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Religious Literacy and Religious Education in Europe and the United States

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Can public schools teach about religion without students having their own religious foundation?

What can the U.S. learn from the German system of theological faculties?

Is there an educational system best suited to developing religious literacy?

Stephen Prothero, a noted scholar of religion, has identified a fundamental paradox in American religious culture: "Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion. They are Protestants who can't name the four Gospels, Catholics who can't name the seven sacraments, and Jews who can't name the five books of Moses. Atheists may be as rare as Jesus-loving politicians are in Europe, but here faith is almost entirely devoid of content. One of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates."¹

Prothero defines religious literacy as "the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life."² Religious literacy is not just an accumulation of knowledge; it is the ability to participate in a religiously pluralistic world. Knowledge is the only basis for understanding religion, for communication with religious and non-religious people, and for participation in religious and interreligious communication. Prothero holds: "My goal is to help citizens participate fully in social, political, and economic life in a nation and a world in which religion counts."³ In this view, teaching about religions in public schools would be an important part of the schools' civic education program.

A New Consensus on Religious Education in the United States?

Are there legal obstacles to a program on religious literacy in public schools in the United States? Although religion should never be imposed on anyone by the state, religion may be studied as an academic subject. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1962 and 1963 that school-sponsored religious exercises, such as organized prayer and devotional Bible reading violated the First Amendment,⁴ the Court tried to underscore that teaching about religion is perfectly constitutional. In *Abington School District v. Schempp*, Justice Thomas Clark wrote, "It 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 consistently with the First Amendment."⁵

But what is an "objective presentation" of religion within a "secular program of education"? In *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, the U.S. Supreme Court stated that teaching about religion must have an educational purpose, that its effect must neither advance nor inhibit religion, and that it must not foster excessive government entanglement with religion. Despite this legal emphasis on state neutrality toward religion, many Americans came to believe that public schools are not simply neutral toward religion but are actively hostile toward it. Many educators feared touching on religious issues because they did not want to encounter legal problems. Only a minority of public schools offer courses in religious studies. There is much more "teaching around religion" than "teaching about religion."

In 1995, thirty-five religious and civil liberties groups—among them the National Association of Evangelicals, the American Muslim Council, and the American Humanist Association—issued a statement called "Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law" which endorsed teaching about religion in public schools. The Bible Literacy Project in 1999 stated that the "study about religion, where appropriate, is an important part of a complete education. Part of that study includes learning about the Bible ... [which] contributes to our understanding of literature, history, law, art, and contemporary society." In this, the project was supported by a wide range of right and left wing groups.⁶

It seems that a new consensus emerged in the 1990s that a public school is not a religion-free zone. But when a public school wants to address issues of religion it has to make sure

that the school's approach to religion is academic and not devotional; that it helps the students to become aware of religions, but does not press for an acceptance of a particular religion; that it exposes students to religion, but that it does not impose a particular view; that it teaches about all religions, but neither promotes nor denigrates religion; that it informs, but does not seek to conform students to particular beliefs.⁷

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Stephen Prothero finds the ground rules for public school courses on religion fairly simple: "They should be taught only if there are trained teachers ready and willing to teach them. Parents should be offered an opt-out provision if they consider any course to be objectionable on grounds of religion and conscience. Finally, these courses should be academic offerings about religion rather than devotional courses in religion. Teachers cannot be preachers. They need to inculcate knowledge rather than belief—religious literacy rather than faith. Their courses must be neutral, neither encouraging nor discouraging any particular religious belief or practice."⁸

But are the rules for teaching about religion really that simple? Can a teacher stand above all religions and offer an "objective perspective on all religions"? How objective can a Muslim teacher be on Judaism on the question of the Promised Land, and how objective can a Jewish teacher be when it comes to the role of German Christians during the Shoah? Can a Buddhist teacher give an objective account of the Hindu caste system? And who is able to teach the teachers about all religions within the short time of their training at university? What is the main perspective on all the different religions? Is there not a danger that this perspective will serve as a kind of super-religion? Will not then a secular school religion of its own develop? And will the exposure to different religions and faiths in school not necessarily relativize the student's own faith and induce changes in his or her belief system which the student's parents would not approve of? Let me explain my point by applying an analogy: One can only learn a specific language among a plurality of languages—no one can teach language as such. And it is much easier to learn a foreign language when a student feels comfortable and secure in his mother tongue. Does not the religious literacy program fail to recognize that there are many alphabets and many grammars in the field of religion? These are some of the questions that confront Americans as they consider whether their strict church-school separation is accomplishing what they want it to.

Religious Education in Germany

The German system of religious education displays a number of strengths. Although the state feels a strong responsibility to provide religious literacy to its future citizens, it does this exclusively in cooperation with the existing religious communities, because it wants to make sure that the particular perspectives on religion do not get mixed up. Catholic students are taught about religion from a Catholic perspective, Protestant students from a Protestant perspective, and Jewish students from a Jewish perspective. The idea behind this kind of religious education is that students will be much more able to understand other religions when they first have gained a good understanding of their own.

One might compare this approach to learning music. A student who has learned to play the flute, the violin, or the piano can easily become part of an orchestra and play together with others. Although the violin player does not know how to play the flute, she can very well understand what it means to be a good flute player: it takes time and practice to become one. And both will be able to turn the notes for each other at a concert. But what kind of understanding of music can a student develop when he or she is shown all kinds of instruments but is never taught to play one?

Religious education in Germany is a matter of close cooperation between the state and the religious communities. The right to receive religious education by the state is part of the twenty most fundamental human rights of German citizens. Article 7:3 of the Basic Law states: "Religious instruction shall form part of the regular curriculum in state schools" and "religious instruction shall be given in accordance with the tenets of the religious community concerned." Parents have the right to opt-out. The state supervises the curriculum in religious instruction classes, but the curriculum is developed together with the religious communities concerned. These religious communities have in the past been mainly the Protestant and the Catholic churches, but Art. 7:3 is open for all religious communities. There are three presuppositions: there has to be a sufficient number of students who belong to the religious community which applies for religious education according to Art. 7:3 of the Basic Law; the religious community has to project permanence; and the state needs a representative who has the religious community's mandate to discuss and to agree upon a curriculum. While the Muslim communities in Germany have enough students and can guarantee permanence, it is not so easy for Muslims to provide a representative of the Muslim community to negotiate with state authorities about the establishment of religious education for Muslim children.

Nevertheless, *Länder* (states) with a high Muslim population

have established religious education for Muslims in conjunction with Catholic and Protestant religious education. The CDU-run *Länder* Baden-Württemberg and Niedersachsen entertain so-called "*Modellversuche*" (pilot projects) in selected schools. The evaluation of these classes is positive. Students like the new subject, they develop a sense of belonging to a religious tradition but at the same time want to learn more about other religions.⁹ While the CDU-run *Länder* support religious education for Muslims in public schools, the SPD/PDS-run senate in Berlin has refused to introduce religious education according to Art. 7:3 of the Basic Law, and instead has established a new compulsory subject called "Ethics" which is supposed to also

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Berlin school authorities argue that religious education as it is practiced in all German *Länder*—except Bremen, Hamburg, and Brandenburg—supports separatism and segregation where they believe dialogue is required. The situation in Berlin reveals features of a "culture war" where a secularist political majority tries to keep religious education according to Art. 7:3 of the Basic Law out of the public schools. Currently, a referendum is under way which calls for free choice between ethics and religious education.

Religious Education at Universities: Theological Faculties in Germany

Ironically, the Berlin Senate has no problem financing a Protestant theological faculty at one of its universities—as all German *Länder* do. There is a plethora of Protestant and Catholic theological faculties throughout Germany. What is the rationale for state-run and state-sponsored theological faculties at state universities—even in secularist Berlin?

Understanding the role of theological faculties in Germany helps one to understand why a close cooperation between state and religious communities is so attractive in Germany—and has been for centuries. The Reformation in Germany began at the small theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg where young Martin Luther and even younger Philipp Melancthon changed the religious landscape of the West. After the split from the Roman Catholic Church, German Protestants found themselves in need of an institutional structure; the Lutherans relied heavily on the state to provide an effective organization of the church. Indeed, until 1919 the highest bishop of the Protestant churches in Germany was the

prince or the king of one of the many German principalities. And if he happened to be Catholic—like the king of Bavaria—he nevertheless was the *summepiscopus* (the highest bishop) of the Protestant population. Although Luther claimed a differentiation between church and state theologically, the state took care of the organization of the Protestant churches for centuries. One could argue, then, that the system of religious education in Germany is nothing but a relic of the old days when a state-church was still in existence.

Even after the breakdown of the state-church system in Germany no one dared to remove the theological faculties from the universities—not even the GDR regime dared to do

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so. Although the GDR regime prohibited religious education in public schools, it kept the traditional theological faculties at universities. Why is this? German theological faculties had been and continue to be highly influential in the churches. From a religio-political angle, theological faculties are one of the most powerful means of the state to influence the churches without violating the principle of separation of church and state. If Martin Luther is an early example of a highly influential

professor of theology, Pope Benedict XVI is the most recent one. As Joseph Ratzinger he received Catholic religious education at a religious school in Bavaria. He received his theological training at a state-sponsored German university and he worked for many years as a professor of theology, and, as such, as a state servant, at different German theological faculties before he began his career in the hierarchy of the Catholic church. Pope Benedict XVI is a theologically sophisticated pope—and the German system of religious education is proud of one of its most excellent products.

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, a debate began in the German academic community as to whether theological faculties should be transformed into religious studies departments. In 1901 Adolf von Harnack defended the existence of theological faculties by holding that scholarly excellence in the field of religion not only requires the knowledge of religious teachings and rituals but also the knowledge of a religious culture including history, literature, art, and politics, as well as its ethnic and geographical contexts. Where is the scholar who has such a thorough knowledge of all the world religions? As a matter of fact, the thorough knowledge of just one religious culture requires many years of living in it; anything else would be dilettantism.

State-sponsored theological faculties influence the churches by providing a clergy who has gone through a rigorous training

of historical-critical thinking. Historical-critical thinking forces students of theology into a hermeneutics of self-criticism. Historical-critical thinking not only puts the Holy Scriptures into a contextual framework, it also forces the historian to conceive of himself as a person with only limited insight and possible prejudices. While American fundamentalism attempted to be the cure against the changes wrought by modern theology, theological faculties in turn believe they are a good cure against fundamentalism.

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Today the Muslim community in Germany would like to see Islamic faculties established. As Muslims have the right for religious education in public school, so, too, do they have the right to a theological education of their clergy and their teachers. But if Islamic theologians want to become part of the German university system they will have to agree to the principle of an historical-critical approach to their fields of research. The capacity for historical and self-critical thinking is a prerequisite for being part of a Western-style university. Neither the Catholic nor the Protestant churches particularly like this kind of theology; since theological faculties are institutions of the state, the churches' influence is limited. As the example of Hans Küng shows, the church can force a professor to leave a Catholic faculty, but they could not prevent him from becoming a globally influential religious intellectual.

While religious studies departments may produce a lot of knowledge about religions, their influence on the religious communities is very limited. Theological faculties shape the teachings as well as the practices in the religious communities considerably. Theological faculties can civilize religion through education because theological faculties train preachers and teachers. On the one hand, faculties are independent of the churches and, on the other hand, they are the institutions with the strongest influence on the life of the religious communities, because they shape the attitudes and practices of the religious elites within these communities.

Knowing about this influential role of the state-run theological faculties, religious communities retain some control over the personnel at these faculties. While the university chooses the best professor according to scholarly standards of excellence, the religious community concerned in Germany is allowed to check the orthodoxy of the candidate—and it can refuse to give its approval (*nihil obstat*: "There is no obstacle"). This system of checks and balances between state, church, and university is complex and lies far beyond a system of separation of church and state. To the contrary, it is a system of mutual interpenetration.

tration—with a pay-off for both sides. The churches get well trained preachers and teachers from the state and the state makes sure that the theology which is taught in the churches

is of a high scholarly standard. Religious fundamentalism is not a problem in Germany. There is no “wall of separation” between church and state in Germany, as there is in the U.S.

German Religious Statism vs. American Religious Individualism

There is a striking difference in mentalities between the United States and Germany in the field of religious education: Germans do not believe in the individual's capacity to take care of his or her religious education; instead, they believe that the state is a good institution to govern this field. Americans are very suspicious of the state's involvement in religious matters,

and they are confident that the individual is able to organize his or her religious life on his or her own. Germans conceive of religion as something the state and the churches have to provide; Americans know that you have to do something active to build a religion, if you want to have one.

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Germans view religion as potentially dangerous, Americans see religion as an important human resource for building civil society. Germans want the state to civilize religion, Americans believe in the civilizing potential of religion.

This German mentality of statism became apparent when the German Constitutional Court ruled against permitting home-schooling. Good governance of religion as well as of education is state governance. American history and American mentalities are quite different. Americans have never relied on the state in religious matters, and a child's religious education is the parents' responsibility. When Germany and the United States face similar problems of religious illiteracy and interreligious incompetence, Germans tend to ask the state for help while Americans tend to keep the state out for the sake of religious liberty.

Religious Schools

In Germany, church and state also cooperate in the field of schools run by the churches, who prefer the term “free schools” or “*Schulen in freier Trägerschaft*” instead of “private schools.” In Germany, there are 4,711 free schools and more than 2,100 schools are run by the churches. Between 1992 and 2006 the so called “free schools” grew by almost 50 percent. About 12 percent of German students attend a “free school.” Beyond that, Germany has about 20,000 kindergartens run by the churches. In eastern Germany, especially, the number of schools run by the churches has grown rapidly.

The number of applications is about three times higher than the number of admitted students. The state carries between 80 to 90 percent of the costs and the rest is paid by the parents and the churches.

Parents' motives for sending their children to a church-run school are rarely religious and mostly pedagogical. They want “the best for their child” and so they try to find a school that treats their child with respect and that is known for its high quality of teaching. Protestant parents do not hesitate to send their child to a Catholic school, if this school is considered the best in the neighborhood—and vice versa. All schools are under the supervision of the state, including “free schools” and their curriculum has to be approved by the state. However, schools run by the churches are allowed to hire teachers on the basis of their denomination. Having the right to do so does not necessarily mean that realities allow for it. Protestant churches in eastern Germany, for example, have a hard time finding teachers in math, physics, or biology who are church members—especially when one considers that 75 percent of the German population in the east does not declare a religion (*konfessionslos*). Teachers in western Germany, where about 75 percent of the population belongs to one of the churches, will often not come to the east, where salaries are lower.

The typical religious school in the United States is the Catholic school. Against a WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture that dominated the public schools in the nineteenth century, Catholic immigrants established a school system of their own. Whereas Catholic schools in the past were run in the interest of protecting the culture of Catholic immigrants, today's Catholic schools are open to children of all denominations. These schools are an important factor for the prosperity of civil society because they embrace diversity and educate for responsible citizenship, as well as being an option for the poor.

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Religious Education in Europe

There seems to be a growing consensus in Europe that all students should acquire a minimum of religious literacy and interreligious competence. Even France, where the state's principle of *laïcité* requires the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, plans to develop modules called *culture religieuse* which can be taught in history or literature classes. The ways in which religious competence is supposed to be acquired are, however, different across Europe. Germany and Austria act according to a model of cooperation between state

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and religious communities in which the parents decide whether their child should take part in religious education. Italy and Spain have a similar legal system, but the cultural situation is quite different from Germany: more than 95 percent of the population in these Mediterranean countries is Catholic. England, Norway, and Finland have state-churches. Religious education in these countries is a compulsory subject with the possibility for the parents to opt-out.

The situation in Great Britain, for instance, is a paradoxical one, because on the one hand, Britain still has a state-church system that requires daily common worship in schools, but on the other hand, religious education in England tries to act according to the principle of "teaching about religion" in one class. The national framework for religious education, first published in 2004, was developed in cooperation with the Agency for Jewish Education, the British Humanist Association, the British Union of Seventh-day Adventists, the Buddhist Society, the Catholic Education Service, the Church of England, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Muslim Council of Britain, the National Council for Hindu Temples, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is, the Network of Sikh Organizations, and the Russian Orthodox Church. This framework stipulates that each Local Education Authority must establish a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) whose members have to reflect the denominational plurality in a given region. The SACREs may require a review of the agreed syllabus at any time. Nevertheless the Education Act of 1996 states that an agreed syllabus must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are predominantly Christian, while taking account of the teachings of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.

The importance attached to religious education in Great Britain is demonstrated by the following statement: "Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and

the nature of reality, issues of right or wrong and what it means to be human."¹⁰ These are profound questions and one wonders: who is able to give an answer to these questions? The national framework's answer, "Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning. It challenges pupils to reflect on, consider, analyze, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics and communicate their responses,"¹¹ leaves one to wonder how this will be possible. Who would have the audacity to evaluate other beliefs, values, and traditions without having any idea of how it might feel to be part of these religions, beliefs, values, and traditions? There is a danger of superficially evaluating something which appears "strange" or uncommon to some.

Students are invited to evaluate before they have had time to develop a sense for different belief systems. How can a Christian child know how it feels when a Jewish child starts the ceremony of Pesach by asking: What makes this night different from all other nights? How can a Muslim child know how it feels when a Catholic receives his or her first communion? And how can a Hindu child know how it feels when a Protestant teenager struggles with herself whether she should accept the Protestant confirmation although she has the strong desire to protest against this family ritual? What does a student really learn in "teaching about religion" when he or she has not been taught what religion really does to someone and how it works for someone?

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The British system tries to meet this problem of comprehensive religious literacy by using two approaches to religion. On the one hand, students learn about religion; on the other hand, they are supposed to learn from religion. "Learning from religion is concerned with developing pupils' reflection on and response to their own and others' experiences in the light of their learning about religion. It develops pupils' skills of application, interpretation and evaluation of what they learn about religion. Pupils learn to develop and communicate their own ideas, particularly in relation to questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, and values and commitments."¹²

There still remains the question of whether the British approach creates some sort of "super religion" which encompasses all

particular beliefs. The British system rests on a phenomenological understanding of religion. From a phenomenological point of view, a common set of functions can be identified in

all religions. All religions try to give answers to basic questions about life, truth, trust, guilt, death, hope; students explore the ways in which different religions answer these questions.

Conclusion

Religious education in public schools is a tricky topic. While Americans still rely on parents' capacity to educate their children in religion without the help of the schools, Europeans are

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much less confident that parents would be able to provide a good religious education. This is why almost all European countries—except France—support parents in this respect. The Spanish constitution states in Article 27: "Public authorities guarantee parents' right for their children to receive religious and moral education according to their own convictions." This is the rationale for a so-called denominational religious education: the state respects the parents' religious

traditions and supports them in raising their children in these traditions. Since 96 percent of the Spanish population is Catholic, this does not pose heavy organizational problems. But what will happen in a city with dozens of different religions? The school cannot provide religious classes for every denomination.

It would be a valuable consensus if all states agreed that public schools should support families and religious communities in preparing the children for a religiously plural world. "Teaching about religion" is certainly better than no religious education at all. But in any "teaching about religion," certain presuppositions are already made which will influence the students' beliefs. A better approach might be to include as many different denominations as possible in the curriculum and allow them to present their particular views of the religious world to the students. This is the European way. As to the United States, it will be interesting to see how it will remain the most religious country in the Western world, but also whether there is any possibility of it becoming the religiously best informed.

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NOTES

1 Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What every American needs to know – and doesn't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 2.

2 Ibid., 26.

3 Ibid., 29.

4 The First Amendment holds that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

5 See <http://www.oyez.org/cases/1960-1969/1962/1962_142/>

6 *The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide* (New York: Bible Literacy Project and Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1999), 7. Cit. according to Prothero, 538.

7 See *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1999), 3.

8 Cf. Prothero, 261.

9 See Edgar S. Hasse, "Studie: Islamischer Religionsunterricht in Niedersachsen trägt zur Integration," *Welt-online*, 8 October 2008.

10 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (ed.), *Religious Education: The non-statutory national framework* (London, 2004), 7.

11 Ibid., 7.

12 Ibid., 11.

This Issue Brief results from a workshop held in Berlin, Germany, entitled “Religion in School: Top of the Class or Dropout? A Comparison between the United States and Germany.” A complete summary is available on AICGS’ website. The workshop and Issue Brief are part of a larger project at the Institute that examines “Religion *In* Politics: The Impact of Culture and Religion on Public Policy Debates.” AICGS seeks to address the need for advanced dialogue regarding the ways religious and culturally sensitive factors influence the policymaking process. The project links matters of religion and ethics to public policy and governance issues in Germany and the United States, emphasizing commonalities and what can be learned from the diversity of each country’s experience. Dr. Lily Gardner-Feldman, Director of AICGS’ Society, Culture, and Politics Program, pilots this project.

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