

About Faith

The religions of the world inform our understanding of history, literature and cultures

by Jim Carnes

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Lee Smith marches into his classroom waving an American flag. "What do we have here?" he asks his students. "It's a flag," one teen-age boy answers, with an inflection of sarcasm.

"What else can you tell me?"

"A piece of cloth."

"Colors."

"The symbol of our country."

Now they're getting somewhere. "So what does it mean?"

This isn't a civics class or even American history, but rather a course called World Religions that Smith helped organize at St. Louis Park High School 20 years ago. Talking about symbols is one way Smith helps his students look more discerningly at the world around them; including its varieties of religious expression.

"Religious Expression," in fact, is the name of the first unit in the course. "We spend the first week or two developing a model for looking at religions. The model has three parts, beginning with observation: We can observe religious phenomena all around us. The second part is description. It's not so hard to describe these things. The third part is interpretation. What does it mean? And that's very tricky. So we take a look at some of the concerns involved in interpretation, like prejudice and bias."

Smith is quick to bring this theoretical framework to bear on his students' own experience. That's where the flag lesson comes in. "We start out looking at widely recognized secular symbols - the flag, the dollar sign, a heart. Then I ask them to think about something that's really important to them and find some physical embodiment of it to share with the class. Very often the thing symbolized is something like a sport that they participate in.

"Each student presents his or her symbol, and we apply our three-part model to it. First, we observe it, experience it. Then we describe it - it's metal, it hangs on a chain around your neck, etc. Then we move on to interpretation of meaning. I think this process gets them in step with another kind of communication. They begin to realize that the expression of abstract ideas is tricky business and the best we've got is humanly developed symbols. Oftentimes, we tend not to get into each other's symbols at all unless somebody leads us to them."

A policy under fire

A class set aside for such philosophical inquiry is a luxury unavailable in most public high schools. Its presence at St. Louis Park, in a suburb of Minneapolis, is a tribute to creative problem-solving; not budgetary bounty. And one of those problems involved a symbol.

In December 1971, St. Louis Park was a quiet Midwestern suburb. There were lights in the shop windows, fires in the hearths and the traditional Christmas tree in the snowy schoolyard. But at St. Louis Park High the image of holiday cheer concealed a growing unease. For some faculty members, the persistence of Christmas trees, caroling and gift exchanges in a school that was roughly one-third Jewish represented an insensitivity that could no longer be explained away as "tradition."

The teachers took their concerns to school officials, and together they developed an internal policy that banned religious observances in school while encouraging descriptive, balanced, inclusion of religious subject matter in the curriculum.

Despite good intentions, the policy came under fire. The local paper ran a headline declaring 'God Taken Out of St. Louis Park Schools.' What may have been careless editorial phraseology quickly inflamed the passions of some fundamentalist Christians, which in turn put the Jewish community on the defensive. As Smith recalls, "We had a full-blown conflict on our hands."

The school board moved its meetings to a bigger room to accommodate unprecedented crowds and appointed a blue-ribbon committee to study the issue. The committee, whose members represented the full diversity of St. Louis Park, worked out a new set of guidelines that closely resembled the controversial original policy. But the fact that the new policy grew from the full community participation earned it the community's respect and approval. And the final plan did contain a novel provision aimed at fostering understanding among the groups - an elective high school course on World Religions.

With the help of generous grant support, Smith and his colleague Wes Bodin spent four years developing the religions curriculum, which they published under the title *Religion in Human Culture* (see resource list below).

The curriculum is based on Smith's model approach, using observation, description and interpretation as a nonthreatening way of examining religious traditions.

"The ground rules have to be very clear," Smith emphasizes. "We're trying to increase understanding, not prepare kids for bat mitzvah or confirmation."

In one unit, the class looks at the concept of "special" time, (Smith and his students prefer the word "special" over "religious" or "scared.") "We look at calendars and life-cycle rituals, the cycle of the year and its relationship to the cultivation and harvesting of food." From these observable

rituals, it's easy to move into a discussion of religion as an expression of its culture's most deeply rooted values.

Greg Goddard took Smith's course in 1979 and gained from it a broader understanding of diverse religions and their expression in individual lives. "It opened my eyes," Goddard says, "to the diversity of the kids I had grown up with. I came to appreciate that no matter what the tradition, no two individuals ever have exactly the same beliefs."

Now Goddard is guiding his own students toward this expansive view. When budget cuts prompted Smith to take early retirement this year, Goddard was assigned to his position.

Religions in history

The success of the World Religions program has inspired teachers at St. Louis Park to explore religious aspects of other subjects. Marge Bingham teaches Advanced Placement American History, European History and Western Civilization. Dissatisfied with textbooks that omit, oversimplify or distort religious ideas, Bingham goes beyond the books to offer a balanced view of religions in history.

When teaching about the Puritans, she includes diary excerpts, poems, essays and autobiographies from the period in order to dispel common stereotypes. "I try to show that even within the Puritan community there was diversity about the way in which they saw their religion."

In another lesson, she expands on textbook treatments of the Ghost Dance, a movement among Native American groups in the 19th century brought on by the wholesale disruption of traditional culture.

"Textbooks usually treat the Ghost Dance as this sort of weird thing that just happened," she says. But Bingham's students get a broader view. "We ... talk about the boarding schools that many Native American children were forcibly placed in, and how the reservations were divided up among the Christian denominations as missionary territories." We talk about how the chances of continuing your traditional religion in such conditions were pretty slim and how that goes against the First Amendment."

The religious diversity of Bingham's students adds depth to their history lessons. "When we're studying the Transcendentalist writers of 19th-century New England, I usually have some of my East Indian students talk about their ancient philosophical traditions that influenced this group. Recently when we studied the Vietnam era, some of my Cambodian students talked about Buddhism and how for them and their families the war went totally against their religion."

By opening her history curriculum to religious ideas, Bingham often discovers surprising cultural connections. "I teach Islamic love poetry, for example, as an introduction to the courtly love tradition in European literature. Our basic idea is that different cultures are supposed to learn from each other."

Religions in Literature

At Fox Chapel Area High School near Pittsburgh, Michael Benedict follows a similar path in both his untracked 9th-grade and Advanced Placement senior English courses.

As he teaches a particular work, Benedict asks his students to examine links between the myths and rituals of different cultures. "If we're looking at rites of passage, we pull from African groups, Native American groups, Jewish tradition, Christian tradition, showing the common treads. I try to bring across the ideas that 'myth' is not just these quaint little stories that seemingly primitive tribes use to explain the unexplainable. I use Mircea Eliade's definition of myth as the truth that a culture has lived and is now telling."

Benedict first helps students examine the explicit religious references in the literature they are studying. Next, they look for parallel themes or motifs in other traditions. And finally, they draw analogies with their own experiences.

"When we read Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*," he explains, "I bring in the Catholic background for the story, and then we look at how the 'epiphany' moment is analogous to the moment of *bodhi* or "enlightenment" in Buddhism and *satori* in Zen. Then we talk about it more personally, not so much in religious terms but in terms of the flashes of insight that we can all have from time to time."

Spirituality, Benedict and his peers acknowledge, can be difficult to discuss. People are often reticent or defensive about the subject, and some deny its relevance to their own experience. The practice of respect in Benedict's class, and those at St. Louis Park, extends to atheists and agnostics as well.

Says Benedict, "We tolerate no proselytizing and no put-downs for belief or lack of belief. Ideas and theories we can criticize, but we can't say, 'You're wrong for holding that belief.' Kids can discern the difference."

Wes Bodin at St. Louis Park applies the same rule. "I think the overriding goal is to develop respect for the diversity of beliefs. We say to our students, 'Feel good about your convictions. Don't apologize. But in our society we're not all the same.' Kids are very open about it, and they realize after a while that other people have reasons for believing and behaving the way they do. That takes them a long way."

Commentary

We cannot know the world's cultures without knowing something about the faiths that influenced them

by Martin Marty

"The history of man is inseparable from the history of religion."

"It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion...."

Most Americans would be surprised to learn that these statements accompanied the U.S. Supreme Court's 1962 and 1963 decisions banning prayer and devotional Bible reading in the public schools. The prayer ban awakened such passions that the Court's more complex educational challenge has long been overlooked.

But the separation of church and state, the Supreme Court rulings implied, never meant banning religious themes from civic discourse. Public schools, the Court affirmed, are legally free - even expected - to teach about religion.

In our increasingly diverse society, teachers are finding the examinations of any people's history and culture are incomplete without some exploration of their religious traditions. Often, that exploration yields not only greater understanding of cultural differences, but a surprising treasure of shared principles - like fairness, peace and compassion - that can help reinforce our common bonds.

Unfortunately, teachers who want to bring a discussion of religions into their history, art, social studies or literature curricula have had few tools to work with.

Ten years ago a study sponsored by Learn Inc. found that religion was "the great unmentionable" in public schools. The next year, a National Institute of Education report, *Religion and Traditional Values in Public School Textbooks*, cited examples that ranged from the merely deceptive to the downright ludicrous. One textbook, for example, defined pilgrims as "people who travel a lot."

In 1986, People for the American Way, a liberal secular organization, added its voice to the critique. Religions, said PFAW, was treated in textbooks "by exclusion or by brief and simplistic references."

Most notably, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, in a major report entitled *Religion in the Curriculum*, observed in 1987 that "the critical influence of religion on world history and culture is...slighted in texts on political science, sociology, literature and world history."

The ASCD report concluded: "Today's schoolbooks no longer inform young people about religion in the world" - and thus, one could argue about the world itself.

The Court in 1962-1963 spoke of religion's place in our national heritage. But it isn't just our understanding of the past that suffers if we are ignorant of spiritual traditions.

Deeply-held religious convictions still lead people to war, just as they motivate many to improve their world. Some of the sharpest controversies in our own society - over abortion, euthanasia, the rights of women, gays and minorities - have religious dimensions. Spirituality is a primary element of "self-help" and "recovery" movements and other restorative processes, all of which have public bearing.

Once we lift the longstanding taboo against religion in the classroom, it's not hard to bring up and address social issues in their full compass.

In fact, the growth of pluralism and the increasing diversity of the population have made teaching about religion potentially easier. James Madison liked to cite Voltaire on England: If England had one religion, that one would do what most monopolistic belief systems do - deny a voice to any other. If it had two, those would do what rival faiths often do - come to blows. But England had thirty religions, so they had to find ways of getting along.

In our own country's past, when religion was a more homogeneous force in society, the majority held the power to pray and teach as it saw fit in public schools. Today our society includes non-believers and believers from hundreds of varieties of Native American, African, Asian, Latino and European traditions. We have more reason than ever to seek mutual understanding.

After years of omitting religious themes, textbook and curriculum publishers are scrambling to come up with better materials. In the meantime, many teachers have been filling the curriculum gap by combining primary source material with community resources offering their students a chance to view objectively the religious influences on history and culture.

By including religion in the standard curriculum (particularly when to avoid it would be to misrepresent the material or hinder civic understanding) these teachers encourage not only comprehensive learning but also enhanced respect for the faiths of others. In the process comes the opportunity to talk about some of the more profound wellsprings of human emotion and action. Teaching offers few richer rewards.

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Resources

- The most comprehensive program available on world religions for secondary teachers is *Religion in Human Culture*, a flexible curriculum developed by teachers. This multi-media program (\$320) includes six units (available separately): an introduction to religious expression and individual sections on the Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. These well-researched and bias-free materials include student readers, teacher guides, filmstrips and blackline masters. The developers also offer teacher training workshops and technical assistance for implementation of the program. [Curriculum Development Center, St. Louis Park Public Schools, Minneapolis, ND 55426; (612) 925-4300.]

- Facts on File publishes a World Religions series that is versatile enough to be used with grades 5 through 12. Each volume treats the history, literature, beliefs and practices of a major faith tradition. [Facts on File, Inc., 460 Park Ave. S., New York, NY 10016; (800) 322-8755.]
- The booklet Religion in the Curriculum reviews issues surrounding the study of religions in public schools. *Religion in American History: What to Teach and How* is a comprehensive guide for teachers. [Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1250 N. Pitt St., Alexandria, VA 22314; (703) 549-9110.]
- *My Friends' Beliefs* is a useful guide to world religions for middle and high school readers. The book covers historical development and contemporary practices and includes profiles of young members from each group. [Walker and Company, 435 Hudson St., New York, NY 1004; (800) 289-2553.]
- The National Council on Religion and Public Education publishes a newsletter and journal, *Religion and Public Education*. The Council offers curriculum items on religions and general statements on religion and public education. [National Council on Religion and Public Education, 451 Sutton Hall, Indiana, PA 15701; (412) 357-2310.]
- The curriculum package *Living With Our Deepest Differences: Religious Liberty in a Pluralistic Society* uses the Bill of Rights as a focal point for understanding religious diversity. Separate units for elementary, middle and secondary students are provided. [Learning Connections, P.O. Box 6007, Boulder, CO 80306; (303) 441-9260].
- The First Liberty Institute sponsors statewide programs in California, Georgia, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Utah that include teacher-trainer certification in two areas: teaching about religion and religious liberty, and managing administrative controversies related to these issues in public education. The institute also holds workshops in many other locations and offers course materials on religious liberty and civic responsibility. [First Liberty Institute, George Mason University, 4210 Roberts Road, Fairfax, VA 22032; (703) 503-8504].
- The National Conference's 1994 InterFaith Calendar (\$15.00 donation) is designed to promote understanding of diverse religious faiths. The handsome and informative calendar highlights one religion each month, describing its principal beliefs and practices, and displaying exemplary art. Cited throughout are feasts, holy days and other observances of various faiths. [National Conference, 360 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1009, Chicago, IL 60601; (312) 236-9272].