TEACHING RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: REVIEW OF WARREN A. NORD, DOES GOD MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

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ABSTRACT. In this review of Warren Nord’s Does God Make a Difference! Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities, Walter Feinberg provides a detailed analysis of Nord’s argument that the study of religion should be constitutionally mandated as a corrective to the overwhelmingly secular course of study offered in contemporary public schools and universities. Nord bases his claim on both constitutional and educational grounds. His constitutional argument is that, due to their secular bias, schools fail in their requirement to take a neutral stance toward religion; he contends that this creates a school environment hostile to religion that thus requires a legal remedy. Nord’s primary educational argument is that religion courses are needed to counterbalance the secular bias dominant in public schools and universities. Feinberg delineates how Nord’s constitutional argument fails and how his educational argument has serious flaws and contradictions. According to Feinberg, a stronger argument for mandating courses on religion in schools would be that because public schools exist in a religiously infused environment, it is important for students to be exposed to alternative understandings that promote reflection on and criticism of one’s own beliefs, including religious beliefs. Feinberg concludes that if religion is to be taught in the public schools, it needs to be justified on civic rather than religious grounds.

With the passing of Warren Nord, advocates for teaching religion in public schools and colleges have lost a powerful ally. In his most recent book, Does God Make a Difference! Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities,1 published shortly after his death, Nord continues to develop the argument he made earlier in Religion and American Education and [with Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center] Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum.2 All three books embrace the separation of church and state while claiming at the same time that the study of religion is neglected in both high school and college. In Does God Make a Difference!, for example, Nord argues that students should be required to learn about religion in school for both educational and constitutional reasons. He proposes that two courses, one in religion and one in morality, be added to the required high school curriculum and, further, that a religious perspective should be a part of every subject in the curriculum (DGD, 237). To make room for these courses, Nord suggests that two required math courses be dropped (DGD, 292).3 He also proposes that a one-year introductory course be required in college, with

1. Warren A. Nord, Does God Make a Difference! Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010]. This work will be cited in the text as DGD for all subsequent references.


3. Here Nord may have overestimated the number of math courses high schools require [see http://mathcurriculumcenter.org].
one semester devoted to the Bible, Christianity, and Judaism, and the other to Islam and Eastern religions. In addition, Nord asserts that the study of religion should be constitutionally mandated as a corrective to the overwhelmingly secular course of study of public schools and universities.

Nord makes three claims to support his proposal. First, public schools and colleges leave students religiously ignorant. As he puts it, “Very few students encounter religion as a live option for making sense of the world” (*DGD*, 81). Second, “public schools and universities are not religiously neutral; rather, they take sides by privileging secular over religious ways of making sense of the world and living our lives” (*DGD*, 81). Third, public education is secular indoctrination (*DGD*, 81). Hence the absence of religion in school is for Nord both educationally and legally problematic.

Before looking closely at his argument, it is important to note a few significant facts. The principal issue is not whether religion courses can be taught in public schools. In its Abington decision, the Supreme Court made it perfectly clear that courses about religion can have a valuable place in the curriculum. The Court did not mandate such courses but commended them as being part of a good education. Nor is the issue even whether schools and universities should require such courses if they believe them to be educationally valuable. It is perfectly legal for schools and universities to do so as long as the courses do not violate the tenets of the Supreme Court’s Lemon test. The issue is not even whether it is a good idea to teach about religion. There are many good educational reasons for considering the inclusion of courses in religion both in high school and college, and Nord makes a reasonable, although not unassailable, educational case for the inclusion of religion in the curriculum. Rather the issue is twofold: first, there is the question of whether religion courses are needed to balance the secular bias of the curriculum and, second, that of whether schools and colleges should be legally required to do so. Nord is not convincing on either of these scores. However, before exploring these two questions, it will be useful to look at the parts of Nord’s case that are more defensible.

Nord believes that in neglecting a religious point of view — say, in the just war theory of the Catholic Church, and the everyday good works carried out by many religions to promote peace and justice — students are educationally deprived. Most importantly, they are deprived of the view that, according to Nord, is held by all religions: that “humans are moral beings existing in a web of obligations with other

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persons and God, and some practices and policies are right or wrong in themselves and not subject to cost-benefit analysis” \(DGD, \, 29\). Without the balance that comes from teaching this view, Nord argues, the secular view becomes the default position and students learn only that all people are self-interested. Thus he concludes that the religious view — that is, the view that it is “our responsibility to rise above our sinful natures, acting for the good of our fellow creatures and God” \(DGD, \, 29–30\) — is silenced. Although the preceding quote, with its emphasis on sin and its [implicit] reference to the fallen nature of humankind (“rise above our sinful natures”), reveals an implicit Christian understanding of religion, Nord intends his point to be taken as a universal. As he puts it, “from within all religious traditions, work must be understood in moral and spiritual as well as in economic terms. There are moral rights that should protect workers from exploitation, and working conditions must reflect the dignity of people” \(DGD, \, 30\). He asserts further that “virtually every religious tradition has placed special emphasis on compassion and the duty to help the poor and oppressed” \(DGD, \, 30\).

Whether this “special emphasis” is an exclusively religious concern and whether all religions interpret and approach poverty and oppression in the same way are issues that Nord does not address. Nevertheless, he treats this as one of the critical dividing points between the religious and the secular, and he is concerned about what he believes is the failure of American schools and colleges to present the “religious” standpoint to counterbalance the “secular” view. According to Nord, the religious point of view should be present in every subject matter, from literature and economics to math and biology.

When Nord claims that education leaves students religiously ignorant, he is not just claiming, as a number of scholars have, that students are religiously illiterate and cannot identify major religious figures or events on a multiple-choice test, although he might well agree with this observation.\(^6\) More importantly, he is claiming that even if students were religiously literate in this minimal sense, “they would not be able to appreciate the kind of understanding that people within a religious tradition have of their own tradition and of the world as it appears from the vantage point of their tradition” \(DGD, \, 82\). In other words, these students would still lack an insider’s understanding of a religious tradition, or empathy for that tradition. The development of empathy would require that students study religion in depth, as a live option for understanding their world. Because they neglect to advance an empathetic understanding of religion and, further, because they block out of consideration all but the secular viewpoint, Nord believes that the public schools indoctrinate students. Indoctrination by silence need not be intentional, but it is systematic.

The problem for Nord lies in the cumulative effect of what he labels “scientific naturalism” operating in every course and securing a “secular mentality that marginalizes and ... discredits contending religious interpretations” \(DGD, \, 91\).

The result is, according to Nord, a form of indoctrination whereby students fail
to develop the critical distance they need in order to perceive, let alone evaluate,
the framework that pervades all of their subjects. Nord sees this as the equivalent
to a Christian academy that requires students to take twelve years of religion but
no science.

Nord also argues that students need a comparative religious perspective “on
various live religious and secular traditions”:

Taking religion seriously can be done without promoting religion or abandoning neutrality. Consider a philosophy course in which Buddhist, Christian, Marxist, and Darwinian ways of making sense of ethics are all taken seriously — that is, students study each tradition in some depth, acquiring inside understanding of each live alternative, ... and read ... how advocates of each position respond to the alternatives, engaging ... in a critical conversation with each other. ([DGD], 105)

This comparative perspective is especially relevant at a time when so much educational discourse is dominated by vocational concerns. A truly liberal education must encourage critical thinking, and Nord is correct that this requires exposing students to different and competing worldviews that introduce them to the different ways in which humankind makes sense of the world and to the different ways people have attempted to answer the big questions involving the meaning of life.

Nevertheless, he wants priority to be given to Christianity and the study of the Bible on the grounds that students need to locate themselves “historically within traditions that give them some sense of moral values and cultural identity” ([DGD], 190). A more ambitious aim, although politically risky, would be to enable students to understand themselves and their tradition as actively engaged in understanding and reinterpreting sacred texts. This might not be the kind of insider’s view that Nord has in mind, but it has the advantage of promoting dialogue both within and across traditions.7

The proposal that a religious point of view should be presented as an alternative in all courses is excessive. Although the claim sounds on the surface much like Nel Noddings’s proposal, in her book Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief, that religious issues be addressed throughout the curriculum, there is an important difference between the two. Noddings makes her proposal as a way of encouraging both intelligent belief or unbelief, as the book’s title suggests. She wants to promote discussions about such weighty matters as the existence of God and whether, if God does exist, he must be perfect.8 Nord is less interested in promoting critical thinking about religion than he is in correcting a perceived imbalance in favor of a secular perspective and displaying unanimity among religions.

7. For examples of such teaching, see Walter Feinberg and Richard A. Layton, For the Civic Good: Teaching Religion in the Public Schools [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming].

The courts have rejected the view that the Constitution requires that schools must use religion as a balance to secularism, and in certain cases, such as the attempt to offer creationism as an alternative to evolution in biology classes, they have ruled that doing so violates the establishment clause.\(^9\) Clearly, the idea that schools must strike a balance between religion and nonreligion in each and every course would present a nightmare for those concerned about the entanglement of church and state as prohibited by the Lemon test.

Nord’s claim that schools exhibit an antireligious bias in their promotion of a secular point of view is not only problematic, but it actually obscures the educational values that religion courses could serve for religious as well as nonreligious students. Such courses could provide opportunities for students to engage in critical discussion, as Noddings proposes, and to reflect upon their own belief or nonbelief in a systematic way. However, because he believes that schools promote antireligious sentiments, Nord’s main educational objective is to provide students with a sympathetic insider’s understanding. While empathy is a reasonable educational goal, it is certainly not the only one. Because Nord is intent on correcting what he perceives as a secular bias, he largely fails to consider the role that empathy for other religions can play in helping students gain a critical distance from their own taken-for-granted religious views.

This failure is important, especially considering that Nord initiates his argument by observing that Americans are a religious people, a view that is hard to reconcile with his claim that schools are hostile to religion. Indeed, the stronger argument would be that because public schools exist in a religiously infused environment, it is important for students to be exposed to alternative ways of understanding — particularly those that promote reflection on and criticism of one’s own beliefs, including religious beliefs. This argument would rub against Nord’s constitutional concerns without necessarily denying his educational ones. In Nord’s mind, however, these concerns are tied together in such a way that to reject the rationale for the first is to reject the rationale for the second, and thus by overreaching, he casts doubt on both his legal and educational rationales.

We can boil Nord’s constitutional argument down to the following:

1. The Court requires neutrality between religion and nonreligion.
2. Subjects are taught exclusively through a secular frame in both public schools and the university, and this silence about religion constitutes bias against religion.

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3. Therefore schools fail the neutrality test, and a religious viewpoint must be required to counterbalance the secular perspective that is dominant in schools.

The success of the argument depends on three unstated assumptions: first, that there is such a thing as a secular point of view; second, that this view is opposed to a religious point of view; and third, that to neglect to teach something is to oppose it. If we grant these assumptions, then Nord’s argument that silence about religion is antireligious and thus unconstitutional seems sound. But are these assumptions really sound? Let’s begin with the third assumption: that silence is opposition.

Clearly, there are times when to be silent is to take a stand. Consider a situation where a virulent antihomosexual environment contributes to bullying in school. In such a circumstance, failure to address the antihomosexual environment in a systematic way actually perpetuates it. The same case can be made for a school that fails to confront racist beliefs about the inferiority of African Americans, especially in a racially poisonous environment. Here, the school’s silence is hostility. Hence Nord’s general point has credibility, but largely where there is a pervasive and hostile environment. Where there is a hostile environment, then the school’s silence serves to perpetuate that hostility, and it would be quite correct to say that the school is hostile to the particular group that is oppressed.

While there are some religions — for instance, Islam in the context of contemporary American society — that might accurately claim that they exist in a hostile environment, this cannot be said for religion in general, and it certainly cannot be said about Christianity. The fact that Nord opens his book with a statement about the unusual importance of religion in American society and the high percentage of Americans who believe in God contradicts the claim that religion in general exists in a hostile environment. Hence if the premise regarding silence — that to neglect is to oppose — were to be argued for on the grounds of a hostile environment for religion, it should fail.

However, the religious and the secular are not two opposing points of view. In fact, the “secular” is not a point of view but rather a set of rules that define how any given point of view — including both specific religious points of view and antireligious points of view — is to be expressed in the public arena. Indeed, Nord implicitly admits this when he claims that his is in fact a secular argument that should appeal to believers and nonbelievers alike. Nord has made a category mistake. The opposition is not between the religious and the secular but between believers and nonbelievers, or between those who embrace religion and those who do not. Scientific naturalism, which Nord believes is the epistemological arm of secularism and which he questionably claims pervades the school curriculum, is but a term for the various methods that scholars in different disciplines, including religion, use to ground belief. Nord discusses it as if it were an enemy of religion.

Consider this example. An economics teacher would be hostile to religion if she taught, in addition to the basic principles of economics, that there was no higher-order design or purpose to the exchange of goods and that such exchange
was not subject to any moral or religious constraints. Similarly, this teacher would be promoting religion if she claimed the opposite on the basis of some divine authority. However, to simply teach that there is a relationship between the price of something and the supply and demand is neither advancing nor inhibiting a religious point of view, although it might serve to advance capitalism.

To introduce, as Nord proposes, counterperspectives on human nature and on our responsibility toward others is good education and should be endorsed, but it is not economics in any technical sense and could be accomplished as effectively by introducing a nonreligious communitarian or socialist perspective as it could by teaching any number of religious perspectives. The important point, though, is that this is an educational issue, not a constitutional one. It speaks not to the legal question of constitutionality, but to the educational one of what we should count as an adequate understanding.

Nord confuses an understanding of the phenomena with a metaunderstanding of the understanding of the phenomena. A science such as biology is concerned with understanding the phenomena of living organisms through careful observation, study, and experimentation. Religion provides a way of understanding this understanding — as designed, purposeful good, and so on. Science has nothing to say about this religious understanding, except perhaps that it is not really needed in order to describe the development and relations of living organisms. Science, then, has technical value. It can, for example, describe and to some extent predict how the AIDS virus evolves, and this may be useful in developing effective interventions. Religion cannot do this, although it may sometimes provide comfort to AIDS victims.

Nord’s constitutional argument fails, but what about his educational rationale? Here he is on firmer ground, but there are important tensions even on this point. Certainly he is correct in observing that the United States is a religious nation. Yet he might have also noted that the eighty percent or so of the population who are religious receive their religious education in a church, temple, or mosque or from their families. Furthermore, Nord might have noted that many of these people are quite satisfied with this arrangement, and for good reason. Within their own house of worship, religious dogma and tradition can be free from critical scrutiny. And where religion is taught within public schools, the biggest concern of many teachers is that they not upset parents by challenging dogma and tradition through offering counterevidence. It is certainly a weakness in Nord’s argument that he does not factor this into his account, and this weakness becomes even more pronounced when he proposes that students need an insider’s view of religion. One might expect that those eighty percent of Americans who are religious already have an insider’s view and that schools need not reinforce it for them.

Yet this uncomfortable fact reveals an important tension in Does God Make a Difference? Nord really seems to want religion in the schools for two conflicting reasons: first, because it is a way to acknowledge the interests of more than eighty percent of Americans who are religious but, second, because Americans lack an
internal understanding of the religious point of view. Nord does a poor job of explaining, let alone acknowledging, this tension, but it is worth the effort to try to understand what he is getting at.

Oddly, Nord also admits that for the most part the “secular indoctrination” that he claims occurs in schools is very ineffective. He notes that it is remarkable that “students survive their secular education with so little damage to their core religious beliefs — after all, most of them still believe in God” (DGD, 98). Nord does not raise the question of whether the reputed inefficiency of schools is a blessing, nor does he ask whether it is a chink in his argument — just as he does not consider how his argument is affected by the fact that eighty percent of Americans, the vast majority of public school graduates, are religious. It is certainly a weakness that he does not confront these questions in the book, had he done so, however, he might have argued in his own defense that it makes a difference whether two competing views are held unconsciously or consciously. Nevertheless, the simple fact that most Americans are religious, with the vast majority identifying as Christian, raises doubt about his claim that schools have a responsibility to cultivate in students an insider’s view of Christianity. This doubt could be relieved if teachers took care to help students reflect upon their own belief systems and traditions in ways that brought their own taken-for-granted beliefs into relief and made them available for both internal and external inspection. If religion is to be taught in the public schools, it needs to be justified on civic rather than religious grounds. A comparative religion course is more likely to serve this end than is a course on the Christian Bible. Perhaps the most important learning that students could gain from any religion course is the understanding that there is no one religious point of view and that even members of the “same” religion can differ on fundamentals. In addition, students could begin to understand religions as evolving systems that, much like other systems, change over time as they respond to internal tensions and external environmental factors. This learning is far different, however, from much of what is presently taught in many religion courses. Had Nord lived, he might have considered the implications of the evolution of religions for the teaching of religion in public schools. Unhappily, we can only speculate on what he might have said.

10. For a more detailed account of what students learn in public schools about religion, see Feinberg and Layton, For the Civic Good.

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