

# RELIGION

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## AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION

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*Commentators on American life will pour countless words over the U.S.A. this year. After all, a two-hundredth anniversary is a rare event, and exploiting such an event is a rare temptation. At the risk of being covered ourselves by the deluge of words, we succumb to the temptation and offer this essay. It does not come with the conventional prayer for the reader's patience. RELIGION is a journal with a mission: to observe and interpret the new revolution in the relation between religion and society at the threshold of the nation's third century.*

The American people have been through three periods of general religious identity: 1) the time of the established church; 2) the time of legal separation; and 3) the period of practical pluralistic dialogue.

### THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH

The first period was characterized by religion's domination of civic activities, especially of education. Prominent in the colonial stage was the *église dominante*. Most of the colonies had an established church or established churches. The relationship was an American adaptation of the European *cujus regio ejus religio* dictum—who(ever) is the regent, his the religion. Protestant values and vision prevailed in the colonies. Since churches controlled the few schools then existing, they were Protestant flavored to be sure. The old European seeds were transplanted in new American soil.

Developments in Massachusetts, later to be the podium of Horace Mann, illustrate the tightness of the church-state (and the church-school) fusion. In 1654 the Bay Colony was stipulating by law adherence to Protestant doctrines for its citizenry. Its *New England Primer*, which was nearly all religion, was long a generally honored school text. Culture and learning began with

A In Adam's fall  
We sinned all.

Virtually all knowledge was compacted into an alphabet ending with

Z Zaccheus he  
Did climb a tree.

The public school with this religion foundation was good for citizenship in the commonwealth and, of course, necessarily bad for the "olde deluder, Satan."

In 1701 the Massachusetts legislature required that every master of a grammar school be approved by the town minister, and that minister was certain to be a rigid Calvinistic Congregationalist.<sup>1</sup> Any persons who did not like this kind of life and education could simply leave the colony.

It must be granted that American education owes its birth to religion. The new nation brought forth upon this continent may have been conceived in liberty, but the sireing of the school was in the control of the Protestant church.

### LEGAL SEPARATION

This fusion of religion and education was being questioned in 1776 when the Liberty Bell pealed. The second period in the American religious experience began with the formal detaching of religion from civil structures. Of the five great

### ANNOUNCING

#### THE KANSAS CENTER FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION RELIGION STUDIES

- To collect and share learning resources
- To sponsor training for teachers
- To conduct research in curriculum and methodology
- To assist in interpreting the program to various professional and popular interests in the state

Based on the premise voiced by Justice Tom Clark that some study about religion is essential to complete American education, the KCPERS is a curricular resource and teacher service.



founders of the nation, only Washington had adhered unreservedly to a regular church. Franklin, Madison, and John Adams, as well as Jefferson, were extreme liberals, Unitarians or Deists. Jefferson, although a passionate admirer of Jesus, was anti-Calvinist and anti-Catholic in an institutional sense, abhorring the partnership of church and state as the road to tyranny and oppression.<sup>2</sup> It was he who led (with Madison's help) in dis-establishing the Anglican Church in Virginia in 1779, by terminating the practice of state pay for teachers of the Christian religion. Virginia was the first state to make this move.

When the founding fathers wrote the First Amendment, they were undoubtedly influenced by the thinking of British philosopher John Locke, who argued that religion was outside the power of government. What other influences were at work? Perhaps the fact that these civic patriarchs were themselves unorthodox in religion. Perhaps the fact that only 10 percent (if that many) of the new nation were church members.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because it was the breathing of Voltaire and Locke and not religious aspiration that made the winds that unfurled the flags of the American revolution. Maybe the colonists were just sick of divisive old world establishments. Maybe the inspiration for the first amendment lies with all of the above. In any case, though Jefferson was vilified as an atheist and arch infidel because of his talk about a "wall of separation between church and state,"<sup>4</sup> God was not named in the Constitution when it appeared, and the First amendment was recorded.

Legally, the step had been taken toward Virginia's "free common schools" wherein "no religious reading, instruction or exercise shall be prescribed or practiced inconsistent with the tenets of any religion . . .," as Jefferson described them in 1817. At the insistence of the Unitarian Horace Mann, the Massachusetts Assembly fifteen years later legislated free public schools in that state, tax supported, without sectarian control. Whether understood or not, effected or neglected, a basic principle for the public school districts of all the states had been set when Massachusetts officially dropped its established church in 1833, the last state to do so.

Schools like this formed the ideological dock upon which landed the 19th century immigrants: Catholics, Jews, and many Protestant sects from many European nations. The various religious groups stood apart, furtively regarding each other with suspicion. With this influx began the long, uneasy period of official (if not practical) separation of the civil and the religious covenants of citizenship. Occasionally the government put up aids to religion: functional chaplains, grants of land, tax exemption and the like. Nevertheless, while religious teaching shifted from a tax base to volunteerism, and numerous colleges waxed strong as private corporations, the Puritan theocratic influence<sup>5</sup> lingered in public tax supported education for a long time.

#### PRACTICAL PLURALISTIC DIALOGUE

The third distinctive period in the history of religion in public life began about a half century ago. It took on clearer form in the early 1960's. The National Conference of Christians and Jews appeared in 1928, portending a new sensitivity. Among the new cultural characteristics were these: an extension of individual religious liberty, the clear respect for pluralism, and the appearance of interreligious dialogue with

methods for encounter.<sup>6</sup> Mutual recognition and living room dialogue replaced separateness. Suspicion began to diminish. *Aggiornamento* was affirmed.

Windows have been opened to a fresh appreciation of religious liberty as we come to the bicentennial event. Millions of Americans will journey to Philadelphia in 1976 to see Independence Hall where the Liberty Bell is kept and to see old Christ Church, where Washington prayed. It is to be hoped that some will also visit the Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, also a national shrine; the Arch Street Meeting House; Old St. Joseph Church, where Mass has been offered, legally, for 244 years; and the Swedenborgian Center, to savor the complex fulness of our religious heritage.

Today we view the American nation as a very big tent. It has room inside for the unconventional Lancaster Mennonites, who will not mark the bicentennial because the Revolutionary War is inconsistent with their pacifist background.<sup>7</sup> There is room, too, for the Native Americans who find nothing in the bicentennial to celebrate.

Conceivably there is room for an American civil religion, a reality that partially includes and yet departs from the established religious tradition. Civil religion has been variously identified in recent debate. For the purpose of discussion, I borrow the definition of Boardman Kathan, executive of the Religious Education Association. As a point of departure, Kathan refers to the appraisal of the renowned sociologist Robert Bellah that civil religion is not the worship of the nation, but "an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality." Then Kathan defines American civil religion as "the peculiar blending of patriotism and piety that has characterized our public life as a nation and our self-understanding as a people with a special purpose and destiny in the world."<sup>8</sup>

Kathan further suggests that it is this civil religion which became the religion of the public schools; so that the business of school became the making of good citizens. That, he contends, is why so many people were upset when they thought the Supreme Court threw religion out of the schools in 1962 and 1963. But that is not what the Court did.

#### THE COURT'S CLARIFICATION

The essence of the Court's recent pronouncements on religion and education was simply a further refining of what American people had been talking about in the long and confused second period of the national religious experience. *The Court clarified a distinction between the practice and the study of religion.* It upheld the case against the government's institutional practicing of religion. It opened encouragement for study about religion in the public schools. But it was the emphases of the third period of American religious life—individual liberty, honest pluralism, and inter-religious dialogue—which led to the denouement of the Court's decision.

While stating in 1962 that the New York Board of Regents' prescribed school prayer was inconsistent with the establishment clause of the First Amendment, Justice Clark, speaking for the majority in the *Engel vs. Vitale* decision hammered at the point that education cannot be complete without the *study* of comparative religion, or the *study* of the history of various religious movements, and he indicated that the Bible is worthy of *study* for its literary and historic qualities.

Three landmark decisions are especially pertinent to this discussion:



Engel vs. Vitale, June, 1962

Abington vs. Schempp, June, 1963

Murray vs. Curlett, June, 1963

It is not without significance that each of these suits originated in the neglected limbo of America's religious pluralism. The Engel complaint was brought by five parents in the New Hyde Park School District: one, a Unitarian; two, Jewish; one, an unbeliever; and one, in the Ethical Culture Society. In the second case, Mr. and Mrs. Edward Schempp and their children were Unitarians. Not indifferent to religion, the Schempps had countenanced their daughter Donna's taking a turn in the daily Bible readings at the Abington School in Pennsylvania. (Their older son, Ellory, had earlier demonstrated his objection to the practice by reading the Koran at the time.) The third case was initiated in Baltimore by Madalyn Murray and her son Bill, avowed atheists.

When the legal dust had settled on the tortuous path to the 200th anniversary of the nation, the dual nature of American religious experience came clear. The two parts are not necessarily exclusive of each other or even incompatible. They can be comfortably complementary. There are two pulsebeats in the popular religious experience of this people: one, *the pilgrimage of faith*; two, *the pursuit of truth*.

### PRACTICE OF RELIGION

We look briefly to the first one, the nurturing of faith. That recalls an ancient discussion: Plato's consideration of the question of the proximity of knowledge and virtue. He touches variously the question of whether knowledge is the same as virtue. After 12 books he still does not settle the matter.

The parents of the pupils who are preparing for America's third century are apprehensive about the moral climate around their children. Many are near panic over the "current spiritual malaise." Many look to the school for help on values and moral decisions. Some value clarification may come from public religion studies,—from an appreciation of various heritages, from analyzing various answers to some of life's deep questions.

But the base for spiritual nurture is essentially some "we-feeling" community. Value learning does not happen item by item. As the Synagogue Council of America indicates, spiritual values belong essentially with the home, the church, and the synagogue. With some popular apprehension whether the public school even can convey values comes the realization by many parents that the confessional religious community will occupy an important place in the Age of Aquarius next century. The parochial community traditionally has tended to this values education, regardless of public education patterns. *Religious studies in the common schools will not erase the need for the synagogue, the church, the home, and "we" base for moral values.* The practice of religion is important as a matrix for values study. And, of course, practice involves much more than values development.

### STUDY ABOUT RELIGION

The second pulsebeat—the pursuit of truth—can lie in the province of public education. Here religion can be studied; the study is important. Teaching about religion in the public education institution is an acceptable procedure to many third-century parents. So it is useful to recall just what the Court did point out. The Court stated unequivocally that the aca-

demic study of religion is both necessary and appropriate for public schools to include in their curricula.

What is new is the problem of approach to what is studied in the open academic setting. It would be a moot exercise if it turned out to be simply a detached data review of exotic and far-off people. A field of scholars which knows more about the ancient Aztecs or Zoroastrians than about the problems in the United Nations General Assembly or the vibes of the Kanawha, West Virginia, book burners somehow misses the point. I doubt that this kind of learning "completes one's education," to appropriate Justice Clark's words.

With this new challenge, this moment in the American religious experience can be exciting and liberating. We have come a long way from the New England primer and the Virginia free common school. We can go further yet with this opportunity opened up by the Court.

### CONTINUING REVOLUTION

**For this country's schools to treat all religions with openness and understanding is a change of revolutionary proportions.** The public schools are one of the avenues through which change is coming. A revolution aims at a new freedom. Many public school students already enjoy the new freedom to study objectively about many of the world's religious experiences. They are developing increased understanding of the role of religion in all dimensions of human existence.

This quiet new revolution is a fitting part of the bicentennial celebration. When this year is over—when the candles on the cake are snuffed and the plastic rifles are stacked, when the bands have gone home and all the dishes have been washed, the results of this change will linger. This is a birthday celebration consistent with the great idea of the American experience, independence itself.

Before we crack the bell over this new freedom we must inform ourselves about the magnitude of the task at hand. Consistent with this special approach, we need to develop curriculum and we need desperately to train teachers. College and university faculties can use this freedom to generate new programs, inter-disciplinary projects, and courses in areas where we have not been before.

An emerging new profession of public school religion teachers has been working seriously on curriculum during much of the last decade.<sup>9</sup> A clear distinction exists between "religion studies" and the traditional Bible and theology courses offered by seminaries and schools with a confessional orientation. Some quality resources have been produced especially for secondary schools. More are needed. The materials already available show the following characteristics:

1. Interdisciplinary nature
2. Non-sectarian and cultural orientation
3. Pedagogical approach
4. Sensitivity to the inherent problems and restrictions of public school religion studies.

Religious Heritage of America has prepared a suggested guide to development of this field of study in the general program of secular education.<sup>10</sup> It notes:

**Religion is a major social force in all human history, and to accord it superficial treatment is a denial of actuality.**

**Religion is one of several institutions common to**



**KCPERS WORKSHOPS, 1976****Public Education Religion Studies:**

proper and significant study about religion in the secular program of education, elementary and secondary.

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all civilized societies, and an adequate evaluation of both religion and the other permanent institutions requires that it be analyzed fully and in its proper context.

Religion provides one of the most profound and encompassing areas for intellectual activity, which all education, ostensibly at least, is supposed to stimulate; thus, since study of religion is a means for developing the capacities of the human mind, students should not be denied access to this intellectual highway.

From certain vantage points it is obvious that organized religion has not always promoted the cause of humanity; such aspects are as essential as any others to basic understanding and must be discussed.

The teachings of any religion are likely to vary at times from accepted secular knowledge; this must be recognized as a natural condition, particularly in a democratic society.

As the new profession takes religion out of its ghetto and into public schools for study, the crucial need is for significant programs of teacher preparation. The limited academic background of many teachers and the traditional residue of specialized seminary-type instruction will not do the job. The operating base of this new profession lies in the same context as good teaching in the other common subject areas.

Three states now approve religion studies as an area in which teachers may be certified for public school teaching: California, Michigan and Wisconsin. A fourth state, Florida, recognizes a special certification in Bible. In a fifth state, serious study of a certification program is in progress.

Certification programs are a small part of the teacher-preparation task. In-service programs for teachers already certified are growing in number. Summer workshops are scheduled at

some major universities and colleges for teachers who desire to improve their own courses or add to their existing curriculum. Research in resources and methods is in progress. Consistent with the Fourteenth Amendment these efforts are state centered, not national. And with this new freedom comes new responsibilities.

Religion studies the questions of the meaning of our existence, said Tillich. But after that fact, and after whatever answers come, the process of study flings people into the midst of life, off of selected premises, into who knows where. That attitude is characteristically American. It is also prompted by the demand that man's religious spirit be completely free. Contemplation on where this might lead on into the third century is exciting.

An image by Duncan Howlett describing a related subject provides an appropriate stopping point:

"The faith of adventure is like a flower that unfolds before your eyes. . . You cannot encompass half the meaning such an experience contains. It is as if, having spent the night on a mountaintop, you watch incredulously while the broad invisible earth beneath you slowly takes form as the dawn comes on; you watch as the scene slowly takes color while the morning light advances. . . The faith of adventure has emerged as an historic faith of our time."<sup>11</sup>

**FOOTNOTES**

1. Blanchard, *RELIGION AND THE SCHOOLS*. Beacon, 1963, p. 8.
2. *Ibid*, p. 12.
3. Support for this estimate is given by Blanchard, *op. cit.*, and by Winfred Garrison, cf: *ANNALS OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY*, March, 1948.
4. Jefferson's term in a letter, 1802: the phrase is not in the Constitution.
5. Gausted's concept.
6. I am indebted to Franklin Littel for this observation.
7. Cf, *RELIGION TODAY*, Dec. 1975, p. 2.
8. Kathan's perceptive discussion is reported in *RELIGION TEACHER'S JOURNAL*, Nov/Dec, 1975, pp. 16-19.
9. Uphoff, Piediscalzi and Panoch in "A New Freedom," their unpublished *PERSC* essay, 1973, describe this.
10. Cox, *THE FOURTH R*, Hawthorn, 1969, p. 86.
11. Howlett, *THE FOURTH AMERICAN FAITH*, Beacon, 1964, p. 214.

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