RELIGION & AMERICAN EDUCATION

RETHINKING A NATIONAL DILEMMA

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RELIGION AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

A few years ago, during the brouhaha over E. D. Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy*, I tested the religious literacy of my students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I contrived a short exam of thirty questions dealing with the Bible, Western religious history, and world religions. To pass—to be religiously literate—students had to answer 70 percent of the questions correctly. I gave the test to two classes in the philosophy of religion, and a colleague gave it to two classes in American religious history—about 150 students in all. One might have expected them to do fairly well: like most students at research universities, they were bright, and the majority of them were juniors and seniors. Most were from North Carolina, a Bible-Belt state; and because the courses were electives the students might be expected to have some special interest in, and knowledge of, religion.

No one passed the test. In fact, the average score was 28 percent. I suppose the most obvious explanation for the low scores is that I have no realistic sense of what it means to be religiously literate. Let me give a few examples and you can judge: 55 percent of the students could name the first two books of the Bible; 42 percent could provide something approximating the first of the Ten Commandments; 14 percent had some idea of what Zionism is; just under 10 percent could name the two major divisions of Islam; 2 percent could

place the *Analects* in the Confucian tradition; 2 percent could identify Pope John XXIII with the reforms of Vatican II; one student had heard of the Social Gospel.

As we shall see, understanding religion involves much more than knowing a few facts. Still, the results of the survey are suggestive. 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.[1] (Their parents may not be very literate either: according to a 1990 Gallup Poll, only half of Americans could name even *one* of the Gospels.[2])

To this point I have documented the absence of religion from public education—indeed, the hostility of public education to religion. It is now time to begin the constructive argument for incorporating the study of religion into education. I begin this chapter by saying something about the idea of a liberal education. Is religion important enough to have a place in the curriculum? How should religion fit into the curriculum? Should it be integrated into existing courses and texts when it is relevant, should there be special courses in religion—or both? How should religion be taught? What is the relevance of religion to the multicultural movement? What does it mean to *take religion seriously*? Finally, I will respond to several of the most common arguments *against* including religion in the curriculum.

The Idea of a Liberal Education

Students should learn something about religion in elementary schools and in vocational or professional education, but that is not my concern here. I shall limit my discussion to the secondary and undergraduate schooling that are at the heart of a liberal education.

We no longer live in a traditional society in which our knowledge of what is true and false, and good and evil, are inherited securely from the past. We cannot help but be aware of many different, often conflicting ways of making sense of the world. And we have come to believe—in most fields, if not always in religion—that it is through a self-conscious, critical consideration of the alternatives that we are most likely to acquire truth. We believe in the possibility of progress.

A liberal education should initiate students into a self-conscious search for better, more reasonable, more humane ways of thinking and acting; it *liberates* students from parochialism by enabling them to see and feel the world in new ways. What do they know of England, who only England know? Or, as John Stuart Mill put it, he "who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to re-

fute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the other side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion."[3] 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 judgments, to conclude, however tentatively, that some ways of thinking and living are better or worse than others.

A liberal education is *an initiation into a conversation.* The term "conversation" suggests the civility that is proper to a liberal education, but in some ways the word "argument" might be more appropriate, for conflicting claims about truth and goodness are built into a liberal education—at least to the extent that it reflects the variety of ideas and values found in our culture and our world. Of course, the argument/conversation is ongoing—it has a history—and just as one can make little sense of an everyday conversation walking into it midstream, so students can make little sense of the conversation that constitutes a liberal education without understanding something of its history. A liberal education *must be comparative and historical.*[4]

The problem with much of what passes for liberal education is that while students hear a good number of voices, each is crying in the wilderness; none converses with others. Education has become specialized at all levels, and the higher students climb educationally, the more distant they are from climbers on other peaks of learning. Efforts at communication take place at some distance, over yawning conceptual chasms; misunderstanding—and suspicion—inevitably result. Indeed, the ways in which we separate education into disciplines and courses makes the conversation all but impossible to understand, and students are left inadequately prepared to reconstruct the conversation for themselves. The curriculum should not be a set of parallel monologues but a conversation—or argument.

This being the case, it is important to recognize that to liberate, a liberal education must *require* a good deal of students and their teachers. It is incompatible with specialization, which, in and of itself, is a form of parochialism. A liberal education requires a core curriculum, not just distribution requirements, for it must make connections as well as ensure that students hear different voices; it must be interdisciplinary and structured if the conversation is to be coherent. And because a liberal education deals with matters that require some emotional and intellectual maturity—literature and politics, for example—it should continue through the greater part of one's undergraduate years. Students should not specialize too early.

There is another reason why a liberal education must be taught historically. We distort the idea of rationality if we think of individuals as "neutral" spectators or "objective" judges of alternative worldviews and cultural possibilities. We are not primarily individuals who stand at some epistemic distance from the options open to us. We are members of communities with histories; we are characters in ongoing stories. In Alisdair MacIntyre's words: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' [or 'what am I to think?'] if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are to be construed. . . . Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."[5] A self exists, according to Charles Taylor, only within "webs of interlocution."[6] Or, as Maynard Adams once put it, we would not, each of us, be an I unless we were a first a we.[7] Without a cultural location we have no place to stand in our moral and intellectual deliberations.

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.

Much of modernity—and modern education—has been rightly directed at nurturing our individuality and autonomy, at giving us some distance on our inherited identities, but there is reason to believe that we may have gone too far. All too often, for example, students arrive at college with no firm convictions, no clear identities; the more "sophisticated" of them often assume an (all too uncritical) moral relativism.[8] Richard Rorty once suggested that "you cannot liberate a tabula rasa; you cannot make a free individual out of an unsocialized child."[9] Liberal education has both a conservative and a liberating task: it should provide students a ballast of historical identities and values at the same time that it gives them an understanding of alternatives and provides critical distance on the particularities of their respective inheritances.

I add that the understanding a liberal education provides is not merely an abstract, inert knowledge of facts and theories; it should nurture passions and imagination as well as thinking. Hence it must draw on literature and the arts to inform students' feelings, articulate their hopes and fears, nurture their sense of guilt and compassion, enrich their ability to empathize with other

people and other cultures, and enliven their sense of history, of being part of developing stories.

Indeed, cultures might be understood as works of art embodying ways in which people have more or less artfully created meaning in the world. Just as our imaginations and our passions are excited as we wander through an art museum, seeing the works of various artists, cultures, and periods, so a good liberal education should inform and excite our imaginations and our passions, providing us with imaginative insight into life's possibilities as painted on the backdrop of the world's cultures. Just as there is aesthetic joy to be had in art, so there is joy to be had in the cultural creations of humankind and in a liberal education that reveals them to us.

What I want most to emphasize, however, is the significance of imagination and the passions in enabling us to get at the meaning of human experience so that we can make informed, reasonable, perhaps even wise judgments about how to live our lives.

At the end of chapter 2 I suggested there are four common, if conflicting, ways of thinking about contemporary education. There are dangers, I think, in letting any one of them control the curriculum too completely. The conception of liberal education which I am advocating incorporates a good deal of the (often conservative) historical ballast of a classical or "liberal arts" education at the same time that it incorporates many of the liberating emphases of expressive education and the Cultural Left. And I would leave a little room in the curriculum for some of the more narrowly utilitarian goals of work and vocation.

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. The error of traditional education was its overemphasis on the former; the error of much modern education is its unsystematic and uncritical emphasis on the latter.

The Importance of Religion

A *liberal* education is the opposite of a *parochial* education. It cannot be specialized, or fixate on matters of narrow interest or of no great concern. The content of a liberal education should be whatever we take to be most important in life.

There is, of course, no scientific or pedagogical formula for cranking out a definitive assessment of what is important. The criteria we use to determine

what is important will be moral, political, and, for many people, religious, and this being the case, we will inevitably disagree.

With limited pages in textbooks and limited hours in the school day, is religion sufficiently important to merit precious space and time, especially given the clamor of the competition for inclusion? In his review of religion in American history textbooks, Dan Fleming noted: "Almost every special interest group that reviews history textbooks concludes that its particular topic has been shortchanged in coverage, whether it be a minority group, the Holocaust, labor, business, the family, or, in this case, religion. From the perspective of each group, they may be right. The problem is, if you increase the coverage of one topic, what can be deleted to find room for the expansion? It appears this same principle applies to the coverage of religion. . . . As is usually the case, thoroughness is in the eye of the beholder."[10] Well yes, there is a practical, political problem of priorities here. But, no, thoroughness does not lie simply in the eye of the beholder. Some things *are* more important than others, and it is not at all clear that we have our priorities straight.

For example, mightn't it be as important for students to understand the break between religious liberals and fundamentalists in the first decades of the twentieth century as it is for them to understood the concurrent split between the Republican and Bull Moose parties? Mightn't it be as important to understand religious beliefs about death and the soul as it is to understand tariffs and international trade? Mightn't it be as important to understand the Five Pillars of Islam as it is to understand the geopolitical significance of the Persian Gulf? Mightn't it be as important to understand the history of Jews in America as it is to understand the history of cowboys in America? Mightn't it be even more important for students to understand the Bible than trigonometry? (The answer in every case is yes, though no one would guess this from looking at textbooks and curricula.)

How important is religion? Let me count the ways.

Religion and Culture. Until the last century or two, nothing was so influential for good and evil in human affairs as religion. When the sacred and the secular were still fused, religion pervaded all of life: the sustaining rituals of life were religious, and people's understanding of politics, war, economics, justice, literature and art, philosophy, science, psychology, history, and morality and their feelings about death and hopes for a life to come were all religiously shaped and informed. Religion simply cannot be avoided in studying history.

But it is also true that much contemporary culture is shaped, or contested, by religion. Consider, for example, the importance of the Christian Demo-

cratic political parties in post–World War II Europe, the Catholic church in Poland, Bishop Tutu in South Africa, liberation theology in the Third World, the abortion debate, and the role of the black church in the civil rights movement. There are ongoing religious wars in Northern Ireland, India, the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Sudan, Bosnia, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The Holocaust is still a living memory, and anti-Semitism and religious terrorism haunt the world. People continue to be persecuted because of their religions, and all too often the persecutors persecute in the name of their religions.

Or consider the fascination that religion (and its absence from the modern world) holds for many of the greatest contemporary writers: Walker Percy, John Updike, Saul Bellow, Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene, T. S. Eliot, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and the existentialists. Theologians continue to contest scientific accounts of nature, and a striking number of scientists (especially in physics, cosmology, and ecology) seem to be moving toward a kind of mysticism or vaguely religious view of nature. Most of the mainline Christian denominations have issued statements on justice, the economy, and war and peace.

Religion continues to influence our contemporary world—sometimes for good and sometimes, no doubt, for evil. Religious voices continue to speak out on most matters of importance, and they contest much of what is taken as the conventional wisdom that finds its way into textbooks and the curriculum. How can students make sense of our cultural conversation without understanding what they are saying?

Religious Liberty. One historical theme is of particular importance. The Williamsburg Charter, signed in 1988 by many distinguished Americans, reaffirmed the importance of the principles of religious liberty in American life. The charter's Summary of Principles begins: "The Religious Liberty clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution are a momentous decision, the most important political decision for religious liberty and public justice in history. Two hundred years after their enactment they stand out boldly in a century made dark by state repression and sectarian conflict. Yet the ignorance and contention now surrounding the clauses are a reminder that their advocacy and defense is a task for each succeeding generation." Religious liberty is our nation's "first liberty," undergirding "all other rights and freedoms secured by the Bill of Rights." The religion clauses allow us to "live with our deepest differences," providing us with a "common vision" that embraces "a shared understanding of the place of religion in public life and of the guiding principles by which people with deep religious differences can contend robustly but civilly with each other."[11]

Religious liberty is fragile. To understand the sources, the history, the meaning, and the implications of the First Amendment and religious liberty is a matter of great importance. Yet only 71 percent of Americans know that religious liberty is guaranteed in the Constitution. Appallingly, government leaders (64 percent) and Protestant ministers (69 percent) are less aware of this than the general public.[12] What do we know of America if we do not understand the story of religious liberty?

Religious Pluralism. Religious liberty is made more important and more difficult by the growing religious pluralism of America. If the great majority of Americans—about 85 percent—are at least nominally Christian, a growing minority of Americans are not. The number of those who claim no religious affiliation has increased from about 2 percent thirty years ago to perhaps 11 percent today.[13] Jews make up about 2 percent of the population. Muslims fall somewhere between 0.5 and 2 percent of the population depending on who does the counting, and adherents of various Eastern religions, predominantly Hindus and Buddhists, make up another 1 percent.[14] In one state, Hawaii, Christianity is a minority religion and Buddhism is the majority religion.[15] Perhaps as important is the growing split between conservatives and liberals within the same religions.

The old Protestant cultural establishment was disestablished long ago. Many fear that no American *unum* can bind together the *pluribus* of contemporary culture. We see the effects of this "exploding diversity," Os Guinness argues, in our "cultural breakdown," in the "collapse of the previously accepted understandings of the relationship of religion and public life and the triggering of the culture wars." As a result, a series of bitter "contentions over religion and politics has erupted, extremes have surfaced, the resort to the law court has become almost reflexive . . . and in the ensuing din of charge and countercharge any sense of common vision for the common good has been drowned.[16]

This situation places a tremendous burden on the schools to help devise ways of enabling us to "live with our deepest differences," as the Williamsburg Charter puts it. Certainly a part of that effort must involve a better understanding of the diverse religious backgrounds of people in our culture. Of course pluralism is not without its merits, if only we would choose to exploit the richness of our diversity, learning from—and not just about—people with different ideas and values.[17]

Religion and Morality. Moral education is an unavoidable aspect of education; we educate morally whether we intend to or not. The curriculum orients students in the world; it tells them what is important. Various courses teach students what is normal and abnormal in human behavior, what actions are

rational and irrational, and what causes the suffering and flourishing of humankind. A good education cannot ignore issues such as abortion, sexuality and sex roles, justice, and politics. These issues are morally and religiously loaded—and controversial.

For most of human history, morality and religion were one and the same; morality was, in some sense, God's law. Following the Enlightenment, morality began to be secularized, becoming autonomous from religion. Of course, there are many secular accounts of what morality is, and many people continue to believe that morality makes sense only on a religious understanding of the world. The result is considerable cultural confusion. Unhappily, this confusion exists at a time when many observers sense a major moral slippage in the life of our culture. Indeed, it can be argued that our confusion about what morality is contributes to our inability to act in morally responsible ways. What could be a more important topic for education than morality? And yet it is not on most educators' agendas.

The Spiritual Dimension of Religion. It should go without saying that religion is important quite apart from any political or social or moral influences it might have. It is important because it has given voice to universal spiritual questions of ultimate concern. It has structured our thinking about suffering and salvation, death and the meaning of life, guilt and forgiveness, love and community; it has spoken to our deepest hopes and fears. Whether or not we approve of the various religious answers to these existential questions, we must acknowledge the importance of the attempts and the ultimacy and the universality of the concerns. If students have no sense of the spiritual dimension of life, they are ignorant of much that has been and is central to the human condition.

Of course, we cannot understand the story of religious liberty or the impact of religion on politics without understanding something about the spiritual—the theological, the ritual, the existential—meaning of organized religions. If students do not understand something about Puritan theology (which is typically not included in the texts), how are they to understand Puritan thinking about the relationship of church and state (which is mentioned in the texts)? If students do not understand something of souls, how are they to understand the abortion debate? If students do not understand how Islam fuses the sacred and the secular, how are they to understand the politics of the Middle East?

Religion and Modernity. Finally, we can make sense of our world only if we have some sense of the underlying movement of history. The secularization of the West is one of the great themes of modern history. The philosopher William Barrett goes a little further: the "central fact of modern history in the

West . . . is unquestionably the decline of religion."[18] Of course, even if the West has become highly secular, it has not become completely secular. Conservative religion continues to resist much of modernity, and liberal religion has accommodated itself to modernity in important ways. But unless we understand the broad outlines of this story, we will not have sufficient context for making sense of modernity itself.

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.

Religion has a particularly important educational role in fulfilling both the conserving and the liberating purposes of liberal education. By virtue of its influence in history, it has shaped our ideas and ideals, our culture, and our institutions in powerful ways. We are who we are, to some considerable (if diminishing) extent because of our religious past, and education should give students some appreciation and understanding of their place in these traditions. I will argue that just as it is not the responsibility of schools to transform children into Republicans or Democrats, so it is not their responsibility to initiate students into any particular religion. This is the proper task of parents and their religious communities. But just as a student should learn a good deal about our political heritage and the political parties that are part of it, so they should learn a good deal about our religious heritage and the religions that are part of it. Education should provide the cultural and historical context that informs and, in various ways, makes sense of our religious identities. A good liberal education will not play favorites but will provide the context within which all students will come to some understanding and appreciation of their own traditions. This is as important for nonreligious students as for religious students for we all are who we are in large part because of our religious past.

As important, it is the goal of liberal education to expose students to voices that enable them to assess critically their often parochial ways of thinking. Perhaps most important, some understanding of various religious voices provides students with critical perspective on the relentlessly secular thrust of education and so much of modern culture. Historically, the great religions ori-

ented people in the world and structured education in the process. It is still true that if we are to listen to all of the voices speaking out on justice and injustice, human suffering and flourishing, morality and politics, economics and work, love and human relationships, the search for identity and the ways we find meaning in life, many will be religious voices. I do not suggest that the best answers to the questions inevitably posed by a liberal education are religious. I only claim that if education is to be liberal, all the voices, at least all the major voices, should be heard.

The Curriculum

The curriculum provides the conceptual map by which we orient students in reality. If we are to take religion seriously, what are the implications for the curriculum?

Religion in Courses: Natural Inclusion. 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. Because of the secularization of modern culture the influence of religion will be much more evident in courses that are largely historical, and teachers who are historically sensitive are likely to have a much greater appreciation for the role of religion in their subjects than will colleagues in fields that are not taught historically but are governed by a more narrowly scientific worldview.

Arguably, religion should be included in the conversation whenever it has something to say about the subject at hand, whenever it "naturally" comes up. But there is a very important ambiguity hidden in the term "natural inclusion." Natural to whom? Teachers of economics, for example, are not likely to have any background in relating religion to economics, for the relationship has been nurtured almost entirely from the side of religion over the past hundred years as the discipline of economics has become a social science. Yet religion continues to exert a powerful influence on the economic world by virtue of the ways in which it has shaped, and continues to shape, our thinking about reform movements, justice, human rights, suffering, and the good life—and by the ways in which theology challenges fundamental assumptions about human nature and morality made in economics. Many Christian denominations have statements on the economy, many of which are critical in important ways of the conventional economic wisdom.[19]

The problem is that economics is not only a *subject* that might be studied in secular or religious ways, it is a *discipline*, a way of thinking about the world. The purpose of economics courses is not just to teach students about the

economic world, it is to teach them to think about the economic world *like economists*. If students should learn how to think about the economic world religiously, most economists would say they should take a religion course.

Most public schools teach economics but not religion, so this solution would discriminate against religious ways of thinking about economic matters. As important, it fragments what should be taught and renders students unlikely to see the relationships between economics and religion, between religious and social scientific ways of thinking about the economic world, and hence virtually guarantees a measure of ignorance. It also allows teachers to maintain a degree of specialization that encourages them to teach illiberally. And it assumes that the secular and the sacred can be disentangled—a controversial (typically secular) assumption.

Gerald Graff has argued that although college students "are exposed to the *results* of their professors' conflicts" they are not given access to "the process of discussion and debate they need to see in order to become something more than passive spectators to their education." The established curriculum, Graff argues, is *separatist*, "with each subject and course being an island with little regular connection to other subjects and courses. It is important to bring heretofore excluded cultures into the curriculum, but unless they are put in dialogue with traditional courses, students will continue to struggle with a disconnected curriculum, and suspicion and resentment will continue to increase." Moreover, when "teachers in rival camps do not engage one another in their classrooms, all sides get comfortable preaching to the already converted."[20]

Graff is not discussing religion, but the same principle applies. Courses and textbooks that deal with religiously contested issues should at least acknowledge the existence of those religious alternatives and engage them in conversation. In the introduction to the course, or in the first chapter of the text, students should be made aware of the religiously controversial nature of the claims in the text and offered some brief account of the (major) religious alternatives. I am not proposing that we make all courses into religion courses. Economics courses and texts should be essentially (secular) economics courses and texts. But they must not contribute to the indoctrination of students; they must observe the obligation to acknowledge the controversial nature of the claims they make and say something about the existence of alternative frameworks for interpreting their subject. They must participate in the conversation that constitutes a liberal education. They cannot pretend to students that there is only a monologue when in fact there is a lively cultural conversation going on. Economists should approach their subject not just as economists but as teachers of a liberal education.

Put more generally, liberal education texts and teachers should be governed by the Principle of Philosophical Location and Weight: that is, they are obligated to locate their positions philosophically on the map of alternatives, indicating what weight their views carry in the discipline *and* in the larger culture. If students are to be educated, they must have some sense of when they are being taught what is controversial (and for whom) and when they are learning consensus views. Good teachers or texts should not convey to students a single view only when that view is controversial; nor should they simply provide an array of alternatives without giving students some sense of which are mainstream and which are marginal (and for whom).

There is a difference, in this regard, between introductory and advanced courses. A good liberal education must require students to understand the relationship of religion to the subject matter and disciplinary perspectives of their courses, but I see no reason to insist that the same battles be re-fought over and over. If students come to understand the conceptual lay of the land in a good introductory course, there is no need for continuing to provide all the alternatives in every course that follows. But the nature of a liberal education obligates faculty to make sure that all (major) contending voices are heard at the appropriate time and place. This will certainly be in introductory courses and perhaps elsewhere as well. In high school, most courses are introductory courses: they introduce a subject and a disciplinary way of thinking about the subject. In universities, students can sometimes do advanced work without having taken the introductory courses (especially in the humanities and social sciences); here the situation is more complicated.

Courses in Religion. Most advocates of the study of religion argue for natural inclusion, rather than for (new) courses that take religion as their subject. The conventional solution is "religion in courses" rather than "courses in religion." There is some tactical advantage in this approach, for courses in religion would require a good deal of consciousness raising all around. Nonetheless, this leaves us far short of the ideal.

What would we think if economics or biology were to be taught only by natural inclusion in history or literature courses by teachers who had done no course work in economics or biology? Obviously the importance and complexity of these fields warrants separate courses taught by faculty educated to teach them. So it should be with religion. Students cannot come to understand religion if they acquire only a few facts here and a snippet of insight there. If religion is to be understood it must be studied in some depth. This view is now widely accepted at the undergraduate level, and most public universities have departments of religious studies that offer a curriculum of religion courses and often an undergraduate major.

But courses in religion should not just be offered. All students should be required to take an introductory course in religion at the high school and undergraduate level. (Of course, additional elective courses should also be available.) An introductory course should be required for at least three reasons relating to the purposes of a liberal education. First, religion is a tremendously important aspect of human experience. Second, religion is too complex a subject to be handled adequately by natural inclusion (by teachers not educated to teach about it). It is at least as subtle a field as science. Time and effort are required to read religious texts and acquire some familiarity with religious traditions and subcultures. Third, because of the power of the secular disciplines in shaping the curriculum, religion must be granted at least one required course to maintain a modest measure of critical perspective on the conventional secular wisdom of most subjects so that indoctrination can be avoided.

At the public school level there are likely to be few religion courses if any, and faculty who teach them are unlikely to have had religious studies as a primary field of study. (According to a Department of Education study conducted in the early 1980s, only 640 of 15,000 public high schools offered courses in religion, and only two-tenths of 1 percent of students were enrolled.[21]) I have noted the familiar complaint that there is not time enough in the school day now for all the courses various interest groups want to have worked into the curriculum. So what is to be done? Well, let me put it this way: how can anyone believe that a college-bound student should take twelve years of mathematics and no religion rather than eleven years of mathematics and one year of religion? Why require the study of trigonometry or calculus, which the great majority of students will never use or need, and ignore religion, a matter of profound and universal significance? This would be my first answer to the inevitable question: what should be dropped to make room for the study of religion? (If anyone opts for the twelve years of math, I will take this as additional evidence for my claims about secular indoctrination.)

There is some hope from the record of universities: fifty years ago most public universities did not have courses in or departments of religious studies; now most do.

High schools and universities cannot leave this task to each other. The shortcomings of secondary education in the United States require that universities also provide a liberal education and require that specialization be held off at least until the third undergraduate year. And because religion is not likely to be taught in many high schools, universities should require, at an absolute minimum, an introductory course in religion. In any case, religion, like all subjects in the humanities, requires a good deal of emotional and in-

tellectual maturity.[22] Correlatively, the presence of religious studies in universities does not absolve secondary schools of responsibility. In part this is because religion is central to liberal education at whatever level, but also because a majority of students will not go on to receive a liberal education in universities, either because they will pursue no higher education at all or because they will receive a narrowly technical or professional education.

What material should be included in a required religion course? It must provide students some understanding of what it means to respond religiously to the world, giving them some sense of the tension between religious and secular ways of living in and understanding the world. It should demonstrate the power of religion to shape history and contemporary culture. More particularly, it should provide students with various religious interpretations of topics in the curriculum that are religiously contested but are likely to be taught in narrowly secular ways in their other required courses: the origin of the world; the meaning of history; the nature of morality, social justice and sexuality, for example. It should explore how several different religions have answered the major moral and existential questions of life; it should be multicultural and comparative. Finally, it should use primary source readings (especially sacred texts) and imaginative literature to enable students to appreciate religions "from the inside."

I will address the constitutionality of required classes in religion in the next chapter. For now I simply note that most political objections would be defused by offering exemptions from the course for students who object to it for reasons of conscience or religious conviction.

Taking Religion Seriously

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.

Understanding Religion from the Inside. As Ninian Smart puts it, we convey to students an inside understanding of religion when we present them with "the beliefs, symbols and activities of the other . . . from the perspective of that other. The presuppositions, feelings and attitudes of the explorer of the other's world must be bracketed out as far as possible. That is, we should not bring external judgments to bear upon the other's world."[23] 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. We take religion seriously only when we

try to understand it from the inside, on its own terms. At least, this must be the first move we make in any study of religion.

Much modern scholarship attempts to make sense of actions and texts and cultures using the concepts of the scholarly observer rather than those indigenous to the actor or author or culture. The working assumption is that through scientific study, scholars can put the claims of people in a context that explains them. For example, Freudians explain behavior, including religious behavior, on the basis of unconscious causes resulting from childhood experiences; behavioral psychologists explain all behavior on the basis of environmental contingencies of reinforcement; economists often explain behavior in terms of "rational" self-interest; some neurologists explain all behavior and experience (including religious experiences) in terms of brain chemistry.

Often these accounts are reductionistic, that is, the scholars who advance them hold that reality is not nearly so rich as religious believers take it to be. Religious claims are "reduced" to being about psychological or social needs, for example. As we have seen, many modern secular intellectuals are committed to eliminating supernatural or religious understandings of events and actions and texts and replacing them with secular, scientific explanations. So, for example, to tell the story of ancient Israel from David through the Babylonian captivity, as the author of one history text did, without referring to God's actions in history, is to tell a secular version of the scriptural story that drains it of all religious meaning. The textbook author does not convey the Hebrew account of history, the inside account of ancient Israel, but rather his account, the modern secular story. I have no objection to historians telling their own story, but it must be made clear that they are telling their story, not the story of the people about whom they write, and if we are to understand the ancient Hebrews, and not just modern historians, we must first hear *their* story.

One reason why we should listen to their story is that people are, to some considerable extent, just what they take themselves to be. They do what they do for reasons that make sense to them; they live within a structure of meaning that gives coherence and direction to their lives. If we miss this essential fact, if we miss their world, then we miss them. 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. 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.

Smart argues that this can be done through an "informed or structured empathy." Indeed, Smart would have us pause to "celebrate" the "glory" of empathy: "To see the world through another person's eyes: is this not a noble task? For a boy to know something of what is like to be a girl, for a lover to see herself through the eyes of *her* lover, to see the problems of one's mother-in-law, to imagine what it is like to be a starving Ethiopian or a Tamil, to conceive the thought world of the ordinary Russian or Romanian or Italian."[24] 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. Indeed, it can be argued that our intellectual and cultural biases cut so deep that we are simply unable to perform such acts of empathy, and it is probably true that when the culture we try to understand is *very* different from ours, we will not likely succeed. (This is why the Dark Ages remain dark.) But it is also certain that almost always we can succeed *more or less*, and succeeding more is surely better than succeeding less.

There is an important difference between empathy and sympathy: we might say that empathy is thinking or feeling *with* someone, while sympathy is feeling *for* someone. To have empathy does not mean that one has sympathy, though empathy often leads to sympathy. Empathy is not a "sentimental" emotion; it is, or can be, a hard-headed intellectual virtue (as it should be when we try to empathize with Hitler and the Nazis in an effort to understand them). To see the world from a certain perspective is not to believe that it is a good or true perspective. The difference between empathy and sympathy is, in part, the difference between understanding and judgment.

Still, the idea of taking other people—and their ideas, their religions—seriously is, in part, a moral notion; it is, as Smart suggests, a *noble* task. It accords others a basic respect. Put in terms of the Golden Rule it would amount to something like this: I want you to take me and my ideas seriously and I don't think you can understand me without listening to what I have to say about my beliefs and actions; therefore I must (morally) take you and your ideas seriously. John Dixon has suggested that we "are not free to treat others as less than ourselves, to be explained by our wisdom. . . . We must do them the courtesy of taking them seriously. . . . To treat them otherwise is to reduce them to an it. Explanation is an act of power inflicted on an it. True interpretation is an attempt to grasp the other as 'thou.'"[25]

In the end, some people, perhaps even some cultures, do not deserve respect. But this is a judgment we must make *after* we have attempted to

understand them. It is also true that in the end we may decide that one of the reductionist accounts is, in fact, true. But first things first.

Of course, it is not always easy to know who can speak for a tradition from the inside. Are there authoritative "insiders" who can define what shall count as orthodox and who else is an insider? Who defines whether the Unification church is a part of the Christian tradition? The Reverend Moon, or the Southern Baptist Convention? Do we privilege the accounts of theologians, or do we listen to the stories of women and minorities who have been largely powerless within the tradition? The uneducated may be able to speak for only a small part of a tradition, the local subculture, and be unacquainted with large stretches of it—but then theologians may speak for an understanding of the tradition held by intellectuals only. Pursuing the insider's account of a religion is not without its conceptual problems. Indeed, it is unlikely that there would ever be a single "inside" understanding of any tradition.[26]

Religious Experience. Understanding from the inside is not exclusively, perhaps not even primarily, a matter of intellect and belief. Smart has distinguished six "dimensions" of religion.

> (1) doctrines (e.g., the Trinity, the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence); (2) the sacred narratives or myths of the tradition (Christian "salvation-history," the story of the Buddha Gautama); (3) the ethical and/or legal teachings (as in the Torah, the Shari'a, the Sermon on the Mount, etc.); (4) the ritual and practical side of a religion (the Mass, daily Muslim prayer, Buddhist Prescriptions and practices of meditation); (5) the experiential and emotional side of a religion (the nature of devotion to Christ, Paul's religious conversion, the Buddha's enlightenment, and actions to attain nirvana); and (6) the social institutions in which a religion is embodied and the social relations in which it is embedded (the organization and role of the Church of Scotland, the Sangha in Sri Lanka, etc.). And as part of all this, or in addition, it is important to see something of a tradition's artifacts—the Cathedrals of medieval Christendom, the stupas and pagodas of Buddhism, and so on.[27]

Some religions emphasize some dimensions more than others. Confucianism and Judaism, for example, emphasize the ritual, social, and ethical dimensions: to belong to that religion is to belong to a community; it is not necessarily to hold certain beliefs about God or the hereafter. This is increasingly true of liberal Protestantism. Some schools of Hinduism and Buddhism are almost entirely concerned with the experiential and ritual dimensions of religion. Conservative Protestantism has often exalted doctrine, sometimes at the cost of the ritual or ethical or experiential dimensions of religion: salvation comes

through belief, not through the sacraments or good works or membership in any community.

Because religion is essentially a matter of belief for many Protestants, understanding religion has often been taken to be a matter of knowing theology and doctrine. Yet there is much more to religion than belief. Schleiermacher claimed that true religion is so rare "that whoever utters anything of it, must necessarily have had it, for nowhere could he have heard it. . . . To the man who has not himself experienced it, it would only be an annoyance and a folly."[28] Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued that an outside observer may "know *all about* a religious system, and yet may totally miss the point. The outsider may intellectually command all the details of its external facts, and yet may be . . . untouched by the heart of the matter." The fundamental problem, according to Smith, is that the observer's understanding of a religion "is by definition constituted of what can be observed. Yet the whole pith and substance of religious life lies in its relation to what cannot be observed." What the observer will miss is transcendence—the (scientifically) unobservable experience of God. Smith notes that his argument will not carry much weight with nonbelievers, "a fact that in itself illustrates the point I wish to make."[29]

Parker Palmer reminds us that the Hebrew Bible "uses the word 'know' to indicate the conjugal relation of husband and wife (as in 'Abraham knew Sarah')" and the "most common New Testament word for 'know' is also used for lovemaking." Religious understanding is, on such accounts, *personal*; when we assume instead the role of a detached, scientific observer the world can no longer speak to us; it becomes a mere object as we become "objective."[30] Reality then remains, as Martin Buber put it, a "total stranger," an "it" rather than a "thou."[31]

Theology is the attempt to systematize and render intellectually intelligible what people experience in worship, in ritual, in communal experience, in their encounters with God. But if we miss the *experience* of God, if we settle for the *beliefs* or the behavior then we have missed what is, arguably, at the heart of religion—and what we are left with may seem unintelligible. To understand much religion we must live in the community of adherents, we must participate in the ritual, we must be open to the experience of God.

This suggests a daunting task for religious education. John Wilson and Samuel Natale have argued that "'teaching religion' is not a matter merely of *instruction*: the child also requires *experience*. In trying to educate children in those areas commonly called 'musical appreciation' or 'drama,' we are not content merely to instruct them about music and drama; we also require them to take part in concerts and plays. So too with religion. Provided we keep our aims clearly in mind, there is an obvious case to be made out for giving

children that experience of religion that may be gained by particular forms of worship."[32] The analogy with music is helpful. If students only read about the beliefs of musicians, or scanned sheets of musical notation, or learned acoustics, it is safe to say they would develop neither an understanding of, nor an appreciation for, music. It is only in listening to it, or better yet, in performing or composing it, that any full understanding becomes possible. Similarly, it is a commonplace that science must be practiced to be fully understood and appreciated. It is in the laboratory that one learns what science really is.

We routinely require students to practice science and music, to *experience* them, but in public education we do not allow students to participate in the practice of religion. Of course, many students will have practiced religion in their homes and churches, synagogues, or mosques, but many will not have had such experiences. And virtually all of the students who have had such experiences will be limited to one religious tradition—their own. If we truly want to understand religion, if we want to take it seriously, then we must participate in religious ritual and open our hearts to religious experience. Yet we obviously we cannot require this of students (even if the courts allowed it).

Wilson and Natale suggest that students participate in a worship service. There are two problems. First, participating in the ritual is likely to violate our sense of moral integrity for it requires the affirmation of beliefs or intentions students may not have and that may conflict with commitments they do have. Of course, schools require students to do many things that challenge deeply held convictions, from dissecting frogs to undressing in front of other people. But at some point we draw the line, believing that the value we place on moral integrity is violated. Students should not be required to participate in political rallies or affirm beliefs or attitudes they do not have. Religious commitments are often the most deeply felt of all and must be undertaken voluntarily.

Second, ritual and worship can flood the emotions, eliminate psychological distance, and subvert reason. They can overwhelm or frighten children with images of hellfire or hypnotic mantras. Of course, this is just what some religions try to do—and understanding that they do so should be part of religious education. But education requires that we keep some critical distance on our world, some ability to compare and contrast, some objectivity. Teachers must be sensitive to the emotional maturity of students.

Nonetheless, if students could be seated in a back balcony of the synagogue (or church or mosque) so that they would not have to participate in the worship (so that they would not have to respond to the liturgy or close their eyes during prayer), and if it were clearly understood that the purpose of attending

the service was not to convert them but to provide them with a deeper understanding of religion, and if they were sufficiently mature, and if there were an excusal policy for students whose religious convictions prohibited even this form of education (or if the course were an elective) and if the rabbi (or leader of the service) knew and approved, this would seem to be a legitimate, indeed, valuable form of education. Students might come to feel something of the reverence, the values, the concerns and hopes which religious folk feel.

Of course, if they know nothing intellectually or doctrinally of the religion, a religious service is likely to be perceived as a jumble of sights and sounds and smells that makes little sense. The experience must be informed by at least some background understanding of what is going on. It is, in part, the theological understanding that congregants have of doctrine and myth and history and ritual which makes worship meaningful for them; it is not just the immediate experience. Observing the ritual is no substitute for the conceptual side of religion.

It is often claimed that religious experience is ineffable—that it cannot be put into language—and this is no doubt so, at least in the usual ways we think of language conveying meaning. No dictionary definitions, scientific descriptions, or philosophical accounts of religious experience will convey its meaning or power to people who have not had it. This is also the case with many other experiences: aesthetic experience, or our experience of love or guilt or despair, for example. And yet we talk about them (often at great length).

If we think of the power of language to convey meaning by way of narratives or poetry or drama we may be more generous in our assessment, however, for language has the power to recreate experiences imaginatively. If we have never been in love, we may be caught up short by the word "love," and no number of psychology texts will help. But we can come to feel something of Natasha's love for Prince Andrey in *War and Peace*; we experience it vicariously. It is often said that good art doesn't tell us things, it shows us. It makes us experience the world in a certain way.

Language can be used to minimize emotional overtones (as is the case in most textbook accounts of religion), or it can be used to draw out and play upon emotion (as is the case in literature and poetry and drama). For example, to read Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* is to (imaginatively) live inside the mind and feelings of a Jewish boy in the New York of the 1940s. The best substitute for firsthand personal religious experience is autobiographical or literary accounts of such experience. In fact, such accounts are often much richer than any observation of religious ritual and worship.

Because of the difficulty of putting religious experience into language, religion often functions symbolically; its natural language is poetry and symbol

and metaphor and myth. The extent to which religious language is to be taken symbolically or literally is a major theological question, but it cannot be denied that much religious language functions very differently from scientific language, and students need to be aware of this. It requires a different sensibility. The idea that the skills of scientific critical thinking carry over to religion is extraordinarily dangerous. Religious language and experience are part and parcel of and meaningful only within a religious worldview. There is no way to translate religious language into scientific language. Arguably, once we have opted for scientific ways of understanding religion we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

There are, I suggest, four ways of getting *inside* religion. The first is to live a religious life, to seek God and participate in religious ritual. I have suggested that attenuated participation, something closer to observation, is a legitimate way of proceeding pedagogically. Second, through literature and poetry and drama we can imaginatively and vicariously think and feel our way into a religious frame of mind. Third, there is autobiography, apologetic literature, Scripture, and theology, which may not operate imaginatively but is written from within a religious worldview and uses religious categories and logic. It gives students a sense of what it is to think religiously. Teachers (or guest lecturers) can talk about their own religions personally, conveying an understanding of religion from the inside. Finally, third-person accounts—Jews believe x, Buddhists do y—give some sense of what religions are all about. For novices such accounts can have considerable value because they may translate (in very rough ways) the religion into more familiar concepts. Anthropological studies often provide "thick" descriptions of religious life which are helpful in conveying a sense of lived religion.

Critical Thinking and Truth

We might stop at this point with an array of religions laid out before us, each understood and appreciated to some considerable extent from the inside—a theological smorgasbord to be sampled and enjoyed. But if we stop here, we are not taking religion as seriously as we might, for every religion claims truth and goodness, though not all religions claim to possess the exclusive truth or the sole track to goodness. If we are to take religion seriously, we must take these claims seriously.

There are also pedagogical and epistemological reasons for moving on to questions of truth. After all, a fundamental purpose of education is to help students sort out the reasonable and the unreasonable, the good and the evil, the true and the false. If we fail to think critically about religion, Wilson and

Natale suggest, education is no more than "a form of window-shopping in which the child can buy whatever happens to appeal to him."[33] Indeed, as any teacher knows, the question of truth cannot be avoided, for any good student will inevitably ask of religion: "but is it true?" or "what do *you* think?"

In chapter 7 I will argue that public schooling must be religiously neutral (though the meaning of neutrality will require a good deal of spelling out). Neutrality does not require that teachers and texts forgo all critical thinking about religion, however, so I will say just a little about what it might entail when religion is at issue.

Some scholars believe that it makes no sense to talk about truth. Instead, there are simply multiple worldviews, each "true" on its own terms perhaps, but none any more true than the others in any "objective" or "absolute" sense.[34] It is not obvious that this is a coherent view (is it *true* that there is no such thing as truth?) and it surely should not be assumed; it is, after all, a minority view even among intellectuals. Surely teachers and textbooks are obligated to argue their case, considering the alternatives.

But whatever we think of the possibility of truth, if we are to take religion seriously, we must take seriously religious claims to truth *as truth is understood within various religious traditions.* We must *engage* religious accounts of the world. We cannot simply mention them, or talk "about" them, or even limit ourselves to trying to understand them empathetically. We must grapple with them; we must see what can be said for and against them. We must think critically about them. Even if we do not believe in any final "truth," we may believe that some views are more reasonable, more satisfying, or more likely to lead to the happiness of humankind than others; there is almost always some foothold for critical assessment. In any case, if my response to your claim to possess the truth is merely, "that's nice, how interesting," I haven't taken you seriously. How do we do this?

Being Open. We have already taken the first step. In attempting to understand a religion from the inside we forgo any automatic reductionism and open ourselves to religious ways of thinking and feeling. Thinking critically about a religion is not simply a matter of applying scientific method or the critical insights we bring with us to that religion. We take it seriously when we let it question us, when we open ourselves to the possibility that we misunderstand the world and are subject to enlightenment by that religion—when we are willing to be self-critical.

Critical Distance. If one kind of understanding is acquired by immersing oneself "inside" a religion, another kind of understanding is acquired by pulling back to achieve a critical distance on the religion. We can lose sight of the forest for the trees. Perhaps the most insightful book about America was

written by an outside observer—Alexis de Tocqueville (though Tocqueville first made a considerable effort to understand America from the inside). If the insider's understanding of religion must be the first word, it need not be the last word.

Moreover, if we are to take religion in general seriously—and not just a particular religion—we must take the historical and comparative study of religion seriously. This requires scholarship. It requires the effort to understand a variety of cultures, historical periods, and religions, using the resulting comparative knowledge to put the claims of a particular culture or religion or epoch in perspective, noting similarities and differences, and constructing theories to account for the particularities.[35] The Protestant emphasis on belief and salvation by faith becomes particularly striking when compared with Muslim, Jewish, and Catholic emphasis on works. The transcendent God of traditional Western religion stands out in sharp relief when compared with the immanent God of Indian religion. What, if anything, is universal among religions, and how do we account for it? What is unique to some particular religion, and why is that?

Comparative Criticism. But we cannot uncritically assume the truth (or adequacy) of the modern scholar's assumptions or conclusions any more than we can those of any particular religious tradition. A truly liberal education, I have suggested, is a conversation in which the various speakers take seriously and respond to the insights of the other participants. We take a religious tradition seriously when we try it on, when we use it to make sense of its rivals—including its scholarly rivals. Correlatively, we take those rivals seriously when we use them to try to understand the religion at issue. From within Freudian theory, what sense can we make of religious experience? Correlatively, what sense, if any, does Freud make from within the vantage point of different religions? How does a Marxist understand religion? How does a Protestant fundamentalist or Catholic liberation theologian understand Marx? How does a Christian understand Islam or Judaism? How do Jews and Muslims understand Christianity?

One can do this comparative criticism without assuming any particular vantage point, neutrally as it were (a matter of neutrality as fairness). We need not start with the assumption that any particular view contains the truth; instead, we can engage each, in its turn, for what critical light it can throw on the others. We need not ask: what is true or false about Christianity? We can just ask: what did Freud (or Luther or Muhammad) think was true or false about Christianity? When we do this we are engaging our critical faculties; we are arguing.

The Appeal to Cumulative Experience. I have suggested that what counts as a fact, what counts as evidence for the facts, what counts as a good argument, what counts as rational, is largely a matter of the worldview within which one thinks and lives. We must remember the comprehensive and systematic nature of worldviews: virtually all evidence, all reasoning, all experiences, all data can be interpreted in various ways. No data are completely theory-neutral; there are never knock-down arguments or crucial experiments or unambiguous facts that point us to the truth of one rather than another worldview.

True, there are relatively uncontroversial facts on which most everyone can agree; for example, we may be able to resolve certain matters of biblical chronology through archaeological or historical research. But it is doubtful that any scientifically ascertained facts could ever verify or falsify a foundational religious claim—the claim of Jesus' resurrection, for example. What possible evidence would be sufficiently unambiguous, sufficiently closed to rival interpretations? What uncontroversial evidence is there for or against immortality or reincarnation? It is one thing to solve problems and determine what the facts are according to fairly well defined criteria *within* a worldview (be it liberal Christian, fundamentalist Christian, Buddhist, scientific, or whatever); it is another, much more difficult thing to solve problems or determine what the facts are, or what they mean, when worldviews *conflict* and we must decide which worldview, which methodology, which criteria of reason and evidence, to think or live within.

Nonetheless, to a considerable extent religious traditions and worldviews *can* be held accountable. Our worldviews do not allow us to make of the world anything that we will, and when worldviews compete some will prove inadequate while others will be more reasonable all things considered. Everyone agrees that the facts do not support the old claim that the earth is the center of the universe; biblical geocentrism is mistaken (or is myth or poetic license). Almost everyone now agrees that slavery is wrong; therefore, biblical tolerance of slavery was wrong. Feminists argue that moral experience demonstrates the shortcomings of biblical patriarchalism; hence we need to rethink the imagery we use to understand God. This, of course, is more controversial. Liberals, who are more open to new ways of thinking, are more likely to revise (or even revolutionize) their core beliefs; conservatives are more resistant—though they too are willing to revise beliefs—at least on the periphery of what they take to be central.

Worldviews are not isolated, abstract, timeless constructs. They evolve, they respond to the discovery of new "facts," they respond to the challenges of

rival interpretations of the world, they are affected by the larger social and cultural world in which they exist. They have a history. Some die so that they are no longer "live" alternatives. Others thrive. Why? In some very informal and imprecise way, worldviews constantly run what William James called "the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience."[36] Some hold up better than others. So it is with religions. (In his book *Religion and Cultural Freedom* E. M. Adams provides a rich and nuanced account of how this should work.)

Even though there are no simple rules, no formulas by which to test the claims of worldviews, it still makes sense to talk of testing them, of holding them responsible to the "total context of human experience." Some will prove more reasonable than others. Of course, when we know only one tradition well, most all evidence can be interpreted to support it. It is only when we become familiar with other worldviews and take them seriously that we see that human experience may support one better than the other. No simple "fact" of history or nature will settle any of the big questions; but human experience can cumulatively affect our reading of the plausibility of religious (and other scientific and philosophical) claims, at least when we have alternative ways of reading experience available to us, when we can assess the fit with various worldviews. The trick is to recognize the subtle interplay between facts, human experience, and worldviews. Needless to say, once we decide to take the alternatives seriously it is not so easy, on critical grounds, to decide where the truth lies. A good deal of humility is in order.

Students must come to appreciate that at least when dealing with fundamental questions—regarding nature, psychology, justice, history, and morality, for example—they cannot uncritically assume that the truth is made available to them, clear-cut, in any particular course. In biology classes students learn something of the views of (most) biologists; in economics classes students learn something of the views of (most) economists. A good curriculum will provide them with various perspectives on the world, but education is not a matter of uncritically accepting each of these accounts in turn. Rather, students are educated when they have the ability to enter into an informed and reasoned discussion about where the truth lies, *all things considered, all courses considered.* Education requires that we be reasonable, not just rational.

The logic of education—and the idea of taking religion seriously—pulls us toward *judgment,* toward conclusions about the reasonableness of alternative ways of understanding the world. But we can stop short. The various elements of critical thinking I have described—openness, critical distance, comparative criticism, and the appeal to cumulative experience—are all compat-

ible with what I have called neutrality as fairness. Nothing that I have described commits us to taking sides on religion. In chapter 7 I will argue that there are good reasons for maintaining neutrality and suspending judgment about the truth of contending religious and secular ways of understanding the world in public schools. In chapter 8 I will argue that academic freedom protects the right of university scholars to take sides.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism comes in several shapes and sizes. Some varieties fit nicely with liberal education as I understand it; others do not fit at all.

If multiculturalism is simply the movement to understand the various cultures and subcultures that make up our world (and our neighborhoods), it is good, important, and relatively uncontroversial. Indeed, it is an integral part of a liberal education.

Multiculturalism often means something stronger, however. Many multiculturalists argue that the particular interests, ideas, and values of men, of whites, of people in the West, and of elites have been uncritically taken to be canonical and normative for Americans, when in fact they are deeply controversial. One of the truly exciting and important developments of recent scholarship has been the recovery of the lost stories, ideas, and values of people who never had the power to write history and shape the canon.

For much of American history, for example, the orthodox American story began in Puritan New England—in spite of the fact that Anglican Englishmen had already settled Virginia, Catholic Spaniards had preceded them to America, and the Native Americans, with their own religious traditions, were here first. Many other religious stories—such as those of the African slaves—were submerged and even lost as Protestant Christianity shaped the institutions and historical self-consciousness of America, defining who "we" were in the nineteenth century.

In part because Protestant Christianity did so much to shape American education and culture, many educators and members of minority religious traditions have been suspicious of religious voices (and particularly conservative Protestant voices) in the curriculum. But, as we have seen, things have changed. Secular ideas and values shape the new orthodoxy, and religious voices are now lost from the conversation. It is important that students hear women's voices, the voices of ethnic and cultural minorities in America, and Third World voices; but multiculturalism should also require that they hear religious voices.

Millions of Americans continue to find the most profound sources of meaning in their lives in their religious subcultures; indeed, many people define themselves not in terms of ethnicity or nationality but of religion. Their primary identities are as Christians or Muslims, not as whites or Americans. The *Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education* issued by the National Council for the Social Studies acknowledge that people's identities may stem from "gender, social class, occupation, political affiliation, or religion" (although the guidelines then ignore everything but ethnic identities).[37] Of course, ethnic and cultural identities are often closely wrapped up with religion; only in the modern West has religion been so sharply separated from the rest of culture.

A purpose of a liberal education is to move students beyond any narrow cultural orthodoxy so that they can appreciate and think critically about the diversity of stories—and the variety of religions—that go to make up the cultures of America and the world.

There are three dangers in multiculturalism. We might call the first the danger of reverse discrimination. In affirming and giving voice to previously neglected (and subjected) cultures and subcultures, multiculturalists sometimes overcompensate for past injustices, conveying to students a distorted sense of America's or the West's contributions to progress. Indeed, a good deal of multiculturalism disparages American values and Western civilization. There is something to be said for Arthur Schlesinger's observation that the "sins of the West are no worse than the sins of Asia or of the Middle East or of Africa," and there is this mitigating factor: the "crimes of the West have produced their own antidotes. They have provoked great movements to end slavery, to raise the status of women, to abolish torture, to combat racism, to defend freedom of inquiry and expression, to advance personal liberty and human rights."[38] The virtues of America and the West are considerable—as, no doubt, are its vices.

The second danger is that of transforming education into therapy. According to the 1989 New York State Task Force on Minorities, the "systematic bias toward European culture and its derivatives" of the curriculum has had "a terribly damaging effect on the psyche of young people of African, Asian, Latino, and Native American descent."[39] Because of similar concerns the National Council for the Social Studies prescribes a curriculum in which students learn "to feel positively about their identities" and "develop a high regard for their original languages and cultures." Students should learn that every ethnic group has "worth and dignity." Hence, comparative approaches to ethnic experiences must be "descriptive and analytical, not normative or judgmental" and teachers "should avoid, as much as possible, labeling any perspective

'right' or 'wrong.'"[40] This variation on the self-esteem movement in education dictates that all cultures and subcultures be respected equally.

Of course, cultures are not just different, they have *conflicting* beliefs and values, and this makes it difficult to affirm all of the alternatives. Are we to render no judgments about the relative merits of American sexual equality and the overt sexism of many Third World cultures? Can we teach students to respect fundamentalist and gay subcultures equally? Should we uncritically affirm Nazi culture and the apartheid culture of South Africa?

Robert Fullinwider argues, rightly I believe, that multiculturalists should want students "to avoid *smug, arrogant* judgments . . . [and] the *obtuseness* of those who hear and do not understand, see and do not perceive, and who, in their obtuseness, unfairly *denigrate* or *disparage* other people's accomplishments and traditions." The problem is that in response they "recommend an uncritical attitude toward cultural difference when they should be describing instead the virtues of an open mind."[41] In any case, as Charles Taylor notes, a "favorable judgment on demand is nonsense." Such a judgment would be "an act of breathtaking condescension. No one can really mean it as a genuine act of respect."[42]

Indeed, for us to impose our sense of moral equality on all cultures is to fail to take them seriously, for just as every religion claims to possess the truth, so every culture claims to embody the True and the Good. Happily, a bigoted ethnocentrism and a mindlessly nonjudgmental approach are not the only alternatives. It is possible to take other cultures seriously, grant them a place of importance in the curriculum, try to understand them from the inside, and engage them in the effort to discover more sensitive and reasonable ways of thinking and living for all involved—just as I have proposed for the study of religion.

We can get at the third danger of multiculturalism through a distinction Diane Ravitch has drawn between "pluralistic" and "particularistic" multiculturalism: "The pluralists seek a richer common culture; the particularists insist that no common culture is possible or desirable."[43] For Stanley Fish, as for many particularists on the Cultural Left, there is no such thing as common culture: "Someone who says to you 'This is *our* common ground,' is really saying, 'This is *my* common ground, the substratum of assumptions and values that produces *my* judgments.'"[44] Whose values are embodied in the canon? Those with power; the traditional elites. Education, in such an account, is a matter of political struggle. All values are *local* values, and all moral visions are *particular* moral visions. One variation on this theme is Afrocentric education, which conceptualizes all experience in African categories. As Molefi Kete Asanti puts it, if a thought or a value "cannot be found in our culture or

in our history, it is dispensed with quickly" because "it is just not ours."[45] Of course, one's local culture may be liberal and its vision broad and tolerant; but there is nothing in the logic of particularism that requires this, and there is a good deal that militates against it.

Multicultural particularism is, I suggest, a tremendously dangerous notion, for it cannot make sense of the binding obligation educators have to take seriously alternative ways of thinking about the world or the common sense intuition we have that our judgments are likely to be more reasonable for having done so. Perhaps most troubling, particularism isolates us from each other, and at a time of growing ethnic, nationalistic, and religious violence in the world, this is worrisome.

Ravitch notes that one of "the primary purposes of public education has been to create a national community, a definition of citizenship and culture that is both expansive and *inclusive*."[46] As we've seen, the old common schools fell well short of inclusivity; to some considerable extent it was their purpose to teach students an all too "particularistic" version of Protestant Americanism. Given the vestiges of such education, there is, no doubt, a need for a "pluralistic" multiculturalism that requires students to learn something of the history and culture of women as well as men, of minorities as well as whites, of the Third World as well as Europe and America. And, as I have suggested, given the secular nature of the new orthodoxy, multiculturalism requires that religious voices be included in the conversation.

I would argue (as I did in chapter 3) that in spite of our deep differences, there continues to be an "overlapping moral consensus" that grounds at least a few common moral and civic virtues. Indeed, our obligation to seek peace in a multicultural society commits us to the kind of constitutional framework we have as a nation—a framework that requires us to *take each other seriously*, to treat each other with respect, to reason with each other in the public sphere and make ours a better society. If our country is to survive, we must learn to live and work together within the shared framework that our Constitution and civic institutions provide. The American project, for all its flaws—and there are many—is a good and valuable project. America was the first nation in the world to be formed not on the basis of blood or baptism but moral principle. There's a great deal to be said for this, and students should come to appreciate it.

Two final comments. Arthur Schlesinger argues that the underlying philosophy of multiculturalism is that "America is not a nation of individuals at all but a nation of groups, that ethnicity is the defining experience for most Americans." Schlesinger contrasts this with a notion he clearly favors (good

liberal that he is)—that we should instead understand ourselves as a "nation composed of individuals making [our] own unhampered choices."[47]

But this is problematic as well, for we are who "we" are, in large part, because we are members of communities defined by ethnicity, class, sex, region, nation, and religion. To think of ourselves as mere individuals, rather than as members of "communities of memory" (to use Robert Bellah's fine phrase) is to have an impoverished notion of who we are. A liberal education should provide students with a deep understanding of the various communities that make claims on them and contribute to defining their identities. *And* it should provide them with the intellectual and imaginative resources to reflect on their own and other cultures, thus allowing them to be individuals, with some critical distance on those communities as well.

Finally, because multiculturalism is so deeply controversial, it should not be taught to students uncritically (in any of its guises). If we are to teach students to think critically about the world, they must have some sense of the national debate going on about multiculturalism. Students certainly should not be taught to believe uncritically the traditional accounts of Western Civilization courses *or* any of the newer multicultural responses to it. They should acquire some sense of what is at issue in the debate.

Textbooks and Primary Sources

John Stuart Mill argued that it is not enough for students to hear the arguments of adversaries from their own teachers, "presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations." If justice is to be done, Mill claimed, students must hear the arguments "from persons who actually believe them . . . in their most plausible and persuasive form. . . . Ninety-nine in a hundred of what are called educated men . . . have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them . . . and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profane."[48]

Textbooks are written from a point of view, from within a worldview that defines for its author what is true, what counts as a fact, what is normal, what is reasonable, and what is good. As a result, what students encounter in a textbook is the world (or a particular subject) as it appears when strained through the author's conceptual net of interpretation. Inevitably, the emotional power and logical coherence of alternative understandings of the world are strained out of the account. Unhappily, most authors give their readers no sense of the controversial nature of their basic philosophical commitments.

If we are to take any point of view—secular or religious—seriously, we must let its advocates tell their own stories. No textbook can convey what Jeremiah or Paul or Martin Luther King, Jr., had to say as well as they themselves can. The one- or two-page excerpts of primary source readings found in many textbooks help, but not much, for the power of a position depends on seeing it in the context of supporting evidence and assumptions, and this requires a more substantial dose of material than the few excerpted paragraphs can provide. Anthologies and supplementary primary source material, including imaginative literature and art, are essential. True, primary source material is difficult and takes time to work through, particularly when it is historical or from a non-Western culture, but the effort must be made. Students should read Jewish accounts of the Holocaust, fundamentalist arguments against abortion, papal encyclicals on economic justice, and much else.

No doubt textbooks remain essential for some purposes. For younger children the coherence of a textbook (dealing with relatively uncontroversial material) may be as important as the encounter with contending points of view is for older students. It takes some intellectual and emotional maturity to work one's way through the often confusing mix of voices found in anthologies. But when textbooks do deal with controversial material, they must be written with more sophistication. They must make students aware of the philosophical baggage they carry with them and alternative ways of thinking about their subject matter. I have suggested that there should be at least an opening chapter in each text devoted to some such discussion. Still, for the purposes of liberal education—for high school and undergraduate students—anthologies and primary source material are absolutely vital.

Arguments against Religion in Education

Religion Is No Longer a Live Alternative .The reason God and religion are absent from most scholarly work—and textbooks—is that they are no longer live alternatives for most scholars, at least within the context of their disciplines. If God was a live option, religion could not be ignored with such casual impunity. Religion is close to being academically dead. Nonetheless, religion continues to play a role of some importance in people's lives and in our public life. Religion is culturally live.

The world can be understood in ways that are both academically and culturally dead. Ancient Greek science and Babylonian religion are dead everywhere, and I make no claim that we must now treat them as live alternatives and take them seriously. Our question is whether the (near) death of religion within the academic world justifies its exclusion from courses and textbooks

that deal with the contemporary world. Should students be taught only what (most) scholars take to be reasonable possibilities, or should they be exposed to points of view that may not be reputable among scholars? (I take it that virtually no one objects to the study of religion in historical settings.)

First, it is important that religion is far from dead, even among intellectuals. There are first-rate scholars (including some at our best research universities) who write with great insight about the conventional wisdom of their disciplines but argue for religious alternatives to the prevailing orthodoxies, and the secular majority should feel some obligation to take them seriously in constructing curricula and writing textbooks. Of course, many of these scholars are segregated into religious institutions, partly as a matter of professional choice (this is where they feel most comfortable) and partly because the orthodox majority makes little room for them in secular universities.

It is worth noting that religion continues to be a matter of some personal, if not scholarly, importance to the majority of university faculty members. According to a 1985 Carnegie Foundation survey, 61 percent of them claimed moderate or deep religious convictions, while 32.2 percent were largely indifferent, and 6.8 percent were opposed to religion.[49] (Scholars, like all of us, have developed an extraordinary ability to segregate their personal and intellectual worlds.)

Second, the purpose of liberal education is to prepare students for living in the world, not for graduate work or professional school. Initiating students into the conventional wisdom of the respective disciplines does not, by itself, constitute an adequate education. Whatever continues to shape people's lives and thinking in some profound way, should be taken seriously in the curriculum. Religion continues to be a force of profound importance in people's lives and in our nonacademic intellectual life.

But if we take religion seriously, must we also take astrology or flat-earthers or witchcraft seriously? Of course not. I do not deny that astrology, for example, is of some importance to a fair number of people, and perhaps of considerable importance to a very small number of people, but its cultural and intellectual significance is very small when compared with religion. It has nothing of the intellectual or cultural significance that religion continues to have. We are certain to encounter problems in drawing the line between what is and is not intellectually respectable, what is and is not culturally live, what is and is not profoundly important, but on any of these counts religion is surely on the side of the line that warrants inclusion. And surely a *liberal* education requires us to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

The Fear of Controversy .Textbook publishers and school administrators often claim that religion is too controversial to include in textbooks and the

curriculum, at least at the public school level. Religion *is* controversial. My argument here is that including religion in the curriculum will prove, in the end, to be less controversial than any other proposal. In a highly pluralistic culture, and in the long run, the least controversial position is the one that takes everyone's position seriously.

Alternative proposals—to ignore religion completely or to privilege one particular religion—would inevitably prove more controversial because with either of these alternatives some significant group will suffer discrimination and will object. In fact, it is the absence of religion from public schools that generates much of the existing controversy over education (such as the voucher movement). I am proposing articles of peace: taking all (major) culturally live alternatives seriously. It may be that almost everyone would prefer to have only their own view of the world taught, but this would be a recipe for conflict. Surely everyone's second choice would be to have *all* points of view taken seriously; this allows peace. It allows us to live together civilly with our deepest differences.

The conventional wisdom has been that neutrality (and peace) can be maintained by ignoring religion, but such neutrality is chimerical. Education simply cannot avoid dealing with matters that are religiously contested, and points of view that are hostile to religion pervade the curriculum now. Of course, so long as people believe that a secular education is neutral, the absence of religion may be (relatively) uncontroversial. But too many people know that secular education is not neutral.

The proposal to incorporate religion into education is not so controversial as some people fear. According to a 1986 Gallup Poll, the great majority of Americans approve of teaching about the major religions of the world (79 percent) and using the Bible in literature, history, and social studies classes (75 percent) in public schools.[50] A more thorough survey of five hundred Americans, employing hour-long interviews, found that 82 percent believed that neutral religious education should be *required* in public schools. Wilson and Natale, who conducted the survey, write:

> There is, we believe, sufficient evidence to show that the promotion of a neutral, non-indoctrinatory education in . . . religion is not only publicly acceptable but also publicly demanded, at least in the USA and the UK. That is on any account a very striking result. Before undertaking the survey, many people told us that in the USA public opinion was firmly fixed against any sort of religious education—a view made plausible by its absence in the public school system. This turns out not to be true, for a fairly simple but extremely important reason: because (to put it

bluntly) *nobody has taken the trouble to canvass opinion in sufficient depth or with sufficient conceptual sophistication.*[51]

My own experience in conducting workshops and seminars on religion and public education for wary teachers, administrators, and school board members leads me to a similar conclusion. Once there is some understanding of the First Amendment, American religious pluralism, and fairness to all points of view, virtually everyone finds it proper and important to include religion in public education.

Perhaps the most impressive evidence in this regard is furnished by a document entitled *Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers*, cosponsored by a group of seventeen national religious and educational organizations, including the American Jewish Congress, the Islamic Society of North America, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, the AFT, the NEA, the American Association of School Administrators, and the National School Boards Associations.

> Q. Why should study about religion be included in the public school curriculum?
>
> A. Because religion plays significant roles in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. Omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant. Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices, and concepts of the various religions makes much of history, literature, art, and contemporary life unintelligible.
>
> Study about religion is also important if students are to value religious liberty, the first freedom guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Moreover, knowledge of the roles of religion in the past and present promotes cross-cultural understanding essential to democracy and world peace.[52]

There is a striking consensus about the importance of religion in the public school curriculum—at least at the national level.

The Inevitability of Ignorance and Prejudice. Many secularists and members of minority religious traditions who might accept my argument in principle believe that in practice it is extremely dangerous to include religion in the curriculum, for teachers, no matter how well intentioned, will inevitably display their ignorance and prejudices in teaching about religion. In a predominantly Christian culture, alternatives to Christianity won't be treated knowledgeably or fairly.

Given the history of public schooling, such concerns are neither surprising nor unreasonable. The novelist Cynthia Ozick has written of her "childhood dread of a school-imposed Christmas" and her "undiluted memory of the shock of public punishment for refusing to sing Christian hymns at school assembly. The pain of this inescapably overt and helpless nonconformism, forced on a diffident and profoundly frightened Jewish child, has left its lifelong mark."[53] For about a century, Lance Sussman notes, "no other issue in American Jewish life has evoked as much emotion and energy at the local level as the struggle to keep religion out of the schools."[54] Some skepticism about my proposal will come naturally to members of religious minorities who have suffered deeply felt discrimination.

I am arguing, of course, for the *study* of religion, not the *practice* of any religion in schools, and in the next chapter I will make clear why I believe the study of religion should be religiously neutral (at least at the K–12 level). Teaching about religion gives no license to proselytize or indoctrinate. Indeed, a large part of my argument for teaching about religion is to *avoid* indoctrination—secular indoctrination (a concern to many members of minority religious traditions). Still, the great majority of teachers and textbook authors are not competent to teach about religions other than their own—and they may not even be particularly well informed about their own religion (if they have one). Moreover, most teachers have too little understanding of the constitutional constraints within which they must teach. Shouldn't we then stop all teaching about religion until teachers are prepared to do it right?

There are two problems with this proposal. First, because a secular curriculum is not neutral, it makes no sense to propose that we stop teaching about religion. So long as we teach views that conflict with religious views we are giving answers to religiously contested questions. We are, in effect, teaching about it; we are teaching that it is irrelevant or mistaken.

Second, teachers must deal with religion, for in parts of the curriculum—in history and literature, for example—it is unavoidable. Indeed, much proselytizing goes on now; teachers are biased now; textbooks have distorted and inadequate accounts of minority religions now. The solution, I believe, is not to leave "well" enough alone, to allow bad and biased education to continue, but to make teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum planners self-conscious about what they are doing—and improve teacher education and textbooks.

The task of improving teacher education is formidable, but the task of improving textbooks (or making anthologies of primary source material available) is less so. There are many scholars capable of writing good textbooks

and editing good anthologies. Indeed, a fair amount of good material exists now; it is just not widely known. It does require some money.

Conclusions

A good liberal education should map out the cultural space in which we find ourselves. It should help us fill in our identities, locating us in the stories, the communities of memory, into which we are born. It should root us in the past.

It should also give us the resources for thinking critically about the past and the communities of which we are a part. Our world is inescapably pluralistic, and there is a great deal about which we disagree profoundly. A good liberal education will initiate students into a conversation about these matters, taking seriously the various major points of view. I agree with Gerald Graff when he argues that "the best solution to today's conflicts over culture is to teach the conflicts themselves, making them part of our object of study and using them as a new kind of organizing principle to give the curriculum the clarity and focus that almost all sides now agree it lacks. In a sense this solution constitutes a compromise, for it is one that conflicting parties can agree on."[55] If students are to be liberally educated they must understand the alternatives. They must be taught the conflicts. But we instead paper over the conflicts. No discipline feels any obligation to take points of view in other disciplines (much less the points of view of various religions) seriously, and we make little effort to make sure that the curriculum is structured in such a way that students will hear all the voices, be able to relate them coherently to each other, and recognize the conflicts. Education is a confusing babble of voices.

This being the case, I have advanced two claims. First, because religion is important, because it is complex, and because the conventional wisdom of all academic disciplines is so uncritically secular, the curriculum, at both the high school and undergraduate levels should require that students take at least one course in religion. That course must give them the intellectual and imaginative resources to take religion seriously. Religious voices must have access to the conversation. Second, introductory courses in the various disciplines should locate the conventional wisdom of those disciplines within the larger curricular conversation. Students should be provided with some philosophical perspective on the basic assumptions of each discipline and their relationship to the major alternatives—religious alternatives included. Teachers and textbooks must do what they can to make the conversation coherent.