

Overcoming Religious Illiteracy Through Public Education

A Conversation with Diane Moore

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Q: How should religion be included in the public school curriculum? In what way?

A: Religion already is in the public school curriculum in ways that I think are unhelpful, as well as in unconscious ways. So it's not a question for me of whether religion should be taught in our schools—it's a question of how it will be taught. I think, and I share this view with many others who are advocating for the public understanding of religion, that we need to be able to teach about religion. We have to teach the diverse and complex phenomena of religion from the academic study or religious studies perspective, rather than a devotional understanding.

Q: You've said religion is in the curriculum now. How is it being taught?

A: At Harvard, we're involved in a qualitative research project, a simple online questionnaire that we've sent out to educators. The pilot stage included primarily teachers of social studies, literature, and religious studies, all in California, Massachusetts, and Texas. The questionnaire asks if religion is included in your curriculum. We've heard consistently that they're expected to teach about religion, and many don't feel like they have the resources to know how to do that, because they don't have the training. So this is a current problem for teachers in public schools. We also know from the research of people like Mark Chancey and others that religion is deeply imbedded in public school curricula—again, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. So the concern for me is that we need to educate teachers to be able to teach about these questions. They're eminently capable, but they haven't had the training they need, and they recognize that.

Q: Are there places that do it especially well within the model that you're conceptualizing?

A: Yes—at Harvard, for example. I don't mean to self-promote, because this isn't about us, but our program is uniquely geared toward giving teachers that educational model. It is intentional about giving future teachers the framework and the background to think about how to teach about religion, as well as the religious studies background they need to do so. They get the content-based background they need to integrate these ideas into the curriculum effectively and responsibly. A couple of other places are doing this, and it should be able to be replicated in public schools. Several of the independent schools that are non-sectarian have religious studies departments, where they're looking exclusively at how to study about religion. They often train really good teachers.

Q: Your work so far has been about public education. Do you think the same principles apply to private education?

A: In my book, I distinguish between exclusive and inclusive sectarian ways to think about religion. I do this in the context of our democratic framework. In the U.S., I think all educators need to be teaching students about religion and religious diversity, so that everyone has exposure to the study of religion in a larger context of diversity, both within certain traditions and outside of them. I also think there's a place for teaching sectarian forms of religion. For example, one of the proposals I make is that in a Roman Catholic school, you might have a religion department that intentionally teaches about religion from a Roman Catholic perspective. But at the same school, you might also teach religion from a more non-sectarian framework, considering how religion might be incorporated in other dimensions of the curriculum, like history or literature courses, from an academic perspective. So I think non-sectarian forms of teaching about religion are appropriate in all contexts.

Q: Does allowing sectarian teaching about religion jeopardize the civic ideals you're promoting?

A: I think it does if it's the only thing we learn, and if it's not recognized as being sectarian. I would say those two issues are the major concerns. Sectarian frames of education have an appropriate place. The problem is when that's the only frame that people have and they don't recognize that it's a specific representation of a particular tradition.

Q: What about primary schools? Are those students capable of making those discernments?

A: My own areas of specialization are middle and secondary schools. But in my work with educators across the world, I'm convinced that the cultural studies model of education—which is really about learner-centered frameworks and methodologies in education—is absolutely appropriate in primary schools. In fact, primary school educators tend to do this better than secondary and middle educators. They know to address these issues in the age-appropriate context in which they teach. So, yes, I think a cultural studies approach is appropriate across the board.

Q: I want to propose a couple of objections our readers will have. Doesn't your proposal to teach about religion, somehow violate the separation of church and state?

A: It absolutely doesn't. All Supreme Court decisions have significantly addressed issues of First Amendment guidelines. One decision is especially explicit that this decision does not undermine the importance of teaching about religion in the schools.

Q: This next objection is more philosophical. If you say all religions are worthy of respect and study, doesn't that marginalize those people and religious concepts that say otherwise?

A: I would actually frame that as a theological conversation, rather than a philosophical one. Yes, I think that's true. No education is objective, and that's why I promote a cultural studies model, whereby the transparency of what we're educating for, and what we're trying to promote in the context of any given unit that we're teaching, is really explicit. That way, students know what is being promoted and what isn't, and they can make responsible decisions in relationship to that. After all, that is the overarching goal of public school

education itself. So teachers can't just teach religion however they want. Their methods have to be defensible in terms of what's legal and what's educationally sound in the context of public education and democracy.

Q: That brings us to the question of curriculum. First, would you advocate having one class on religious studies or should every class discuss it in some fashion? Second, how are teachers going to be trained to deal with this?

A: Again, religion is across the curriculum already. It's embedded in every subject we teach. The key is to be able to recognize this. That said, I think it can also be beneficial to include courses about religion, but I don't think that's required or necessary, because if we become literate about religion, we will recognize that embeddedness. You can pick up any novel, for example, and recognize that the characters themselves are making either overt or covert assumptions about religion in the context of those stories. This becomes an opportunity to think about how religion's already there in a more informed way. Or, historically, what are the religious influences in the Cold War? They're profound, and they need to be addressed if we're going to understand the cultural challenges we're facing today around religion.

How do you educate teachers? That's a really important point, and one that I care a lot about. Teaching religion is a very substantial undertaking, and one that can't be addressed in short-term professional development institutes that are currently the model for teacher training. Those are appropriate for teachers who are keeping up to date with their own disciplines. They need to be exposed to the academic study of religion to understand both the content and the philosophical foundations of it. They need more substantial opportunities in that way. We're probably going to be promoting this through the program—the most basic fundamental training to be able to address these questions. A substantial amount of engagement is required for teachers to be able to do this well.

Q: One last question comes to mind. Are you somehow putting the interests of the state, or the interests of the polity at-large, ahead of the interest of the individual? If so, what that might mean?

A: I don't think so. State interests are generated out of a sense of how to create a society whereby people can flourish. That's where state interests come from initially. And in the case of educating about religion, people flourish in the sense of being able to engage differences in a creative way. So I don't think that there is a state interest that's trumping individual interests. I think the two actually act in deep concert with one another, and we need to be promoting them in that way.

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