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EXAMINING THE THEORIES AND PEDAGOGIES
OF THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION
IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the following question: “Is the academic study of religion a desirable educational endeavor for public school students?” In examining this question I conclude that students should study religion as part of a robust education that seeks to not only inform students about religious traditions, but also to engage them in alternative viewpoints that take seriously the issue of religious diversity. My argument is not a legal one (i.e., the government should *require* or *not require* schools to teach about religion), but instead an educational one. I argue that the study of religion is desirable insofar as it contributes to civic education—not through providing a single metaphysical and moral basis for citizenship, but through informing students about religious diversity and giving them the skills needed to engage in thoughtful discussion of identity, culture, ethics, and globalization. This argument is developed through an examination of three current models for including the academic study of religion in public schools (the liberal, multicultural, and literacy models), which are analyzed separately in chapters two, three, and four. The models differ in important respects, including: the underlying conception of religion informing these models; the content to be included in the curriculum; the pedagogical objectives sought; and the anticipated work of the teacher and students for achieving these objectives. The goal of this study is to put these models in dialogue with one another in order to illuminate the problems and possibilities for including the academic study of religion in public schools. Chapter five concludes by illustrating how a world religions course can be incorporated into a public high school classroom, thus providing a way for students to learn about religious diversity as a means to strengthen their civic identities in a global world.

For my mom and dad, truly remarkable parents.

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CHAPTER 1
RELIGION AND EDUCATION

Introduction

Since 1948, legal precedent in the United States has declared religious instruction in public schools—that is, education directed toward the spiritual or devotional—a violation of the Establishment Clause¹ and over the years school-sponsored Bible reading, teacher-lead prayer, and the posting of the Ten Commandments in schools have been found unlawful.² On the other hand, teaching *about* religion, as an academic subject, does not violate the Establishment Clause. Delivering the opinion of the court in *Abington Township v. Schempp*, which prohibited school-sponsored Bible reading, Justice Thomas Clark stated:

[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. 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 consistent with the First Amendment.³

This decision has been paradigmatic for setting the platform for instruction in the classroom, distinguishing between *religious education* (education directed toward the spiritual or

¹ From the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

² In 1948 the Court found “released time” courses, where public schools set aside class time for religious instruction, unconstitutional. *McCullum v. Board of Education*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948); In 1962 the Court ruled that any type of prayer led by school officials is unconstitutional. *Engel v. Vitale*, 82 S. Ct. 1261 (1962); In 1963 the Court ruled that schools cannot require students to participate in prayer and/or Bible reading. *Murray v. Curlett*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); In 1980 the Court found that the posting of the Ten Commandments in school buildings is unlawful. *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980)

³ *Abington Township v. Schempp* 374 U.S. 203 at 225 (1963)

devotional) and *education about religion* (the academic study of religion). Religious education is strictly prohibited, while the academic study of religion, when done objectively, is legal.

The opinion of the court does not mandate the inclusion of the academic study of religion in public schools, nor does it define what “objective” inclusion looks like. In addition, the ambiguity of the phrase “presented objectively as part of a secular program of education”⁴ leaves a great deal of room for interpretation by public interest groups, policy makers, and educators alike. Similarly, because there exists no national educational mandate for public schools to include the study of religion in the curriculum, individual schools and school districts may elect to offer numerous courses in the academic study of religion, or none at all. Yet, as discussed below, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that Americans know very little about religion. This is problematic, because as Diana Eck notes, the American religious landscape is becoming increasingly diverse and citizens must learn how to successfully navigate this diversity.⁵ Therefore, knowledge of religion is vital for creating a healthy populace of citizens who regularly interact with religious difference.

The question guiding this dissertation, then, is this: “Is the academic study of religion a desirable educational endeavor for public school students?” I will argue that students should study religion as part of a robust education that seeks not only to inform students about religious traditions, but also to engage them in alternative viewpoints that take seriously the issue of religious diversity. My argument is not a legal one (i.e., the government should *require* or *not require* schools to teach about religion), but instead an educational one. I will argue that the study of religion is desirable insofar as it contributes to civic education—not through providing a

⁴ *Abington Township v. Schempp* 374 U.S. 203 at 225 (1963)

⁵ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperOne, 2002).

single metaphysical or moral basis for citizenship—but through informing students about religious diversity and helping them to cultivate the skills needed to engage in thoughtful discussion about religion.

Recently a handful of educational proposals have emerged that have called for the inclusion of the academic study of religion in public schools. The proposals of Warren Nord, Diane Moore, and Stephen Prothero have been particularly influential.⁶ Although their proposals—which I call the liberal, multicultural, and literacy models—demonstrate some unity in their desire to educate students about religion, they offer different justifications and different pedagogical modes of inclusion. The models differ in important respects, including: the underlying conception of religion informing these models; the content to be included in the curriculum; the pedagogical objectives sought; and the anticipated work of the teacher and students in the classroom for achieving these objectives. The goal of my study is to put these models in dialogue with one another in order to illuminate the problems and possibilities for including the study of religion in public schools. My goal is not simply to blend the models into one unified theory, but instead to find the right balance of characteristics from each model in order to develop a pragmatic approach for incorporating the study of religion in public schools. The approach I advocate seeks to provide students with the tools necessary for talking about religious diversity as a means to strengthen their civic identities in a global world.

America: A Nation of Religious Diversity

The religious diversity of the American citizenry is well documented, and scholars typically cite the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 as a watershed moment in American

⁶ Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

religious history.⁷ The act, signed by President Lyndon Johnson, loosened the restrictive immigration quotas put in place in 1924 that cut off virtually all immigration to the United States.⁸ Since 1965, religious practitioners from around the globe have immigrated to the United States, altering the religious landscape like never before. New immigrants from formally restricted countries brought with them the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and other “non-Christian” traditions. These immigrants settled in large cities and small towns across the nation, in effect diversifying the religious populace of neighborhoods, schools, and places of employment.⁹

However, unlike past waves of immigration, today’s immigrants live in a much more complex world, allowing for the formation of “multilocal” religious identities.¹⁰ For example, advances in technology, travel, and communication have contributed to porous national boundaries, allowing new immigrants the opportunities to maintain strong ties to their homelands. At times, the religious diversity of the U.S. “is sometimes shaped as much by forces at work outside our borders as within them.”¹¹ Of course, the changing dynamics of religious identity are not limited to new immigrants. Long-standing Jewish communities in the United States, for example, have formulated and re-formulated new conceptions of Jewish identity over

⁷ For example, see: Richard Alba, Albert Raboteau and Josh DeWind, eds. *Immigration and Religion in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); Jenna W. Joselit, *A Parade of Faiths: Immigration and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2007); Peggy Levitt, *God Needs No Passport* (New York: New Press, 2007).

⁸ The Immigration Act of 1924, or Johnson–Reed Act (43 Statutes-at-Large 153): United States federal law that limited the annual number of immigrants who could be admitted from any country to 2% of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States in 1890, down from the 3% cap set by the Immigration Restriction Act of 1921, according to the Census of 1890. (The law was aimed at further restricting the Southern and Eastern Europeans who were immigrating in large numbers starting in the 1890s, as well as prohibiting the immigration of East Asians and Asian Indians, or “Asiatics.”)

⁹ Eck, *A New Religious America*, 5-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Levitt, *God Needs No Passport*, 11.

many generations.¹² Religious diversity in the U.S., therefore, remains a mixture of local and global religious identities inextricably linked to the transforming contexts of a multilayered society.

In light of these profound changes in the American religious landscape, Eck asks these very important questions:

What will the idea and vision of America become as citizens, new and old, embrace all this diversity? The questions that emerge today from the encounter of people of so many religious and cultural traditions go to the heart of who we see ourselves to be as a people. They are not trivial questions, for they force us to ask in one way or another: Who do we mean when we invoke the first words of our Constitution, “We the people of the United States of America”? Who do we mean when we say “we”? This is a challenge of citizenship, to be sure, for it has to do with the imagined community of which we consider ourselves a part. It is also a challenge of faith, for people of every religious tradition live today with communities of faith other than their own, not only around the world but also across the street.¹³

These challenges of citizenship and religious diversity outlined by Eck highlight persistent theoretical questions of American identity that scholars and educators have struggled with for decades. More importantly, however, Eck implicitly reminds us that the formation of an American identity is not simply a task of theoretical musing, but instead is an everyday project of identity formation for those Americans who increasingly encounter religious diversity in their daily lives.

¹² Calvin Goldscheider, “Immigration and the Transformation of American Jews,” in *Immigration and Religion in America*, eds. Richard Alba, Albert Raboteau and Josh DeWind (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 198-223.

¹³ Eck, *A New Religious America*, 5.

America: A Nation of Religious Illiteracy

Despite a marked increase in religious diversity in the United States, recent sociological and survey data suggest that most Americans know very little about religion. For example, sociologist Robert Wuthnow recently found that although Americans have strong views on religious subjects, they are poorly informed about the practices of different religions, and also exhibit a weak capacity for reflection on their own tradition.¹⁴ Wuthnow notes that this is especially problematic for a nation that has grown increasingly diverse. As Wuthnow puts it “religious diversity has become a fact of ordinary life,”¹⁵ and Americans can no longer afford to ignore the social challenges of living and working side-by-side with individuals from diverse religious backgrounds.

Moreover, recent national polls show that Americans on average display a dismal amount of knowledge about religion. For example, a 2010 survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that “large numbers of Americans are uninformed about the tenets, practices, history and leading figures of major faith traditions—including their own.”¹⁶ In this nationwide survey of basic religious knowledge, participants scored on average 50 percent, answering 16 of 32 questions correctly.¹⁷ The pervasiveness of religious illiteracy is surprising here, considering that previous Pew surveys have shown—through a number of different indicators—that America is among the most religious of the world’s developed nations.¹⁸ For

¹⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Wuthnow, *Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 37.

¹⁶ “U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey,” Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. September 28, 2010, <http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey.aspx>

¹⁷ The nationwide poll was conducted from May 19 through June 14, 2010, among 3,412 Americans age 18 and older, on landlines and cell phones, in English and Spanish.

¹⁸ “U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey,” Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

example, approximately 90 percent of Americans believe in god, and nearly 83 percent of Americans continue to be affiliated with a religious tradition.¹⁹

According to Pew, the problem of religious illiteracy can be traced to one's level of education. The Pew center concluded that "data from the survey indicate that educational attainment—how much schooling an individual has completed—is the single best predictor of religious knowledge. College graduates get nearly eight more questions right on average than do people with a high school education or less. Having taken a religion course is also strongly associated with higher religious knowledge."²⁰ This lack of knowledge about religion has been in recent years labeled as "religious illiteracy," which denotes both the lack of religious knowledge held by Americans and the corresponding lack of formal education about religion in the public schools.

In his popular book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*, religious studies scholar Stephen Prothero cites anecdotal evidence about his own encounters with religious illiteracy while working as a college professor. Early in his academic career, Prothero discovered that many of his students lacked basic knowledge about religion, which made it impossible for him to have challenging conversations with his students.²¹ When he tested his students with a "religious literacy quiz" at the beginning of an introductory religious studies course, most failed the test.²² Likewise, professor Warren Nord tested the religious

¹⁹ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. June 23, 2008, <http://www.pewforum.org/US-Religious-Landscape-Survey-Resources.aspx>. In a more recent poll, Pew found that formal religious affiliation had fallen, but many of the unaffiliated individuals who responded to the survey claimed to be religious in some way. Pew attributed this change mostly to a generational divide between younger and older generations. See: "'Nones' on the Rise," Pew Forum on Religion & Public life. October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

²⁰ "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey," Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

²¹ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 27-8.

literacy of his students taking college courses in the study of religion.²³ Consisting of basic questions about the Bible and world religions, Nord was surprised that none of his 150 students passed the test, with the average score of only 28 percent. For Nord, the quiz results suggested a problem with public schooling. “The great majority of students know *very* little about religion. They learn nothing about it at school, and increasingly, they learn nothing about it at home or in church or synagogue.”²⁴

Setting the Boundaries of this Study

Validating Nord’s claim is a difficult task. The lack of scholarly research regarding the inclusion of the academic study of religion in the curriculum makes it difficult to provide empirical evidence about the quality and frequency of students’ exposure to the academic study of religion in public schools. As mentioned earlier, courses in the study of religion are not federally mandated, and only recently have some states passed legislation to allow separate courses in the academic study of the Bible.²⁵ At the local level, it is up to individual school districts to decide whether and how to include academic courses in the study of religion. For example, beginning in 2000, the school district of Modesto, California, instituted a rule requiring all incoming ninth-graders to take a course in world religions, while other Californian school districts have no such requirements.²⁶ National and state statistics are not kept on the number of

²³ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 199-200.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 200 italics original.

²⁵ For example, in April 2006, Georgia became the first state to authorize the use of public funds to subsidize elective courses in bible. In May 2007, Texas approved legislation that expanded the permission to develop bible courses. Enabling legislation for bible courses has been proposed in Alabama, Tennessee, Indiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Policy makers and legislators regard these classes as different from “bible studies,” which was banned in 1963.

²⁶ Emile Lester and Patrick Roberts. *Learning about World Religions in Public Schools: The Impact on Student Attitudes and Community Acceptance in Modesto, Calif* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2006). PDF e-book. http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/madison/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/FirstForum_ModestoWorldReligions.pdf.

schools—public or private—currently offering courses in the study of religion, nor do state standardized tests assess student knowledge about religion.

The Pew survey of religious literacy provides only a small glimpse of the pervasive religious illiteracy facing this country, but the problem is apparent for instructors who teach introductory courses in the study of religion. In my own experience teaching an undergraduate-level world religions course, most students come to class without ever having taken a course in religion and are ill prepared to engage in discussion about religion and religiously influenced topics. This problem is only amplified at the high school level. As mentioned above, including courses in the academic study of religion in public high schools is a fairly new concept, and there exists very little scholarship examining the pedagogical and curricular issues involved in such an endeavor. Of the scholarship that does exist, there is a great deal of disparity between rationales provided and pedagogical strategies offered by the experts in the field. This is problematic for educators who wish to help combat the pervasive religious illiteracy plaguing society, because there is little cohesive scholarship to draw from. A goal of my study, therefore, is to assist in providing some structure to the current body of scholarship by bringing the key authors on the subject into dialogue with one another.

Moreover, since this study is a philosophical investigation into the desirability of including an academic study of religion in public schools, some limitations must be recognized. First, despite the lack of empirical data regarding the current state of religion and religious knowledge within public education, my investigation begins with the assumption that American students know very little about religion as an academic subject as evidenced by its lack of inclusion into the formal curriculum. Second, this dissertation recognizes that students have the opportunity to learn about religion in other venues—for example, at home or as congregants in

various religious organizations. However, I do not feel that these non-public contexts are adequate substitutes for learning in the context of public schools, and therefore I am specifically concerned with analyzing the academic study of religion within the formal institution of public schools. In order to do this, it is necessary to explain what type of formal academic courses I will investigate in this dissertation, as well as clarify the concept of “religion.”

Religion and the Public School Curriculum

Scholars have pointed out that when religion is taught in public schools, it is typically presented as an addendum to core subjects like history or literature.²⁷ Including religion in this manner means integrating religious elements in different courses when appropriate. For example, in teaching about American slavery a history teacher may choose to include a short unit on how Christianity played a role in both supporting and condemning slavery. In this scenario, students would learn about the historical, moral, and cultural significance of Christianity during the Civil War period, but they would not necessarily be expected to learn about Christianity per se. In contrast, teaching about religion as a subject in its own right differs from including religion across the curriculum. For example, academic courses in Bible history and Bible as/in literature seek to teach students to recognize the profound influence the Bible has had on the nation’s historical development, in art and literature, and in pop culture and the media, while also providing students with the tools of literary analysis. These courses vary greatly in style and

²⁷ For example, many scholars have argued that due to legal precedent and other historical/social factors, teaching about religion—even as an academic subject—is mostly absent from K-12 public education. When it is addressed, it is typically presented as a supplement in English and history courses. See: Jay Wexler, “Preparing for the Clothed Public Square: Teaching About Religion, Civic Education, and the Constitution,” *William and Mary Law Review* 43 (2001): 1168-9; Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 1998.); Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993.); James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999.); Robert Kunzman, *Grappling with the Good: Talking about Religion and Morality in Public Schools* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006.); Suzanne Rosenblith and Scott Priestman, “Problematizing Religious Truth: Implications for Public Education,” *Educational Theory* 54, no. 4 (2004): 366.

content from courses in world or comparative religions, which aim to introduce students to the beliefs and practices of some of the world's most influential religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Legal scholar Jay Wexler has documented the various ways in which religion can be included in the curriculum, such as:

Religion's role in U.S. history; religious interpretations of history; theological history; competing views of the First Amendment; religion's role as a buffer to state authority; religious views on contested policy issues; how religion affects political choices; religious views on economic questions; religious meanings in art and literature; the secularization of literature and art in modern times; religious views on the debate over origins, the Big Bang, nature and ecology, technology, genetic engineering, health and healing, and other scientific issues; the Bible as literature, in literature, as history, in history, and as scripture; and world religions, including a comparative study of sacred scriptures.²⁸

This dissertation, however, will only examine the role of world religions in public education.

This focus is necessary because including the academic study of religion in the curriculum means deciding what aspects of religion hold the strongest claim to inclusion. My argument is that world religions hold the strongest claim to inclusion for two reasons. First, due to the increasing religious diversity in the United States, along with increased globalization and access to a diversity of religious viewpoints, students must be educated for global awareness. As Robert Nash points out, the calamitous events of September 11, 2001, changed the geopolitical-religious landscape forever, reminding educators of the interconnectedness of the world.²⁹ In this new era of global connectedness, Nash argues that “no longer can any of us continue to think of religions

²⁸ Wexler, “Clothed Public Square,” 1168-9.

²⁹ Robert J. Nash, “A Letter to Secondary Teachers: Teaching about Religious Pluralism in the Public Schools,” in *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, ed. Nel Noddings (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), 93-4.

outside the Judeo-Christian axis to be unimportant, or inferior, in the global scheme of things.”³⁰ Furthermore, Wuthnow has argued that Americans regard other religions—in particular non-Christian religions—as inferior and dangerous, writing “although it is common to give lip service to the value of diversity, many Americans regard religions other than their own as fanatical, conducive to violence, closed-minded, backward, and strange.”³¹ Now more than ever it is important that students are exposed to a variety of religious traditions so that they may effectively navigate a religiously pluralistic world.

Second, with limited space in the curriculum for the academic study of religion, choices have to be made about what to include and what to exclude. Even though schools can add religious themes across the curriculum, as Wexler’s list demonstrates, such additions are not sufficient to provide students with the tools of deliberation, autonomy, and mutual respect needed to engage in civic dialogue in the public square. As Wexler notes, “in a world in which nations and peoples are linked by high-speed transportation, a highly developed international economy, global political alliances and associations, and the Internet, students must learn how to exist within and support the global political community, with its incredibly broad array of religious diversity.”³² Wexler goes on to say that “although narrow religious studies programs focusing only on the Bible, or on Christianity, or on the role that dominant religious traditions have played in American history do promote some goals consistent with civic education ... they nonetheless are far from ideal ways to prepare students to exist within and support their political community.”³³ Therefore, in order for students to learn the skills and dispositions needed to

³⁰ Ibid., 94.

³¹ Wuthnow, *Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 228.

³² Wexler, “Clothed Public Square,” 1239.

³³ Ibid., 1241.

effectively participate in the public square, it is educationally desirable for them to learn about the major religions of the world in a separate course that examines each tradition as an academic subject worthy of study.

Defining “Religion”

According to religious studies scholar Jonathan Z. Smith, scholarship is always an act of choice, selection, and focus. To study a phenomenon, including religion, is to choose to focus on certain aspects of the subject while leaving others out. Smith claims that although there exists an overwhelming amount of data that may be characterized as *religious*, “*there is no data for religion.*”³⁴ Instead, “religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparisons and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.”³⁵ Smith’s point is that “religion” is not a stand-alone concept, nor is it its own distinctive referent. “Religion” is a category of analysis created by scholars in an effort to make sense of those practices that typically fall outside the realm of the “scientific.”

Of course, a “religious person” would likely disagree with this definition of religion. It is undeniable that religion plays a role in the lived experiences of millions of practitioners around the globe, indicated by their faith and spiritual commitment to something other than themselves. This view of religion has been promoted most famously by religious studies scholar Mircea Eliade, who asserts that religion can be characterized by the “sacred”—the sphere of the

³⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi italics original.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

supernatural and transcendent.³⁶ Eliade argues that since the beginning of time people have sought refuge in the sacred, organizing their lives around that which is mysterious and extraordinary. For Eliade, the concept of religion is that of an autonomous phenomenon, not a by-product of some other variable like scholarly creation.

These two scholars, Smith and Eliade, illustrate the broad spectrum of thought and diversity of viewpoint regarding what counts as “religion.” Their viewpoints showcase an important point that guides this dissertation—the way in which one defines “religion” implicates not only the content of religion presented to students but also the pedagogy used to deliver the information. Put another way, the way in which the question of religion is framed ultimately determines the way in which its outcome will be understood. Peter Berger argued this idea saying, “definitions cannot, by their very nature, be either ‘true’ or ‘false,’ only more useful or less so.”³⁷ Definitions are not simple mirrors of reality, and therefore it is impossible to develop an all-inclusive, clear-cut definition for religion. Instead, definitions are merely tools used by academics for a particular purpose and for guiding research in a particular direction. Therefore, peppered throughout this dissertation is an exploration into the implicit and explicit ways in which scholars use definitions in order to inform their theories about the curricular and pedagogical qualities of teaching about religion in public schools.

Chapter Overview

In chapter two, I analyze the liberal justification for teaching about religion in public schools advocated by educational scholar Warren Nord, who argues that schools should teach

³⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

³⁷ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 175.

students to think in new ways about the world around them. Nord claims that such skills are the foundation of a liberal education, where students learn about alternative cultures, traditions, and ways of life in order to make informed decisions about their own lives. He writes, “only if we can do this [engage with the variety of ideas and values found in the world] are we in a position to make judgments, to conclude, however tentatively, that some ways of thinking and living are better or worse than others.”³⁸ He argues that public schools have for years unfairly excluded religion from the curriculum, thus only paying lip service to the ideal of a liberal education. For Nord, religion is a cornerstone of the American story but has fallen victim to the increasingly pervasive secularization of society. Nord wants to reverse this trend by asking that public schools begin to take religion seriously and include an academic study of religion in the curriculum. In particular, Nord thinks that religion should be taught through a framework of empathy so that students learn to appreciate religion as a viable alternative to secularism. I argue that Nord’s position is problematic since he views the purpose of a religious studies curriculum as reversing the historical injustices leveled against religion, and in particular Christianity. This does not coalesce with a liberal education that seeks to expand students’ horizons, nor does it recognize religion as a dynamic organism that develops and changes over time in relation to changing social and cultural movements.

My critique of Nord leads me into chapter three, where I take up this idea of religion as a lived tradition that is both influenced by—and influences—modern culture and society. In examining the multicultural justification for teaching about religion in public schools, I analyze the work of Diane Moore, who suggests that religion functions as a pervasive cultural phenomenon in need of further study. For Moore, education serves a multitude of purposes.

³⁸ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 201.

One purpose is democratic, where schools promote the skills and virtues that citizens need in order to engage in deliberation within a pluralistic society.³⁹ Another purpose of education is to cultivate within students moral agency, self-confidence, humility, and the skills of critical thinking and self-reflection.⁴⁰ Finally, she believes that education should encourage students to lead fulfilling lives, and to be inspired to imagine, create, and discover the kinds of lives they want to live.⁴¹ With all of these goals in mind, Moore argues that schools must therefore teach about religion so as to create the kind of discerning, self-reflective, and open-minded citizens that society needs. She writes:

Religion is an especially complicated topic in our culture precisely because there are so few opportunities for people to identify and explore their assumptions about religion itself or particular faith traditions in settings that encourage the conscious interrogation of those assumptions toward the goal of deeper understanding. Schools should provide this opportunity while also teaching students about the world's religions from an approach that emphasizes the diversity within traditions.⁴²

Moore details an argument for a type of robust multicultural education that resists any movement toward essentialism because she views religious traditions as complex and multidimensional.

Moore argues for a student-centered pedagogy that allows for students to critically evaluate how their own context for understanding (or misunderstanding) about religion is central to an interpretive process that provides them with a critical lens to analyze religious phenomena. Yet, despite some of the favorable aspects of her theory, I argue that Moore's theory for an academic study of religion falls short since she too often conflates religion with culture, insisting that students learn about religion insofar as it informs their understanding of culture. Although

³⁹ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 9-16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23-5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

Moore views religion as a complex, multilayered organism in need of further study, her multicultural approach to the study of religion ignores religion as a phenomenon worthy of study in its own right. Furthermore, her pedagogical strategy for including the study of religion in schools is unrealistic since it ignores the very real problem of religious illiteracy. Moore assumes that students come to school well-equipped with knowledge about religion and can therefore engage in higher-level interpretation and critique. However, this strategy is problematic since most students know little about religion, which is something that Moore herself acknowledges.

In chapter four, I examine the literacy justification for the study of religion in public schools, which is modeled after the theory of cultural literacy developed by educational scholar E.D. Hirsch. In short, the theory of cultural literacy asserts that students should be familiar with the formal and informal knowledge that constitutes the dominant culture in order to be socially and economically successful in life. Stephen Prothero appropriates this theory to argue that knowledge about religion is necessary for successful navigation of civic life. He argues that in the United States and abroad, politics and culture are fundamentally entangled with religion, therefore learning about religion as an academic subject is crucial for creating knowledgeable and responsible citizens.

In particular, Prothero is concerned that Americans have become complacent about their religious knowledge, which he argues was not the case for past generations.⁴³ What has resulted is rampant religious illiteracy, which has affected the ability of citizens to participate meaningfully in public life. Prothero argues that religion and public life are inextricably woven together, and when citizens fail to understand religion, they fail to understand the religiously-

⁴³ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 86. Prothero argues that prior to the Second Great Awakening and the rise of evangelicalism, Americans knew quite a lot about religion, but since then have lost much of their academic knowledge about religion in favor of spiritual or emotional knowledge of religion. See: 59-86.

inflected social and political issues of our time. Prothero wants public schools to start teaching courses in the academic study of religion so that students—who are future citizens—will be well-prepared to participate in civic dialogue about the most pressing issues of the day. To reverse the rising tide of religious illiteracy, Prothero advocates for a knowledge-based approach to the study of religion. Following the lead of Hirsch, he argues that religious literacy involves “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives.”⁴⁴

I argue that Prothero’s approach to the study of religion is problematic since it ignores the way in which knowledge and meaning operate within the classroom. Prothero’s scheme imposes on to students a narrow conception of “what counts” as meaningful religious knowledge by insisting that the religion of the dominant group (Christianity) anchor a religious literacy curriculum. This approach hijacks meaning and limits students’ exposure to religious diversity. As the public square becomes increasingly global, students should instead be exposed to knowledge about the variety of religious traditions found in the world, while also being taught the skills and dispositions necessary to engage in civic dialogue.

In the fifth chapter, I revisit the three justifications analyzed thus far, and in particular, I consider how all three approaches recognize that learning about religion has an inherent civic function. In one way or another each author wants to instill within students a certain kind of civic identity, such as teaching students to embrace civic virtues like open-mindedness and mutual respect, or providing students with academic skills like critical reflection. Yet, none of the authors adequately address the way in which the emergence of globalization, and the corresponding interconnectedness of people across the globe, has changed what it means to be a

⁴⁴ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 11-2.

citizen. Utilizing the work of Melissa Williams,⁴⁵ I argue that conceiving of citizenship as “shared fate” will open up a host of opportunities for teaching about religion in public schools as part of a robust education that seeks to nurture students’ capacity for global awareness. I then conclude the chapter by providing a concrete example of a course project that illustrates how the study of religion can be incorporated into a high school level world religions course. The goal of the class project is to utilize the best components of each approach discussed so far, while also promoting an ethos of global awareness.

⁴⁵ Melissa S. Williams, “Citizenship as Identity, Citizenship as Shared Fate, and the Functions of Multicultural Education,” in *Education and Citizenship in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities*, eds. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

CHAPTER 2

ANALYZING THE LIBERAL JUSTIFICATION

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I indicated that in recent years a handful of educational proposals have emerged that call for the inclusion of the study of religion in public schools. In this chapter, I analyze the work of Warren Nord, who was one of the first scholars to develop a comprehensive argument for why the study of religion is necessary. Nord argues that for too long religion has been unfairly excluded from the public school curriculum, which he finds problematic for a liberal education that seeks to expose students to different conceptions of the good life. Illustrating this point Nord writes:

Whether or not any religious account of the world is true, religion *is* important because it has had, and continues to have, a powerful impact on politics, society, and culture. The story of religious liberty is basic to our understanding of America. Growing religious pluralism makes it necessary for us to understand religion if we are to understand our neighbors and have peace. It shapes our moral beliefs and actions. It has addressed those “existential” questions which are fundamental to our humanity. The most profound “culture war” of the last three hundred years has been between religious and secular ways of understanding the world. If we are to teach about what is important, we must teach students about religion.⁴⁶

Nord believes that religion is important, and therefore as part of a liberal education, students must learn to “take religion seriously” as a “live option” for understanding the world. In particular Nord wants students to view religion as a live option for understanding the world *in contrast to* secular frameworks for viewing the world. As such, Nord advocates that religion be

⁴⁶ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 208 italics original.

included in a way that allows students to both appreciate religion and empathize with the religious other.

This mode of including the study of religion in public schools contrasts with the model proposed by Suzanne Rosenblith, who also argues that learning about religion is important for a liberal education.⁴⁷ She believes that an academic study of religion calls for a critical engagement with different religious traditions, where students learn to evaluate logically and critique the rival truth claims of different traditions.⁴⁸ In what follows, I tease out the particularities of both of these positions, discussing the educational implications of each approach.

The Secularization of American Life

In *Religion and American Education*, Warren Nord argues that the academic study of religion in the public school curriculum is justified as a necessary component of a well-rounded liberal education. He does not claim that a liberal education is the only aim of schooling, nor does he think it should dominate an overall approach to education. However, he does view liberal education as having a unique claim to schooling in our modern culture, where students are regularly confronted with diversity of all types. A liberal education, therefore, should help students learn how to navigate this diversity, which includes religious diversity since religion is a social and ethical phenomenon that profoundly impacts the daily lives of individuals. This impact is felt either directly as practitioners of religious traditions grapple with their faith commitments, or indirectly through the religiously-influenced social, political, and cultural networks in which students find themselves.

⁴⁷ A great deal of Rosenblith's work is co-authored, so to avoid confusion I refer to "Rosenblith" singularly.

⁴⁸ Rosenblith and Priestman, "Problematizing Religious Truth."

Nord claims that for far too long public schools have unfairly excluded religion from the curriculum completely or mentioned it as an afterthought in history and literature courses. He views the pervasive exclusion of religion from public education as both *unconstitutional* and *illiberal*, arguing that its absence signifies hostility toward religion and religious people. Nord contends that ignoring religion in the curriculum is *unconstitutional* because it defies the First Amendment's neutrality clause. He writes: "education must be fair and neutral, not taking sides on matters of profound disagreement."⁴⁹ When public schools ignore religion yet teach about secular viewpoints, they are in effect taking sides against religion.⁵⁰ Nord states, "too often strict separationism has excluded religion from the public square generally, and from education in particular, in ways that are not religiously neutral but hostile to religion and contribute to the secularization of our culture."⁵¹ He goes on to assert, "true, it is not permissible for government (and public education) to promote religion; official prayers and devotional Bible reading put government on the side of religion and violate neutrality. But it is equally impermissible for government (and public education) to discriminate against religion. That is also a violation of neutrality."⁵² Moreover, the exclusion of religion from public education is *illiberal* because it prohibits students' exposure to the variety of ideas and values found in society, restricting their ability to think critically and autonomously about life's most important issues. This neglect of religion arises from a failure of public schools to understand that religious worldviews are a meaningful part of many people's identities and experiences.

⁴⁹ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 240.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 137.

My analysis in this chapter focuses on Nord’s latter contention—that leaving religion out of the curriculum is an illiberal educational practice. However, before I delve into Nord’s analysis, it is useful to locate him historically since the thrust of his argument developed out of a particular political climate that was ripe with discussion about the proper place of religion in American society. For example, Wexler notes the emergence of several research studies in the mid-1980s that demonstrated the systematic exclusion of religion from social studies textbooks.⁵³ In particular, he cites the work of Paul Vitz who found that:

[N]ot one of these textbooks acknowledges, much less emphasizes, the great religious energy and creativity of the United States ... For all practical purposes, religion is hardly mentioned as existing in America in the last seventy-five to one hundred years; in particular, none of these books includes any serious coverage of conservative Protestantism in this century, although a few books mentioned the Scopes Trial ... None of them offers any serious appreciation of positive Catholic contributions to American life. Prejudice against Catholics is commonly noted, but positive contributions in terms of the assimilation of countless immigrants, the many hospitals and orphanages built by Catholics, and the significance of the Catholic school system are (with one exception) not mentioned. Likewise, the very many positive contributions of American Jews receive almost no notice.⁵⁴

Wexler notes that the publication of Vitz’s study, and several like it, “spurred several influential educational groups and associations to reexamine the question of whether public schools should teach students about religion and to articulate in strong terms the need to include the objective study of religion in the curriculum.”⁵⁵ Moreover, beginning in the fall of 1986 a significant political movement provided further momentum for teaching about religion in public

⁵³ Wexler, “Clothed Public Square,” 1181.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1159 citing Paul Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in our Children’s Textbooks* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986), 56-7.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1182-3.

schools. A group of representatives from America's leading faiths including Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and secularists came together and signed the Williamsburg Charter in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Virginia's call for a Bill of Rights. The Williamsburg Charter was "written and published expressly to address the dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities posed by religious liberty in American public life today."⁵⁶ Among the points raised in the charter include an assertion that secular opposition towards religion in the public sphere prevents the flourishing of liberty for all. In order to rectify this problem, signing members of the charter called for a renewed commitment for religious dialogue in the public square. As such, the charter:

Sets forth a renewed national compact, in the sense of a solemn mutual agreement between parties, on how we view the place of religion in American life and how we should contend with each other's deepest differences in the public sphere. It is a call to a vision of public life that will allow conflict to lead to consensus, religious commitment to reinforce political civility. In this way, diversity is not a point of weakness but a source of strength.⁵⁷

Examining the crossroads of religion and American life continued into the 1990s. In 1993, legal scholar Stephen Carter published *The Culture of Disbelief*, arguing that the modern legal and political system trivialized religion to the point of pushing it out of the public sphere altogether. Carter argued that America had become too secular due to a restrictive reading of the First Amendment by the courts and other public institutions such as schools. He writes:

It [the First Amendment] does not mean, however, that people whose motivations are religious are banned from trying to influence government, nor that the government is banned from listening to them. Understanding this distinction is the key to

⁵⁶ Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2001), 231. PDF e-book.
<http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/first/findingcommonground/FCG-complete.pdf>

⁵⁷ Haynes and Thomas, *Finding Common Ground*, 234.

preserving the necessary separation of church and state without resorting to a philosophical rhetoric that treats religion as an inferior way for citizens to come to public judgment.⁵⁸

Carter goes on to explain how the U.S. can create a friendlier climate for religion while still preserving the necessary separation of church and state.

According to Marci Hamilton, Carter's message resonated with then President Bill Clinton whose "two terms in office have been awash in religious rhetoric and in actions taken to further religious exercise, both domestically and abroad."⁵⁹ Hamilton goes on to say "judging from his own comments, the President was profoundly affected by the book [The Culture of Disbelief]" and "he credited the book with motivating him to push his Administration to 'live up to the spirit as well as the letter' of religious liberty legislation, and to disseminate guidelines for religious practice in public schools."⁶⁰ The guidelines issued by the Clinton administration surveyed a range of religious activities, from whether or not students are allowed to pray before exams to what extent students are allowed to wear religious clothing.⁶¹ In terms of teaching about religion as an academic subject matter, the guidelines state:

Public schools may not provide religious instruction, but they may teach about religion, including the Bible or other scripture: the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture)-as-literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries all are permissible public school subjects. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature and social-studies.⁶²

⁵⁸ Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 106.

⁵⁹ Marci A. Hamilton, "Religion and the Law in the Clinton Era: An Anti-Madisonian Legacy," *Law and Contemporary Problems* (2000): 360.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 364-5.

⁶¹ Leland J. White, "President Clinton's Memorandum on Religion in Schools," 1999, <http://whitel.people.cofc.edu/ClintonSchoolReligion.htm?referrer=webcluster&>

⁶² *Ibid.*

It is within this social and political context that Nord's work emerges. Nord views the secularization of American life as having profound consequences for how individuals view religion and religious liberty in society. He views this secularization as having both historical and cultural causes. For example:

No doubt television and twentieth-century mass culture have been particularly potent carriers of secular modernity. But the root causes of twentieth-century culture were already entrenched by the end of the nineteenth century. In that crucial century Darwin removed the last vestiges of divine purpose from nature, the social sciences made God irrelevant to our understanding of psychology and society, industrialization and market economies gave new luster to mammon while continuing to uproot traditional religious communities, politics and pluralism undermined established religions—and religion lost its cultural authority.⁶³

Nord is particularly concerned with religion's loss of cultural authority within public schools. More importantly, however, he is concerned that "much secular education nurtures a 'passive' hostility to religion."⁶⁴ In 2010, Nord published an updated version of his work entitled *Does God Make a Difference?*⁶⁵ In it, Nord expands upon his view of secularization, discussing the most recent scholarship in the field, including *The Secular Revolution* edited by Christian Smith.⁶⁶ The edited volume makes the case that secularization was not a natural outcome of an increasingly secular age, but instead an intentional act by secularists seeking to gain control of public institutions and assert their own cultural authority in society. Citing Smith, Nord writes:

He [Smith] argues, as his title suggests, that "the secularization of American public life was in fact something much more like a contested revolutionary struggle than a natural evolutionary

⁶³ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 39.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁶⁵ Warren A. Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?: Taking Religion Seriously in our Schools and Universities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶⁶ Christian Smith, ed. *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

progression.” This revolution, which took place between 1870 and 1920, was fought especially over children, both K-12 and higher. “The rebel insurgency,” he [Smith] argues, “consisted of waves of networks of activists who were largely skeptical, freethinking, agnostic, atheist, or theologically liberal; who were well educated and socially located mainly in knowledge-production occupations; and who generally espoused materialism, naturalism, positivism, and the privatization or extinction of religion.”⁶⁷

Nord agrees with Smith in his assertion, blaming the secularization of public schools on intentional forces, but also contends that secularization has been an unintended consequence of historical forces a long time in the making. In *Religion and American Education*, Nord provides a brief sketch of the development of secularization in the West, starting with the pre-modern world and examining major epochs like the Reformation and industrial modernity. Throughout his discussion Nord presents secularization as a move away from religion and a move toward science and non-religious ideologies. For example, he argues that “on the eve of modernity, religion pervaded the Western world.”⁶⁸ From there he writes:

As James Turner put it, “birth meant baptism; adulthood brought marriage by the priest; and life’s journey ended in the churchyard.” Indeed, the church was “as inevitable as death and taxes, one of which it presided over and the other of which it collected.” In the mass the priest performed the miracle of transubstantiation, changing bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Prayer was powerful; churches were built on the belief that prayers offered there could help save the souls of their founders languishing in purgatory. Monasteries and convents dotted the landscape. The world was filled with holy relics, holy shrines, holy places, and holy ground. People made pilgrimages. The liturgical calendar dictated the activities of life, and holidays were holy days, religious festivals.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Nord, *Does God Make a Difference*, 76-7 citing Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution*, 1.

⁶⁸ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-8.

The quote above illustrates an important point about Nord's view of religion, which has significant implications for how he contextualizes his argument that hostility leveled against religion in modern times is the result of sustained secularization. Notice that Nord is not simply showing how *religion* pervaded the pre-modern West, but instead how *Christianity*—and in particular, Roman Catholicism—permeated society. Of course, Nord's description here is accurate. Prior to the Reformation, religious life was closely tied to a Catholic way of life. However, the breaking of the church's monopoly in the West does not in itself entail an embrace of a "secular" point of view, though Nord characterizes secularization as such. Regardless of whether or not Nord's characterization is accurate, the important point is that Nord makes little reference to Christianity or Catholicism in particular, but instead chooses to use the term "religion" as the standard placeholder for his discussion about secularization.

Throughout his argument Nord conflates religion with Christianity, though to be fair, there are times when Nord discusses Christianity in a more direct way, illustrating how Catholics and Protestants have weathered the storm of secularization. For example, he shows how the Second Vatican Council and the publication of the Protestant booklets, *The Fundamentals*, offered two distinctly different reactions to secularization.⁷⁰ Yet, in discussing "religious" reactions to secularization he chooses to focus on the reactions of "liberal" and "conservative" branches of Christianity by emphasizing the emergent cultural divide within Protestant Christianity. When he very briefly touches upon Jewish reactions to secularization, it is only done in comparison with either liberal or conservative Christian responses.⁷¹ For Nord, the secularization of the West equates to the disenfranchisement of not simply religion, but of Christianity. Therefore, when Nord asserts that his "argument is that public schooling clearly

⁷⁰ Ibid., 49-50.

⁷¹ Ibid., 42-61.

and forcefully discourages students from thinking about the world in religious ways,”⁷² he is in effect arguing that public schools prevent students from viewing the world through a Christian framework, since “religion” can inherently be understood as “Christian” in the context of American society.

To reiterate, Nord argues that the secularization of American life has led to the removal of religion from public schools, which in his view is both unconstitutional and illiberal. He argues that schools must begin to take religion seriously, and can do so in a few different ways. Religion should be taught across the curriculum and if possible, in separate religious studies courses in bible and comparative religions. Nord writes, “we take religion seriously when we accord it a place in the curriculum proportional to its importance in our history and culture, convey to students an ‘inside’ understanding of religion, and contend with it in searching for the truth.”⁷³ In the next section I briefly discuss the “liberal” model of education, and in particular I analyze how Nord appropriates liberal theory to argue for the academic inclusion of religion in the public schools.

Religion and Liberal Education

Liberal education—broadly understood—seeks to cultivate within students the ability to think and act autonomously in their everyday lives. This means that, regardless of who they are or where they come from, students should be encouraged to inquire, judge, and think for themselves. For the liberal educator, a central task is to teach students to better understand themselves by freeing themselves from the narrowness of their own minds. Liberal theorist Michael Oakeshott nicely points this out:

⁷² Ibid., 245.

⁷³ Ibid., 213.

It is a somewhat unexpected invitation to disentangle oneself from the here and now of current happenings and engagements, to detach oneself from the urgencies of the local and the contemporary, to explore and enjoy a release from having to consider things in terms of their contingent features, beliefs in terms of their applications to contingent situations and persons in terms of their contingent usefulness: an invitation to be concerned not with the employment of what is familiar but with understanding what is not yet understood.⁷⁴

He goes on to say that “learning here is not merely acquiring information ... nor is it merely ‘improving one’s mind’; it is learning to recognize some specific initiations to encounter particular adventures in human self-understanding.”⁷⁵ The process of learning, then, is the promise of self-understanding. Schools, therefore, should play a significant role in helping students to become self-aware and to imagine new horizons of being. Oakeshott discusses this as follows:

Each of us is born in a corner of the earth and at a particular moment in historic time, lapped round with locality. But school and university are places apart where a declared learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may happen to have acquired, and is moved by intimations of what he has never yet dreamed.⁷⁶

A truly liberal education, then, should allow students to expand their horizons emotionally and intellectually and discover new possibilities of understanding themselves and the world around them.

Nord seems to have this in mind when he writes, “a liberal education should initiate students into a self-conscious search for better, more reasonable, more humane ways of thinking

⁷⁴ Michael Oakeshott, “A Place of Learning,” in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 39.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

and acting; it *liberates* students from parochialism by enabling them to see and feel the world in newer ways.”⁷⁷ Yet, for Nord a liberal education is not simply concerned with liberating students from narrow ways of thinking. A liberal education teaches students to recognize that individuals are part of different communities with unique ways of seeing the world. Nord writes:

A liberal education should place us within the various historical communities of which we are a part. We are all members of several communities—families, nations, ethnic groups, religions, civilizations—indeed, the human community. We are born with various identities, and we do not know who we are until we know something of these communities and their histories, until we see that we are part of a story or, better yet, an anthology of stories which provides us with contexts of meaning that orient us in the world.⁷⁸

Nord claims that it is important for individuals first to understand their own anthology of stories in order to understand the stories of others. A liberal education, then, is an initiation into the inheritance of human self-understandings, with the goal of nurturing within students critical reflection of alternative ways of being while also encouraging appreciation for difference.

Moreover, Nord thinks that a liberal education will allow students to become part of an ongoing dialogue about the “big questions” in life, giving them access to conflicting arguments about the nature of things. From there, students will inevitably reject some views in favor of others. He writes:

Indeed, it is only when we can feel the intellectual and emotional power of alternative cultures and traditions that we are justified in rejecting them. If they remain lifeless and uninviting this is most likely because we do not understand them, because we have not gotten inside them so that we can feel their power as their adherents do. Only if we can do this are we in a position to make

⁷⁷ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 200 italics original.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

judgments, to conclude, however tentatively, that some ways of thinking and living are better or worse than others.⁷⁹

As mentioned above, Nord thinks that religion is taken seriously only when “we accord it a place in the curriculum proportional to its importance in our history and culture, convey to students an ‘inside’ understanding of religion, and contend with it in searching for the truth.”⁸⁰ This is essentially the crux of his argument—that students be given the opportunity to engage with alternative viewpoints (in this case, religious traditions) in order to search for the truth—since this is what he believes is the hallmark of a liberal education. Yet, Nord argues that engaging with alternative viewpoints means that educators should put matters of truth aside and teach students to use a form of comparative criticism to grapple with diverse and conflicting worldviews.⁸¹ Nord views comparative criticism as a methodology of the “insider.” The best way to learn about another religion, and to compare religions across the board, is through a religious person’s perspective of her own religion.⁸² The aim of the insider approach is for students to suspend judgment and approach the study of religion in a genuine spirit of empathy, where students “bracket” their own beliefs (regardless of whether or not their beliefs are religious) in order to try and understand the perspective of the religious “other.” He sees this as a necessary aspect in taking religion and the religious beliefs of others seriously. He writes, “we take religion seriously only when we try to understand it from the inside, on its own terms.”⁸³ Likewise, “to understand people, we must hear what they say and see what they do in the context of their beliefs about the world, their philosophical assumptions, their reasoning, their motives.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 201.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 213.

⁸¹ Ibid., 222.

⁸² Ibid., 220-2.

⁸³ Ibid., 214.

To understand a religion is to be able to look out on the world and on human experience and see and feel it from the viewpoint of the categories of that religion.”⁸⁴ This means that students must learn to try on different religions for themselves in an attempt to make sense of rival conceptions of the world.⁸⁵

This methodological (and consequently pedagogical) approach to studying religion from the categories of the religions themselves is similar to the approach to studying religion advocated by Ninian Smart in the United Kingdom.⁸⁶ Smart identified six dimensions of universal religious phenomenon that are shared by most of the religions of the world. These dimensions include: mythological, ritual, doctrinal, social, ethical, and experiential. Each of these dimensions has many layers, which are meant to be interlocking. Smart argues that the study of religion requires at minimum a descriptive study of religion that uses the six dimensions to aid in classification, but goes further by asking students to view religion as a unique human experience in need of deeper understanding. He writes that “the significance [of religion] needs to be approached through the inner life of those who use the externals,” and any understanding “must also penetrate into the hearts and minds of those who have been involved.”⁸⁷ Moreover, “we can describe these inner events and meanings without prejudice and with sympathetic understanding.”⁸⁸ Yet, the study of religion from the inside does not presume that students (who in this case are acting as “outsiders”) can feel *exactly* what insiders feel, or experience *exactly* what others experience, but this methodological position does suggest that students can understand the experience of insiders in a meaningful way. Understanding from the inside opens

⁸⁴ Ibid., 214.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 222.

⁸⁶ Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 4.

up the possibility for students to have empathy for the religious “other.” For example, Smart writes, “he who wishes to explore Hinduism will need to get a feel of the impact of Śiva and Visnu upon their adherents. He fails properly to understand them if he cannot grasp their rich reality in the eyes of the faithful. But this grasp entails neither accepting or dismissing Hindu theology.”⁸⁹ Moreover, “because feelings enter into religion often in an intense way, the exploration also needs to be empathetic (and more warmly, loving—the student of Buddhism who is alienated from it is scarcely likely to be successful). The explorer therefore needs to be equipped with a certain sort of sensitivity.”⁹⁰ This process requires that students put aside their own preconceptions, so they may get to know the religious “other” through a genuine spirit of empathy.

Engaging in the study of religion through an insider perspective takes great care and a fine-textured approach. It entails a demanding expectation that students be able to *leave their own skin behind and climb into another’s*. Presumably students must engage in a high-level of psychological maneuvering in order “get inside” the perspective of a religious person while suspending their own feelings and beliefs. Nord recognizes the difficulty in this task. He writes, “of course, it is extraordinarily difficult, for a variety of reasons, to bracket our own way of understanding the world, our own philosophical convictions, to empathize with others—particularly with others who are very different from us, others whom we may not judge highly.”⁹¹ Moreover, it is unclear who represents an “insider.” If there can be multiple insider-perspectives, which Nord acknowledges,⁹² do certain insiders count as more reliable than others?

⁸⁹ Ninian Smart, “The Exploration of Religion and Education,” *Oxford Review of Education* 1, no. 2 (1975): 99.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹¹ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 215.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 216.

In that case, is a more reliable “insider” an idealized construct of the religious other? Or is a more reliable “insider” a religious other who exemplifies the “lived-experience” of religion (warts and all)? Nord does not take on these conceptual problems, only saying that when studying religion from the inside “it is also certain that almost always we can succeed *more or less*, and succeeding more is surely better than succeeding less.”⁹³ Nord’s hope that students succeed more—rather than less—in their quest to understand religion from the inside reveals some problematic aspects to his theory, particularly as it relates to the idea of “bracketing” one’s own ideas about religion.

Nord wants students to suspend judgment about different religious traditions until they can better understand what each tradition is all about. He argues that comparative criticism can be done “without a student assuming any particular vantage point.”⁹⁴ Furthermore, students “need not start with the assumption that any particular view contains the truth; instead, [students] can engage each [insider perspective], in turn, for what critical light it can throw on others.”⁹⁵ This is where the idea of bracketing comes into play. Nord wants students to put aside their own dispositions in order to better understand the religious dispositions of others. In practice, this means that, for example, in trying to understand the Christian concept of the trinity, a Muslim student should set aside her own belief that “there is no god but God.” The Muslim student should not try and determine what is true or false about Christianity, but instead might ask herself questions such as these: How does a Christian who believes in the trinity understand the Hindu belief of multiple deities? How does a Christian understand the monotheistic beliefs of Judaism or Islam? Nord wants students first to engage with other traditions through a spirit of

⁹³ Ibid., 215 italics original.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 222.

empathy *before* they can begin to engage in any sort of critical discussion about religious believers or religious traditions. Yet he does not articulate how students move from understanding religion through a framework of empathy to a framework of critical analysis.

Nord does, however, provide a thorough discussion of what this spirit of empathy should look like and how students can get inside the “hearts and minds” of the religious insider. He writes “it is one thing to *understand*, another to *judge*. We understand others if we are able to think and feel our way into their hearts and minds, if we are able to understand them as they understand themselves.”⁹⁶ He provides a few different pedagogical strategies for helping students get “inside” religion, which include: observing the religious ritual or practice of others; reading literature and watching drama that transports students vicariously into the lives of religious others; reading religious scripture; and finally, reading about religion through third-person accounts and anthropological studies.⁹⁷ It is difficult to determine whether or not these strategies are “more or less useful” in aiding students to get inside the hearts and minds of the religious other, but even if they turn out to be useful strategies, it is debatable whether or not empathy is even possible. Robert Jackson points out the problem with empathy and “how easy it might be to convince ourselves that we have empathized with others when in reality we have not done so.”⁹⁸ Empathy in this context is problematic because it assumes the transparency of the religious other. Put another way, the insider approach assumes that students can simply “try on another religion” and come away with a tangible and empathetic understanding of that religion or religious person. However, religions—and religious persons—are complex organisms constituted by varied historical, cultural, and social identities, all of which are not fully

⁹⁶ Ibid., 213 italics original.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 220.

⁹⁸ Robert Jackson, *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 46.

transparent and accessible to a religious “outsider.” Jackson’s point is important, since it highlights the idea that empathy is not a tourist activity where encountering one or two aspects of the religious other’s experience amounts to a sufficient understanding.

Moreover, the pedagogical strategies suggested by Nord do little to further his original claim that students should learn to engage critically with other religious ideas and traditions. As mentioned earlier, Nord thinks that students should set aside truth claims when engaging in comparative criticism. He first wants students to engage in an empathetic understanding of religion before they can “critically” evaluate whether or not some ways of living are better than others. Here, Nord opens himself up for criticism since he holds that one mark of “taking religious seriously” involves a search for truth. In particular, Suzanne Rosenblith critiques Nord for sidestepping the difficult pedagogical issues involved in teaching students to think critically about religious traditions. Furthermore, she critiques Nord for *disrespecting* religion; precisely the opposite of what he claims to be his intention. She argues that since doctrine and belief are central to religion, any education aimed at cultivating within students the liberal values of openness and autonomy must recognize the role that truth plays within religious traditions.

The Problem of Truth

Suzanne Rosenblith argues that Nord’s quest to take religion seriously in public school has in fact resulted in disrespect toward religion since his pedagogical approach avoids any substantive discussion of religious truth claims.⁹⁹ Specifically, Rosenblith sees some major gaps in Nord’s appropriation of liberal theory and his intended pedagogical scheme for teaching about religion. She argues that Nord’s approach would result in religious relativism, since students are

⁹⁹ Rosenblith and Priestman, “Problematizing Religious Truth,” 365-380.

asked to put aside their assumptions about religious truth claims.¹⁰⁰ She writes, “bracketing matters of truth in religion is not a genuine act of respect, for it presupposes that truth is neither central nor relevant to religion.”¹⁰¹ It is disrespectful toward religions because “most religious believers and religious worldviews do not consider their beliefs and claims to be relative, and a relativistic attitude might lead to reductionism in the teaching of religion.”¹⁰² She fears that “cultivating a relativistic attitude in students might lead them to become apathetic toward religion and religious belief, a result that directly undermines the call for respect.”¹⁰³ Finally, she believes that religious relativism can have an adverse effect that results in religious hostility. She writes:

Engendering a relativistic attitude might have the effect of reducing the plausibility of the claim that students, if given opportunities to reflect on religious beliefs from a personal, internal position, will become more respectful and tolerant of those who hold different beliefs, and a more humanistic attitude will result. While such a result is possible, it is also equally possible that precisely the opposite will occur. For people who hold absolute and fundamental beliefs, surfacing opposing points of view might produce more hostility among believers and unbelievers.¹⁰⁴

Rosenblith here contests the inevitability of empathy leading to respect. And while her claim is speculative, she makes a valid point that studying religion through Nord’s insider approach might actually increase intolerance or fundamentalist attitudes toward religion, which runs counter to Nord’s goal of decreasing religious hostility.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 371.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 371.

¹⁰² Ibid., 371.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 371.

¹⁰⁴ Suzanne Rosenblith, “Religion and Public Education: Rival Liberal Conceptions,” in *Philosophy of Education*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 127.

Stanley Fish offers similar criticisms of teaching about religion in a manner that eschews truth claims. He argues that studying religion without studying claims to truth is “like studying the justice system and bracketing the question of justice. (How do you take something seriously by putting it on the shelf?).”¹⁰⁵ For Fish, the truth claims of religion, and in particular the claims of the major western religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, “are not incidental to its identity; they are its identity.”¹⁰⁶ To ignore truth claims is to miss the point of religion altogether. Fish claims that the significance of religion is not found in the rituals, traditions or myths, but the significance of religion is found in the religion’s truth claims. Take away the truth claims, Fish argues, and all you have left is an empty shell. Moreover, educational schemes to teach about religion through a process of “bracketing” truth claims for the sake of respect ignores the reality of religious proselytization. Fish writes, “religion’s truth claims don’t want your respect. They want your belief and, finally, your soul.”¹⁰⁷ While Fish’s assertion may be extreme, he argues that teaching about religion absent of evaluating truth claims is educationally inadequate since religions and the beliefs of the religious may be misrepresented. Therefore, in his vision any educational scheme for including the study of religion must provide a mechanism for students to critically examine truth claims. Despite his strong critiques, however, Fish does not offer such a mechanism.

Rosenblith, however, does propose a pedagogical strategy that she thinks will help students to make informed and rational judgments on the merits of different religious truth claims. Calling her strategy the “recognition challenge,” Rosenblith says, “to demonstrate true respect, we must submit religious claims, beliefs, and experiences to some shared process of

¹⁰⁵ Stanley Fish, “Religion Without Truth,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/31/opinion/31fishs.html?_r=0

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

evaluation. While we may not be able to provide decisive evidence as to the veracity of any one claim, the recognition challenge demands that we submit the claims to such a process.”¹⁰⁸ The process of evaluation that Rosenblith has in mind would first and foremost require that religion be allowed as a contender for truth within any course aimed at providing students with a liberal education. For example, students would be allowed to discuss the truth claims of their religion, bring forth evidence for why they believe their truth claims are correct, and try to convince others of why their beliefs are correct.¹⁰⁹ From there, classroom discussion on how truth is constructed, and how assumptions about knowledge and rule-creation determine what counts as truth, would take place. For Rosenblith, this kind of discussion should happen with any other intellectual debate and therefore should be no different when discussing religion. Moreover, she thinks that scholars should not assume that it is impossible to identify a set of criteria or an objective standard for evaluating religious truth claims. She claims that scholars and educators have incorrectly assumed that mechanisms for evaluating religious truth claims cannot exist, since there are no current standards for such evaluation (in contrast to many scientific disciplines where universal standards and methods are common and used widely as the basis of scientific inquiry). She believes that this kind of thinking has made it possible for scholars to ignore, without hesitation, the difficult issues regarding truth and religious belief.

Despite her attempt to create a theory that allows for an objective evaluation of religious truth claims, Rosenblith’s solution falls short on two levels. First, she overemphasizes the role of truth claims within religious traditions, and also does not account for the variety of truth claims that may arise out of any particular religious context. For instance, a “historical” truth claim might be “Jesus of Nazareth died by means of crucifixion,” which would then be evaluated by

¹⁰⁸ Rosenblith, “Problematizing Religious Truth,” 371.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 378-9.

historical methodology. Even if this statement could be demonstrated to be true (to everyone's satisfaction), it would not yield "Jesus died for your sins," which is an entirely different type of truth claim and not susceptible to historical argumentation. Thus, the category of "truth" is too vague to be a useful rubric in an educational setting. It would have to be further defined to provide students with the necessary guidance to engage in any sort of evaluation.¹¹⁰

Second, Rosenblith fails to acknowledge that the very notion of "religion" is a highly contested and disputed matter. As mentioned in the first chapter, the way in which the question of religion is framed ultimately influences not only the content of religion presented to students but also the teacher's method/s used to deliver the content. Though she does not explicitly define religion, it is clear that Rosenblith views religion as primarily concerned with propositional statements. Yet this is not a view shared by many scholars of religion. Consider William James' classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which James likens religion to the inner-dispositions of man where experience is so varied and intimately connected to personal experience that it cannot be explained by doctrine or theology.¹¹¹ Presumably James would have been dumbfounded with the practice of evaluating truth claims as a way of studying religion.

By presenting students with a narrow conception of religion as dominated by concerns over matters of truth, Rosenblith is in effect ignoring the numerous and diverse understandings that correspond to the term "religion." Moreover, this account of religion draws primarily from a Western understanding of religion that reinforces the tendency to seek single truths about religion, while marginalizing other religious ways of understanding where truth does not

¹¹⁰ Thanks to Rick Layton for alerting me to this example.

¹¹¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Vol. 13 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

dominate belief or practice. The way in which one defines the concept of religion inevitably characterizes the process by which one can approach the study of religion, which also pre-determines to some extent the choice of methodology employed. For example, defining religion as a cultural system will entail that one investigates religion through a framework of cultural studies (as will become apparent in the next chapter). Since Rosenblith wants the religious studies classroom to foreground matters of truth, it would necessitate that the study of religion be situated within the field of epistemology, requiring students to appropriate a philosophical or epistemological framework to examine the merits of religious truth claims. Of course, using an epistemological framework to study religion is not problematic in and of itself. The problem is that requiring students to study religion through an epistemological framework conveys to them a narrow definition of religion as one-dimensional and disproportionately concerned with matters of truth, which simply is not the case.

Moreover, it is pedagogically imprudent for educators to force students into a single shared understanding about the nature and purpose of religion. Progressive educators such as John Dewey were keenly aware of how *experience* fundamentally shapes the practice of education. According to Dewey, starting from what students already know and building upon their experiences will help students to actively engage in the learning process, opening the door to continued learning.¹¹² In recognizing the role that one's experience plays in education, it is important to view students as active agents in their own learning, who, through the process of education, construct and refine their identities. When Rosenblith imposes a narrow understanding about religion in the classroom, she thwarts the possibility for students to reflect upon their own understandings or experiences with religion. This dictates to students how they

¹¹² John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

ought to construct their identities in relation to religious ideas, which does not adhere to the ideals of a liberal education. Pedagogically this is problematic because Rosenblith assumes that students share the same type of religious experiences without providing them with the means to investigate how their religious experiences have shaped their understandings of the world. This in effect disregards the variety of ways in which religion can be discussed in the classroom.

In order to make this point clear, let us examine the following example. After teaching about the difference between monotheism and polytheism, a teacher asks the following question: “Is god one or many?” Undoubtedly, the students would answer this question differently—Muslim students would assert that there is only one god, while many Hindu students might claim that god is both one and many. Adherents from other religious traditions (Christians, Jews, Buddhists, etc.) would also likely submit any number of replies to this question. In Rosenblith’s ideal classroom, students would then be asked to bring forth evidence to support their assertions about whether god is one or many.

It is at this point where the potential for disaster arises: *A Christian student might provide evidence from the Bible to support her claim, while a Muslim student references the Qur’an. An atheist student joins the discussion saying that the Bible and Qur’an don’t count as real evidence since they’re not based in fact. This angers the Christian and Muslim students who verbally attack the atheist student for being disrespectful to their religion. The teacher—not wanting to impose her beliefs onto the class—doesn’t chastise the Christian and Muslim student for their verbal attack. This frustrates the self-declared non-religious students in the class who claim that the teacher always favors the religious students, and they proceed to angrily voice their opinions. The remaining twenty-or-so students in the class sit silently during the entire class*

period, counting the minutes until the bell rings. Not only has the classroom environment turned negative, but also the lack of student engagement has shut the door to continued discussion.

Of course, this is simply an example of what *could* happen if high school students were required to evaluate religious truth claims in the classroom. It is also quite possible that students could maintain some level of goodwill toward one another when presenting their evidence for religious truths. In fact, I am inclined to believe that high school students are quite capable of acting maturely and respectfully toward their peers. Yet, what does seem unlikely is that students from an average high school classroom could muster the kind of evidence to support their arguments that Rosenblith presumes they should be able to do. Studying religion from an epistemological framework typically requires a higher-level mastery of religious and philosophical knowledge. A major consideration, therefore, is at what level of sophistication must a high school-aged student be in order to study religion through an epistemological methodology? In a recent qualitative study, Feinberg and Layton interviewed a handful of high school world religions teachers who voiced their skepticism of asking students to evaluate truth claims. One instructor noted, “I’m not there to [ask students to] break down critically what might be wrong about their beliefs. I think they’re at a tender age and I think that kind of thinking happens at college.”¹¹³

Moreover, judging from the pervasiveness of religious illiteracy discussed in the first chapter, it is impractical to think that high school students are academically mature enough to study religion through sophisticated academic frameworks. I explore this idea more fully in chapter three, but it does beg the question of how Rosenblith can both claim on the one hand that

¹¹³ Walter Feinberg and Richard A. Layton, *For the Civic Good: The Liberal Case for Teaching Religion in the Public Schools* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).

it is necessary to teach about religion due to students' pervasive ignorance of the subject, but then on the other hand argue that students should engage in high-level analysis of the subject. Students with little or no prior exposure to religion (both inside and outside of the classroom) cannot be expected to perform complex philosophical analysis of the nature of truth, god, and religion without significant exposure to the content of religious traditions as well as the academic language and vocabulary needed to engage in such analysis. Presumably, schools would not consider teaching students calculus before teaching them basic arithmetic. The same considerations must apply to the academic study of religion. Exposing students to the complexity of intellectually advanced methods should only be done when students are academically ready. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, students in Rosenblith's classroom would miss out on potentially interesting and robust discussions about religion since they would presumably be spending the majority of class time searching for (elusive) evidence.

Rosenblith, in her effort to critique Nord for failing to recognize the role of truth within religious self-understanding, ends up promoting an unrealistic approach to the study of religion that does not take into account the nature of the phenomenon being investigated. Perhaps this is why Nord wants students to put matters of truth aside and engage in an empathic understanding of religion, since inevitably he would find himself in the same untenable position as Rosenblith. It seems likely that public school teachers would want to avoid the type of negative classroom environment that would result from asking students to evaluate and critique religious truth claims, and instead present religion in a softer light. In the next chapter, I analyze a pedagogical approach that seeks to smooth-over religious differences and present religion through a framework of shared values and positive attributes. Such an approach is in stark contrast to the one advocated by Rosenblith, but also carries with it a number of problems.

However, before moving on to the next chapter it is important to first break down Nord's conception of empathy. While it is possible that Nord advocates for an empathetic understanding of religion in order to avoid a difficult classroom situation, this conclusion does not paint a full picture of Nord's goal. Recall that Nord is concerned with what he considers to be the pervasive secularization of society. It is out of his understanding of this pervasive secularization, and corresponding hostility toward religion in the public square, that Nord promotes a strategy of religious empathy in the classroom.

Empathy Unmasked

Nord claims that including the study of religion in public schools is necessary for cultivating within students the capacity for an empathetic understanding of religion. Before I analyze the implications of his claim, I first want to consider what an empathetic understanding of religion can look like. Returning to the classroom scenario discussed earlier where students responded to the question "Is god one or many?" it is useful to examine how this question might be answered if students are not asked to evaluate religious truth claims. Regardless of the responses given by the students (god is one, god is many), the students in the classroom would learn about the identities of their peers and possibly gain further insight into an entire community of thought regarding the nature of god. Asking one simple question, "Is god one or many?" lets students engage in reflection about not only their own understandings of god, but also the understandings of different religious communities by way of their peers' responses. This allows students to engage in the construction of their own identities, while also allowing them to reflect on how their identities are constructed in relation to religion and religious others. The activity of the class is not directed toward the evaluation of truth claims, but instead it is directed toward identity construction and reflection on the phenomenon of plurality.

Of course, this example assumes an ideal condition for dialogue—a classroom filled with students who embody diverse religious identities and who can speak knowledgeably about their religious communities or traditions. Not all classrooms—perhaps only a few—will enjoy such diversity. However, even in a religiously homogeneous classroom, empathy is possible. In answering the question, “Is god one or many?” students would be encouraged to “step inside” the experience of a Muslim in order to try and understand the Islamic concept of “there is no god but God,” all the while suspending their own judgments about the concept of god. They would be asked to do the same for Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. Students would not be required to adjudicate between the differing claims about the concept of god, but only to try and better understand those claims. Instead of students engaging in reflection about their own tradition, they would learn to reflect at the meta-level, thinking about how their beliefs either inform or hinder their ability to “step inside” the experience of a religious person different from themselves. The construction of a certain kind of identity is still taking place—one that values empathetic understanding of others. This type of classroom exercise fosters within students the liberal ideal of being open to new ideas and expanding one’s own horizon.

In Feinberg and Layton’s study they interviewed a world religions teacher who expressed the purpose of empathy, explaining that the goal for students is to:

Try to see the religions of others through the eyes of practitioners as best you can. So try to visualize in your mind what it must be like for a Jewish person to be walking up to the wailing wall/western wall for the first time and to understand why that’s such a significant moment for them and why some people can experience ecstasy and why some people write prayers and put those prayers into the spaces between the great stones. What’s that like? What’s it like for a Muslim man who is 22 years old to be making a hajj and walking around the kaba for the first time and to be getting closer and perhaps touching it and passing out. Why?

What would that be like? Try to understand that through the eye of the believer.¹¹⁴

For this teacher, empathy for the religious “other” is more important than evaluating truth claims. Also, the religious other is not a religious practitioner in the United States, but instead it is the *global* religious other: the Jew in Israel and the Muslim in Mecca. More will be said in chapter five about the incorporation of a global conception of religion and religious identity into an academic study of religion. Here, however, I simply want to point out how the goal of empathy can function within religiously diverse and non-diverse classrooms.

In Nord’s view, the goal of empathy has little to do with seeing the “global religious other,” and more to do with better understanding religious viewpoints within the context of a secularized society. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Nord views the secularization of the West not simply as a removal of religion from the public square, but instead a removal of Christianity and Christian tradition from public life. In order to restore balance in society, Nord argues that religious voices must once again be heard outside the private realm. Requiring public schools to teach about religion as an academic subject can help restore balance while also adhering to the requirements of the Establishment Clause. More importantly, however, teaching about religion with a goal of empathy will enable society to be less hostile toward religion and religious ways of life.

In Nord’s updated work, *Does God Make a Difference?*, he provides an interesting clarification to his main thesis, writing, “as I have argued, taking religion seriously requires that religion is understood from the inside, studied in sufficient depth to make sense of it, treated as a live option in its most compelling forms, and *allowed to contend with secular traditions*,

¹¹⁴ Feinberg and Layton, *For the Civic Good*.

narratives, worldviews.”¹¹⁵ The most notable revision here is how Nord reorients his notion of liberal education and the function of learning about religion. Previously Nord emphasized learning about religion as a way to “contend with it in searching for the truth”¹¹⁶ where the aim of liberal education is to open up possibilities for seeing the world in new ways and freeing students from the grip of parochialism. Subsequently, Nord modified the aim to “contend with secular ways of knowing,”¹¹⁷ thus altering the purpose of a liberal education and transparently pitting religion against secular understandings of the world. Not only does this move eliminate the thorny problem of truth, but also it allows Nord to reclaim and reassert his original argument that secular forces have intentionally removed Christianity and Christian tradition from American life. This allows Nord to situate liberal education within a context that is wholly secular, where the aim is to liberate students from the authoritative grasp of secularism.

Under this conception of a liberal education, the study of religion need not include a critical understanding of religion since critiquing religion or illuminating the problems inherent within religious traditions may ultimately limit the ability of a student to empathize with religion. Limiting a student’s ability to gain an empathetic understanding of religion restricts access to her understanding “the Christian,” and understanding the Christian is a necessary step in repairing the broken relationship between secular and religious America. Moreover, in reframing liberal education, the study of religion need not include an examination of the various religions of the world if those religions do not provide students with a “live option in its most compelling forms.”¹¹⁸ Nord argues, “we may justifiably give priority to those [religions] that are most

¹¹⁵ Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 196 italics mine.

¹¹⁶ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 213.

¹¹⁷ Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 196.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

influential.”¹¹⁹ Furthermore, “it is justifiable to give some priority to traditions depending on proximity” and “there are trade-offs given the time (and textbook pages) that is available.”¹²⁰ We will see this argument re-emerge in chapter four by Stephen Prothero who claims that it is educationally justifiable to emphasize certain religions over others based on their political relevance, but what does Nord mean by *influential* and *proximity*? This question is best answered by examining Nord’s proposal for how and where religion should be included in the curriculum. First and foremost, Nord thinks that religion should be studied across the curriculum in history, civics, economics, literature, and science courses.¹²¹ For Nord this represents a “natural” inclusion of religion. He argues, “in any course, if there are religious influences that bear on the subject in some important way, or if there are competing religious and secular interpretations of some important issue, it is appropriate to discuss religion.”¹²² This is especially apparent in history courses where the inclusion of religion should be the most obvious due to the profound influence of religion throughout history. Nord believes that the influence of Christianity throughout history cannot be overstated. He writes:

Of the world’s religions, Christianity has been far and away the dominant influence on Western, European, and American history; students simply can’t understand Western history apart from Christianity. It would be ludicrous to require that courses in American, European, or Western history pay equal attention to (all?) other religious traditions. A good historical education must devote more time and space to Christianity than to other religions on entirely secular grounds.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 115.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 116.

¹²¹ Nord discusses this idea in-depth in: Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*.

¹²² Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 209.

¹²³ Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 223.

This view is in stark contrast to Diane Moore, whose work in multicultural education will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. Moore argues that Christianity is promoted both intentionally and unintentionally in schools, and in particular argues that “the valorization of Western European history, culture, and traditions is also a valorization of Christianity.”¹²⁴ Therefore, “the default assumption about religion in our culture in general and our schools in particular is that of Christianity.”¹²⁵ Nord, however, disagrees with Moore and asserts that the prioritization of Christianity is necessary because liberal education *requires* that students learn about themselves. For Nord, the process of liberal learning is the promise of self-understanding, and understanding oneself requires an understanding of Christianity. In regard to the school curriculum, he writes:

Why tilt the scales in the direction of Western or American history (and Christianity) at all? I don’t think this is a serious question, though there are many answers that might be given. As I have argued, it is one task of a liberal education to root students in traditions that make sense of the moral and political values they have inherited (as American, for example). We can’t turn students loose on the world rootless, somehow equally shaped by all traditions (or no traditions). In the end, neutrality—and what we take seriously—must be determined on the basis of the entire curriculum, not individual courses.¹²⁶

For Nord, then, prioritizing the study of religion in America based on influence and proximity undoubtedly means that the study of religion should focus on Christianity and its many manifestations. Moreover, along with including religion across the curriculum, Nord argues that students should study the Bible if they are to understand culture. He includes the study of the Bible in his proposed course called “introduction to religion,” which he wants to see as a

¹²⁴ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 64.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹²⁶ Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 224.

mandatory yearlong course with one semester “devoted to the Bible, Christianity, and Judaism, and the other to Islam and Eastern religions.”¹²⁷ Yet, his proposal for mandating an introductory course in the study of religion seems like an afterthought since Nord mentions it only in passing and does not explain what the course would consist of, what its aims would be, what pedagogical approach it might take, or any other educational justification for the course.

In sum, Nord wants to include an empathetic study of religion in public schools in order to establish a mechanism for combating the hostility leveled against religion in a thoroughly secular world. In Nord’s vision, empathy is a way to bring religious voices—and particularly Christian voices—back into the fold of public life. In the end, Nord does not suggest that students study religion with a critical eye, presumably because such an approach would mirror the method advocated by Rosenblith, which applied in a real classroom situation is unsustainable. However, there is another reason why Nord disavows a critical engagement with religion—such an approach would fundamentally disqualify his assertion that religion has been unfairly demonized in the public square and now deserves respect.

Conclusion: Religion and Liberal Education

Including the study of religion in public schools through a liberal framework seeks to encourage students to think openly and critically about the world, and to grapple with deeper meanings. Both Nord and Rosenblith desire this type of liberal education, though they approach the study of religion in drastically different ways. Nord wants students to put aside their own preconceptions about religion by “bracketing” their beliefs and approaching the study of religion through a framework of empathy. For Nord, the goal of empathy is inherently tied to his belief that society has become too secularized for its own good. Nord’s proposal for including the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 236-7.

study of religion in schools developed out of what he views as a serious deficit in the modern public school system. Religion—and in particular Christianity—has been unfairly pushed out of the schools, and the task of a religious studies curriculum is not to learn about religion as a subject worthy of study in its own right, but instead to reverse this historical injustice and allow religion to reassert its cultural authority. As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, Nord claims that “the most profound ‘culture war’ of the last three hundred years has been between religious and secular ways of understanding the world.”¹²⁸ For Nord inserting religion into the curriculum is a way to wage battle in this “culture war.”

Like Nord, Rosenblith ultimately sees value in providing students with a liberal education directed toward openness. She writes:

While it is true that public schools should not set out with the purpose of undermining students’ religious beliefs, providing students with opportunities to examine their beliefs (or unbeliefs) seems consistent with what might, broadly speaking, be considered liberal educational values. Helping students to become autonomous thinkers, which is a core principle of liberal theory, can only come about if students are given opportunities to practice autonomous thinking for themselves, and compelling students to think systematically about the veracity of religious beliefs, claims and experiences is one way to help realize this goal.¹²⁹

However, her insistence that students evaluate truth claims misconstrues “what counts” as religion, but also her approach is unrealistic for the average American high school. Rosenblith does not seek to provide a cogent definition of religion, nor does she acknowledge that the category of truth as a means of evaluation can entail different, and sometimes conflicting possibilities for understanding. This approach blocks students’ ability to think about religion as a dynamic and lived phenomenon and ignores the fact that religious traditions are organisms that

¹²⁸ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 208.

¹²⁹ Rosenblith, “Religion and Public Education,” 109.

develop and change through time. By constructing the problem in this way, Rosenblith inescapably imposes a narrow view of reality within the religious studies classroom, obstructing her students from engaging in reflective dialogue about unique and contingent understandings of the world. This approach flattens students' view of the world and makes it impossible for them to understand and imagine different perspectives that do not count as "rational" within Rosenblith's limited definition.

Overall, both of the approaches advocated by Nord and Rosenblith fail to accomplish the goals of a liberal education. Wexler correctly points out that "a school seeking to teach students about religion to expose them to different conceptions of the good life that they might choose to adopt as their own would have little reason to favor major religious traditions over minor ones, because each tradition presumably would represent an equally viable possibility for the students."¹³⁰ He goes on to say that such a school might focus on the experiential dimension of religion in order to provide students with an understanding of religion as a lived-experience, rather than focusing on religion as a detached historical system to be evaluated and analyzed.

In the next chapter, I examine the idea that the study of religion should be included in the public school curriculum as part of a multicultural education that seeks to present religion as a lived tradition that is influenced by, and influences, modern culture and society. In order to do this I focus on the work of Diane Moore, who suggests that religion functions as a pervasive cultural phenomenon in need of further study. In particular, Moore challenges approaches to the study of religion that characterize religion as ahistorical and one-dimensional. Moore argues for a student-centered pedagogy that allows for students to critically evaluate how their own context for understanding (or misunderstanding) about religion is central to an interpretive process that provides them with a framework to analyze different religious traditions.

¹³⁰ Wexler, "Clothed Public Square," 1233.

CHAPTER 3

ANALYZING THE MULTICULTURAL JUSTIFICATION

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced the liberal justification for teaching about religion, where, according to Nord, “the essential tension of a liberal education, properly understood, lies in its commitment to initiating students into the communities of memory which tentatively define them, and, at the same time, nurturing critical reflection by initiating them into an ongoing conversation that enables them to understand and appreciate alternative ways of living and thinking.”¹³¹ However, Nord does not establish a mechanism to address the type of “critical reflection” necessary for a liberal education, nor does he establish a curriculum that enables students to explore alternative ways of living and thinking outside of a Christian context. In contrast, Rosenblith wants to apply the task of critical reflection to the valuation of truth claims, which is problematic on both a curricular and pedagogical level.

In this chapter, I examine the multicultural justification for teaching about religion in public schools, using the work of Diane Moore who suggests that religion functions as a pervasive cultural phenomenon, which necessitates further study. The multicultural approach differs from the liberal approach since it contextualizes religion within the realm of culture. A liberal education and a multicultural education are not mutually exclusive and overlap in many regards, but the former is best defined as aiming to teach students to think about how best to live in the world, while the latter is best defined as an approach to education that seeks to transform society by eliminating injustices. As such, a central goal of multicultural education is to enable

¹³¹ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 203.

students to lead fulfilling lives by becoming socially and culturally aware on the local, national, and global stage.

In examining the multicultural justification for including the study of religion in public schools, part of my argument is that the multicultural approach can help to resolve some of the concerns that I addressed in chapter two. In particular, a multicultural approach “takes seriously” not just religion as Nord would have it, but students’ roles as active agents in learning about religion and how this contributes to the construction of their identities. The kind of critical reflection that Nord desires, but fails to deliver, is central to Moore’s pedagogy, which focuses on interpretation and interrogation of religion as a historical and socially-situated phenomenon. Unlike Rosenblith, however, Moore wants students to recognize and analyze “value claims” rather than examining “truth claims.” This means that Moore is more concerned with teaching students to pay attention to the full range of often competing ideological convictions found within religious traditions, while also recognizing the various contexts that have influenced religion. In particular, Moore advocates for a multicultural approach to the study of religion because she believes it allows for students to explore issues of power and privilege in society. She explains this as follows:

No religious tradition can be accurately represented as a singular worldview...There is nothing “essential” about religion that lends itself to an accurate portrayal of any given tradition as ideologically or epistemologically “uniform.” In the context of multicultural education, being a Muslim or Jew or Sikh in America does not necessarily mean that your worldview will be consistent with democratic ideas. It *will* mean, however, that you will be in a better position to understand how imbedded cultural assumptions promote both Christian and secular values that often thwart your ability to fully express yourself a religious person in multicultural America. A cultural studies method will help identify these cultural assumptions while also providing the tools to interrogate all value claims and assess them in light of whether they will serve

to promote or hinder human agency and well-being in the context of our multicultural democracy.¹³²

However, similar to the approaches analyzed in the previous chapter, the multicultural approach is also limited by a certain kind of reductionism—one that views religion as simply part of culture and unworthy of study in its own right. In studying religion through the lens of culture students may be misled about central aspects of religion such as doctrine and theology, which often display distinct characteristics that do not accord with cultural norms and cannot be explained solely through a framework of culture.

Religion and Multicultural Education

Justified as necessary for providing students with a robust multicultural education, Diane Moore advocates a cultural studies approach to the academic study of religion that seeks to tease out the complexities of the world's religious traditions. One of the reasons why Moore believes the academic study of religion is necessary in public schools is because of a moral imperative to respect diversity. She argues that “the study of religion should be incorporated more fully into curricula [because] ignorance about religion itself and the world's religious traditions promotes misunderstanding that diminishes respect for diversity.”¹³³ She cites a number of examples of religious discrimination in schools and how religious ignorance perpetuates hateful stereotypes that sometimes lead to violence. Moore realizes that exposing students to an academic study of religion will not eliminate discrimination completely, but such an education will help to diminish discriminatory practices and contribute to a more inclusive attitude among students. She writes:

Even in schools where the population is seemingly (or perhaps truly) religiously homogenous, cultivating an informed respect for religious differences will equip students with the skills and

¹³² Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 77-8 italics original.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 31.

temperaments to function more meaningfully and effectively within their home communities and the workplace realities they are likely to encounter in the future. Promoting religious literacy in the schools will enhance intellectual rigor, sharpen critical thinking skills, and further advance deep multiculturalism by giving students the tools to understand religion and the plurality of religious experiences across the curriculum and within the school community itself.¹³⁴

Furthermore, Moore states:

Without a basic understanding of the beliefs, symbols, literature, and practices related to the world's religious traditions, much of history and culture is rendered incomprehensible. Religion has always been and continues to be woven into the fabric of cultures and civilizations in ways that are inextricable. The failure to recognize this fact impoverishes our understanding of the human experience and sends the false message that religion is primarily an individual as opposed to a social phenomenon.¹³⁵

Moore articulates an interesting contrast in how she approaches the problem of religious illiteracy, as opposed to the way Nord approaches the problem. Nord holds that society has shunned religion due to the “false message” that religion is not an important part of life; in contrast Moore argues that the “false message” has more to do with religion being understood as an individual, rather than social construct. It is from this vantage point that Moore wants to argue that religion and religious belief is not something private, but instead is part of the broader social and cultural systems in which individuals construct normative ways of being in the world. She recognizes the complex way in which religious traditions both inform and are informed by society, and therefore argues that the field of multicultural studies provides a useful guidepost in teaching about religion in a multicultural world. She believes that schools must “do a better job

¹³⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 5.

of promoting the religious dimensions of multiculturalism,” so as not to continue the promotion of religious ignorance.¹³⁶

Theories of multicultural education are extensive, ranging from liberal theories of multiculturalism to feminist and postmodern approaches. A central goal of multicultural education in general is to instill within students the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to successfully navigate a culturally diverse society. Multicultural education, therefore, is not just about learning content, but also learning attitudes and dispositions towards diverse cultural systems. This broad task of multicultural education opens up a host of questions regarding the responsibility of schools and educators in preparing students to successfully navigate an increasingly pluralistic society. For example, Dhillon and Halstead point out the following list of questions:

What use schools should make of the variety of mother tongues spoken by children from ethnic minorities; how schools should respond to the racism and other forms of discrimination and disadvantage experienced by the children and their families; whether and how schools should teach about religion in schools in view of the increasing religious diversity in Western states; how schools should ensure that the culture of ethnic minority children is not ignored in the curriculum and general running of schools; and how schools should respond to the specific demands of ethnic minorities (including demands for single-sex schooling, for freedom to wear the turban or the *hijab* in school, for permission to be absent from school on religious festivals, for facilities for Islamic prayers in school, and so on).¹³⁷

The answers to these and other questions are not clear-cut, especially since multicultural education contains a wide range of political, social, religious, cultural, and moral issues all

¹³⁶ Ibid. 52.

¹³⁷ Pradeep A. Dhillon and J. Mark Halstead, “Multicultural Education,” in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 9, ed. Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard D. Smith and Paul Standish (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 146-7 italics original.

tangled up together, though there is an abundance of scholarly work attempting to develop a coherent approach to multicultural education.¹³⁸ However, in regard to the study of religion, scholars who advocate for the inclusion of the academic study of religion in public schools tend to view multicultural education through a framework of liberal values. For example, in James Fraser's analysis of the history of religion and public education, he points out that in the interest of creating a "religiously tolerant and religiously informed America,"¹³⁹ a multicultural understanding of religion is necessary. In order for America to thrive in the 21st century, "the nation's schools must be places for embracing and building tolerance and a love of diversity."¹⁴⁰ This idea of tolerance and love of diversity corresponds to what Dhillon and Halstead term "liberal multiculturalism." "In the liberal vision of multicultural education, there is an equal stress on two main principles: on the one hand, respect for difference, on the other, the equal need of all children for education for life in a pluralist society."¹⁴¹ They go on to state that life in a pluralist society, where diverse individuals live harmoniously together, requires that all students develop attitudes of tolerance, respect, and cross-cultural understanding.

Fraser appeals to this liberal vision of a multicultural education that seeks to enrich cultural understanding through a student's engagement with different beliefs, including religious beliefs. He writes as follows, "religion is a fundamental part of most cultures. Efforts to understand cultural traditions without attention to their religious roots invites a shallowness unhelpful to true cultural understanding."¹⁴² Therefore, Fraser thinks that adding the study of religion to the multicultural agenda will help heal some of the wounds from the nation's long-

¹³⁸ Ibid., 147.

¹³⁹ Fraser, *Between Church and State*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴¹ Dhillon and Halstead, "Multicultural Education," 151.

¹⁴² Fraser, *Between Church and State*, 5.

standing school culture wars.¹⁴³ Fraser is a historian of education so he does not detail a curricular plan for the inclusion of religion, nor does he provide a philosophical analysis of what “respect,” “tolerance,” or “understanding” might look like, but he is quite right to suggest that if religion is viewed specifically as a cultural system, it does not make sense to leave religion out of the study of culture. Multicultural education, without mentioning the culture of religion, fails to fulfill its mission to create citizens with deeper cultural awareness.

Postmodern and feminist commentators have critiqued theories of liberal multicultural education for not identifying or giving sufficient attention to the hierarchies of power found within and between different cultural groups, thus failing to recognize instances of oppression and inequality. On a pragmatic level, liberal multiculturalism has been critiqued for promoting a thin vision of respect and tolerance, which results in treating “other cultures in a tokenistic way, failing to respond fully to the quality and extent of their otherness.”¹⁴⁴ Thin versions of tolerance and respect produce multicultural classrooms that engage in a form of superficial cultural tourism that merely celebrates different holidays, exotic foods, and traditional clothing. Culture is idealized and viewed as a closed system with fixed understandings. Dhillon and Halstead note, “the prevailing discourse on multiculturalism and cultural diversity, with its concern for the welfare of subgroups or of individuals within marginalized groups, takes cultural groups to be both undifferentiated and hermetically sealed. In other words, most discussion of cultural diversity rest on an idealized view of what a culture is.”¹⁴⁵ Idealizing a culture in the name of tolerance and respect can be useful in some educational contexts, for example when educators want students to become aware of their own stereotypes—both negative and positive—about

¹⁴³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴⁴ Dhillon and Halstead, “Multicultural Education,” 154.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 156.

cultural or ethnic groups different from their own. But this pedagogical technique can limit educators who wish to provide students with a “thicker” understanding of culture.

For Moore, including the study of religion within public schools means eliminating the tendency to reduce culture to single traits or define culture through essentialist characterizations. Moore advocates for a type of robust multicultural education that “takes students seriously as moral agents and helps them develop the tools of discernment, accountability, and negotiation needed to engage in positive social change.”¹⁴⁶ This goal diverges significantly from Nord’s goal, which is to inculcate within students a means to understand religion as diametrically opposed to secularism. As touched upon above, the “wrong” that Nord wants to correct has to do with reversing the tides of secularism and restoring balance so that religion can once again be viewed as an important part of life. In contrast, Moore wants students to learn about religion so as to reverse the tide of misunderstanding about religion, which in her view diminishes respect for diversity.¹⁴⁷ In order to do this, Moore has developed a cultural studies approach that encourages students to engage *critically* with a diversity of religious traditions. However, before examining Moore’s cultural studies approach, it is worthwhile to illustrate what an essentialist study of religion might look like when the goals of tolerance and respect overshadow any critical engagement with religious traditions.

All Religions Are Not the Same

In a recent volume on religion and multicultural education, H.S. Wilson proposes a framework for including the study of world religions as part of a multicultural education in public schools. He argues that the purpose of including the study of world religions is “to

¹⁴⁶ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 75.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

inculcate a proper understanding and appreciation for diversity and thereby minimize the scope of using differences among people to build barriers ...”¹⁴⁸ Moreover, “... great care must be taken to avoid issues that have historically divided or contemporarily contested between religions, to build a certain level of trust and ensure some initial success.”¹⁴⁹ Wilson envisions a religious studies curriculum that focuses on the positive aspects that all religions share, especially in relation to their ethical systems. For example, all of the major world religions conceive of some form of the “golden rule” where individuals are required to respect or care for the “other,” regardless of the other’s religious affiliation. Wilson believes that by illustrating this principle of altruism found within each religion, students will have a greater appreciation for religious diversity and will become more religiously tolerant. He writes, “better understanding between religions, affirming common values and visions they hold for the welfare of humanity, is a greater service to multicultural communities. It will be a positive alternative of a world of exclusive claims by religious communities.”¹⁵⁰ In sum, rather than focusing on the beliefs that all too often divide religions and religious believers, educators should focus on highlighting the ethical beliefs that all religions share.

Indeed, Wilson’s vision of religious harmony is commendable, but it is problematic in that it misrepresents religion as a one-dimensional and unsophisticated form of cultural expression. For example, Wilson greatly oversimplifies the ethical systems of each world religion in an effort to showcase what he regards as their “sameness” by outlining the similar ways in which they call for their adherents to treat others. He cites Hinduism’s commitment to

¹⁴⁸ H.S. Wilson, “The Other/Neighbor in World Religions,” *Religion in Multicultural Education: A Volume in Research in Multicultural Education and International Perspectives*, eds. Farideh Salili and Rumjahn Hoosain (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006), 35.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

dharma (duty), Buddhism's goal of *karuna* (compassion), the Confucius rule of *shu* (reciprocity), Judaism's pledge to welcome strangers, Christianity's message of loving your enemy, Islam's call for *salaam* (greeting of peace), and Sikhism's belief in *seva* (service to others). While it is true that these terms generally have similar meanings—that humans should treat others with kindness and/or respect—it is incorrect to assume that *within* each religion there is agreement on how that kindness/respect should be cultivated and carried out. This results in a gross oversimplification that can lead to partially inaccurate or misleading understandings.

One example that illustrates this point is found in Wilson's discussion of Hinduism. He writes, "harmony and order (*rita*) is important for the cosmos to move on. Harmony and order is ensured by every human adhering to *dharma*, a comprehensive term that includes righteousness and duty, right conduct that is tested and handed down through the ages."¹⁵¹ As a result, "fulfilling or flouting *dharma* has a consequence to an individual and the whole of humanity."¹⁵² Here, Wilson wants to make the case that *dharma* serves as the central ethical foundation for a practicing Hindu, and that *dharma* specifically functions at two levels—individually and socially.

The theory behind this dual understanding goes something like this: for society to function properly, every living being must act in accordance to his or her social duty (*dharma*), which is determined by the caste system and predicated on the belief that one's actions (*karma*) in a prior life have determined his or her current caste. Therefore, performing one's *dharma* is beneficial to a smooth functioning society, but also beneficial to the individual because he or she will move one step closer to obtaining the ultimate goal in Hinduism, which is to realize that every living being in the world is connected, divine, and ultimately *Brahman*. One of the major

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 18-9.

¹⁵² Ibid., 19.

consequences with this vision of society is that over the years the caste system became corrupted, resulting in extreme inequality between castes. Various reform movements renounced caste-based discrimination, and although the social reformer Mahatma Gandhi brought worldwide attention to the problems of Hindu inequality and oppression, the caste system persists in modern India. Therefore, in trying to better understand the ethical implications of *dharma*, a number of questions arise. What does one do when her social duty conflicts with her personal values or beliefs? Why should someone who finds herself in a lower caste continue to adhere to the caste system if she feels oppressed by that very system? These complex ethical questions are nearly impossible to address when viewing *dharma* simply as an ethical concept that promotes righteousness and duty. Upon further inspection, it is apparent that the ideas of righteousness and duty can conflict. This understanding requires that students engage in a deeper conversation about *dharma*. Inevitably, this deeper understanding will showcase the differences between the Hindu ethical system from that of other religions, which Wilson wants to avoid on both an epistemological and pedagogical level.

Of course, one can simply ignore the complexity of *dharma* and showcase the positive aspects that Wilson thinks are necessary for cross-religious understandings. For Wilson, the result of creating an arena of mutual respect and tolerance in the face of conflict outweighs the truncated presentation of academic content. After all, how can a teacher be faulted for wanting to showcase the positive aspects of our shared humanity, particularly as a means to create mutual respect among students? A central flaw within this line of reasoning, however, is that it denies the cultivation of authentic religious tolerance or cooperation, because it ignores the very real claims with which practitioners from within a tradition struggle. Ignoring the differences within

religious traditions is akin to the type of “thin” multiculturalism that turns a blind eye to critical thinking and academically rigorous methods of investigation.

In another example, Wilson discusses the Christian principle of “loving your enemy” as the central ethical dimension of Christianity. Similar to Hinduism, this principle of love is a great oversimplification of a Christian ethic. What it means to love, and the definition of an enemy, is exceedingly complex within historic and modern Christian tradition and practice.¹⁵³ Furthermore, generically using the term “loving your enemy” portrays Christianity in a positive light, ignoring the infinite number of ways in which this ethic can be used by different ideologies in promoting their own political and moral agendas throughout the world.¹⁵⁴ Wilson wants to underplay the fact that religion often served as a source for conflict and discrimination in the world in order to construct an idealized (and false) notion of humanity.

Wilson believes that students should learn about these favorable aspects of religion because, “it is such positive teachings that need to be promoted in multicultural education for promoting better understanding and greater solidarity among humans.”¹⁵⁵ While this may be a noble goal, including the study of religion within the framework of superficial multicultural education distorts religious worldviews and traditions, as well as scholarly analysis of religion. Religions are not fixed or unchanging, nor are they easily defined or understood, and to include only “the best” aspects of religion in the curriculum—in the name of respect and tolerance—is to disrespect the authenticity of diverse religious beliefs and practices. In Wilson’s scheme, little attention is paid to the moral complexity of religious traditions because such complex

¹⁵³ John Piper, *Love Your Enemies’: Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis: A History of the Tradition and Interpretation of its Uses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁵⁴ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003).

¹⁵⁵ Wilson, “The Other/Neighbor in World Religions,” 30.

understandings make the goal of religious tolerance or respect much more difficult to accomplish. It is from this standpoint of critique that Moore wants to reclaim a “thick” multiculturalism, which seeks to encourage mutual respect among different religious ways of knowing without forsaking critical academic engagement.

A Cultural Studies Approach

Similar to Wilson, Moore believes that the academic study of religion in public schools is justified as part of a multicultural education that seeks understanding, and where students learn about religion in a genuine spirit of respect and openness. In molding students to be productive members of society, Moore believes that “cultivating an informed respect for religious difference will equip students with the skills and temperaments to function more meaningfully and effectively within their home communities and the workplace realities they are likely to encounter in the future.”¹⁵⁶ Yet, unlike Wilson, Moore thinks that schools should teach students about religion from a cultural studies approach that “emphasizes diversity within traditions,” rather than seeking to mask religious difference and highlight sameness as proposed by Wilson.¹⁵⁷

In order to showcase the diversity of ways in which religion functions in the world, Moore outlines a cultural studies approach, which “is the employment of multiple lenses to understand the subject at hand, including an awareness of the lenses of the interpreters (authors, writers, artists who are being studied), inquirers (students), and teachers who set the larger context for the inquiry itself.”¹⁵⁸ This is essentially a student-centered approach that begins from the assumption that all knowledge is created through different ideological frameworks that require interpretation in order to reveal the meaning behind the claims. In particular, Moore is

¹⁵⁶ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 33.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

sensitive to the ways in which knowledge claims are situated and arise out of “certain social/historical/cultural/personal contexts and therefore represent particular and necessarily partial perspectives.”¹⁵⁹ As such, one of the goals of a cultural studies method (and therefore a goal of education writ large) is for teachers and students to recognize how those claims operate during the process of learning and how they dictate the process of academic inquiry.

To illustrate the central point of a cultural studies approach, recall Wilson’s view that the positive aspects of religions should be taught in order to demonstrate their common ideologies and to combat negative stereotypes. Moore points out that common dictums such as “Islam is a religion of peace” or “Christianity promotes love, not hate” are oftentimes well-meaning comments, but “are actually theological statements that represent particular versus universally held assertions about whatever traditions being characterized.”¹⁶⁰ Moore argues that these types of statements showcase a lack of critical reflection about religious ideas, but also, these are situated knowledge claims that showcase the imbedded assumptions that many individuals hold about religious traditions. The goal for educators, then, is to help students bring these assumptions to the forefront, to interrogate their origins, and to work to reduce their unconscious reproduction.

Moore details six essential features of a cultural studies method that she believes will simultaneously encourage respect for religious difference and develop skills of critical academic inquiry. These features include:

1. An assumption that religion is deeply embedded in all dimensions of human experience
2. A belief that the human experience cannot be studied accurately though discrete disciplinary lenses (political, economic, cultural, social, etc.)

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 67.

3. A view that all knowledge claims are situated
4. A recognition that the lens of the interpreter is partial, biased, and particular
5. A need to address issues of power and powerlessness
6. A recognition of the political and non-neutral act of the educational enterprise¹⁶¹

The cultural studies approach to the study of religion, therefore, provides a method to study religion as well as a pedagogical technique that recognizes and affirms a student's role in the process of learning as an interpreter with a particular point of view.

Not surprisingly, Moore finds other common approaches to the study of religion—including intentional sectarianism, unintentional sectarian practices, the phenomenological approach, literary approaches, and historical investigations—problematic.¹⁶² She argues that the phenomenological approach (which can be characterized as a descriptive study of religion) views religion from an essentialist standpoint by presenting various religious traditions as “timeless, uniform, and unchanging systems of belief that betray the social/historical dimensions that define all religious expressions and interpretations.”¹⁶³ Unlike Rosenblith, she does not critique these types of descriptive practices as stripping religion of their essential qualities (such as their truth claims), but instead is troubled by the ahistorical/asocial contexts in which religion is presented. For Moore, religion is inextricably woven into the fabric of human experience, so to remove religion from its various contexts is to ignore the full range of religious expression in the world.

For example, Moore details what a study of the Ten Commandments might look like from a cultural studies approach as opposed to a descriptive approach. According to Moore, a descriptive approach would require that students examine the Commandments as central

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 79-81. Moore acknowledges that this is not an all-inclusive list.

¹⁶² Ibid., 57-71.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 69.

theologies of Judaism and Christianity, but it would not, for example, ask students to explore the controversy over displaying the Ten Commandments on government property.¹⁶⁴ In contrast, a cultural studies approach would “cultivate the intellectual and methodological tools that would enable students to explore how the Ten Commandments must be understood through the intersecting lenses of religion, history, politics, and culture that would include and expand upon the other approaches.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, “it would also include a more broadly understood awareness of the context of inquiry itself (what the teacher hopes to achieve in assigning and designing the lesson, unit, class) as well as an awareness of the student’s own lens of analysis.”¹⁶⁶ Moore makes it clear that the purpose is not to exhaustively study the Ten Commandments, but instead to provide students with the methodological tools needed to understand particular cultural and historical contexts, and to recognize and interrogate different modes of interpretation.

Finally, Moore details the way in which she has implemented a cultural studies approach in her own teaching at a highly-selective private boarding school where she teaches in the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department. She highlights her experiences with a course on Islam and also discusses some examples from a course that she teaches about the Holocaust. The purpose of featuring these case studies is to showcase the way in which the cultural studies model functions pragmatically within different types of courses—those that focus directly on religion (Islamic Cultural Studies) and those that use religion as a lens of analysis (Understanding the Holocaust). Overall, Moore’s ultimate goal is to emphasize how building a

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 83.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 84.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 84.

strong interpretive foundation in the classroom will lend itself well to the application of a cultural studies approach, regardless of the topic of study.

The Problem with Context

Unlike Wilson's "thin" multicultural approach to the academic study of religion, Moore's cultural studies method promotes critical thinking and reflective discussion within the process of teaching and learning. Due to her focus on interpretation, Moore's approach is also in stark contrast to Rosenblith's method that seeks to isolate and evaluate the epistemic claims of religious traditions. Moore argues that it is inaccurate to view religion through isolated frameworks because it is impossible to uncover "objective" ways of knowing about reality. Therefore, Moore's goal is to draw attention to the interconnectedness of social phenomena and to encourage a pedagogical strategy that fosters dialogue about the profound influence that religion has on individuals and society throughout history. In sum, Moore believes that "a sophisticated understanding of how all knowledge claims are situated should be a focus of the educational enterprise as one way to challenge any claims that are aimed at closing further legitimate democratic inquiry."¹⁶⁷ In recognizing an interpretive view of reality, Moore's student-centered pedagogy allows for the kind of criticality and openness that informs the performative nature of identity construction. Within a cultural studies framework, one's "location" in the world influences how she will make sense of reality. Thus, determining and interrogating one's "context" becomes central to the interpretive process and provides the interpreter with a horizon from which to analyze knowledge claims.

Yet, a central drawback to the cultural studies approach is that religion need not be studied outside the context of culture. For Moore, "a cultural studies approach is as much about

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 81.

a method of inquiry as it is about content coverage itself.”¹⁶⁸ Or, put another way, the study of *religion* becomes more about the study of the *religious*—the external, observable actions of religious persons, institutions, or ideas. Studying any one religion is useful insofar as it reveals something about the broader social/cultural/historical phenomena under investigation. This context-dependent approach to understanding certain human phenomena is an intentional design of the cultural studies method, because it prevents researchers from imposing universal and essentializing claims onto the object of study.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz most famously advocated for a context-dependent, non-reductionist technique for studying cultural systems. Specifically, Geertz did not view religion as a universal concept but only a system of specific cultural meanings. Getting at the core of religion involves a process of interpreting religious symbols, since religious symbols are outward signs that both elucidate and construct meaning. In this understanding, a symbol can be just about anything that carries with it a deeper meaning. An object such as a Jewish prayer shawl carries meaning with it, just as the event of a Buddhist funeral carries meaning. Geertz conceded that understanding these meanings is not an easy task because the best understandings emerge only through the use of anti-reductionist methods by employing “thick description” and engaging in a multi-step interpretive process.¹⁶⁹ A context-dependent method, therefore, allows religion to be understood through a framework of diverse cultural interpretations, rather than through metaphysical or epistemological contexts. Such an approach avoids the problem of essentializing religion into a system of fixed meanings, because it does not romanticize religion as having an ideal, original function that is easily accessible and explainable. This in turn renders a critical evaluation of religious traditions possible.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 84-5.

¹⁶⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic, 1977), 125.

Referencing Geertz, Daniel Pals writes that understanding the meaning of religion “is never just to describe the mere structure of a tribe or clan, the bare elements of a ritual, or, say, the simple fact that Muslims fast in the month of Ramadan. Its task is to discern meanings, to discover the intentions behind what people do, the *significance* for all of life and thought of their rituals, structures, and beliefs.”¹⁷⁰ The aim of this method is to get underneath the basic description of the religious behavior and to produce a more robust understanding. This process for trying to understand religion shares characteristics with the insider approach advocated by Nord. For Nord, understanding religion means going beyond simple descriptions of religious phenomena. Similarly, a cultural studies approach also seeks deeper and more robust understandings of religion. One central difference, however, lies with the motivation of each approach. The intent of the insider approach is for students to become empathetic toward the religion or religious person under investigation—to really try and feel the effect of the religion from the point of view of the religious other. In contrast, the motivation for Geertz and other cultural theorists is not empathy, but instead the motivation is to find deeper meaning and significance for the actions of the religious other, which are not always consistent or ideal.

Recall in the previous chapter my critique of empathy as a goal in understanding the religious other. Empathy assumes an ideal condition for understanding the religious other as having an easily identifiable archetype that can be recognized by the “outsider” once she is able to “get inside” the religious other. However, when religion is understood as a cultural system, this ideal situation cannot exist because culture ebbs and flows, and cultural systems change within time and place because the actions of people regularly change. Moreover, Pals reminds us that “people sometimes behave in ways that seem to clash with the system of meaning

¹⁷⁰ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 241 italics original.

prescribed by their own culture; or, perhaps more accurately, cultural systems sometimes present multiple and conflicting patterns within which people choose courses of action.”¹⁷¹

Understanding the diversity of religious persons, societies, or ideas involves consciously avoiding the practice of idealizing religion as a uniform system with fixed meanings. Instead employing a “thick” description requires that researchers interpret the interior states of religious persons by focusing on their outward religious expressions.

Therefore, approaching the study of religion through a framework of cultural studies necessitates that all knowledge be understood as “situated” or “local.” However, a problematic result of localizing religion is that it becomes difficult to discuss religion outside of a geographical location. Jonathan Z. Smith shows how the act of localizing religion produces academic work like Geertz’ *The Religion of Java*, which details how the Javanese people apply religion themselves, illustrating the diversity within Native, Islamic, and Hindu practices.¹⁷² Smith argues that “all of these [practices of ‘situating’ religion] result in projects describing ‘the religions of’ such and such a geographical region or folk, arguing that these eschew the imposed universalism or barely disguised apologetics of their predecessors in the name of a new ethic of locality that often favors native categories.”¹⁷³ Yet, according to Smith, “what remains uncertain is what he [Geertz] intends by the singular ‘religion’ in his title.”¹⁷⁴ Smith makes an important observation that the concept of “religion” is missing from methodologies that attempt to highlight the situated practices of religious persons over universal generalizations about a religious tradition. Utilizing a cultural studies framework, therefore, results in narratives that

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 241.

¹⁷² Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 192.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 192.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 192.

focus on a particular culture's interpretation and performance of religion; not an analysis of religion in and of itself.

As mentioned in the introduction, Smith argues that scholars like Geertz are engaged in an imaginative, scholarly act in their attempts to understand religion. Smith writes:

“Religion” is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as “language” plays in linguistics, or “culture” plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.¹⁷⁵

Geertz makes clear that religion should be defined *as* a cultural system, providing a five-part definition that seeks to explain what religion *is* (a system of symbols) and what it *does* (establish moods and motivations about the general order of existence).¹⁷⁶ Religion can only be “known” insofar as it is expressed by individuals or communities. By defining religion as culture, Geertz and others who study religion through the lens of culture can attribute religious practices and beliefs as based on cultural preference or geographical location, and thus ignore the way in which universal claims about truth, or the nature of god, influence religious traditions regardless of location.

Geertz has been criticized by scholars such as Talal Asad for ignoring the critical dimensions of power in the construction of knowledge. Asad has faulted Geertz for not seeking answers “in terms of the social disciplines and social forces which come together at particular

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 193-4.

¹⁷⁶ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90. Geertz's full definition is as follows: “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

historical moments to make particular religious discourses, practices and spaces possible.”¹⁷⁷ In other words, Asad finds problematic cultural theories of religion that do not recognize the profound way in which power shapes religion. Moore, however, is sensitive to issues of power and powerlessness in the construction of religious phenomena; in fact she makes this a central step in her interpretative process by asking questions such as, “what worldviews or perspectives are prominent in particular contexts and what social mechanisms are in place that give legitimacy to certain views over others?”¹⁷⁸ Asking these types of questions is important for Moore so that “the complexity of the cultural construction of value claims can be understood more fully and positions scrutinized in light of the democratic values being promoted.”¹⁷⁹

Although this move toward unmasking issues of power and powerlessness provides Moore with yet another dimension from which to analyze religious traditions, it does not allow her to engage in an analysis of religion as differentiated from culture. Any negative religious values can be subsumed under the banner of culture, power, and agency, thus thwarting the possibility of critiquing the values of specific religious traditions directly. For example, Rosenblith points out that diverting critique away from a particular religion toward an analysis of power and agency ignores fundamental epistemic issues. She writes, “so for instance, students might learn about anti-semitism and look at many examples of anti-semitic policies and laws, but schools would steer clear of the core beliefs that make Jews different from Christians. This would be done in order to teach students about the importance of tolerance and diversity, but in effect it also ignores those important features that make Jews different from Christians.”¹⁸⁰

Rosenblith notes that conflating religion with culture is dangerous in that it can lead to

¹⁷⁷ Talal Asad, “Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz,” *Man* 18, no. 2 (1983): 252.

¹⁷⁸ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 82.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸⁰ Rosenblith, “Beyond Coexistence,” 111.

erroneously depicting religion as something based on preference or societal norms, rather than foundational doctrinal tenets.

Conversely, conflating religion with culture may also prevent the possibility of highlighting the *positive* aspects of religious values and beliefs, since it is assumed that values are constructed through specific cultural systems rather than universal religious tenets. For example, should the Catholic Worker Movement, which generally espouses the values of human dignity, nonviolence, and charity, be understood as a set of social and cultural responses to the Great Depression? Or, should the movement be analyzed through the framework of Catholic doctrine? It seems that appropriating Moore's method would entail an analysis of the movement through the historical and social circumstances that spurred its development. Presumably this would divert analysis away from Catholic doctrine, since the main focus of a cultural studies approach is to interrogate the cultural, social, and historical contexts that surround such a movement.

In diverting analysis away from "religion" and toward "culture," Moore can avoid difficult classroom situations in which some students may feel that their religious beliefs are being unfairly vilified while other religious beliefs are being celebrated (or vice versa). However, what justice does this do to the self-understanding of different religious traditions? For example, if the four noble truths are addressed only as exercises in cultural symbolism, how can students make sense of the sangha's efforts for epistemological awareness? Are Buddhists' efforts in this regard misguided? Or is there something to be said for trying to understand these types of religious efforts? Moore's cultural studies approach is not suited to handle these types of questions.

Interestingly enough, however, Moore does not define religion *as* a cultural system like Geertz. Indeed, she does not provide a definition of religion at all. Similar to Geertz, Moore is careful to avoid making grand and sweeping generalizations about religion, arguing instead that all knowledge is local knowledge and therefore studying religion means utilizing multiple lenses (cultural, historical, political, etc.) in order to better understand human experience. Presumably she is hesitant about defining religion because through the very act of constructing a definition certain ways of knowing will be closed off in favor of others, which she is clearly against. This is a common argument made in the study of religion—there is no single, correct definition of religion—only more useful and less useful definitions.¹⁸¹ However, just because the task of defining religion is difficult, the task should not be ignored altogether. Smith thoughtfully reminds us that in order to focus one’s scholarly attention, religion must be defined at least provisionally. “For the self-conscious student of religion ... the student ... must be able to articulate clearly why ‘this’ rather than ‘that’ was chosen as an exemplum. His primary skill is concentrated in this choice.”¹⁸² Moore does not have an operational theory of religion to work with, and as a result the “context” of what is being studied becomes more important than the “content” of religion itself.

In terms of pedagogy, Moore’s approach to the study of religion takes great care to recognize that students are active agents in the construction of their own identities. She advocates for a student-centered approach that takes seriously the task of interpretation. As mentioned above, Moore is sensitive to the ways in which knowledge claims are situated and arise of out “certain social/historical/cultural/personal contexts and therefore represent particular

¹⁸¹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 175.

¹⁸² Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

and necessarily partial perspectives.”¹⁸³ Therefore, a central goal of the religious studies classroom is for teachers and students to investigate how knowledge claims emerge and how this potentially affects one’s own understanding of religion. One danger with this approach, however, is that students may end up spending too much time thinking about their own conceptions of religion, or they may spend too much time interrogating their own situated identities and perspectives, rather than spending time learning about the religion of others.

Another problem that arises from the cultural studies approach is that it is questionable whether or not this pedagogical strategy is even possible for an average high school classroom, which is a similar critique that I leveled against Rosenblith and Nord. It appears that much of Moore’s classroom activity is directed toward reflection and meta-level analysis, rather than learning basic information. In Feinberg and Layton’s qualitative study, they demonstrate the difficulty involved in asking students to engage in complex interpretive practices. They conducted a short classroom exercise where students were asked to do a close reading of a bible passage, and then work in small groups to discuss the passage with their peers. They write, “the primary goal of the lesson was to have students understand themselves as interpreters of the text, and to see that there can be internal differences and tensions in the way a text can be understood by the same reader, or in a group of readers.”¹⁸⁴ They found that although students were able to draw out some ambiguity in the text, “at the same time, they did not fully recognize the significance of their own interpretive agency.”¹⁸⁵ In particular, they found that teachers would have to be deeply involved in leading students through the interpretive process. They writes:

That is, it was our conclusion that the students were able to exhibit strong interpretive skills when provided sufficient cues, but they

¹⁸³ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 82.

¹⁸⁴ Feinberg and Layton, *For the Civic Good*, 138.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

were less prepared to recognize themselves as *interpreters*, and consequently, did not place value on the moment of self-recognition. We concluded that if such an exercise were to be incorporated as a part of high school syllabi, it would also be necessary for the teacher to mirror back to the students how they had actually shifted their interpretive focus and their character assessment in the process, and to draw out the implications.¹⁸⁶

Although the mini-exercise dealt with a close reading of a bible passage, the conclusions drawn by Feinberg and Layton can be applied to Moore's cultural studies approach, since their purpose was to explore the different levels of interpretation that students are capable of engaging in.

They found that students were able to absorb material, and with some coaching were able to think about the material in a new way. It was quite difficult, however, for students to recognize their role in thinking about the material in a new way, thus displaying a minimal capacity for self-reflection without significant coaching from the teacher. Oddly enough, it is somewhere at this level that Moore expects her students to start the process of interpretation. She wants students to first be aware of the situated nature of knowledge claims and to reflect on their roles as interpreters within the process of education. From there, she thinks that students can situate their own process of interpretation within an academic discipline (cultural, historical, etc.), resulting in a meta-level analysis that they could then use to address issues of power and powerlessness.

Considering the results of Feinberg and Layton's mini-experiment, and given the high-levels of religious illiteracy in this country (which Moore recognizes as a problem), I am doubtful that Moore's model can serve as a realistic approach to the study of religion in the average American high school. In particular, Moore seems to underestimate the need for students to spend class time learning and absorbing material. She presumes that students come

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 139 italics original.

to school equipped with well-formed understandings about religion, and therefore the task of the class is to examine these pre-understandings. As evidenced by my analysis in the previous chapter, it is educationally desirable to create a student-centered pedagogy that takes seriously students' role in the construction of their own learning, and Moore's model recognizes this need. Yet, it is imprudent for educators to assume that students can start at the level of interpretation that Moore supports, without first exposing them to the basic attributes of religion and giving them sufficient time to learn about these basic attributes. In the next chapter, I will discuss an approach to teaching about religion that recognizes the need to teach students some core knowledge about religion (although the approach ultimately fails to push students to think critically about basic religious terms and concepts).

Finally, due to Moore's context-dependent approach and lack of attention to the basic content of religion, it is unlikely that Moore's cultural studies approach would be successful in an introductory world religions course. Her method does not provide any apparatus for a multilevel description and comparison of different religious traditions, but instead provides a method more suited to the study of a single cultural tradition. This may be a reason why Moore highlights her course *Islamic Cultural Studies* because a cultural studies approach is more suited to a course focused on a single tradition rather than a broad introduction to world religions. Moore admits her unique situation as an instructor at a highly-selective private boarding school where the curriculum is flexible and students can choose from an array of boutique courses (such as *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* and *Views of Human Nature*).¹⁸⁷ Moore's experience is not typical of most public high schools in America where teachers and students do not have the luxury of spending an entire semester delving deeply into a single topic. As discussed in the introduction, public high schools overall rarely offer courses in the study of religion, and

¹⁸⁷ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 112.

certainly most schools do not support entire departments of religion similar to the school where Moore teaches. Moore argues that her approach could easily be utilized in a variety of different courses in the study of religion, but without providing an analytic framework that allows for cross-comparison of religious phenomenon, such an approach would not be possible in a world religions course.

Conclusion: Religion and Multicultural Education

Including the academic study of religion in public schools as part of a multicultural education showcases the need to prepare students to successfully navigate an increasingly pluralistic society. Yet, the study of religion comes with some problems. At best, religion can be used as a tool to elucidate the complex historical, political, and social issues of any one particular culture, but at worst religion can be reduced to token slogans about universal peace and love. Pedagogically, Moore's cultural studies approach affirms the importance of interpretation and encourages a student-centered approach that views religion as a dynamic and lived-phenomenon. Moore has developed a robust conception of why and how to teach about religion, which is not simply an alternative to Nord, but a coherent proposal that seeks to solve the problem of religious illiteracy in the U.S. She advocates for a type of critical multiculturalism that encourages students to recognize and analyze the various "value claims" associated with religious traditions, while also teaching students to identify the full range of often competing ideological convictions found within religious traditions. In particular, Moore wants to expose students to the issues of power and privilege in society so they may become active agents in transforming society by eliminating injustices.

However, despite Moore's accomplishments, she conflates religion with culture, thus diverting sources of critique and investigation toward various historical, social, and cultural

factors, rather than providing students with a means to examine “religion” for its own sake. It becomes confusing as to what the object of examination is under Moore’s scheme. Instead, any approach to the academic study of religion must promote some kind of systematic study of what “religion” means, particularly in a course dealing with multiple traditions, such as world religions. Furthermore, one must question whether or not Moore’s project has practical application in public schools today. Similar to Nord and Rosenblith, Moore recognizes the profound religious illiteracy threatening modern U.S. society—after all, the title of her book is *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*. Surprisingly, though, Moore’s cultural studies approach assumes that students already come to the religious studies classroom ready to engage in high-level interpretive work. Her approach does not acknowledge that students should learn some basic attributes of religion, nor does it discuss the kind of knowledge about religion that students must possess in order to engage in the dynamic, interpretive-based learning that she desires.

In the following chapter, I discuss a third justification for the study of religion in public schools, which I am calling the literacy justification. In particular Stephen Prothero has promoted the idea that students must have some basic knowledge about religion in order to effectively engage in challenging and intellectually rigorous discussions about many aspects of life. Prothero, following in the footsteps of Nord, argues that for far too long religion has been unfairly excluded from the public school curriculum, resulting in a religiously ignorant populace. The best way to correct this problem, Prothero proposes, is for public schools teach about religion as an academic subject, focusing on the major terms, concepts, and ideas associated with religious traditions.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYZING THE LITERACY JUSTIFICATION

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced the work of Diane Moore who claims that “the study of religion should be incorporated more fully into curricula [because] ignorance about religion itself and the world’s religious traditions promotes misunderstanding that diminishes respect for diversity.”¹⁸⁸ Moore views multicultural education as the best entry point for introducing students to the study of religion, and supports a cultural studies framework that allows students to examine the contingent nature of religion while recognizing the historical, social, and cultural contexts that influence religious traditions. While Moore’s approach offers a strong pedagogical foundation for teaching about religion, her model lacks a curricular design that allows students to disentangle religion from culture, while also lacking a method in which students can learn the basic knowledge about religion necessary to engage in higher-level thinking.

In this chapter, I analyze the literacy justification for teaching about religion in public schools, using the work of Stephen Prothero who argues that Americans have become complacent when it comes to their lack of knowledge about religion, thus compromising their ability to participate meaningfully in discussions about politics and world affairs. In *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t*, Prothero argues that being illiterate about religion is not only intellectually shameful, but dangerous, considering what is at stake in terms of domestic and international policy. He writes:

Unfortunately, US citizens today lack ... religious literacy. As a result, they are too easily swayed by demagogues on the left or the right. Few Americans are able to challenge claims made by

¹⁸⁸ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 31.

politicians or pundits about Islam's place in the war on terrorism or what the Bible says about homosexuality. This ignorance imperils our public life, putting citizens in the thrall of talking heads and effectively transferring power from the third estate (the people) to the fourth (the press).¹⁸⁹

In order to solve this problem, Prothero thinks that public high schools should begin to offer courses in the academic study of religion, where students learn a “basic understanding of Christianity and the world's religions.”¹⁹⁰

In proposing that public school students obtain a basic understanding of religion, Prothero utilizes the work of E.D. Hirsch who developed the theory of cultural literacy. This theory asserts that public education has eroded since schools began to favor progressive models of education over more traditional models. As a result, students are allowed to graduate without a basic knowledge of traditional culture, art, history, and literature. Due to what he believes are relaxed pedagogical and curricular standards, Hirsch thinks school curricula should return to “core knowledge.” Hirsch argues that a core knowledge curriculum will combat the recent phenomenon of “shopping mall high schools,” which offer a diverse array of curricular choices to students. The emergence of these schools has resulted in “cafeteria-style education, [which] combined with the unwillingness of our schools to place demand on students, has resulted in a steady diminishment of commonly shared information between generations and between young people themselves.”¹⁹¹ Hirsch believes that public schools offer students too many specialized courses, especially in the humanities, that cater to the cultural diversity of Americans rather than the cultural similarities that all Americans should share. To rectify this problem Hirsch

¹⁸⁹ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 10.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143. Prothero also argues that institutions of higher education should teach about religion.

¹⁹¹ E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 20-1.

developed a dictionary of cultural literacy, which is a list of approximately 5000 terms that he thinks every American should know.

In contrast to Moore's multicultural approach discussed in the previous chapter, Prothero does not want to conflate religion with culture. Instead he wants students to study religion as an academic subject in its own right since he believes that citizens must know enough about the basics of religion in order to participate in religiously-inflected debates. In appropriating the work of Hirsch, Prothero downplays any hint of multiculturalism. He writes as follows:

In fact, many a college course in American religion devotes more time to Vodou than it does to Methodism. The point of this multicultural approach to American religion is to underscore the fact that the United States is one of the most religiously diverse nations on earth. But the United States is also the world's most Christian country. With a Christian population of about 250 million, there are more Christians in the United States today than there have been in any other country in the history of the world.¹⁹²

Therefore a central component of Prothero's approach to the study of religion is to focus on what he calls "Christian literacy" since most Americans practice Christianity. In what follows, I examine Prothero's proposal for teaching about religion in public schools, arguing that his promotion of a Christian ethos ultimately limits a student's ability to make sense of religious diversity in the modern world.

Religion and Cultural Literacy Education

In recent years, use of the term "religious literacy" has gained momentum among some individuals and groups advocating for the academic inclusion of religion in public schools. This broad-based movement includes educational and religious scholars, public school teachers and administrators, as well as various advocacy groups seeking to implement religious literacy

¹⁹² Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 12.

programs that educate the masses about religion. This movement gained mainstream attention in 2007 when an article entitled “The Case for Teaching the Bible,” graced the cover of *Time Magazine*. In the article, author David Van Biema argues that America has become a “nation of biblical illiterates,” and overcoming this illiteracy entails an academic study of the Bible in public schools.¹⁹³ Adopting this idea of religious literacy, Prothero argues that Americans are vastly illiterate about Christianity, the Bible, and world religions, which he sees as problematic, and even dangerous, for a pluralistic society.¹⁹⁴ Taking religious literacy to be a civic necessity, Prothero argues that in order for citizens to engage in productive and respectful dialogue in the public square, they must first be knowledgeable about a variety of social issues, including religion. He asks, “in an era in which the public square is, rightly or wrongly, awash in religious reasons, can one really participate fully in public life without knowing something about Christianity and the world’s religions?”¹⁹⁵ Answering this question with a clear “no,” Prothero stresses that citizens ought to have some basic and universal knowledge about religion. He defines religious literacy as “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives.”¹⁹⁶

Taking a cue from E.D. Hirsch, who pioneered the theory of cultural literacy in the 1980s, Prothero incorporates a core knowledge approach to his theory of religious literacy. Hirsch and his supporters argued that American public schools have lost sight of teaching “core knowledge”—knowledge that everyone needs in order to succeed in society. Possessing this

¹⁹³ David Van Biema, “The Case for Teaching the Bible,” *Time Magazine* March 22, 2007.

¹⁹⁴ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 146-7.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-2.

core knowledge enables one to be culturally literate and thus able to participate in a shared national culture. Hirsch argues that bridging cultural, social, and economic gaps within our populace is a desirable goal, and therefore all students should leave public schools with an understanding of the traditional knowledge, literature, art, history, and values shared by all Americans. Driving this point home, Hirsch declares:

To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world. The breadth of that information is great, extending over the major domains of human activity from sports to science. It is by no means confined to “culture” narrowly understood as an acquaintance with the arts. Nor is it confined to one social class. Quite the contrary. Cultural literacy constitutes the only sure avenue of opportunity for disadvantaged children, the only reliable way of combating the social determinism that now condemns them to remain in the same social and educational condition of their parents. That children from poor and illiterate homes tend to remain poor and illiterate is an unacceptable failure of our schools, one which has occurred not because our teachers are inept but chiefly because they are compelled to teach a fragmented curriculum based on faulty educational theories.¹⁹⁷

This theory of cultural literacy asserts that culturally-literate citizens should know, at the very least, the basic facts about American society. For example, all Americans should know that George Washington was the first president of the United States and that Springfield is the capital of Illinois, but also, Americans should understand the traditional reasons for celebrating Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. In contrast, all Americans do not need to know about Casimir Pulaski, a Polish-born Revolutionary war veteran who is honored by the Polish-American community in Chicago on *Casimir Pulaski Day*, an official Illinois state holiday.¹⁹⁸ Hirsch would view knowledge about Pulaski as “local knowledge”—knowledge which may be useful for Polish-Americans and those living in Illinois, but unnecessary for the majority of

¹⁹⁷ Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, xiii.

¹⁹⁸ Pulaski Day is observed in other parts of Illinois and also some areas of Wisconsin.

Americans living in other parts of the country. Choosing what counts as “core knowledge” is built into Hirsch’s theory, because “the concept of cultural literacy helps us to make such decisions [about what to include in the curriculum] because it places a higher value on national than on local information.”¹⁹⁹ Hirsch believes that prioritizing national content over local content “has nothing to do with merit, only with the accidents of culture”²⁰⁰ and therefore “what counts” as national knowledge is based more on innocent happenstance rather than historical or political bias. Moreover, “although everyone is literate in some local, regional, or ethnic culture, the connection between mainstream culture and the national written language justifies calling mainstream culture *the* basic culture of the nation.”²⁰¹

Similarly, Prothero argues that including the academic study of religion in the curriculum is an indispensable component for any well-rounded education, and he cites both Hirsch and Nord as having the right idea when it comes to studying religion. He writes:

Being committed to seeing the study of religion as an indispensable part of a liberal education—to viewing religious literacy as a key component, perhaps *the* key component, of what Hirsch called cultural literacy. So I share with philosopher Warren Nord the conviction that our current inattention to religion in secondary and higher education today is a failure of the highest order—that “current American education is profoundly illiberal in its refusal to take religion seriously.”²⁰²

He stresses, however, that the stakes are much higher when it comes to ignorance about religion as opposed to ignorance about culture. He notes that “religious illiteracy is at least as pervasive as cultural illiteracy” but more dangerous because misunderstanding about religion can have

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 25.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 26.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 22 italics original.

²⁰² Ibid., 8 italics original.

real-world negative consequences that may lead to violence and hatred.²⁰³ “Whereas ignorance,” he asserts, “of the term Achilles’ heel may cause us to be confused about the outcome of a Super Bowl game or a statewide election, ignorance about Christian crusades and Muslim martyrdom can be literally lethal.”²⁰⁴ According to Prothero, the ignorance that results from religious illiteracy makes it difficult for Americans to understand the actions of religious people throughout the world. He writes:

Religious illiteracy makes it difficult for Americans to make sense of a world in which people kill and make peace in the name of Christ or Allah. How are we to understand protests against the Vietnam War, which compelled Catholic priests to burn draft records in Maryland and Buddhist monks to set fire to themselves in Vietnam, without knowing something about Catholic just war theory and the Buddhist principles of no-self and compassion? How are we to understand international conflicts in the Middle East and Sri Lanka without reckoning with the role of Jerusalem in the sacred geography of the Abrahamic faiths and with the differences between Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia? Closer to home, how are we to understand faith-based electioneering if the “reds” on the Religious Right and the “blues” on the Secular Left continue to stereotype one another as distinct species?²⁰⁵

Prothero argues that understanding the actions of others is especially important in a modern world where the likelihood of encountering religious diversity is high.

Moreover, understanding religion is important when major world events have a deep religious dimension that drives ideological divides. He is particularly concerned with the emergence of religious ideologies in the political arena, where according to one report, ninety percent of the members of Congress vote on legislation only after consulting their religious

²⁰³ Ibid., 4.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 4.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

beliefs, and the majority of Americans believe that the President should be strongly religious.²⁰⁶

Prothero argues, therefore, that responsible citizenship entails knowing enough about religion in order to make informed decisions about public policy.²⁰⁷ Prothero argues adamantly that the best way to alleviate religious illiteracy is through public education. As mentioned in the introduction, when Prothero began his teaching career he was unable to engage in challenging conversations with his students because they lacked very basic knowledge about religion. He reasoned that discussion about religion could not take place unless all participants held a shared vocabulary. He became, “like Hirsch, a traditionalist about content, not because [he] had come to see facts as the end of education but because [he] had come to see them as necessary means to understanding.”²⁰⁸

In particular, Prothero views knowledge about religion as a means to understand and navigate political discourse. He argues that the primary purpose of learning about religion should be civic, aiming to “produce citizens who know enough about Christianity and the world’s religions to participate meaningfully—on both the left and the right—in religiously inflected public debates.”²⁰⁹ In advancing a civic argument for teaching about religion in public schools, Prothero is clear that his focus is “spreading knowledge rather than inculcating virtues.”²¹⁰ Spreading knowledge is important because he fears that politicians or pundits with distinct political agendas can too easily sway a populace ignorant about religion. For Prothero, an ill-informed and undiscerning electorate is an enemy of democracy and civic cooperation. All in all, Prothero argues that when public schools fail to teach about religion, they also fail to

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 17.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

instill within students the knowledge needed to make informed political decisions that are necessary for a self-governing democracy in the global era.

Recognizing some of the limitations to which Hirsch's theory of cultural literacy is subject, Prothero realizes that including the study of religion in public schools means that some information will inevitably be left out of the curriculum. Therefore, choices must be made about what information is most deserving of inclusion. Prothero writes, "like languages...religions are particular creatures. Just as it is not possible to speak language in general (one must choose to speak one particular language), religious literacy in the abstract is an impossibility. (One cannot be literate in *every* religion; neither is there one generic religion to 'speak.')." ²¹¹ Prothero points out that religious literacy can be broken down by different traditions (Buddhist literacy, Islamic literacy), and by functional qualities (ritual literacy, confessional literacy). Since it is unrealistic for public schools to require proficiency in every religious literacy, schools must focus on Christian literacy because it is the most useful for effective civic participation in the United States. In Prothero's estimation, it is obvious that Christian literacy is the most important since the overwhelming majority of Americans practice some form of Christianity, and since Christian ideology wields the most power in the realm of public policy. ²¹² He recognizes that emphasizing the study of Christianity over the study of other religious traditions is "decidedly out of fashion" in an era when popular multicultural approaches to the study of religion seek to highlight the growing diversity of religious traditions in the U.S. Although Prothero acknowledges that in comparison to other countries in the world, the U.S. is the most religiously diverse, he thinks it foolish to ignore the fact that the U.S. is also the world's most Christian country. He goes on to provide numerous examples of the pervasiveness of Christianity in American society,

²¹¹ Ibid., 12 italics original.

²¹² Ibid., 12-3.

highlighting the number of political leaders who regularly invoke the language of Christianity in their political rhetoric.²¹³ Given his view that civic participation requires at least an elementary level of religious literacy, and since Christianity dominates the corpus of American political life, Prothero thinks it makes sense to foreground Christian literacy.

Despite his assertion that Christian literacy should be at the forefront of religious literacy, Prothero does not turn a blind eye to non-Christian religions, arguing that understanding foreign policy requires knowledge of the major religions of the world. He writes, “Christian literacy is not enough, however. To understand foreign policy on Tibet, for example, one needs to know something about Buddhist monasticism and the Dalai Lama.”²¹⁴ The question of what to include in the curriculum, therefore, is not a matter of preference, but of pragmatics. For example, he rightly argues that some religious ideas are more important to know about due to their current influence on society. It is much more important for citizens to know something about Wahhabism rather than Socinianism.²¹⁵ He goes on to say, “because of the rapid rise of religious diversity in the United States since Congress opened up immigration from Asia in 1965, understanding the basics of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism is far more important than it was a half century ago.”²¹⁶ Prothero does not provide any sort of criteria from which educators can draw upon when evaluating what aspects of religion to include or leave out, but seems to favor the idea that students need to know about religion insofar as it informs their understanding of modern life. Therefore, given the pervasiveness of Christianity as both a way of life and as a political force in our modern society, Prothero holds firm that “nonetheless, understanding

²¹³ Ibid., 12-3.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

Christianity and the Bible must remain the core task of religious literacy education, if only because Christian and biblical terms are most prevalent on our radios and televisions, and on the lips of our legislators, judges, and presidents.”²¹⁷

Knowledge, Meaning, and Choice

Following Hirsch’s theory of cultural literacy, Prothero’s theory of religious literacy seeks to institute a knowledge-based curriculum concentrating on the religion of the dominant group under a value-neutral pretext. As stated above, Prothero wants to “spread knowledge” and not “inculcate virtues.” Consequently, Prothero—in homage to Hirsch’s dictionary—provides a glossary of nearly 200 religious concepts that he thinks all Americans should know. For both Hirsch and Prothero, learning the basic facts about religion is fundamentally a neutral enterprise because, in the words of Hirsch, deciding what should be highlighted within the curriculum “has nothing to do with merit, only with the accidents of culture.”²¹⁸ In following Hirsch’s lead, Prothero claims that his approach to the study of religion is in no way paternalistic, nor is it promoting a larger Christian theology. Underlying his overall argument is a concern for neutrality because it is simply an accident of culture that American political life is more closely tied to Christianity than any other world religion. Highlighting the importance of Christianity over, for example, Buddhism, is an entirely neutral endeavor and not based on any one political or ideological stance.

This claim—that deciding what to include in the curriculum has nothing to do with choice or preference, but instead is an accident of culture—has been a central source of critique toward Hirsch’s work. For example, educational scholar Walter Feinberg has contested Hirsch’s

²¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

²¹⁸ Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 26.

assertion that cultural literacy can be constructed within a neutral framework devoid of political or cultural bias.²¹⁹ Moreover, critics have claimed that knowledge and meaning are never neutral, and the very act of declaring knowledge as neutral is a political stance that carries with it certain dispositions and ideological underpinnings that cannot be divorced from such claims. This mirrors much of what Moore's work stresses, as discussed in the previous chapter. Recall that Moore argues that all knowledge is partial and situated, and therefore cannot be taken at face value, but requires a certain level of interpretation in order for meaning to be determined.

Likewise, in a scathing review of Hirsch, Aronowitz and Giroux argue that the theory of cultural literacy is the "narrative of the winners," "where authority and meaning come together within a view of history that appears unproblematic and unchangeable in its determining influence on the present and the future."²²⁰ Decisions about what to include (and exclude) in the canon of cultural literacy is determined through the depoliticized lens of the "common culture," or in Hirsch's term "everybody's culture," which results in making the language of the dominant culture the sole means of successful communication and interaction in society.²²¹ Put another way, cultural literacy is determined by the tides of the dominant culture, which not only serve to justify what counts as necessary cultural knowledge, but also determines the meaning and value of knowledge. Thus, cultural literacy gives more weight or importance to the knowledge of the dominant culture over all other cultural knowledge under the guise of commonality. Moreover, it reproduces the dominant culture and denies the agency of minority cultures.

²¹⁹ Walter Feinberg, "Educational Manifestos and the New Fundamentalism," *Educational Researcher* 26, no. 8 (Nov. 1997).

²²⁰ Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, "Schooling, Culture, and Literacy in the Age of Broken Dreams: A Review of Bloom and Hirsch," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 2 (May 1988), 184.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

Despite this critique, Hirsch argued in subsequent work that acquiring a canon of cultural knowledge is academically valuable for students, evidenced by the way in which society rewards those who enjoy a larger share of “cultural capital” by granting them greater opportunity, wealth, and social status.²²² He argues that providing students with access to this cultural capital is more important than ever since the current system of public education is broken and has resulted in extreme inequalities. One goal of Hirsch, therefore, is to enable students from all backgrounds—regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or gender—to draw upon the shared frames of reference found within a national culture in order to build bridges across diverse viewpoints and ways of life. When viewed this way, cultural literacy acts not only as a form of cultural capital that allows students to move up through the social and economic ranks of society, but also functions as a type of language that provides a common framework for communication and exchange. He writes:

Literate culture has become the common currency for social and economic exchange in our democracy, and the only available ticket to full citizenship. Getting one’s membership card is not tied to class or race. Membership is automatic if one learns that background information and the linguistic conventions that are needed to read, write, and speak effectively.²²³

Hirsch argues that transmitting this language to students will help to solidify the bonds of a shared national culture.²²⁴ According to Hirsch, “cultural literacy is the oxygen of social intercourse. Only when we run into cultural illiteracy are we shocked into recognizing the importance of the information that we had unconsciously assumed.”²²⁵ For Hirsch, shared

²²² E.D. Hirsch Jr., *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 20.

²²³ Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 22.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

frames of reference and common meaning become the building blocks of discourse that he thinks will lead to increased communication and cooperation among diverse groups in society.

The notion of cultural literacy as a type of language is also present in Prothero's theory of religious literacy. Prothero views the transmission of facts and other traditional information from one generation to the next as an important educational endeavor. He argues, however, that this transmission is pointless unless students are able to understand and communicate the meaning of what they learn.²²⁶ By understanding the "language" of religious literacy, individuals can converse fluently with others without having to explain the basic structure of the language in order to communicate. Underlying the language of both cultural and religious literacy are the idioms, allusions, symbols, and informal content that constitute dominant cultural systems. For example, in American vernacular the idiom "pulling someone's leg," means playing a trick or joke on someone—not physically pulling one's leg. Knowing the literal meaning of "pulling someone's leg" does not enable an individual to understand the meaning behind the phrase. Prothero argues that this informal content is not merely trivial knowledge, but instead essential for understanding the religious idioms, allusions, and symbols fundamental to traditional art and literature. He writes, "religious literacy also troubles educators, who know how much our appreciation of literature, music, and art depends on our knowledge of the Bible—how difficult it is to understand the musical compositions of J.S. Bach and the paintings of El Greco as long as we are deaf and blind to artist's spiritual impulses and religious idioms."²²⁷ Religion has had a profound influence on many aspects of our culture, and without understanding the basic meanings of religious terms and ideas, Prothero claims that one's educational experience will suffer.

²²⁶ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 13-5.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

Prothero deviates from Hirsch's theory, however, in the reason he offers for *why* students should be well versed in the matters of religion. For Hirsch, cultural literacy can provide individuals with the cultural capital needed to climb the social and economic ladders of society. For Prothero, religious literacy is a civic necessity, providing students with the knowledge and skills needed to thoughtfully participate in the public square. Moreover, he wants to emphasize the changing nature of religious traditions, and the changing contexts in which religious information should be understood. He writes, "like other forms of literacy, religious literacy is more a fluid practice than a fixed condition. It is the ability to participate in our ongoing conversation about the private and public powers of religion."²²⁸ As mentioned earlier, as the landscape of society changes it is more important for individuals to know about Wahhabism than Socinianism. Understanding the different sects of Islam—especially since 9/11—is more important than knowing something about an antiquated Christian doctrine; conversations in the public square are more likely to feature discussions about a politically relevant branch of Islam and not musings about fifteenth-century Christian theology.

Prothero's approach to deciding what is necessary for inclusion in the study of religion indicates a concern for cultural sensitivity. This may be an attempt to distance himself from the type of critique leveled against Hirsch, who has been attacked for "attempt[ing] to legitimate a view of learning and literacy that not only marginalizes the voices, languages, and cultures of subordinate groups but also degrades teaching and learning to the practice of implementation and mastery."²²⁹ Prothero makes clear his opposition to rote learning, arguing that the goal of religious literacy is not simply for students to memorize a list of isolated terms and definitions.

²²⁸ Ibid., 14.

²²⁹ Aronowitz and Giroux, "Schooling, Culture, and Literacy," 183.

He also understands that the changing tides of culture will result in what students inevitably need to learn about in schools.²³⁰

Yet, similar to Hirsch, Prothero wants to deny any claim or linkage to the political and ideological consequences of his theory of religious literacy. Take, for example, his justification for providing a dictionary of religious information that all Americans need to know. He claims that the dictionary focuses on “information US citizens need to make sense of their country and the world—the key stories, doctrines, practices, symbols, scriptures, people, places, phrases, groups, and holidays of the world’s major religions.”²³¹ In compiling the dictionary, Prothero considered a key question: “What does one need to know to understand and participate in religiously inflected public debates?”²³² His answer to this question is that Sufism is not included in the dictionary, but Wahhabism is, because of the way in which the sectarian divisions in Islam have impacted American society. Furthermore, Hanukkah gets an entry, but not Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah because “Hanukkah comes up repeatedly in public disputes about Christmas, including lawsuits about the constitutionality of nativity displays (some of which include menorahs and other Hanukkah symbols) on public property.”²³³ For Prothero, religious terms that everyone must know are determined by the degree to which they inform public debate. He does, however, make an exception for terms that are regularly misused like “evangelical” and “fundamental.” Prothero believes these terms are also worthy of inclusion in the canon of religious literacy since their misuse can have negative political and cultural consequences.²³⁴

²³⁰ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 13-24.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

²³² *Ibid.*, 149.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

In framing his argument for religious literacy as a civic necessity, Prothero attempts to escape the cultural essentialism that hounds Hirsch. He wants to make the case that the dominant culture should not simply dictate what knowledge is most useful to Americans, but instead current events and historically important political factors should determine what knowledge is most useful. That is why he favors the inclusion of Wahhabism in his dictionary over Sufism, because it is more likely that Wahhabism will come up in public debate and will influence world events. This scheme, however, directly conflicts with the fact that Prothero includes a number of terms in his dictionary that do not obviously fit the parameters of politically-relevant knowledge, including Vishnu, Holy Communion, Nirvana, and Pharisees, just to name a few. Of course it may be possible to find instances when public figures referenced the term Pharisees, or spoke of Vishnu in an anecdotal way, but these are not religious terms being seriously debated in the public square today. Nor are they likely influencing world events in a profound way.

However, a more pressing problem is that although Prothero claims that the terms he includes in the dictionary are value-neutral, they are not value-neutral since they convey certain ideas to students while downplaying others. This is interesting considering Prothero shows some concern for correcting misinformation about religion and religious ideas. As mentioned above, he recognizes that words like “fundamental” are used loosely—and often incorrectly—in the public square. Furthermore, he thinks that the public is too easily swayed with misinformation about religion by the media and politicians who hold ulterior motives. Presumably, therefore, Prothero would concede that a central purpose of teaching religious literacy is to correct the misidentification of terms, and to alert students to instances when their religious knowledge is compromised by misinformation. Yet, Prothero thinks students need to learn about Wahhabism

over Sufism, even though Wahhabism reinforces at least some stereotypes about Islam and conveys a certain message about Islam. In particular, Wahhabism showcases the conservative and often controversial side of Islam, which reinforces the paradigm of Islam as a strict and intolerant religion. On the contrary, teaching students about Sufism could help *defuse* these types of stereotypes, since Sufism showcases a mystical dimension of Islam that significantly contrasts with its more conservative branches. By choosing to include Wahhabism over Sufism, Prothero conveys to students a certain idea about Islam as strict and intolerant, while downplaying its lesser-known aspects. This practice is not value-neutral since students are exposed to a narrow vision of Islam.

In contrast, if a goal of religious literacy is to equip students with information about religion in order to make informed decisions in the public square, it is important to teach about Sufism *along with* Wahhabism. This provides students with a wider view of Islam, thus helping to alleviate the widespread religious ignorance that Prothero is concerned about. Furthermore, the practice of defusing religious stereotypes is educationally desirable since it provides students with concrete ways in which they can reflect on their own presuppositions about religion. Moore strongly advocates that teachers regularly incorporate exercises into the curriculum that seek to challenge students' assumptions and stereotypes. This not only contributes to correcting the problem of religious illiteracy but also teaches students the skills of critical thinking and interpretation.²³⁵ Likewise, Feinberg and Layton spoke with a world religions teacher who strives to provide students with learning experiences that help them to recognize the misconceptions or stereotypes about religion they may hold. The teacher described a paper in which a student reflected on her attitudes and misconceptions about Sikhs, which she assumed

²³⁵ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 114-5.

were Muslims. After visiting a Sikh temple, however, the student “said that she learned that not all people who wear turbans are terrorists” and that she is no longer going to judge people simply because they are of a different faith. The teacher viewed the student’s revelation as a success, since she was able to understand how her misperceptions adversely affected the way she viewed certain religions and religious people.²³⁶

Overall, Prothero is inconsistent in his application of religious literacy since many of the terms he insists are most important for students to know are not justified under his proposal that religious literacy is vital for civic participation. Some of the terms he includes, however, can be viewed as important in terms of their cultural influence in modern American society. For example, even though it is unlikely for civic debate to include discussion or even reference to nirvana, the term nirvana has been appropriated in culturally-relevant ways in the U.S. Prothero notes this in his definition of the term, writing, “Nirvana, which literally means ‘blowing out,’ was also the name of the grunge band headlined by Kurt Cobain (1967-1994) and is a generic term in American English for paradise.”²³⁷ When talking about nirvana in this way, Prothero’s argument for his brand of religious literacy becomes less effective since he oscillates between conflicting justifications. On the one hand, he wants to make the case that religious literacy is more important than cultural literacy due to the civic imperative involved in understanding religious difference. He wants to differentiate his argument from Hirsch’s argument on the grounds that religious literacy is not simply dictated by the tides of culture, but instead prescribed by the very real implications of religion entangled with politics and world events. On the other hand, he creates a dictionary filled with hundreds of disjointed and somewhat confused terms that address cultural influence rather than religious and civic importance.

²³⁶ Feinberg and Layton, *For the Civic Good*.

²³⁷ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 207.

His inconsistent application of terms is particularly apparent in his inclusion of Christianity and the Bible as a focus of religious literacy. Of the nearly 200 terms listed, more than half refer to Christianity and/or the Bible. As mentioned above, it is unlikely that most of the Christian terms listed in Prothero's dictionary are useful or necessary for citizens to know in order to participate in public debate. Take for example Prothero's inclusion of the concept of the Christian trinity, which is a central Christian doctrine stating that the single being God exists in three forms—the Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit. It seems unlikely that knowing about the Christian trinity is necessary for civic participation, which indicates that Prothero does not have a reliable criterion in place for establishing a hierarchy of importance.

Yet, knowing about the trinity *is* necessary for individuals learning about Christianity, since it is at the heart of most Christian theology. It is a central component of religious literacy, when religious literacy is understood as an academic endeavor. Similarly, knowing about the trikāya—which is the Mahāyāna Buddhist belief in the “three-body” doctrine of the Buddha—*is* necessary for individuals learning about Buddhism. However, the Christian trinity is included in Prothero's dictionary, but not the Buddhist doctrine of trikāya. These two terms are religiously important, and it is difficult to justify leaving either of these terms out of an introductory course in the study of world religions since both terms are central religious doctrines that share interesting metaphysical ideas (the concept of three in one). Only the Christian trinity makes Prothero's dictionary despite its seeming irrelevance to modern civic debate. In including the trinity over the trikāya, Prothero is in effect taking an ideological stance, declaring that knowledge about Christian doctrine is more valuable than knowledge about Buddhist doctrine.

Considering his biased application of “what counts” as necessary knowledge, Prothero's justification for prioritizing Christian literacy fails to be justified under the banner of civic

importance. His desire to implement a knowledge-based approach to the study of religion (following the model of Hirsch) is not a neutral endeavor since he privileges the study of Christianity, relying on the demographic and historical circumstances of Christianity in America. Furthermore, Prothero uses Christianity as the measuring stick from which to evaluate the worthiness of including terms in his dictionary. Returning to the example mentioned above where he justifies giving Hanukkah an entry but not Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah, Prothero decides to include Hanukkah since it “comes up repeatedly in public disputes about Christmas.” According to this line of reasoning, learning about Hanukkah is important insofar as it relates to Christianity. If Hanukkah were not celebrated at a similar time to Christmas, then presumably Prothero would leave it out of the dictionary.

Another example of his bias toward Christianity can be seen in his inclusion of Easter in the dictionary. He defines Easter as “the most important Christian holy day, commemorating the resurrection of Jesus three days after his crucifixion on Good Friday. In a more secular guise, Easter is a popular spring celebration of fertility and new life, replete with marshmallow bunnies, chocolate eggs, flowers and fancy new clothes.”²³⁸ Yet Yom Kippur, which is the holiest day of the year for Judaism is not included. Although Prothero wants to underscore the political and ideological consequences of his theory of religious literacy, his choice in what to include and exclude from the dictionary produces the opposite effect. His choices instead highlight the presumption that Christian literacy is most useful to Americans, and the “culture” of Christianity should dominate space in the public school curriculum. Moreover, the privileging of Christianity also sets the benchmark for what is important in other traditions. Judaism is not viewed on its own terms, but instead through the lens of Christianity. The benchmarks set by Christianity inevitably control what is taught in the classroom, which limits the study of other religions.

²³⁸ Ibid., 175.

These are just some examples that highlight Prothero's uneven inclusion of terms in his religious literacy dictionary. The main point I am trying to make, however, is that Prothero cannot have it both ways. He cannot claim neutrality in his choice of what to include and exclude from the curriculum, yet favor the study of Christianity over all other major religions of the world. The result of this choice is that he imposes onto students what knowledge is of most worth, thus dictating to students what it means to be "religiously literate." This is not problematic for Prothero, because unlike Moore, he accepts the current status of Christianity as wielding the most power in society as a given. He does not attempt to critique this power structure, nor does he advocate that schools provide students with the tools to recognize the way in which structures of power influence their experiences.

This is surprising since Prothero wants students to be able to make sense of religious diversity, especially when that diversity bumps up against the multitude of political events that regularly affect citizens. Yet, how are students meant to understand religious diversity when they are taught to value knowledge about Christianity over other religious traditions? If Prothero is correct, and the main problem facing the U.S. in a global context is the inability to responsibly engage the rest of the world, it seems then, that knowledge of the religious "other" is *more important* than knowledge of Christianity. A civic education that values "otherness," where students are taught to recognize the religious other in order to make informed decisions in the public square, necessitates a broader understanding of religion. Learning to recognize the religious other will enable students to better understand their own religious tradition by seeing the different relationships that their tradition shares with other traditions (including relationships implicated by issues of power and powerlessness). Therefore, the goal of civic engagement

would be even more attainable if religions other than Christianity were a larger part of the religious literacy curriculum.

Religious Literacy and the Challenge of Pedagogy

Suggested throughout this dissertation is the idea that as far as pedagogy is concerned, content and method are interrelated. Or, put another way, *what* one teaches is closely related to *how* one teaches, and vice versa. As mentioned above, Prothero says that he is opposed to memorization and rote learning. He claims that an aim of religious literacy is to spread knowledge and to teach students basic religious concepts so they are able to engage in civic dialogue. For Prothero, the “*what*” that one should teach is straightforward—basic concepts and knowledge about religion. However, when it comes to “*how*” one should teach these basic concepts, Prothero’s explanation is ambiguous. He claims that religious literacy does not equate to memorization, yet he deliberately compiles a dictionary of approximately two hundred terms that he claims one should know *before* attempting to engage in civic dialogue. Prothero concedes that, as a young scholar teaching religious studies courses to college-aged students, he was a follower of John Dewey and other progressives who challenged the notion that education should focus on teaching “facts” largely at the expense of students’ understanding what is being taught.²³⁹ However, not too far into his teaching career, Prothero realized that his students were unable to engage in challenging or intellectually stimulating conversations about religion since they did not possess even the most basic knowledge about religion. From that point on he began to focus on teaching the basics.²⁴⁰ Therefore, despite his claim to the contrary, it appears that

²³⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

Prothero's knowledge-based approach to religious literacy necessitates the use of traditional teaching methods like direct instruction.

Not surprisingly, traditional pedagogical methods presuppose that teachers are the keepers of knowledge and students are merely passive receptacles to be filled with the knowledge transmitted to them by the teacher.²⁴¹ Direct instruction methods have been criticized by progressive educators who argue that those who hold the most power (teachers, administrators, curriculum makers) are the ones who ultimately get to decide which knowledge is most meaningful for students to learn. Prothero's approach to religious literacy epitomizes the problems associated with traditional pedagogy—it showcases the way in which content and meaning are narrowly conveyed to students under the guise of neutrality. As discussed above, Prothero's dictionary indicates that Christian literacy is most meaningful for students and therefore should serve as the foundation of religious literacy. As such, students' own experiences and identities are left out of the meaning-making process when learning about religion, because they are explicitly told what religious knowledge is of most worth, eliminating the need for self-reflection or interpretation. This is in stark contrast with Moore's multicultural approach that encourages students to be active participants in their own education. Prothero's approach reinforces the idea that knowledge consists of de-contextualized and universal terms and concepts, which therefore does little to encourage students to explore the political and ideological circumstances that influence the construction of knowledge. Self-reflective understanding about religion is not a necessary component of Prothero's scheme as either a curricular or pedagogical consideration.

²⁴¹ For example, see: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

Despite this critique, it is important to point out that Prothero's desire for students to learn the basics of religion is not problematic in and of itself. As mentioned in the previous chapter, learning the basics of religion is necessary for at least a provisional understanding of religion. In making the argument that students should have at least some basic understanding of religion the necessary question to ask is: "What counts as a basic understanding?" The next chapter discusses this question more fully. In regards to Prothero, however, the problem lies not with his contention that students learn some basic concepts of religion, but instead with his advocacy of using a *dictionary* to convey the basic information all students need to know. In providing students with a dictionary Prothero writes, "learning five thousand terms is not necessary; a hundred or so is a good start. But knowing what these terms mean is essential."²⁴² Prothero's reliance on a dictionary as a pedagogical tool is puzzling since inevitably many important religious concepts and ideas are left out. Even more puzzling, however, is the idea that a dictionary should be viewed as something other than a reference tool. Imagine, for example, requiring students in a high school English course studying Shakespeare to learn "a hundred or so" commonly used Shakespearian terms *before* the students even begin to discuss *Macbeth* or *King Lear*. This would not only be a laborious task but also counterproductive for students who easily get bored or discouraged with the repetition involved in such learning. In reading texts like Shakespeare, dictionaries should be used as a reference tool for when students get stuck; they should not be used as primers for discussion about Shakespeare.

When used as a reference, a dictionary can be an invaluable tool that provides students with the background information needed to help them get through whatever academic task they are trying to accomplish. Moreover, as the Internet and Google have become ubiquitous in learning, students can easily look up terms and concepts they are unfamiliar with. The Internet is

²⁴² Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 145.

an infinite source for basic information about religion, and unlike Prothero's dictionary, the web does not play favorites by leaving out important religious concepts like Yom Kippur. As a pedagogical exercise, therefore, it is more educationally desirable to teach students how to be *discerning* and *judicious* in looking up reference information, rather than asking them to memorize the reference information. In learning how to judiciously look up information students are not only developing important research skills, but also they are enhancing the development of their critical faculties. Although Prothero wants students to gain critical thinking skills, his insistence on a form of religious literacy mirrored after Hirsch fails in offering students the chance to develop those skills.

Furthermore, Prothero says nothing about how teachers should help students move from knowledge acquisition to intelligent debate and discussion. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Prothero contends that "religious literacy" is an abstract impossibility since there is no one generic religion to "speak." This view informs Prothero's argument a great deal as evidenced by his view that Christian literacy should be the main form of religious literacy taught to students. This argument, however, is not wholly convincing since Prothero uses the term literacy in a functional way, referring to the procedural qualities involved in being able to use language. For example, being literate in English means that I have the ability to understand what other English speakers say, and I also have the ability to respond to other English speakers in a way they would understand. Literacy conceived of in this way serves a basic function of communication. Presumably this is why Prothero claims that there is no single "religious literacy" just as there is no single language that everyone speaks.

However, this does not mean that "religion" cannot be analyzed or understood through an analytic framework that allows students to investigate the basic concept and ideas that emerge

out of religious traditions. Of course there is no one “religion,” but that does not prohibit the possibility that educators provide students with an academic vocabulary and language to discuss religion. Providing students with an analytic framework is a useful aspect of the comparative approach to learning about religion where students are provided with different categories for understanding religious phenomena, such as doctrine and ritual. Ninian Smart’s classification of religious phenomena into six dimensions is one method of providing students with an academic framework from which to approach the study of religion, and not simply an approach to study Christianity as separated from the other religions of the world as advocated by Prothero. Religious literacy, as a whole program of study, is possible if students are provided with the building blocks of a religious vocabulary that allows them to build upon their own knowledge of religion in conjunction with the basic academic terms and concepts they learn as part of a sustained inquiry about religion. In combination, students can begin to work toward the competency needed to engage in civic dialogue. Conroy and Davis summarize this point nicely:

Rather, religious literacy denotes an acquaintance with, and understanding of, the nature of religious experience, religious concepts and practices, together with some basic grasp of the complexities, contradictions and challenges of at least one religious tradition. Perhaps more than any of these, the promotion of religious literacy also entails serious and sustained engagement with religious language and its import, insisting that this be recognized as a necessary condition of successful education for citizenship in the modern polity.²⁴³

Religious literacy involves more than stringing together a list of terms and concepts for students to know. Religious literacy is a language in its own right that offers students an opportunity to develop the critical thinking skills needed to grapple with complex religious ideas.

²⁴³ James C. Conroy and R. Davis, “Citizenship, Education and the Claims of Religious Literacy,” in *Global Citizenship Education (Contexts of Education)*, eds. Michael A. Peters, Alan Britton, and Harry Blee (Rotterdam: Sense, 2001), 188.

It is the horizon from which students learn the basics about religion, but it is also an entry point into a better understanding about religion that enables students to participate in society's ongoing conversation about religion. As mentioned earlier, "religion" is a contested category that does not offer a final or authoritative definition. However, this presents a learning experience where students can work together to construct various meanings of religion. The next chapter explores this idea more fully.

Conclusion: Religion and Literacy Education

A central function of public schools is to prepare students to become informed future citizens who are well equipped to engage with a diverse array of viewpoints and ideas in the public square. Prothero recognizes this as a central aim of schooling, which is why he argues that public schools must begin to teach academic courses in the study of religion. He is correct in his assertion that students need to acquire enough knowledge about religion in order to intelligently discuss politics and world affairs. Yet, by appropriating Hirsch's theory of cultural literacy, Prothero's approach to the study of religion becomes marred by the same critical problems plaguing Hirsch. Most importantly, Prothero's desire to de-politicize a knowledge-based approach to the academic study of religion hijacks meaning and instead promotes a Christian ethos that limits students' exposure to religious diversity. This is particularly problematic since learning about religious diversity is especially relevant for a civic education aimed at preparing students to engage with a diversity of ideas in the public square.

Furthermore, as the public square becomes increasingly *global*, students must be equipped with knowledge about the religions of the world, and not simply the religion that dominates practice in the U.S. Echoing this position, educational scholar James Banks writes:

Because of growing ethnic, cultural, racial, language and religious diversity throughout the world, citizenship education needs to be changed in substantial ways to prepare students to function effectively in the 21st century. Citizens in this century need the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to function in their cultural communities and beyond their cultural borders ... Students also need to acquire the knowledge and skills required to become effective citizens in the global community.²⁴⁴

Banks' suggestion that 21st century education should ensure that students learn the knowledge and skills needed for effective citizenship in the global community is hardly a novel or radical position. Citizenship education has increasingly recognized the need to develop theories and pedagogies that acknowledge the rising tide of globalization in modern society. Prothero's narrow vision of religious literacy falls short because he turns a blind-eye to our increasingly global world. However, and perhaps more importantly, Prothero's approach falls short because of his nomination of Christianity as the default, normative view for how one should understand religion and society. Christian literacy should not dictate religious literacy, nor should religious literacy focus primarily on knowledge acquisition. As Wexler points out, "such classes [focused on prioritizing the study of certain religions] cannot provide the best context for teaching mutual respect and toleration, as they focus on the most prominent religions instead of those that might more broadly be met with ignorance and suspicion."²⁴⁵ Therefore, teaching about religion, in order to provide students with the skills and dispositions for civic engagement, necessitates that students learn about the variety of religious traditions found in the world.

In the next chapter, I discuss more fully the idea of global awareness and introduce a method for teaching about religion that addresses the concerns I raised in the previous three

²⁴⁴ James A. Banks, "Teaching for Diversity and Unity in a Democratic Multicultural Society," in *Education for Democracy: Contexts, Curricula, Assessments*, ed. Walter C. Parker (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2002), 132.

²⁴⁵ Wexler, "Clothed Public Square," 2002.

chapters. In particular, I consider how all three approaches point in some way to the idea that learning about religion has an inherent civic function, and as such, each model offers a view of citizenship as implicated by a certain kind of identity. The three models reveal quite different notions of identity formation, but all recognize that the very act of education results in the development of students' identities. To conclude, I provide a concrete example of a course project that illustrates what the study of religion means in the context of a high school level world religions course.

CHAPTER 5

RE-IMAGINING THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the concept of religious literacy, analyzing the work of Stephen Prothero, who argues that public schools have failed to educate students about religion, and in particular the basic terms, concepts, and ideas of religious traditions. Prothero's major contribution is that he recognizes the value of religious literacy as well as the importance for students to learn some basics about religion. Without learning any of the basics, Prothero argues, students are left unprepared to engage in discussion about the plethora of religiously inflected topics that affect all members of society. Prothero wants to reverse this trend, but unfortunately his method for doing so is an ineffective way to resolve the widespread religious illiteracy facing society. He appropriates Hirsch's theory of cultural literacy, which provides a narrow understanding of what counts as meaningful knowledge. Like Hirsch, Prothero wants to depoliticize a knowledge-based approach to the academic study of religion, which ultimately results in a limited approach to learning about religion since students are left out of the meaning-making process. Moreover, Prothero's approach defaults to a Christian framework, using Christianity as the benchmark from which to understand the concept of religion, as well as filtering information about other religions through the lens of Christianity. This is especially problematic for preparing students to engage with diverse viewpoints in the public square, which is becoming increasingly global.

In this chapter, I analyze the three approaches side-by-side, arguing that although they each contain problems, they also contain some merit. In finding the right balance of characteristics from each model, I then present a practical example of how the study of religion

can be incorporated into public schools. In particular, my goal is to illustrate how all three models point, in some way or another, to the idea that learning about religion has an inherent civic function where students are initiated into a certain type of civic identity.

Religion, Civic Identity, and Global Awareness

As the previous chapters indicate, the study of religion is closely tied to its underlying educational theory, which suggests that as a course of study, religion is an application of a wider educational orientation. Therefore, one's assessment of whether and how to teach about religion will consequently be shaped largely by how one assesses the strengths and weaknesses of those orientations. Nord views the project of education as one that must properly balance differing perspectives, and in particular provide equal opportunity for religious and secular voices in the curriculum. He views the study of religion primarily as a means to restore balance to the public school curriculum, thus fulfilling the tenets of what he considers to be a liberal education. On the other hand, Moore envisions education as a way to empower students with the skills needed to recognize the contingent nature of knowledge and to critique the power structures that oppress some forms of cultural expression while privileging others. For Moore, including the study of religion in public schools is necessary to complete the project of a critical multicultural education, which thus far has overlooked the importance of religion as a form of cultural expression. Finally, Prothero is concerned with the rampant religious illiteracy plaguing this country. Correcting the problem of illiteracy requires that public schools teach students the key religious concepts and terms necessary for navigating the various social, cultural, and political settings in which they will eventually travel.

Although the models represent diverse approaches to the study of religion, they all point in some way to the idea that learning about religion has an inherent civic function. Whether

stated implicitly or explicitly, each offers a model of citizenship as implicated by a certain kind of identity. As such, teaching about religion becomes a way to enable students—as future citizens—to value an assortment of civic virtues and dispositions necessary to navigate their worlds.

For example, in *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, Nord develops an argument with legal scholar Charles Haynes asserting that including the study of religion in public schools is necessary to safeguard religious liberty and ensure that citizens are able to “debate one another with civility and respect” in the public square.²⁴⁶ The kind of civic identity that Nord wants students to embrace is one that values liberty and respect. This is a theme that Nord repeatedly draws from as he develops his theory of a liberal education. In particular, one task of liberal education is to “root students in traditions that make sense of the moral and political values they have inherited.”²⁴⁷ According to Nord, the moral and political values that students have inherited combine to create a shared vision for civic identity that inculcates within students the skills, capacities, and virtues necessary for religious liberty. Learning about religion, therefore, is *how* students learn to respect the religious liberty of others, while also learning to respect religion in its own right. As discussed in the previous chapters, the process of respecting religion and the religious “other” for Nord involves nurturing within students the capacity for empathy. It is with this move that Nord conflates the concept of “respect” with “empathy.” Through the process of trying to “get inside” the religious insider, Nord wants students to construct a particular kind of civic identity: one that values empathy and understanding of the religious “other.” As a result, empathy becomes a necessary civic virtue,

²⁴⁶ Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously*, 29.

²⁴⁷ Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 224.

because without it students would be unable to respect the right of all citizens to embrace religious liberty.

On the surface, this view of identity construction differs from the view explicitly promoted within the multicultural justification for teaching about religion. It also shares, however, some significant qualities. Take, for example, Wilson's view that students should learn about religion in order to "inculcate a proper understanding and appreciation for diversity and thereby minimize the scope of using differences among people to build barriers."²⁴⁸ Wilson too wants to create an environment where students, regardless of the beliefs they hold, can appreciate diversity in the public sphere. He wants students to be open to new possibilities, and to recognize the positive role that cooperation and interfaith dialogue can play in the face of religious difference. Wilson's proposal to emphasize the commonalities that religions share is a way for students to build trust in order to engage in dialogue that rests on mutual respect for difference.²⁴⁹ Building trust, even if it comes at the expense of cutting corners in the academic presentation of religious ideas, is an important part of identity formation within a multicultural classroom that values appreciation for difference.

Likewise, Moore promotes a type of civic identity that values a set of shared characteristics among citizens. Moore argues that "public schools need to help future citizens develop the tools to deliberate about controversial matters from an informed perspective and in contexts aimed at deepening understanding rather than fueling antagonism."²⁵⁰ Moore draws on the work of Amy Gutmann in order to make the case that students must be initiated into a shared

²⁴⁸ Wilson, "The Other/Neighbor in World Religions," 35.

²⁴⁹ Wilson, "The Other/Neighbor in World Religions," 35 citing Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (New York: Langman, 2000), 353-7. Wilson appropriates Sonia Nieto's strategy for "embracing pluralism and cultivating an openness to diversity," which includes four levels of engagement: (1) tolerance, (2) acceptance, (3) respect, and (4) affirmation, solidarity, and critique.

²⁵⁰ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 28.

national identity that values democracy. Democratic citizenship, therefore, requires individuals to value basic democratic principles such as deliberation, fairness, freedom from oppression, and mutual respect. It is the job of public schools to teach students to embrace these qualities in order to “promote the conditions that will enable democracy to flourish in present and future contexts.”²⁵¹ One of the central ways in which democracy can flourish is for students to become critical consumers of knowledge. Specifically in regard to religion, students must learn how to *recognize* and *interrogate* their preconceptions about religion, thus providing them with a contextualized horizon from which to analyze issues of power and powerlessness.

Rosenblith, too, wants students to become critical consumers of knowledge. When it comes to religion, however, she thinks that cultural studies approaches fail to provide students with the skills to truly engage in critical thinking about religion. She recognizes that public schools are committed to: “(1) helping students develop into reasonable and reflective thinkers and (2) helping students become the sort of mature citizens who can at the very least tolerate, and at best respect, others who hold competing and oftentimes incommensurable views.”²⁵² In order to think critically and reflectively about religion, Rosenblith argues that schools must ask students to grapple with religious truth claims. She writes:

I can appreciate why one would want to limit [the study of religion] to cultural matters. Focusing on questions of identity, power, agency, customs and traditions, is interesting, relevant, and far less contentious than dealing with the questions of truth and evidence. Yet ignoring issues of truth is not without its own problems and renders a program of study in religion incomplete, and a distortion of reality.²⁵³

²⁵¹ Ibid., 15 commenting on Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 46.

²⁵² Rosenblith and Priestman, “Problematizing Religious Truth,” 367.

²⁵³ Rosenblith, “Beyond Coexistence,” 114.

Rosenblith is less concerned with creating citizens who appreciate religious difference, but instead is satisfied with promoting a “thin” version of toleration or respect toward others.

Similarly, Prothero sees no need to question the inherent power and privilege granted to the dominant ideologies in society, and like Rosenblith is content with providing students a thin conception of civic identity. His goal in promoting religious literacy is “spreading knowledge rather than inculcating virtues.”²⁵⁴ However, Prothero believes that it is necessary for students to effectively engage with others in the civic realm. It seems that his underlying goal, therefore, is that students develop a civic identity that is committed to the process of democracy. This commitment to democratic citizenship calls for an educated citizenry, where citizens have enough knowledge about the affairs of the world in order to intelligently participate in the public square. In order to achieve this goal, Prothero believes that schools must provide students with access to a common body of information about religion. Similar to Nord, he views the process of secularization as having a disruptive effect on society. Early Americans were quite literate about religion, but over the years citizens replaced much of their *knowledge* about religion with their *beliefs* about religion. He argues that we are now living in an “era in which having a relationship with Jesus is more important than knowing what he actually did, in which believing in the Bible matters more than knowing what the Bible has to say.”²⁵⁵ Solving this problem means incorporating a knowledge-based approach to the study of religion in public schools, where one’s civic identity is enhanced by the knowledge one possesses and not the virtues one holds.

All of the authors above—in one way or another—recognize the need for educating students to embrace certain basic dispositions of a civic body including civility, mutual respect,

²⁵⁴ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 17.

²⁵⁵ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 86.

critical reflection, and reasoned deliberation. Promoting these qualities within public schools is a typical goal of civic education, which has historically served two functions. First, civic education curriculum is the main vehicle in which students learn about the procedural functions of the government, as well as learn about citizens' rights and responsibilities within society. But also, civic education is an initiation into a particular identity. Civic education in terms of identity formation can be conceived as having numerous, often overlapping, aims. For example, one aim of civic education might be to instill love of country within students, but also to teach students to respect the different ways in which love of country manifests itself through both protests and support of government policies. Civic education conceived in this way aims to inculcate a shared sense of identity within students, thus preparing them to think as patriotic citizens who value democracy in all its varied manifestations.

According to Melissa Williams, "this concept of citizenship as identity is thickly interwoven with the emergence of the modern nation-state." Yet, "it is now commonplace that the modern nation-state, and the conception of national sovereignty that accompanies it, are under growing pressure from the cluster of phenomena we call 'globalization.'"²⁵⁶ Williams argues that globalization has changed the world in irrevocable ways, requiring a new understanding of what meaningful citizenship entails. She writes:

I want to explore the idea that, instead of a model of citizenship-as-identity, we should move toward an idea of citizenship as membership in a community of a shared fate. Here, the idea is not that membership entails a shared identity with any particular content, but comes by virtue of being entangled with others in such a way that one's future is tied to theirs.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Melissa S. Williams, "Citizenship as Identity, Citizenship as Shared Fate, and the Functions of Multicultural Education," in *Education and Citizenship in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities*, eds. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 209.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

Williams makes an important argument that the modern civic arena is not merely domestic, but instead it is also global. As such, “a conception of citizenship that fails to come to grips with this will offer little guidance in our fast-changing world.”²⁵⁸ The knowledge, skills, and dispositions that one needs to engage in the civic realm, therefore, must include a capacity for global awareness.

Agreeing with this line of reasoning, Nash argues that the study of religion must be aimed at global awareness. In reaction to the events of 9/11, Nash writes, “as a growing reaction to that day when three airplanes became deadly missiles and a fourth was intended to be, we educators are reminded once again that we are, indeed, interconnected citizens of the world. No longer can any of us continue to think of religions outside the Judeo-Christian axis to be unimportant, or inferior, in the global scheme of things.”²⁵⁹ The idea that we are “interconnected citizens of the world” is a major consideration for how we conceive of our civic identities. None of the authors examined in the previous chapters offers a sufficient vision of civic identity as fundamentally tied to a global understanding of the world. Moore comes closest to this idea, though the focus of her project is aimed more at developing a pedagogical scheme consistent with democratic education, rather than articulating a vision of global citizenship.

Educating students for global awareness is crucial in an interconnected world, where on a daily basis, average Americans are touched by different parts of the globe through the food they eat, the cars they drive, the clothes they wear, and the entertainment they enjoy. The nature of this interconnectedness is unavoidable. A conception of citizenship as shared fate, therefore, recognizes the way in which our lives are entangled with others around the globe. According to Williams:

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 225.

²⁵⁹ Nash, “A Letter to Secondary Teachers,” 94.

The core of the idea of citizenship as shared fate is that we find ourselves in webs of relationships with other human beings that profoundly shape our lives, whether or not we consciously choose or voluntarily assent to be enmeshed in these webs. What connects us in a community of shared fate is that our actions have an impact on other identifiable human beings, and other beings' actions have an impact on us ... A community of shared fate is *not* an ethical community as such. Its members are not bound to each other by shared values or moral commitments, but by relations of interdependence, which may or may not be positively valued by its members. Our futures are bound to each other, whether we like it or not. There is no plausible alternative to living together. In this way, a community of shared fate is a descriptive rather than normative category.²⁶⁰

Understanding citizenship as tied to others in a global world has specific implications for teaching about religion. First and foremost, it means that courses in the study of religion cannot simply focus on teaching about Christianity. When Nord and Prothero promote the study of Christianity over the study of the other religions of the world, they are effectively ignoring the implications of globalization. Not only does this allow students to misdiagnose the influence of religion on a global scale, but it also allows students to construct an inaccurate assumption about *their own experience* as citizens. Even if students are not yet aware of it, they are part of a larger web of relationships that shape the way they live. When educators fail to teach about religion as a global phenomenon, they are in effect providing students with a distorted understanding of the scope of their own experience. The study of world religions is therefore necessary to extend students' imagination beyond the limits of their own communities, ways of knowing, and situated horizons of being.

From the outset of this dissertation, I made the claim that students should study religion as part of a robust education that seeks to nurture their capacity for global awareness. In all of

²⁶⁰ Williams, "Citizenship as Identity," 229 italics original.

the models analyzed, the study of religion is the vehicle for enhancing distinct educational objectives, and not necessarily the end in itself. Prothero's theory of religious literacy is perhaps the most concerned with studying the content of religion for its own sake, though his vision for religious literacy is unreasonably skewed toward Christian literacy. Conversely, Moore's cultural studies approach provides the most developed theory of how to teach about religion, though as discussed in chapter three, her approach assumes that students already possess a great deal of knowledge about religion and are able to engage in a sophisticated analysis of religion. Yet I believe that it is necessary for educators to recognize the importance of teaching the content of religion, since its content can help enunciate the benefits of an education aimed at global awareness. One question that necessarily arises is whether the goal of teaching about religion should be directed by the intrinsic nature of the subject "religion," or whether it should be directed by the external goals desired by the teacher? Ultimately there should be a balance between these two factors, and in the following two sections, I will illustrate what this balance looks like in the context of a high school level world religions course.

Linking Content, Pedagogy, and Theory

The following course project is meant to serve as a foundation for a semester-long course in world religions, as well as provide a framework from which to develop individual lesson plans throughout the semester. The project proposed—which is for students to construct a multimedia repository of world religions information—will be discussed in detail, but first it is important to explain what I believe are the essential features of a world religions course, which include:

1. A shared academic language and vocabulary about religion;
2. An analytic framework that allows students to compare across and between religions;
3. A pedagogy that focuses on student-centered learning;
4. A classroom environment that encourages dialogue;

5. An acknowledgement of students' religious identities and experiences.

These points are not isolated components of a world religions course and overlap in many ways. However, in order to aid in clarification, I will explain these points separately. After I outline the broad features of a world religions course, I will explain the details of the course project that I have in mind.

1. A shared academic language and vocabulary about religion

First, a central component of any world religions course is that students be given a shared academic language and vocabulary about religion. Prothero—despite all of the problems involved with his approach—provides an important consideration about religion that both Nord and Moore seem to ignore. He reminds us that religions are *systems*, which cannot be studied generically and are better suited to study through a shared academic language that allows all students (regardless of their backgrounds) to participate in the conversation about religion. Recall in the previous chapter Prothero writes, “like languages...religions are particular creatures. Just as it is not possible to speak language in general (one must choose to speak one particular language), religious literacy in the abstract is an impossibility. (One cannot be literate in *every* religion; neither is there one generic religion to ‘speak.’).”²⁶¹ In this quote Prothero gestures toward the idea that religions are particular and situated, and therefore those who study religion are in need of a vocabulary to better contextualize them. Ultimately, Prothero steers his theory toward a narrow brand of Christian literacy that effectively blocks students from learning about religion as a diverse and global phenomenon. His initial point, however, is valid. It is necessary for students to have a working language and vocabulary of religion in order for them to make sense of what they are learning and to effectively communicate with one another.

²⁶¹ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 12 italics original.

Moreover, in providing students with an academic language and vocabulary for learning about religion, students also need to be given the opportunity to work with different definitions of religion. This mirrors Moore's assertion that all knowledge claims are situated and therefore require a certain level of interrogation and critique. Reinforcing this idea to students allows them to grapple with the various definitions of religion, as well as teaching them how to focus and clarify their own scholarly analysis in order to achieve their educational goals. Likewise, it teaches students how to think shrewdly about the academic ideas of their peers.

*2. An analytic framework that allows students
to compare across and between religions*

Second, students must be provided with an academic framework from which to make sense of the copious amount of content about religion. In essence, students need some sort of horizon from which to learn about the basic terms and concepts of religion as well as a way to organize all of the information. The idea of an analytic framework overlaps with the previous point (a shared language or vocabulary about religion) but differs slightly. As mentioned above, an academic language is necessary for students so they can learn to communicate their thoughts and ideas to other students in a way that makes sense for all involved in the discussion. On the other hand, an analytic framework is a tool that helps students to organize and make sense of the information being discussed. It provides them with categories of comparison that allow students to build an "inventory of differences"²⁶² about the various religions under investigation.

Particularly in the study of world religions, students need a mechanism for analyzing similarities and differences across religious traditions, but also as Moore has pointed out, students need the tools to analyze religious differences within individual traditions.

²⁶² For example, see: Paul Veyne, *L'Inventaire des Differences: Leçon Inaugurale au Collège de France* (Paris: Seuil, 1976); David Frankfurter, "Comparison and the Study of Religions of Late Antiquity," in *Comparer en Histoire des Religions Antiques: Controverses et Propositions*, ed. Claude Calame and Bruce Lincoln (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2012), 83-98.

Ninian Smart perhaps provides a well-known and useful framework from which to identify and categorize religious concepts and ideas. As discussed in chapter two, Smart developed the six dimensions of religion, which include: mythological, ritual, doctrinal, social, ethical, and experiential. For Smart, the six dimensions are not hermetically sealed categories, but instead are porous and malleable groupings that allow for overlap. Since religion cannot be defined in a finite way, neither can the boundaries of religious categories be too closely defined. Moreover, although the categorization of one religious tradition might incorporate all of these dimensions, the categorization of a different religious tradition might only recognize three or four of the categories. Of using these dimensions Smart writes, “the intention is to describe, rather than to pass judgment, on the phenomena of religion. The intention is not to speak on behalf of one faith or to argue for the truth of one or all religions or none. Our first need is to understand.”²⁶³ Here I agree with Smart that the first step in learning about religion is to describe and understand religion as best we can, which can then lend itself to further exploration and critique. Used as an over-arching analytic framework for a world religions course, the six dimensions offer an academic horizon from which students—regardless of their background knowledge of religion—can begin to think about religion as an academic subject in need of further description and analysis.

3. A pedagogy that focuses on student-centered learning

Third, fostering a student-centered pedagogy will allow for students to explore their own religious identities and experiences, as well as promote a classroom environment that encourages dialogue. Moore’s model, as discussed in chapter three, best exemplifies what a student-centered

²⁶³ Smart, *The Religious Experience*, 4.

pedagogy looks like, where students are encouraged to act as agents in their own learning. This includes:

- A learner-centered, inquiry based methodology whereby discussions are generated by students and are not channeled through [the teacher].
- A syllabus that is (in part) responsive to and reflective of the particular interests of the students in the course.
- Assignments that focus on both an accurate representation of the content topics and student interpretation/response to the ideas and themes addressed.
- An opportunity for students to explore their own particular interest in depth through a final project and/or other activities that are built into the syllabus.
- A genuine respect for and interest in student contributions, ideas, and perspectives. Also, a genuine belief that students are partners in the learning enterprise and not problems who need to be managed.²⁶⁴

In particular, a student-centered classroom highlights the importance of discovery learning where students build on prior knowledge and experience, and search for new information based on their current understandings of a topic. As active participants in the learning process, students are encouraged to explore concepts and learn how to answer their own questions with guidance from the teacher. In sum, a student-centered classroom makes students responsible for their own learning.

4. A classroom environment that encourages dialogue

Fourth, a world religions classroom should encourage student dialogue, where the teacher acts as a facilitator in the process of learning, rather than the final authority who dictates to students what knowledge is of most worth. Dialogue must have a relational quality—between teachers and students, between students and students, and between students and the content

²⁶⁴ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 111-2.

under investigation. The act of dialogue signals the importance of interpretation in the process of learning, where learning inherently is a process by which meaning is constructed. Therefore, learning cannot simply be the act of interpreting and narrating our own perspectives, but it must include the act of interpreting the perspectives of others since it is through this relational process that our identities are developed. K. Anthony Appiah nicely reminds us of the importance of dialogue in shaping who we are and how we understand the world. He writes, “indeed our selves are, in Charles Taylor’s fine phrase, ‘dialogically’ constituted: beginning in infancy, it is in dialogue with other people’s understandings of who I am that I develop a conception of my own identity.”²⁶⁵

Moreover, by encouraging dialogue in the classroom, students have a greater stake in the process of learning. Moore argues that in learner-centered discussions, students have deeper knowledge retention, since “the inquiry arises out of their own questions and thus has an ‘anchor’ of relevance that is often bypassed when the same material is presented externally.”²⁶⁶ This echoes the work of John Dewey and other progressive educators who argue that learning becomes real for students when they actively participate in the process. Furthermore, classroom dialogue is important because it opens up new avenues of learning that the teacher may never have thought of. A teacher might be intent on presenting an idea in a certain way and it is not until students express their ideas that the teacher even realizes there are other ways to think about the issue. Therefore, the relational quality of dialogue opens us new avenues of learning for all involved.

²⁶⁵ K. Anthony Appiah, “Liberal Education: The United States Example,” in *Education and Citizenship in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities*, eds. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 65.

²⁶⁶ Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 131-2.

5. An acknowledgement of students' religious identities and experiences

Fifth, teachers must be keenly aware of how students' identities—both religious and non-religious—inform their ways of thinking about religion. This last element of a world religions classroom may be the most controversial and/or problematic, but it is an essential element in providing students with a robust learning experience. The first four elements all deal in some way with the structure of the classroom as well as the skills that students should aim to develop. This last element, however, rests fully on the qualities of the teacher. In particular, it requires that teachers hold certain dispositions toward their students as well as the subject of religion. Here, teacher-training programs become important in order to cultivate this disposition within educators.

With this in mind, teachers should recognize that no one course in the study of world religions will be the same since students will invariably bring into the classroom different religious experiences and identities. Moreover, some students may bring with them a kind of intimate knowledge about their own religion, with deep roots that extend into a community of belief and practice. While a robust religious identity does not necessarily have to define these students, it is nonetheless important for teachers to recognize how religious identities can be inextricably linked with some students' conceptions of self. In contrast, it is just as important for educators to be prepared that some students will bring into the classroom beliefs and worldviews antagonistic to religious worldviews. Likewise, any number of students will bring with them uncommitted religious beliefs, which do not have deep roots in a single community of practice. Regardless of the type of religious identity and experience that students bring with them into the classroom, teachers must be mindful of how these students' identities and experiences are important in framing their ways of thinking about religion.

A Glossary of World Religions

In providing the following example of a classroom project that can anchor a course in world religions, my goal is not to suggest that all world religions courses *must* include this type of activity, but instead to showcase how a model of teaching about religion can be developed for an average high school classroom taking into consideration the features of a world religions course discussed above.

Project Overview and Goals

Students will work in small groups throughout the duration of the course to construct a multimedia repository of information about the seven major religions of world, which will serve as a capstone project for the course. Capstone projects are active learning endeavors that require significant effort, planning, and implementation by both the teacher and students in the course. Because of the significant amount of work involved by both teachers and students, the direction of the project will contribute to the direction of course, providing avenues for the class to potentially explore the religions of the world in ways considerably different than prior iterations of the course. As discussed above, a world religions course should recognize the ways in which students' identities and experiences construct meaning for them, feeding into the ebb and flow of classroom discussions. This will also affect the direction of the project, since students will have to make choices about what to include and exclude in their projects, and providing justifications for their choices.

The details of the project will be explained below, but it is important to point out the following goals for the project. First, a central component of a world religions course is to develop within students the capacity for using an academic language and vocabulary about religion. The question, however, is what should this academic language and vocabulary consist

of? In order to answer this question, it helps to distinguish between “language” and “vocabulary.” Language in this case consists of the words used to talk about religious phenomenon, but also is a type of grammar that can be used to help develop students’ communicative abilities. Vocabulary consists of the terms, concepts, and ideas that describe the various religions of the world.

To illustrate this distinction, consider the term “worship,” which in the U.S. is ubiquitous and used by many as a way to describe religious practice. However, unless specially referring to Christianity, the academic *language* that should be used by students to discuss religious practice is “ritual” or “experience,” rather than “worship.” The term worship is a characteristically Christian term and does not transcend all religious boundaries. However, students studying religion can include the term “worship” as part of their *vocabulary* about religion, since many Christians describe their devotional practices through the concept of worship. In this example, the academic language that one uses when discussing religious phenomenon may be different from the religious vocabulary they employ in order to describe the phenomenon. It is by reflecting on these practices and being conscious of how language functions that students can learn to think critically about religion.

Presumably there will be a number of instances when the distinction between language and vocabulary will be questionable, but nevertheless the goal is to teach students to be aware of how seemingly ubiquitous religious vocabulary used in their own local experiences are not necessarily characteristic of the vocabulary used by the other religions of the world. This leads into my second point that teaching students to use an academic language is important to help them develop their skills of communication in a diverse world. Both in and outside of the classroom students will interact with individuals who are quite different from themselves, and

therefore it is necessary to provide students with the tools needed to engage in civil and respectful discourse about religion. In order for students to achieve this goal, the teacher will play a significant role in both modeling what an academic language looks like for students, but also in providing students with the materials and resources necessary for students to begin to learn this language. Just like learning any new language, students will not learn the academic language of religion overnight, but instead the process will be gradual and require dedication and practice.

A second goal of the project is for students to begin to think about what it means to define religion, and to practice working with the many different academic definitions of religion. As discussed in previous chapters, defining religion—although difficult—must be done at least provisionally in order for the student of religion to make scholarly choices. The important step in defining religion is that students be mindful of the definition they employ and to begin to learn how to reflect on their scholarly choices. This reflection is part of a “meta” understanding about religion that will presumably be difficult for many students to reach. However, the purpose in building a knowledge repository about religion is for students to have a strong foundation from which to make the move to a meta-level of understanding. Again, the role of the teacher will be vital in helping students to make this move to the meta-level.

Project Details

Each week students will work in small groups to compile information about the religion currently under investigation, using the six dimensions of religion as their analytical guide. Using resources such as textbooks, class handouts, online materials, and personal knowledge, students will create a glossary of what they think are the most important religious terms and concepts for the current unit. Students will categorize the information according to “ritual,”

“myth,” etc., and will note when certain terms or concepts evade categorization, and also when particular terms necessitate overlap in their categorization. Students will be encouraged to use multimedia to enhance their project, including images, videos, and audio, and will also be encouraged to use the technology available to them to generate their own photos and video clips. Moreover, students will be encouraged to bring in religious “artifacts” to add to the database, including personal or family items like works of art, prayer booklets, or religious jewelry and clothing. Regardless of the materials that students decide to use to build the glossary, the important point is that the glossary should be student-built, with students fully responsible for making the choices about what to include or exclude from the glossary. Moreover, students must be prepared to defend their choices as to why they focused on particular religious terms and concepts and why they left other terms and concepts out.

Along with compiling the religious terms and concepts for the current unit, students will be asked to find a current issue—whether it be social, cultural, economic, or political—that relates significantly to the religion under investigation. Students will be asked to provide some critical analysis of that issue in light of what they learned during the process of compiling their glossary. The purpose of this activity is for students to learn to view religion not just as a compilation of data, but also as a “lived” experience with real-life implications.

Organization and Schedule

Beginning in the first week of class, students will form small groups, the number of which will vary depending on the size of the class. Students will remain in these groups throughout the duration of the course, and each member of the group will be expected to contribute at all stages of the project. The schedule of the project will depend largely on the individual school and the type of course schedule employed by the school—block scheduling

versus traditional scheduling, etc. The course will consist of eight units: Defining Religion; Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The time spent on each unit will vary, but teachers should make an effort to block out an appropriate amount of time for each unit. In the first unit of the course the teacher will have to do a considerable amount of work in order to lay the groundwork for how the project will proceed. In particular, the teacher must introduce students to the six dimensions of religion, since students will be using the dimensions as their analytic framework throughout the course.

Moreover, the teacher will need to set clear guidelines and expectations for how much time students should devote to the project. The students will be asked to work on the project both in and outside of class, and at the end of each unit students will present their work to the rest of the class. This will allow students time to reflect on their own work as well as the work of their classmates. Ideally, teachers will allocate some time each class period for students to work on the project, getting students into the habit of spending time on it everyday. Finally, time should be set-aside at the end of the semester for the class to work together to compile the group work into a single world religions database. This will allow students to self-reflect on the project and to provide some analysis of what they created. Also, it will allow students to share with each other what they learned from the course as a whole, and to discuss new avenues for learning that they may be interested in exploring. The final project will then be displayed publically in some fashion so that students can continue to discuss their work with their peers, but also so that they can discuss the project with others; for example other students in the school, their parents, community members, etc.

Role of the Teacher

The role of the teacher should be one of facilitation, and when necessary, intervention. In particular, the teacher will act as a sounding board for the students, making herself available to hear their ideas and offer suggestions for improvement. When students find themselves lost in the project, the teacher can then intervene in a more direct way to help the students get back on track. Moreover, the role of the teacher is to push students to be self-reflective about the work they have done. This means that the teacher should regularly check-in with students to ask critical questions about why the students chose certain terms or ideas over others. The teacher should also question students on their use of the six dimensions, asking the students to justify their categorization of terms and concepts.

It should be noted that although this project will anchor a course in world religions, it is not to be confused as the only educational activity to be undertaken during the course of the semester. That being said, the teacher can occupy a more traditional role when necessary. For example, throughout the rest of the course, there will be times when the teacher engages in direct instruction, assigns readings and homework, and constructs assessments. The goal is for the teacher to provide students with the information and tools they need to construct their project, but also for the project to inform how the teacher builds her lesson plans. So if students are struggling to understand the three marks of reality in Buddhism (impermanence, suffering, no-self), the teacher can prepare an extra lesson on Buddhism in order to provide students with more background knowledge for their project. However, as students work on the project, the teacher's role should switch to one of support and facilitation, helping students to apply what they have learned to their project.

Assessment and Evaluation

Finally, evaluating the students in some way is important, since this project is meant for a real-life classroom where assessment matters to both teachers and students. I am not too concerned with how individual teachers grade the project, but it is important that students are given credit for their work, provided with timely feedback, and are generally able to demonstrate that they learned something.

Project Summary

This project illustrates how a model for teaching about religion can be developed for an average high school classroom taking into consideration the problems and possibilities involved with the study of religion. The type of course being created above is one that values religion as an academic study in its own right, but also one that seeks to initiate students into different horizons of meaning by expanding their global awareness. In working to build a repository of information about religion, students are able to learn some of the basics about the religions of the world, thus increasing their religious literacy. However, the information is not imposed onto students from the outside, but instead students ultimately get to decide which information is necessary and why. In constructing the glossary, students can begin to practice using an academic vocabulary about religion that helps to orient their exploration of religion as an academic task. Furthermore, since this project is student-centered, students will be allowed to express their religious identities and experiences through their work. They can use their own knowledge to help build on what they learn in class, as well as what they learn from their peers. Working in groups necessitates that students engage in discussion with their classmates, and through the process of dialogue students can work to actively shape their identities in relation to their peers, as well as reflect on the concept of identity and religious life.

Conclusion and Findings

Religion is worth teaching. However, in order for public schools to even begin to think about offering courses in the study of religion, colleges and universities must take seriously the task of training educators to teach about religion. Across the country, colleges of education offer licensure programs for prospective public school teachers in a number of traditional academic disciplines, but religion is not generally included in such programs. The most notable exception is the online certificate program in Religious Studies and Education offered by Harvard University, which is geared toward in-service teachers.²⁶⁷ The lack of training opportunities available to teachers is problematic, and is a deep limitation that plagues any model for incorporating the study of religion into the curriculum. Rosenblith writes, “even if we agree that we should include the study of religion in public schools, do we have qualified teachers who are up to the task of such instruction?”²⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the answer for the majority of in-service teachers is currently “no.”

Of course, well-trained teachers can be found—you just have to look in the right places. For example, Feinberg and Layton’s study highlighted two schools that have well-established programs in the study of world religions, taught by teachers with advanced degrees and years of combined experience teaching about religion. These schools have strong financial resources, receive support from school administrators, and to some extent are encouraged by the community to teach courses in world religions. Teaching a start-up course in world religions may pose a significant challenge for some schools, but at the very least teacher-training programs can help in this endeavor. Providing both in-service and pre-service teachers with the opportunity to study religion as an academic discipline is essential for any high school course in

²⁶⁷ Harvard Divinity School, “Religious Literacy Project,” <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/programs-and-centers/religious-literacy-project>

²⁶⁸ Rosenblith, “Beyond Coexistence,” 120.

world religions. Furthermore, teachers should possess well-honed pedagogical skills, which include the ability of the instructor to be self-conscious about her own religious identity and experience, while at the same time opening up opportunities for students to understand religion in new ways. Conveying this message may be the most important task for teacher-training programs, but also may be the most difficult task for teachers to accomplish in the real-world classroom.

However, despite the lack of teacher-training programs, teaching about religion remains a desirable and important endeavor. Current academic scholarship offers three basic models for teaching about religion. The models are not commensurate, but they all provide an idea of what the study of religion in high schools can look like. The liberal model is not without difficulties, but offers a great deal to draw from. In particular, it illustrates that education should strive towards *freedom*—that is, education should: open up the world to students and allow them to imagine it in new ways; to make choices about the good life; and to reflect on who they are, where they came from, and where they are going. Liberal education tells us that learning is not simply about acquiring habits or training for particular careers. It is about openness to new ideas with the possibility for transformation. Learning about religion, therefore, becomes important in order to provide students with information about the full spectrum of what life has to offer. Of all the authors discussed in this paper, Nord most blatantly misappropriates the underlying theory he uses to advocate for the study of religion. He uses liberal theory to pit secular ways of life against religious ways of life, which misses the mark in regards to the goals of liberal education. Moreover, his pedagogical strategy of asking students to compare religious traditions through a lens of empathy glosses over religious difference, thus failing to offer students a means to think critically about the variety of religions and religious ways-of-being in the world. Rosenblith, on

the other hand, goes too far in advocating for a critical approach to the study of religion, misunderstanding the complexity of religious life since she defines religion primarily concerned with truth claims. This view of religion ignores the dynamic and multifunctional way in which religious traditions develop and change over time in relation to changing social and cultural movements.

On the other hand, Moore's desire to include the study of religion as part and parcel of a critical multicultural education provides the most traction for teaching about religion, since she offers a well-defined justification and corresponding pedagogical approach. Including religion as part of multicultural education recognizes the need to educate students, irrespective of their own religious background, to develop respect for difference and mutual understanding as part of living in a pluralist society. Poor examples of multiculturalism include Wilson's proposal, which seeks to downplay religious difference in order to accommodate these multicultural goals. Moving past appreciation for difference, multicultural education generally seeks to expose societal issues of ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and discrimination so that students can learn to see these issues and critically analyze how they affect life in a multicultural world. Moore wants to make sure that religion is part of the dialogue about multiculturalism, since many Americans sorely misunderstand religion and religious ways of life. In teaching about religion, Moore views a cultural studies approach as the proper vehicle for allowing students to examine and interrogate the cultural manifestations of religion in society. For Moore, learning about religion becomes secondary to achieving certain goals of a multicultural education, which include understanding that all knowledge-claims are situated and therefore partial and biased. The result is that Moore's model conflates religion with culture, and assumes that students are capable of high-level interpretation about the nature of culture, society, politics, and knowledge itself.

In stark contrast to Moore's model, the religious literacy model seeks to orient the study of religion onto the subject of religion itself. This model argues that equipping students with enough knowledge about religion is important, in order for them to intelligently discuss religiously-influenced topics. Prothero's proposal fills the gap in Moore's approach, which fails to recognize the need to teach about the basic content of religion. However, Prothero's approach is problematic since he employs Hirsch's model of cultural literacy without reservation. In doing so, Prothero distorts what it means to understand something since he views knowledge acquisition as a neutral enterprise. Prothero's scheme for teaching about religion is reduced to teaching about religion through the lens of the dominant culture. He fails to recognize the value of interpretation and critical thinking, and as such his model in practice reduces religion to its barest parts, while also reducing the process of learning to rote memorization and knowledge acquisition. Interestingly, where Nord fails in appropriating liberal theory as a means to argue for including the study of religion in public schools, Prothero is quite successful in appropriating the theory of cultural literacy as a means to argue for religion's inclusion. Unfortunately for Prothero, however, taken at face value the theory of cultural literacy is problematic as a wider educational orientation.

Viewed as a whole, these models do not offer commensurate projects and therefore should not be blended into one model. My proposal is that the study of religion be aimed at an education that encourages openness, allowing students to act as interpreters of knowledge, while recognizing the need to provide students with an entry-level understanding about the various religions of the world. Learning about religion for these reasons will allow students to expand their horizons of knowing, as well as reflect on their own religious identities and experiences. By becoming active agents in their own learning, students will gain the skills of critical thinking

and also will learn how to engage in thoughtful and productive dialogue with others who may hold different views. Furthermore, teaching students the basic concepts and ideas about religion will allow them to acquire the building-blocks of information needed as an entryway into more complex ideas about religion. All of this is educationally desirable because students, as future citizens, will be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions for engaging with religious diversity in an ever-increasing global world.

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