Religion-free texts: Getting an illiberal education

by Warren A. Nord Nord in the July 14, 1999 issue

In the current culture wars, religious liberals tend to ally themselves with the educational establishment against those on the Religious Right who are attacking the public schools. In politics and theology, I line up with the left. Nonetheless, I believe with the right that public education is hostile to religion—not least to liberal religion. The problem isn't the absence of school prayers. Schools respect the religious liberty of students in prohibiting religious exercises. There is no hostility to religion in that. The problem is that systematically excluding religious voices from the curriculum makes public education fundamentally illiberal—something that, ironically, most liberals fail to see.

During the past few years I've reviewed 82 high school textbooks in a variety of subjects—history, economics, home economics, literature, health and the sciences—for their treatment of religion. I've also read the national content standards that have been developed for K-12 education over the past decade by thousands of scholars, teachers and representatives of professional organizations. To keep my discussion manageable I will comment only on high school texts and standards in three subject areas: economics, the sciences and history. But the problems we find here cut across the curriculum at all levels of education.

Economics.
The scriptures of all religious traditions address justice and the moral dimensions of social and economic life, as does much recent moral theology—from the social gospel through liberation theology. Most mainline Christian denominations and many ecumenical agencies have official statements on economics and justice. Central to scripture and this literature is the claim that to understand the economic domain of life we must apply moral and religious categories to it. Yet in the 4,400 pages of the ten economics texts I reviewed, all of the references to religion add up to only two pages, and all are to distant history. In the 47 pages of the national economics standards there are no references at all to religious ways of understanding

economics.

Neither the texts nor the standards address poverty as a moral or spiritual problem; indeed, they say little about poverty at all. They are silent about the relationship between the First World and the Third. They ignore the effect of economics and technology on the environment. They are oblivious to the moral problems of a consumer culture. They ask no questions about dehumanizing work. They emphasize the importance of the profit motive and competition, and never mention that profits may be excessive or that competition may have its costs. They never speak of the dignity of people, the sacredness of nature or our obligations to any larger community (or to God).

The problem isn't just what's left out, however; it's also what's included. The texts and national standards teach neoclassical economic theory. According to this theory, economics is a "value-free" science, and the economic world can be defined in terms of the competition for scarce resources between self-interested individuals with unlimited wants. Values are subjective preferences. Decisions should be made according to cost-benefit analyses that maximize whatever it is we value and that leave no room in the equation for duties, the sacred or the unquantifiable dimensions of life. Economics and religion seem to be entirely separate realms.

My findings confirm what sociologist Robert Wuthnow discovered in his study of American religious life: people divorce economics from religion. When "asked if their religious beliefs had influenced their choice of a career, most of the people I have interviewed in recent years—Christians and non-Christians alike—said no. Asked if they thought of their work as a calling, most said no. Asked if they understood the concept of stewardship, most said no. Asked how religion did influence their work lives or thoughts about money, most said the two were completely separate."

The way we teach economics contributes to the growing secularization and demoralization of economic life. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to reconcile the understanding of human nature, values and economics found in the texts and the national standards with that of any religious tradition.

According to the national economics standards, students should be taught only the "majority paradigm" or "neoclassical model" of economic behavior, for to include "strongly held minority views of economic processes risks confusing and frustrating teachers and students, who are then left with the responsibility of sorting the

qualifications and alternatives without a sufficient foundation to do so." We certainly don't want to confuse teachers or students by making them consider alternatives.

Science.

The attention given to the conflict over biological evolution distorts the issue by making it seem as if there are just two sides--the evolutionists and the fundamentalist creationists. Actually, there are a variety of religious positions, liberal as well as conservative. Yes, religious liberals have accepted evolution pretty much from the time Charles Darwin first proposed it, but in contrast to Darwin many of them believe that evolution is purposeful and that nature has a spiritual dimension. Darwin stated in his *Autobiography* that there is no more design to be found in nature than in the course which the wind blows, and the National Association of Biology Teachers and the National Science Association have decided to align themselves with his view that evolution is purposeless. This is what students learn in biology classes—though the religious implications of evolution are rarely addressed explicitly. Biology texts and the national science standards both ignore not only fundamentalist creationism but also those more liberal religious ways of interpreting evolution found in process theology, creation spirituality, intelligent-design theory and much feminist and postmodern theology.

There is also a good deal of speculation now among scientists, theologians and philosophers about cosmic evolution, for there appears to be impressive evidence that the universe was fine-tuned to produce life. Life is extraordinarily complicated and improbable, and if conditions had been different in only the very smallest degree the universe would have been lifeless. It is possible to argue that the development of life was, in some way, programmed from the beginning. A creator God seems the most reasonable explanation for this—or so it is often argued. In fact, the whole Big Bang theory has often been taken to be of some theological significance. Yet physics texts and the science standards are silent on all of this.

A vast theological literature addressing the environmental crisis has sprung into existence over the past few decades. Much of this literature argues for the virtue of stewardship, often in part on biblical grounds. Much ecotheology, process theology and creation spirituality go even further by arguing against the traditional split between inert, value-free nature and a transcendent God, and by arguing that God acts in and through the processes of nature, which are reconceived as sacred or spiritual. But neither the science texts nor the standards address religious interpretations of nature or of the environmental crisis.

Many liberal theologians have held that science and religion are conceptual apples and oranges, as it were. According to this "two worlds" view, they should have nothing to do with each other. One is about mechanics, the other about meaning. In recent decades, however, there has been a growing movement among theologians (and among some scientists) to see relations between science and religion. Theologians quite properly use scientific insights to shape their convictions about nature, and scientists—at least those working at the level of basic theory—are inevitably drawn to theological considerations. But because the national science standards and the textbooks have nothing to say about the relationship between science and religion, students will assume that science is competent to provide a complete picture of nature—a claim deeply controversial for religious liberals as well as conservatives.

History.
It is widely thought that students learn about religion when they study history. Indeed, the textbooks and the national history standards say a good deal about religion—yet they don't take religion as seriously as they should. World history texts typically devote about three pages to explaining the origins, basic teachings and early development of each of the great world religions. But religion virtually disappears from the texts as we page past the 18th century or, in American histories, the Civil War. The world histories devote about 1 percent of their pages to religion after 1750. Each of the American histories I reviewed gave more space to the Watergate scandal than to all post-Civil War religion.

Of course, one of the reasons religion disappears as we approach the present is that contemporary societies are much less religious than previous civilizations. Yet none of the texts discuss the secularization of modern civilization—surely one of the most important themes of modern history. With the exception of brief discussions of Darwin in the world histories and the Scopes trial in the American histories, the texts ignore theological responses to science after the 18th century.

While the American histories typically give the social gospel a couple of paragraphs, neither the American nor the world histories mention the development of historical-critical ways of interpreting the Bible or the rise of liberal theology. The Second Vatican Council is briefly mentioned in only two of the eight texts I reviewed; it is not mentioned in the 250 pages of the national history standards. Perhaps most important, while the great Western religions have held that God is revealed in the events and shape of history, none of the texts discuss religious interpretations of

history. The texts clearly (and uncritically) assume that history is a secular discipline and that secular explanations are adequate.

Health and sex education and home economics texts and curricula avoid any discussion of religious ways of thinking about sexuality, marriage, abortion and homosexuality. While some literature anthologies are organized chronologically and so include some religious literature, most include only recent secular literature. Civics textbooks discuss government, law, rights and justice without any substantive discussion of religion. The growing character education movement in public education bends over backwards to avoid any reference to religion's role in nurturing virtues and values.

By ignoring religion, the texts and standards are hostile to religion and discriminate against it. There are a variety of ways of making sense of the world. Many of us accept one or another religious interpretation of reality; others accept one or another secular interpretation. The differences between us often cut deep. Yet public schools systematically teach students to think about the world in secular ways only. They don't even bother to note that there are religious alternatives.

Some argue that a secular curriculum is religiously neutral so long as it doesn't overtly attack religion. But this view is naïve. For some time now, people have rightly argued that ignoring black history and women's literature (as texts and curricula have traditionally done) has been anything but neutral. Rather, it betrays a prejudice; it is discriminatory. And so it is with religion. Indeed, it is more dishonest and dangerous to ignore religion than it is to attack it overtly. An overt attack at least makes students aware of potential tensions and conflicts between religious and secular ways of thinking and living. It makes them realize that what they are taught is sometimes controversial.

No doubt much of what students learn in their secular studies is compatible with religion. The problem lies less with the "facts" they are taught than with the philosophical assumptions, the governing worldview, with which they are taught to interpret the various subjects. They learn particular—always secular—ways of thinking about the content. The assumption is that secular perspectives are adequate to getting at the truth about any subject. The cumulative effect of this approach is that public education nurtures a secular mentality. Religion is intellectually compartmentalized and, therefore, marginalized—though this is almost always done implicitly (and often, no doubt, unintentionally).

It is true that most students continue to believe in God. But God has little to do with how they think about the world or how they live their lives. The vast majority of my students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are religiously illiterate. Perhaps worst of all, they are convinced that religion is a matter of irrational faith, and that when we talk about evidence, arguments and reason we must be talking about science.

Why don't liberals see a problem in this? Some continue to believe, mistakenly, that our constitutional "wall of separation" between church and state prohibits serious study of religion in public schools. No doubt many are concerned that in a religiously pluralistic society it is too difficult—and too controversial—to put religion on the educational agenda. And, of course, there is no vision of what an adequate treatment of religion might look like.

Perhaps more important, our cultural wars have led to tactical alliances between religious and secular liberals, who wish to present a united front against those who would make America into a Christian country and our schools into Christian schools. As James Davison Hunter has persuasively argued, the most important battle lines seem to separate liberals from conservatives, not religious folk from secular folk.

There are good liberal, secular reasons for incorporating the serious study of religion into the curriculum of public schools. First, a good liberal education should expose students to the major ways that humankind has devised for thinking about what is most important. Some of those ways are religious. Religions continue to possess a great deal of intellectual vitality, even in our secular culture. They continue to ask and provide answers to those existential questions on which any educated person must reflect. Theologians—conservative and liberal—continue to provide alternatives to secular ways of thinking about the world.

Second, there are liberal political reasons for taking religion seriously. When we are deeply divided about some matter of importance, public schools must not educationally disenfranchise a significant segment of the public by ignoring its ideas and ideals. Because we are deeply divided about politics, public schools should not side with Democrats or Republicans but should give students some sense of what it has meant, and continues to mean, to be either. We are also deeply divided about religion. Justice requires that religious citizens not be educationally disenfranchised.

We now widely acknowledge the importance of giving oppressed subcultures a voice in the curriculum and think that their history and literature should be taken seriously. Hardly any groups are now so ignored in the curriculum as are religious subcultures—which provide many Americans with their deepest sense of identity and meaning.

Third, there are liberal constitutional arguments for requiring, not just permitting, the study of religion in public schools. Ever since 1947, when the Supreme Court first applied the First Amendment's establishment clause to the states in *Everson v. Board of Education*, the court has held that government must be neutral on matters of religion. This commitment to neutrality has become the liberal position on church and state. (Conservatives have generally held that it is permissible for the state to promote at least nonsectarian religion.)

Of course, neutrality is a two-edged sword—as the court has also made clear. If the state can't promote religion, neither can it denigrate it: As Justice Hugo Black put it in *Everson*, "State power is no more to be used so as to handicap religions than it is to favor them." Writing for the court in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), Justice Tom Clark held that public schools cannot establish a "religion of secularism," preferring "those who believe in no religion over those who do believe." In a concurring opinion, Justice Arthur Goldberg warned that an "untutored devotion to the concept of neutrality" can lead to a "pervasive devotion to the secular and a passive, or even active, hostility to the religious."

This is just what has happened. An "untutored" conception of neutrality has led educators to conflate secular education with religiously neutral education. The only way to be truly neutral when all ground is contested is to be fair to the alternatives.

How to incorporate the serious study of religion into the curriculum is, of course, controversial and complex. But religious voices (conservative and liberal, Christian and non-Christian) must be included in the curricular conversation, not to save religion, but to be consistent with our educational, political and constitutional principles.