

Religion in Five Minutes

Edited by
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Elsewhere

Clifford, James and Georger Marcus (editors). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986.

Gregg, Stephen E. and Lynne Scholefield (editors). *Engaging with Living Religion: A Guide to Fieldwork in the Study of Religion*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015.

68

In what ways can religion be legally discussed in US public schools?

Michael Graziano

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution reads in part: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.' While these words have long been central to how Americans interact with religion, they also offer little practical guidance for how to settle day-to-day disputes about the place of religion in public life. The Amendment says nothing about school principals, for example, or whether a biology teacher can instruct her students in intelligent design. Few areas of public life in the United States have been as consistently divisive as the role of religion in public schools.

Religious freedom in the US is not absolute. In general, while Americans may *believe* whatever they wish, they may not necessarily *act* on those beliefs simply because such beliefs are 'religious.' Furthermore, the Supreme Court sees public schools as areas of special concern, since schoolchildren are captive audiences—they are legally required to attend school until a certain age—and subjected to the influence of authority figures (teachers, principals, other school officials, etc.). As a result, a patchwork of rules has developed to regulate when, and how, religion may be discussed in public schools.

Students and school officials may discuss religion in different ways. For example, teachers can instruct students about religious texts, such as the Hebrew Bible or Muslim Qur'an, so long as these texts are part of a larger program of secular education. These texts could be approached as works of literature, for example, or as windows onto the historical contexts of their invention and revision. However, since school staff are also state officials, they may not use religious content to make theological claims about the value of individual religious traditions or ideas. Schools also cannot mandate or initiate prayer. According to the Court, this is still the case even if the prayer is both voluntary and non-denominational, since this would put the schools in the position of endorsing prayer, and religion, in general. Instead, schools must stay neutral in such debates. The goal of religious discussions must be education and awareness, rather than approval or disapproval.

Students have more flexibility. Unlike teachers and administrators, they do not represent the state's authority. Students may pray by themselves or in groups throughout the school day, subject to the same rules as other speech activities. Furthermore, students may discuss their feelings or ideas with reference to their own religious beliefs. These comments cannot be silenced or marked down by school authorities so long as the student's comments are related to course materials.

Given the variety of people and perspectives involved, it is difficult to draw a clear line between discussing religion academically and discussing religion devotionally. A good example is the controversy over discussing creationism in schools. Some groups object to the teaching of biological evolution and cosmological theories of the universe's origin (such as the 'Big Bang') and have requested equal time for students to learn about alternative explanations more appealing to some religious groups (such as 'intelligent design'). These alternative explanations were ruled unconstitutional on account of being religious rather than scientific. Yet this controversy raises an interesting question: if legal, which creation story would be taught? While many who objected to teaching biological evolution likely favored Christian origin

stories, this is not the only alternative. For example, students in this hypothetical 'equal time' situation might learn that the universe was created by Brahma and preserved by Vishnu. It was just such a debate over creationism and intelligent design that gave birth to Pastafarianism, a new religious movement that pushes for the teaching of its own creation story—in which the Universe is created by the all-powerful Flying Spaghetti Monster—as part of public school curricula.

Challenges in adjudicating these disagreements are exacerbated by the diversity of religious ideas within the United States. Is it possible to teach about a religious tradition's history or literary output—even in an 'academic' and 'secular' setting—without also advocating for the tradition's worth on some level? In a curriculum of finite time and resources, teaching about one tradition might come at the expense of teaching about another. Which traditions should be prioritized? And who gets to decide? These controversies suggest the many different—and often contradictory—ways in which Americans continue to understand religion, belief, and religious freedom.

About the author

Michael Graziano specializes in American religious history. He teaches religious studies at the University of Northern Iowa.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 65 (religious studies v. theology) and 72 (studying religion in public schools).

Elsewhere

American Civil Liberties Union. 'Joint Statement of Current Law on Religion in the Public Schools.' Retrieved from www.aclu.org/joint-statement-current-law-religion-public-schools.

Chicago-Kent College of Law at Illinois Tech. 'School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp.' *Oyez*. Retrieved from www.oyez.org/cases/1962/142.

Haynes, Charles C. *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*. Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2004. Retrieved from www.firstamendmentcenter.org/madison/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/teachersguide.pdf.

69

Do scholars of religion study texts or do they study the religion firsthand, as an anthropologist might?

Richard Newton

The short answer is that they study both.

Scholars of religion understand that their object of study, first and foremost, is a human activity. That human activity encompasses all manner of effective expressions. Through much of the nineteenth century, scholars chronicled 'religion' by referencing particular beliefs, rituals, leadership structures, social organizations, communal laws, reported sensations, and yes, texts. Twentieth century scholarship did not depart from this so much as it focused those efforts toward the question of how to define religion. So if you're thinking that religion can refer to anything, you're not alone. It largely has. This sort of observation has led early twenty-first century scholars to turn their attention to why.

Like anthropology, religious studies is curious about the things people do. People place meaning not simply in their conspicuous sacrosanct behaviors, but also—and even more so—in the behaviors they assume routine. Anthropologists and religion scholars approach a community with questions about the stuff that communities would otherwise take for granted.