

TEACHING RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

ALLAH R. SAMUEL

History of Religions, a one semester course, has been offered as an elective during the last few years, to Juniors and Seniors at Arapahoe High School, Littleton, Colorado. As a teacher of this course my experience has been rich and rewarding, and it has often been suggested by the students that more courses should be offered in this area. I have come to the conclusion that this study has been valued as a highly meaningful and worthwhile educational experience.

The high school students are intellectually inquisitive and emotionally ready, and raise questions about value, validity, origin, and function of religious beliefs and behaviors. We must not ignore this. This course is based upon the educational assumption that knowledge is better than ignorance.

The students present different religious backgrounds, Catholics, Protestants, Jews and others. Some are deeply religious, some make absolute claims, and talk about what they do not know or do not know what they talk about. A few are indifferent and there are always some who are dissatisfied with all religion. Furthermore, unlike other subjects or to a greater degree their knowledge of religion is limited, vague, partial and inadequate. Some have constructed stereotypes; to them all Hindus worship cows and practice the Caste-System. Prejudices, unfavorable opinions and attitudes flourish, without knowledge or understanding.

It seems to me that there are two important problems in the teaching of any systematic course in religion in the Public Schools. First, is the problem of methodology, attitude, and procedure, and the second, of function, goals and objectives.

In teaching History of Religions we have to adopt the historical method of the Social Sciences. We look upon religion not only as a natural and universal phenomenon but also as humanity's most dynamic social-personal behavior. Just as people have social, economic, legal and political needs, and have developed social, economic and legal institutions to meet those needs, they have likewise developed religious institutions to meet religious needs. Education must not ignore this very significant form of human behavior.

The students, strange as it may sound, are much more objective in their outlook than could be expected, and readily recognize the fact that one does not start a study of world religions by claiming that one's own religion is ab-

ALLAH R. SAMUEL is on the faculty of Arapahoe High School, Littleton, Colorado, and has been teaching courses in world history and comparative religion for some years. This statement was written originally for the State Committee on the Teaching of Religion in Public Schools and subsequently has been presented at other professional gatherings and portions of it published in various journals. When he began this course there were twenty some public schools offering a course in religion listed by professional associations; there are now over three hundred. — Ed.

solutely true and all else absolutely false. The purpose of this course is not to validate one belief and falsify another, or to prove that one's own is a direct-divine-revelation or theology, and another's mythology.

It is necessary to maintain a relationship of trust, respect and impartiality. No one's belief or disbelief is at stake. No offense is meant and none should be taken. In religion every position has its opposition, every affirmation its negation. One person's belief is another's blasphemy, one's sacrament another's superstition. The crude fetishism of the primitive as well as the spiritual affirmations of a saint, are both a religious phenomenon. In this sense, Moses, Mohammad, Rama, Buddha, Krishna or Christ do not have any advantage one over the other in the classroom. They are all objects of religious experience and reverence, leading the way to a better, richer and more beautiful life, giving assurance and hope.

The historical method is impersonal, objective empirical and phenomenological. It seeks natural explanations for natural events. Ontology is beyond verification or falsification. To argue about the nature and existence of God is a futile undertaking. One may rest with the Kantian truce: Knowledge of God is impossible, but faith in God is possible, for religious reasons.

History of Religions explores, when, where, and why religious beliefs were formulated; their origin, growth and development; the values desired and the values achieved; and their effect upon human history, society and personality.

The question to raise, then, is not who is right and who is wrong, or true and false, but how and in what ways this reality in which we are all immersed as human beings gives us help to the attainment of a richer and fuller life for all, everywhere. A study of world religions will show that God, the Universal Father of all, is revealed in different forms to different people. The bewildering variety of Hindu Monism, Theism and Pantheism; the Buddhist development of non-Theism, and Impersonal Law and a Personal Savior; the classical paganism with its personal gods and goddesses; the Jewish faith in an inflexible Lord of Righteousness, the doctrine of the Chosen and the Elect, the Messianic Hope; the Christian view of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the Muslim creed of One and only One God, are different ways in which people have tried to orient their relationship to an Existential Reality conceived as something higher and better and more sovereign than the individual self. If we admit the diversity of humanity, we can easily understand this variety in the conceptions of God and the utter futility of reducing all dogmas to one. To the discriminating eye the similarities which unite mankind are far greater than the differences which divide. People of good will all over the world agree that truth in religion is existential or personal commitment, and that we should not call anyone a heathen who does not think as we do, or a villain who does not have our prejudices.

The world is filled with racial, cultural, and religious misunderstandings. Ignorance breeds arrogance and hate. It is not hard to confuse the voice of God with national and personal passions. Armies have fought for opposing interests in the name of the same God. Men have been killed for believing what others have been killed for disbelieving. Nothing has been more hostile to religion than religion. Terrible tortures have been inflicted upon people because of simple questions: Who are the best people? Which is the best race? Which is true religion? Why are others so stupid? Why do they resist our benevolent attempts to civilize them and teach them the Truth? And, of course, people have suffered from political as much as from religious fanaticism.

Instead of competing with each other, the religions of the world must learn to cooperate in building a universal vision of humanity, toward which each religion may contribute its specific best. Religious differences are deliberate and conscious. The attempt to destroy the difference is futile. Life is a panorama of many colors. We must find similarities and affinities, and seek communion not conformity, unity and not uniformity, a union of believers and not a union of beliefs.

The logic of unity in the universe demands a Monism, a Reality or God, the logic of value demands an Ethical Reality. Scientific knowledge requires that we base our lives on The Reality Principle. All express the undying and unextinguishable human faith in the hope that life be made worth living, and that we can realize ultimate significance and meaning in life. The goals are the same, methods and means of achievement differ with different people.

The value character of religion makes its study urgent. The passions make it necessary. Love of Jesus need not mean hatred of the Buddha.

The canons of truth and value applied to one's own must be applied to all religions. A study of world religions will make religion more meaningful and develop a sense of the unity of life, with appreciation and respect for all. The most urgent problem of our times thus shapes itself clearly, namely, there can be no political, national, or international understanding unless there is some religious understanding of the ultimate concerns and values of others. The students of today, the world-citizens of tomorrow, must learn to understand the total spiritual heritage of humanity. This in short is the method and the goal of teaching Religion, as a Social Science, in Public Education. Needless to say, the person who teaches such a course must be someone who is sympathetic with this type of approach and comfortable with its purpose, and who is sincerely devoted to achieving greater understanding and information by the students.

Problems Involved in Teaching of Religion:

1. Claims of absolutism, self-sufficiency, rationality, ethnocentricity, divinity, finality—in favor of one's own religion.

2. Fear that the study of other religions may disturb faith or cause irritations of the mind.

3. Limited, inadequate, and partial knowledge, of one's own as well as other religions, with prejudices, unfavorable opinions and attitudes about others.

4. Emotional reaction against the strange, the different or the alien, as funny, false, untrue and unworthy of serious consideration.

5. Religion is too personal, too private or sacred, hence not open to objective study, inquiry, discussion or criticism. The canons of truth applied to one's own cannot be applied to other religions.

6. Legal problems, center around the belief that religion in public schools is banned by the courts.

Three Major U.S. Supreme Court Decisions:

1. Engle v. Vitale 1962
2. Abington v. Schempp 1963
3. Murray v. Curlett 1963

Engle v. Vitale, indicated that no state agency could create a prayer or require children to read from the Bible. The public reaction was immediately shaped by such slogans: "Bible Banned," "Schools Become Godless," "Religion Outlawed." The courts, of course, did no such thing. In Schempp and Murray cases Associate Justice Tom Clark stated:

Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistent with the First Amendment.

Justice Clark went further and suggested that *education without religion is incomplete*.

In addition it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities.

And he recommended:

Why not inaugurate a course of study on religion in the Public Schools—its background, its part in the great advancement of our

civilization through the centuries, a comparison of various tenets of various religions—the story of the Bible, the Koran, and the other great books of religion. I dare say that such a course would do more to strengthen religion than all the present exercises combined.

The American Association of School Administrators, in 1964, agreed with Justice Clark, and gave religion a further positive academic basis:

A curriculum which ignored religion would itself have serious religious implications. It would seem to proclaim that religion has not been as real in men's lives as health or politics or economics. By omission it would appear to deny that religion has been and is important in man's history—a denial of the obvious . . . As an integral part of man's culture, it must be included.

In short, the courts have made clear what we *can do*, and what we must not and *cannot do*, about religion in the public schools.

The Illegal: It is illegal or prohibited to require prayers, devotions, religious observances, rituals or practices, preaching or evangelism. In short, the use of the public school, for the establishment of faith or belief, a creed, a dogma or a doctrine, including our own, to endorse or to teach a particular religion as essential for salvation, or teach preference of one over another, or to compel acceptance of any religious belief or practice, including theism or atheism, is illegal.

The Legal: It is legal and desirable that objective courses about religion be included in public-school education. A few courses are suggested as follows:

Sacred Literatures of Mankind — the Bible, the Koran, the Veda, and others.

Founders of Religion — The life and teachings of Jesus, of the Buddha, Paul, Mohammad, Moses, Confucius, LaoTze, and others.

Comparative Religion — Comparative studies in world religions, Eastern and Western religions; their similarities and differences, and their basic theological and philosophical assumptions, beliefs and behaviors.

History of Religion or Religions — The origin, growth and development of religion and its influence on culture and history.

Concepts of God or Social and Moral Codes — In different religions, similarities and differences.

Courses in Psychology or Sociology of Religion — With emphasis on what religion does, its effects on individuals and society, and its contemporary social and cultural relevance.

Such courses, and many others, depending upon need, interest, and the academic preparation of teachers, could be offered. Since there is a growing

awareness that education without religion is incomplete, many schools throughout the nation are adding a variety of religion studies to their curricula and have developed necessary curriculum materials. Such studies in religion are likely to increase knowledge, and develop a greater understanding, respect and mutual appreciation among the followers of different religions, in a democratic and a pluralistic society. And experience indicates that such courses, competently and sensitively taught, would reduce religious illiteracy, bigotry, absolutism, fanaticism, ignorance, indifference and hostility toward religion, and enhance objectivity, fairness, and respect for the plurality of religions tradition in American life.

The Method of Teaching: The most important problem in teaching of any systematic course in religion in the public schools is the question of methodology. The key-note to methodology may be stated in one simple sentence: The classroom is not a church. It is not a place of worship, a confession of faith, or an establishment for religion.

We look upon religion as one of the natural, universal, and dynamic forms of social-personal behavior. It is something people do.

Interpretations and explanations are necessary, but no attempt is made to prove or disprove a particular belief. No attempt is made to propagate a faith or belief, including theism or atheism, or to make anyone religious or irreligious. The aim is information and historical knowledge—the study of religion and not the practice of religion. Religious views are examined, not imposed. The aim is education not evangelism, instruction not conversion, information not salvation, teaching not preaching, academic not devotional or missionary, understanding all religions and not confirming or promoting one above others.

Commitment to a particular religion, its practice and propagation is a function of the family and the church. Historical studies is an academic field. In public education, the two must be kept separate.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.