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### The devil is in the details: in America, can you really say "God" in school?

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## The devil is in the details: in America, can you really say “God” in school?

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This article examines conflicts that have unfolded over the past 75 years regarding the separation of church and state in American public education. Through discussion of the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses as articulated in the First Amendment to the *US Constitution*, as well as influential court cases that have set legal precedent and driven educational policy, it examines what is typically referred to as the “separation” mandate. This mandate, codified in the Constitution and interpreted and upheld by the courts, concerns the inclusion of religion in public schools, including discussion of religious history and ideology in the classroom setting as well as tolerance for religious exercise through such venues as school prayer and/or the celebration of religious holidays. It advances the argument that the controversy and litigation that have surrounded issues regarding separation of church and state in the realm of public education have prompted schools to remove most study and discussion of religious history and culture from the curriculum. This move, although understandable, is unfortunate because it denies them exposure to the religious ideologies and historical events that comprise their history and continue to influence the world in which they live. More troubling, it fails to equip them with a fundamental understanding of religious difference they need to co-exist and practice tolerance in a religiously pluralistic society such as our own. For these reasons, the author calls for the incorporation of religious literacy in k-12 public education.

**Keywords:** citizenship; curriculum; policy/politics; diversity; students; teachers

### Introduction

This article examines conflicts that have unfolded over the past 75 years regarding the separation of church and state in the realm of American public education. Through discussion of the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses as articulated in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, as well as influential court cases that have set legal precedent and driven educational policy, it examines what is typically referred to as the “separation” mandate. This mandate, codified in the US Constitution and interpreted and upheld by the judicial system, concerns the inclusion of religion in the realm of public education, including discussion of religious history and ideology in the classroom setting as well as tolerance for religious exercise through such venues as school prayer and/or the celebration of religious holidays. The controversy and litigation that have surrounded these issues regarding separation of church and state in the realm of American public education have prompted most schools to systematically remove the study and discussion of religious history and

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culture from the curriculum. This move, although understandable, is unfortunate because it denies students exposure to the religious ideologies and historical events that comprise their history and continue to influence the world in which they live. Furthermore, it fails to equip them with the fundamental understanding of religious difference they need to co-exist and practice tolerance in a society that always has been and is becoming increasingly more pluralistic in terms of religion. For these reasons, the author advances the argument that religious literacy should be systematically incorporated into the American public school curriculum in grades 1 through 12.

## Background

Historically, American schools have mirrored the Christian-dominated nation they serve, thereby violating the US Constitution's Establishment Clause which mandates separation of church and state in all facets of government. Legally considered "an arm of the state", public schools in America must abide by this mandate by avoiding any and all types of religious advocacy; they have, however, repeatedly failed. Since the days of the one-room school house, school districts across America have set their calendars in deference to Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter, coaches have inspired their players and teams with locker room prayers asking for strength and safety, and principals have invoked God's blessing before sending their graduates out into the world. Nor has the classroom resisted religion's reach, for until the mid-twentieth century, Creationism was routinely taught as scientific fact rather than religious ideology and bible study a centerpiece of daily instruction until banned by the US Supreme Court in 1963 (*Abington v. Schempp*). In both sentiment and practice, religious advocacy has been the *modus operandi* in American public education as Christianity's hegemonic hold has gone largely uncontested, thus rendering the Establishment Clause's separation of church and state little more than an empty promise in the realm of public education.

The mid-twentieth century ushered in new ways of thinking, however, and prompted a steady stream of litigation to challenge Christianity's place of privilege in the public school setting. Expensive, time-consuming and disruptive to the educational process, this litigation resulted in the systematic removal of religion both in and outside of the classroom. Prayers were now forbidden in the locker room, at graduation ceremonies and at baccalaureates, so ending the time-honored tradition of public religious invocation. Religiously-oriented student groups, such as Prayer Around the Flag Pole and Fellowship of Christian Athletes, were told they could no longer meet on school grounds, and many schools abandoned recitation of the *Pledge of Allegiance* because of the phrase "One nation, under God". Of most significance, however, was the decision to remove religious literacy from the curriculum, as fear of controversy and threat of litigation prompted teachers and administrators alike to avoid its study and discussion rather than deal with its inherent controversies.

A democratic society must, however, foster respect for religious diversity, and so in choosing this retreat, schools have disadvantaged students in two fundamental ways:

- (1) They have afforded them minimal familiarity with the religious ideologies and historical events that have comprised their history and influenced the world in which they live.

- (2) They have failed to equip them with the understanding of and appreciation for religious pluralism they need to practice religious tolerance.

For these reasons, religious literacy, controversial though it may be, should hold a place in the public school curriculum. Recent multicultural initiatives have shown us that understanding of diversity is prerequisite to tolerance and social stability, and they have produced a generation of youth more accepting of the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic differences that divided their parents' generation. However, it was only by recognizing and talking about these differences that they were resolved. In regard to religion, however, similar yet equally important conversations have been stymied by schools for fear of controversy and costly litigation. America's schools have taken the path of least resistance, but it is a misguided one because in refusing to acknowledge religious pluralism, they have undermined the very fabric of religious tolerance and acceptance they should proudly endorse.

### Literature review

The twentieth century experienced unprecedented controversy regarding separation of church and state in American public education as court cases made their way through all levels of the judicial system. At issue was the First Amendment's mandate, commonly referred to as the Establishment Clause, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof". Famously articulated in a letter authored in 1802, Thomas Jefferson demanded a "wall of separation between church and state" so that this new nation might avoid the division and bloodshed born of theocracy. Jefferson, along with fellow founders Franklin, Washington, Hamilton and Adams, was forever mindful of the havoc that theocracy had exercised in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. The Spanish Inquisition, which reared its ugly head from 1233 to 1808 and claimed an estimated 32,000 lives, would have been deeply etched in their consciousness as well as the religious wars that had plagued and devastated Europe for decades. Ellerbe (1995) insightfully surveys these religious conflicts including the French religious wars waged between Catholics and Protestants that fragmented French society and culminated in the bloody St Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 24 August 1572. This infamous day in history witnessed the murder of thousands of Protestant Huguenots; an estimated 3000 men, women and children were killed in Paris and nearly 70,000 more in the provinces, and the horrific event prompted the great Enlightenment thinker Voltaire to channel much of his intellectual energy into combatting the fanaticism that inextricably linked itself to the union of church and state. His life became a campaign against what he considered dangers caused by the excessive religious enthusiasm and entanglement he had witnessed in France. Years of strife had taught him that a "man should never...attempt to win over a fanatic by strength of reasoning", and that a state must tolerate religious plurality and practice separation of church and state (Voltaire [1733a] 1778, 11). His views soon alienated him with France's absolutist monarch, Louis XV, though, who considered religious solidarity an essential component for national security, and so the philosophé wisely opted for a voluntary exile to England rather than a second sojourn to the favorite stomping ground of France's political dissidents – the Bastille.

The exile proved fortuitous for Voltaire, however, because in England he found the perfect balance of religious non-conformity and toleration. In *Letters Concerning*

the English Nation (1733), he applauds the religious pluralism that was so prevalent and accepted in England: “It is the number of religions that allow for toleration; if there were only one, there exists the danger of tyranny; only two they would cut each other’s throats, but there are 30 and they live happily together and in peace” (Voltaire [1733b] 1980 , 39). Such pluralism was, in Voltaire’s estimation, the only means of eliminating the religious antagonism and fanaticism that had caused so much suffering and division in his beloved France and across the continent.

Yet Voltaire was no atheist. He recognized the role that religion played in fulfilling individual metaphysical needs and ensuring social cohesion and stability. He understood humanity’s need for religion, but it must be a religion driven by reason and divorced from the fanaticism that had shattered much of Europe. Hence, along with fellow Enlightenment thinkers Rousseau, Locke and Kant, he poised his pen to target religious orthodoxy, challenge the divine right of kings and, most importantly, employ human reason to combat ignorance, superstition and tyranny. However subversive their thoughts and actions, God remained a steadfast part of their vision, for it was God who championed common sense and tolerance and sanctioned the authority of the state. Yet this new Enlightenment God must never privilege the call of Catholics, Protestants, Muslims or Jews and forever refrain from granting allegiance to a particular religious ideology. This paradigmatic shift, engendered by the prolific pens of these Enlightenment thinkers, brought down many of the great houses of Europe including the English Stuarts, the French Bourbons and the Austrian Hapsburgs; once untouchable as God’s anointed representatives on earth, they were forced to step aside as the old world slipped into the shadows and the new embraced the dawn of civil religion.

It was left to Rousseau to succinctly outline the principles of this new “civil religion” that would revolutionize much of Europe and shape the political and cultural landscape of eighteenth century American thought. In *The Social Contract* (Rousseau [1762] 1968), he voices his belief in a divinity but explains that the interests of this divinity are limited to the state rather than any particular religious ideology or organized religion. Like Voltaire, Rousseau concedes the necessity of God’s existence for the fulfillment of mankind’s metaphysical needs, but he makes clear that God’s primary purpose is to sanction the authority of the state. It is to this end, then, that Rousseau appropriates religious ideology to advance the notion of civil religion that would soon be adopted by the founders of a new nation.

Rousseau’s treatise provides a context for understanding the civil religion appropriated by the American founding fathers in their effort to create a new nation and insulate it from the dangers of religious tyranny. Recognizing the importance that religion exercised in politics, George Washington described it as a “necessary spring of popular government” in his 1796 *Farewell Address*; he goes on to name “religion and morality” as the “great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens”, arguing that “national morality”, could not exist “in exclusion of religious principle” ([www.senate.gov/artandhistory/minute/Washington's\\_Farewell\\_Address.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/minute/Washington's_Farewell_Address.htm)).

His successor, John Adams, shared similar sentiments, arguing that statesmen “may plan and speculate for Liberty, but it is Religion and Morality alone, which can establish the Principles upon which Freedom can securely stand” ([www.senate.gov/artandhistory/minute/Adams.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/minute/Adams.htm)).

Even Thomas Jefferson, considered the most agnostic of the founders, invoked God’s blessing in his writing of the *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these

truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" ([www.senate.gov/artandhistory/minute/Jefferson.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/minute/Jefferson.htm)). Like Voltaire and Rousseau, the American founding fathers recognized civil religion's inherent power and calming influence upon the general populace and thus consciously appropriated it for their new nation state. Since its inception, then, civil religion has held a place of prominence in American government, granting legitimacy to what was at the time a grand political experiment yet in its infancy and in need of divine sanction to ensure its credibility both at home and abroad.

Some critics have contended, however, that the very existence of civil religion in American political life violates the First Amendment's Establishment Clause guaranteeing separation of church and state. Yet civil religion precludes both advocacy and establishment of a particular religious ideology and thus in no way undermines this most fundamental constitutional guarantee. Civil religion exists in America today, as Rousseau first envisioned it, to sanction the authority of the state, and so it continues to function, as Bellah (1991) explains, as an "institutionalized collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation expressed in our founding documents and presidents' inaugural addresses" (80). It professes to Americans the belief that their nation is subject to God's laws and the promise that in abiding by them, they and their country will be guided and protected by God's grace. The relationship fomented of this union is a reciprocal one, where the American people honor God and God in turn protects their nation. This reciprocity is perpetuated through a host of iconic symbols such as the US flag, national memorials dedicated to larger-than-life political heroes such as Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln, ritualistic holidays such as Memorial Day, Veteran's Day and Independence Day, and testaments of faith such as the Pledge of Allegiance, the national anthem and solemn oaths of office. Nowhere is it more celebrated though than in the national motto, "In God We Trust", sanctioned in 1955 by an Act of Congress and prominently displayed upon every US coin and dollar bill. Finally, it is continuously etched into the American consciousness by US presidents who routinely invoke its power in both their daily and state of the union addresses. Presidents Ronald Regan and George H. Bush ended 90% of their speeches with the words "God bless America", whereas President Bill Clinton used the words in 89% of his speeches and President George W. Bush in 84% of his speeches. Current President Barrack Obama has continued the tradition, concluding his 2 May 2011 speech announcing the death of terrorist leader Osama bin Laden with the following words: "May God bless you. And may God bless the United States of America" (Domke and Coe 2010). Civil religion permeates nearly every facet of American government, and so its presence, not surprisingly, has not only invited minimal controversy but also become standard practice for most Americans. The same cannot be said, however, for the nation's schools where the existence of religion, even when civil in tone, has invariably invited both controversy and protest. Although few Americans have questioned the legitimacy of civil religion in government, many have problematized its presence in the realm of public education, and so students, parents and even teachers have used the US legal system to determine just what separation of church and state means in the realm of public education.

The nature of this controversy has focused upon the delicate balance between the free exercise of religion and the establishment thereof. The First Amendment to the US Constitution prohibits any establishment of religion in government; public

schools, considered by the courts an “arm of the state”, must comply with this mandate and not “entangle” themselves with religion in any way. Yet the First Amendment also guarantees the free exercise of religion, and so schools must be equally careful not to infringe upon their students’ right to religious expression. However, even in a democracy, no right is absolute, for in their efforts to preserve and protect, governments must invariably consider the “greater good”. This consideration explains why US courts have typically allowed schools to limit their students’ exercise of religious expression when it poses a “clear and present danger” or “material and substantial disruption”. The scope of this limitation is the focus of on-going and heated debate in the sphere of American public education, though, and so what follows is an analysis of select court cases that, in challenging the reach of both the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause, have deeply impacted and driven educational policy in America.

## Discussion

### *Schools as the battleground*

One of the first cases to challenge separation of church and state in American public education was *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) which challenged the use of federal money for parochial school busing. Plaintiffs contended that the award of federal tax dollars to a religious institution violated the Establishment Clause because it constituted advocacy. In offering his opinion, US Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black referenced Jefferson’s ideological mandate which held that the “establishment of the religious clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the federal government can set up a church” (Alexander and Alexander 2011, 121). Consequently, majority opinion ruled that in this instance federal money awarded to parochial schools did not violate separation of church and state as it did not result in “entanglement”. However, the justices were unanimous in their position that the Establishment Clause mandated distinct separation of religion and government, and this legal paradigm profoundly impacted future court rulings and legislation. In terms of public education, the case established an important legal precedent – that schools functioned as an arm of the state and as such must avoid advocacy and involvement in all matters of religion.

Additional concerns with separation of church and state surfaced nearly two decades later in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) when a parent challenged a Pennsylvania state statute which required the reading of the Bible in public school. The case ascended to the US Supreme Court which ruled that mandatory bible reading for the purposes of religious study was a violation of the Establishment Clause. However, in offering his written opinion, Justice Clark was careful to differentiate between secular and religious study: “It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities...when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education” (Alexander and Alexander 2011, 171). The distinction is an important one because it sanctions secular study of the Bible in school, meaning that it could be read, taught and discussed in the classroom when “presented objectively” and not employed to promote Judeo or Christian religious ideology.

Despite this ruling, the vast majority of American school boards, administrators and teachers have willfully avoided the inclusion of secular religious study in the curriculum because of its inherent controversy and potential for costly and

time-consuming litigation. Theirs has been a path of least resistance, but it is a misguided one, for in its refusal to include religious literacy in the curriculum, the American educational system is seriously compromising its children's education. Certain events in history, for example, cannot be studied in a substantive way without delving into the religious events and ideologies that fueled them. Although the medieval crusades serve as a case in point, the examples are endless including heresy trials and witch-hunts staged throughout most of Europe and even in the US in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries; warfare waged through the auspices of religion including the 100 Years War which ravished most of Europe, the French religious wars between Protestant Huguenots and Catholics, and the English Civil Wars which pitted Puritans against Anglicans. Furthermore, much of the world's greatest literature loses its meaning without an understanding of the religious context in which it was authored. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* serves as a case in point, as appreciation is dependent upon an awareness of Catholic ideology and church bureaucracy, for the role that religious pilgrimages played in medieval society and the Church's views of sin and salvation are prerequisite to understanding the allegorical journey of Chaucer's pilgrims. Nor could discussion of Milton's great epic masterpiece *Paradise Lost* unfold without cognizance of Adam and Eve's first disobedience as recorded in the Old Testament. A pedagogy that brings religious history and ideology into the classroom as a means of providing a context is necessary for any type of meaningful analysis. Furthermore, it does not violate the US Supreme Court's mandate for separation of church and state in public education as articulated in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) as religion would be "presented objectively" with no hint of advocacy.

The criteria set forth by the US Supreme Court to measure the delicate balance between secular religious study and advocacy was famously articulated in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971), and the three-pronged test the case set forth became the benchmark for determining violation of church and state in the realm of American public education:

- (1) Schools must do nothing to prohibit or promote religion.
- (2) Schools must be motivated by a secular purpose.
- (3) Schools must avoid excessive entanglement.

In articulating this criteria, the US Supreme Court upheld the delicate balance its founding fathers put into place – namely that the government must allow for the free expression of religion while simultaneously avoiding advocacy of it. *Lemon v. Kurzman* (1971) provides this litmus test, but even the highest court in the land is comprised of human beings and thus subject to the personal beliefs and convictions of those who fill its ranks. The legal landscape is further complicated by the transient nature of the judiciary branch, and so what one US Supreme Court rules, another might overturn a few years later. This protean nature of the American court system, particularly in regard to religion in the realm of public education, is evident in the litany of contradictory rulings that have been delivered over the past five decades.

One area that has shown consistency, however, involves school prayer where US justices have been remarkably steadfast when determining that which constitutes free exercise of religion and that which violates the prohibition thereof. In *Wallace v. Jaffree* (1985), the US Supreme Court ruled that silent meditation or voluntary

prayer violated separation of church and state because the prayer was “school-sponsored”. By requiring all students to participate, the school was not only advocating religion but also compromising student rights. The practice violated all three prongs of the Lemon Test in that it promoted religion, could not claim a secular purpose and resulted in excessive entanglement. This decision was reaffirmed seven years later in *Lee v. Weisman* (1992) when the US Supreme Court held in a 5-4 decision that school-sponsored prayer at high school graduation ceremonies violated the Constitution’s First Amendment. Controversial and efficacious, the ruling’s consequences were felt far and wide as high schools across the nation begrudgingly surrendered the time-honored tradition of reciting a prayer as a good-will offering to their graduates.

It is significant to note that these prayers were almost always delivered by local clergy who harkened from various religious affiliations, who were elected by the graduating senior class, and who typically delivered them in a non-denominational manner. Furthermore, the tradition, deemed “unconstitutional” by the US Supreme Court, ironically echoed that practiced by US senators, representatives and even presidents in the nation’s capital who routinely invoked a higher power in their public addresses. Domke and Coe (2010) note that throughout their presidencies, Ronald Regan, George H. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush consistently invoked the notion of “God” in their public addresses, a tradition that current President Obama has continued. The fact that these invocations have solicited minimal attention, much less controversy, suggests that Americans are largely untroubled by them and perhaps even reassured by their nation’s leaders’ call upon “God” to bless their state.

The same cannot be said for America’s public schools which have become a battleground for the voicing of any religious sentiments, non-denominational or civil though they may be. Similar to those voiced by US presidents and legislators, the school prayers that have typically been offered before athletic contests and during graduation ceremonies have been neither Catholic nor Protestant nor Jewish nor Muslim but born of the same civil religion envisioned by Rousseau and perpetuated by the nation’s leaders. However, this similarity has mattered little to numerous US Supreme Court justices who have considered school-sponsored prayer in public school, even when civil in tone, a clear violation of the Constitution’s Establishment Clause. Whereas the nation’s political leaders continue to openly and unapologetically align themselves with “God” through the auspices of civil religion, America’s public schools are granted no such liberties. The court’s position is clear — school-sponsored religious speech will not be tolerated, yet the contradiction forces a compelling question:

Why must American public schools abide by a more limiting interpretation of the Establishment Clause than its nation’s leaders? Even more specifically, why should the rights of religious expression extended to US presidents, senators and representatives be denied to its nation’s schools?

The answer to this question lies in the notion *in loco parentis*, a legal and ethical mandate that the US courts have extended to the American public education system.

*In loco parentis* is a Latin phrase meaning “in place of the parent”. A cornerstone of American public education, it grants schools all legal and moral responsibility for a child’s well-being during the school day, thereby affording considerable

authority and esteem to the teacher; however, it also delivers a daunting professional responsibility in placing a duty of care upon schools that renders them liable should a student be harmed under their watch. In terms of religion, its effects are more nuanced, but through extension, this legal and ethical mandate has prompted US courts to carefully consider an individual teacher's influence upon a student's religious beliefs. Essentially, the judicial system has determined that teachers, because they literally and figuratively take the place of the parent during the school day, wield considerable influence upon their students. Consequently, justices have expressed concern when teachers, whether intentionally or not, exercise "undue" religious influence upon their students because it could be construed as advocacy and a violation of the Establishment Clause. *Cooper v. Eugene SD #4J* (1986) is a case in point, for the Oregon State Supreme Court limited a teacher's right to freely exercise her religious beliefs because, in the court's view, they morphed into advocacy. As a member of the Sikh religion, the teacher wore a dastaar to school each day, but school administrators considered it a blatant symbol of religious affiliation and thus inappropriate in a middle school classroom where students were both "vulnerable and impressionable". Ordered to remove it, the teacher refused, was terminated, and filed a lawsuit claiming her First Amendment right to "free exercise of religion" was violated. Citing the legal precedent *in loco parentis*, the Oregon State Supreme court ruled in favor of the district. The legal precedent is worth noting, for the court clearly privileged the students' rights over the teachers'. In this particular case, the court deemed that the teacher, as an "arm of the state", must limit her free exercise of religion because it was construed as "advocacy" and exercised an undue influence upon minors.

In regard to students, however, the US Supreme Court has consistently protected their right to freely exercise religious beliefs as long as they did not cause a "material and substantial disruption" or pose "a clear and present danger". In *Westside Board of Education v. Mergens* (1990) the court ruled that students' rights to freely exercise their religious beliefs on school grounds must be honored. The controversy centered upon whether students had the right to organize religious groups and use school facilities for regular meetings. The Westside School District argued that the very existence of student religious groups on school grounds and their use of school facilities caused entanglement. The US Supreme Court took a different view, ruling that students' free exercise of religion must be safeguarded. The court's position was that as a Christian-oriented group, the students had the same rights as any other student-led group to organize and utilize school facilities; however, they were equally adamant that school personnel must avoid entanglement with these groups and attend in a "non-participatory capacity".

A student's right to freely exercise his or her religious beliefs was further upheld by the Fifth Circuit Court of Texas in *Jones v. Clear Creek ISD* (1993). Although the plaintiffs appealed the decision, the US Supreme Court, in refusing to hear it, sanctioned the lower court's ruling. The case once again involved student prayer, but a fundamental difference existed in the fact that the prayer in this case was student-initiated and student-led and thus protected by the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause. Furthermore, school personnel were not involved, and so the court found that the recitation involved neither entanglement nor advocacy. This legal precedent was challenged just a few years later in *Sante Fe v. Doe* (2000), a case questioning a New Mexico high school's use of its intercom system to broadcast a prayer during the school day to honor its football team. The US Supreme Court

deemed the prayer unconstitutional for two reasons: first, it was recited by school personnel rather than students, and second, it constituted “public” rather than “private” speech. In a 6-3 decision, the court ruled that such a “public” act of religious speech clearly violated the Establishment Clause’s mandate for separation of church and state. Although the rulings differed, both cases affirmed a student’s right to silent prayer and expression of religious devotion, as long as they did not pose “a material and substantial disruption” to the school culture. However, in affirming these rights, the court made equally clear that any participation on the part of school personnel would be construed as advocacy and/or entanglement and thus unconstitutional.

Both rulings rectified long-standing violations regarding separation of church and state while simultaneously affirming the free exercise of religion. However, the triumph was not without casualty, for it set into motion those forces that would eventually remove religious literacy from the public school curriculum. Prothero (2007) defines religious literacy as “the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, and stories that are employed in American public life” (12); however, it is an ability, he argues, that most Americans no longer possess. He reveals an inherent irony in the fact that “One of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates” (12). He specifically laments the widespread religious illiteracy among American youth and indicts the school system for its failure to provide even the most basic type of religious literacy.

Faced with their own share of financial hardships and institutional challenges, American schools have removed religious literacy from the curriculum to avoid controversy and costly litigation. Nevertheless, the decision has been a misguided one. By systematically removing secular discussion and study of religion from the curriculum, schools have undermined the socio-civic mandate upon which American education is premised – that schools should serve the society in which they function. From its inception, America has been a pluralistic nation. Its national motto, *e pluribus unum* (out of many one), speaks to a guiding principle upon which it was founded, namely that a diverse people can come together to form a new nation and, despite their racial, religious and/or ethnic differences, peacefully co-exist. Public education has traditionally played an important role in this process of amalgamation, offering a stage whereby the nation’s diversity might be negotiated to form a common core-culture. As noted historian Arthur Schlesinger (1998) points out, “What students are taught in schools affects the way they will thereafter conceive the purposes of the republic”, and for this reason “the debate about the curriculum is a debate about what it means to be an American” (22). One such purpose of this republic was to promote religious understanding and tolerance, and school, as has so often been the case, provided the perfect venue. It was in the classroom that students could engage in the secular study and discussion of the religions that infused their world, religions familiar and unfamiliar, religions embraced by their family, friends and neighbors, and religions practiced by the distant other. As history bears witness, this process sometimes violated separation of church and state, but it also produced generations of religiously literate citizens. The systematic removal of religious literacy from the American school curriculum over the past few decades has halted this important process though. Davis (2010) considers the US Supreme Court particularly culpable. He concedes that the court’s earlier rulings “freed America from a past of sectarian domination”, but argues that its later decisions have promoted the

“very religious divisions they purported to guard against” (34). Ironically, in its zeal to reinforce Jefferson’s “wall of separation” between church and state, then, the US Supreme Court undermined, albeit unintentionally, the very spirit of religious toleration and acceptance upon which its pluralistic society depended.

### **Religious literacy and the public school curriculum: a tie that binds**

As Wuthnow (2005) points out, the *de facto* intolerance fostered by these rulings is problematic in a society where nine out of 10 Americans express a belief in God but claim little knowledge of any religion other than their own. In a recent study, Rosenblith and Bailey (2008) found that the average American’s religious paradigm hearkens from a singular religious ideology, the result being they are “unaware of what others believe” and “why others believe what they claim” (160). Their study unveils an America widely ignorant and intolerant of the “religious other” (160). Wuthnow’s (2005) research confirms this conclusion. His comprehensive survey of the current religious landscape identifies a compelling irony in the fact that Americans, while firmly believing in the rights of individuals to worship freely, have considerable ignorance of and little desire to learn about or interact with them. The majority of American Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims he interviewed experienced consistent stereotyping from their Christian acquaintances, a practice he attributes to “ignorance on the part of the general population about even rudimentary beliefs and practices of the newer minority religions” (2). He calls for a type of “reflective pluralism” where Americans overcome their reluctance to not only acknowledge significant differences between religions but also commit themselves to a better understanding of and tolerance toward them. Religious literacy in the public school curriculum could mediate such religious ignorance and intolerance and realize the “reflective pluralism” Wuthnow (2005) envisions. Such a pedagogical approach would augment students’ understanding of and respect for the “religious other”. As a society, America can only profit by heeding Voltaire’s eighteenth century contention that religious pluralism is the only means of defeating the religious antagonism and fanaticism that invariably destroy a society.

These calls to include religious literacy as part of the standard school curriculum have been heeded by many western nations including Great Britain, Australia, Canada and Germany as a means of promoting tolerance and social cohesion, yet they have been largely ignored in the US despite its mounting religious diversity. Several models for the inclusion of religious literacy in the school curriculum hold promise. For example, Rosenblith and Bailey (2005) endorse a pedagogy that encourages genuine engagement among “diverse religious others” and equips students with the “skills, dispositions, and knowledge to thrive in an increasingly global, pluralistic, and democratic society” (160). Passe and Wilcox (2009) argue for religious literacy as a means of maintaining the “religious tolerance that undergirds the democratic republic that has evolved for more than two hundred years” (102). Changing patterns in American religious demographics further heighten the need for this type of curricular inclusion; as religious minorities increasingly immigrate to America, the gap in religious knowledge widens, thereby sculpting a more diverse and unfamiliar religious landscape. Americans at the turn of the twentieth century had little difficulty accepting the arrival of Italians, Russians, Poles and Scandinavians because they “engaged in similar religious practice”, but the more recent arrival of Muslims,

Hindus and Buddhists has proven more challenging as these groups hearken from a very different religious tradition (Passe and Willox 2009,104).

Segregated housing patterns among these groups have done little to remedy the situation because they allow Americans to have minimal interaction with their non-Christian neighbors. The result is a religiously-segregated society that has minimal understanding of the religious differences that are currently infusing its society. If not in school, where will the children who mature in the midst of such segregation gain understanding of and tolerance for religious difference? Should not school be one of the primary stages upon which a multi-ethnic, religiously-pluralistic society negotiates its conflicts and tensions, where the differences that have divided are resolved and the commonalities that unite are forged? This process fulfills the socio-civic mandate upon which American schools are founded, which maintains that “good citizenship” safeguards a democracy which, in turn, provides the stability upon which opportunity and justice rely. Schlesinger (1998) celebrates Americans for their ability to co-exist in one of the most multi-ethnic societies known to history and to connect with those whom they have little in common other than their citizenship (32). If citizenship is, as Schlesinger contends, the tie that binds Americans together, then religious literacy is one of its integral threads. Tragically, the terrorist events of 9/11 reminded Americans of its importance when one tragic moment revealed to a Judeo-Christian dominated society how little it knew about Islam. In this time of crisis, loss and anger, Americans had to accept that terrorism, and not their Muslim neighbors, was responsible for these heinous attacks. As adults turned to friends, family and their respective faiths, their children turned to the place they knew best – the school – to make sense of this tragedy, making religious literacy a necessary and therapeutic part of the conversation and the healing.

Passe and Willox (2009) point out, however, that 9/11 did little to bring religious literacy into the public school curriculum because of its inherent controversy and threat to the status quo. Consequently, they advocate a curricular plan that emphasizes comparative religion and implements holistic instruction at the elementary, middle school and secondary levels. Premised on their belief that teachers typically avoid discussion and study of religion because they “lack the skills required to teach the content appropriately”, their model includes pre-service teacher education that includes religious study and pedagogical instruction that promotes “nonjudgmental expression of beliefs, and an in-depth grasp of the nuances of major world religions” (105). Yet in enacting this pedagogy, schools must avoid the allure of indoctrination; simply put, they must honor the First Amendment’s promise to protect against religious tyranny while simultaneously safeguarding religious expression.

Such balance might ironically offer itself through the study of non-religious perspectives alongside those of major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. A survey that would begin with eighteenth century Deism and culminate with twenty-first century agnostic and atheistic movements might cogently illustrate to students the inherent pluralism of religious literacy. “New Atheists” such as Dawkins (2006), Hitchens (2007), Harris (2004) and Dennett (2006) question the plausibility of a divine Creator interacting with and judging the world, a creator who would, as Dawkins (2006) argues, need to be of such complexity that he simply could not exist. Amarasingan (2012) points out that these theorists are conveniently grouped together but deserve idiosyncratic study because of the complexity and diversity of their views; however, they share communion in their rejection of the “actively intervening god hypothesis” and their defense of the right to employ

natural science, without threat of social and academic ostracism, to investigate religious ideology (2). Dennett (2006) argues that such investigations have not moved forward though because of a long-standing “mutual agreement” between scientists and researchers to “leave religion alone”; he believes the time has come then to break religion’s “spell” – namely the time-honored power to halt scientific inquiry into the principles of faith (xiii). Although not particularly concerned with disproving religious beliefs, he challenges religious dogma by studying the “natural history” of religion. Drawing from evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology and cognitive anthropology, he examines, in a Hume-like tradition, religion’s evolution in the human experience, essentially striving to understand those forces that shape faith and make people believe what they believe.

Hitchens (2007) and Harris (2004), in contrast, are more openly critical of Christianity’s hegemonic hold on the American public because they believe it has fashioned an American public largely intolerant of alternative viewpoints, even when made with “evidence and reasoning” (Hitchens 2007, 5). The result is that anyone who questions mainstream religious thought is subject to ridicule, suspicion and/or ostracism, a process Hitchens (2007) metaphorically describes as “mutual excommunication” (5). Like Voltaire, they are also concerned with the havoc that results when faith abandons reason, havoc Hitchens (2007) experienced first-hand as a journalist in the Middle East, the Balkans and Northern Ireland; similar to the forces unleashed in Voltaire’s eighteenth century France, the religious fanaticism he witnessed in these countries caused social and political upheaval and widespread death and destruction. He is equally critical of religious ideologies that have impeded public health initiatives, particularly in developing countries where prohibitions against immunizations have, he argues, allowed diseases such as polio and smallpox to renew and flourish. Controversial though they may be, these conscientious objectors, whether eighteenth century Deists or “New Atheists”, merit a place in the canon, for they too represent the views of some Americans and thus constitute a unique genre of religious literacy.

## Conclusion

I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish – where...no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials – and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.

John F. Kennedy

Speaking almost two centuries after its ratification, President John F. Kennedy reaffirms the First Amendment’s dual promise to its citizens: that they will have religious freedom and that church and state would remain forever separate. In the realm of public education, however, this latter charge has too often been ignored. Historically, the US has always been a Christian-dominated nation, and since schools mirror the society they serve, Christian ideology and practice have unduly influenced most facets of the school culture. The result has been that public schools have routinely violated the US Constitution’s Establishment Clause by engaging in religious advocacy and its Free Exercise Clause by marginalizing students

religiously aligned with Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim beliefs. Yet the *Bill of Rights* was put into place by America's founding fathers to protect individual rights, and foremost among these was the First Amendment's dual promise of religious freedom and protection from the religious persecutions endured by their ancestors. Both sacred and irrevocable, this promise endures, reinforced by the "wall of separation" between church and state that forever safeguards against religious tyranny.

For over two centuries, Americans have subscribed to this ideology even though they have sometimes violated it in practice, and so it has been left to the courts to right these wrongs. The result has been a steady stream of litigation that prompted schools to systematically remove religious literacy from the curriculum, for these schools simply did not have the financial and administrative resources to deal with the controversies that invariably surfaced whenever the subject of religion surfaced in school. These decisions were often made with regret and sometimes even protest, but they benefitted both the district and its taxpayers and thus seemed to make "good" sense. What these schools failed to understand, however, was the price that was to be paid, for in removing religious literacy from the curriculum, they were no longer able to equip students with the skills needed to understand and negotiate the forces of religious pluralism so inherent in their society. In a recent survey of 35,000 Americans, the Pew Foundation found that 78.4% described themselves as Christian, 1.7% as Jewish, 0.7% as Buddhist, 0.6% as Muslim, and 0.4% as Hindu; 16.1% claimed no affiliation, suggesting they were either reluctant to express a religious affiliation, agnostic or atheistic (<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports/com>). The complexion of American culture is continuing to evolve in terms of its religious identity and an understanding of its inherent plurality is prerequisite to religious tolerance and social harmony; however, this goal will never be achieved by systematically ignoring the subject of religion in school. The time has come then to bring the cultural study and discussion of religion into America's classrooms for only by allowing this conversation can a people begin to understand and accept the religious differences that have all too often divided the world in which they live.

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