansas, teachers instruct students on simple facts about three different world religions in first grade as part of their Core Knowledge curriculum.⁷¹ In probably the most expansive program to date, a school in Modesto, California has made a world religions course a graduation requirement since 2000.⁷² Modesto in many ways has set the standard on how to approach a world religions course in that they prepped the teachers first who were to teach the class.⁷³ The First Amendment Center first provided training to the school's teachers on how to avoid certain constitutional issues with combining church and state, then the school took a "educate don't celebrate" approach when it came to religious holidays, lastly the teachers attended various workshops taught by religious scholars from all denominations such as Sikhism, Buddhism,

⁶⁷ *Id.* (other groups include: The American Humanist Association, Anti-Defamation League, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Friends Committee on National Legislation, People of the American Way, and many more).

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.* ("The mere fact that most, if not all, religions also teach these values does not make it unlawful to teach them").

⁷⁰ Wertheimer, *supra* note 5.

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² Anderson, *supra* note 56.

⁷³ *Id.* (calling the design the "gold" standard).

Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.⁷⁴ These all being thoughtful and impactful steps to providing a dynamic world religions course to Modesto's youth.⁷⁵

VI. CONCLUSION

Providing a forceful yet thoughtful world religions class to students across our country is not only the correct thing to do for sake of education, but also the ethical thing to do for society's sake. In a historic 1963 United States Supreme Court case *Abington v. Schempp*, Justice Tom Clark remarked, "[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization".⁷⁶ In our democratic republic, we assume that all individuals will make decisions for themselves based on their own motivations and goals.⁷⁷ Parents can introduce and guide a religious belief and faith system to their children, and teachers can inform them about the world they live in and how to traverse it into and through adulthood, yet ultimately these students are the ones that will be joining society and will either be prepared or not to face the challenges and hurdles we all face today.⁷⁸ World religions is only a start, but equipping our youth with the understanding of their neighbors around the world and in their own backyard ensures that they will at least have a fighting chance in understanding and respecting everyone who crosses their path.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ For a more comprehensive plan including how to bring world religion to specific age groups see Cooley, *supra* note 28 at 385-93.

⁷⁶ *Sch. Dist. Of Abington Twp., Pa. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

⁷⁷ Laycock, *supra* note 8.

⁷⁸ *Id.*