

Who's going to teach religion?

By [James Calvin Schaap](#)

September 21, 2015

I'm embarrassed to admit it, embarrassed because it took graduate school to teach me something it's hard to imagine I didn't learn much earlier. I don't want to blame my teachers. I don't think of them as nincompoops. If I didn't learn what I should, I probably wasn't listening.

But I'll never forget working on some graduate school research paper—probably something about John Milton—and stumbling on history so elementary I was embarrassed I didn't know it. I was, after all, thought to be quite exotic in some grad school seminars because I'd been the recipient of an actual Calvinist education, a Christian education from first grade to college, with a four-year sojourn outside, at a public high school filled to the brim with kids from the Dutch Calvinist tradition. With such a strange background, I was like a resource in early American literature. I should have known.

What I learned was this simple: the Reformation was not just a religious movement, it was also political.

I was sitting in the Arizona State University library when I figured that out. Had anyone noticed, I would have been blushing.

When Luther stood his ground at the Diet of Worms (how could anyone forget the Diet of Worms?), that moment was, for him *and* all of us Christians, a grand testimony for the ages: "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise." Awesome. We didn't believe in saints in the Reformed tradition. Except Calvin. And maybe Luther.

That's how the story went, and to my knowledge that's where it stopped. The Reformation was all about the faith of our fathers (maybe a little sexist too).

What I learned was that [some of those men behind Luther in this drawing](#) were German land barons who couldn't give a crap about the efficacy of grace or works or some strange priest's picayune reading of the Gospels. What they knew was what that this guy Luther was threatening the power of the Holy Roman Catholic Church,

which meant at the time, of the entire kingdom. That's action they wanted a part of. "Grace alone?" Sure, why not. They were interested in power, specifically their own.

[In an recent op-ed in the \*Washington Post\*](#), Linda Wertheimer remembers a moment in a small-town school in Ohio when some woman with a flannel board came in to her classroom and talked about Jesus, then led the students in singing "Jesus Loves Me." Wertheimer was and is Jewish. When she told her parents what happened, they complained, she says.

But what she argues in that *Washington Post* article is evident in the lengthy title: "Public Schools shouldn't preach. But they should teach kids about religion."

I spent several years of my life teaching in public high schools in Wisconsin and Arizona, and I know, by my own experience, that talking about religion can be really testy. You start trying to be, well, objective about things even adults can't be objective about, and you're trying to stand up on a really slippery slope.

But Wertheimer is right. It's work that has to be done. Imagine trying to talk about American politics right now and *not* talking about faith. Imagine talking about world affairs or almost any news story on the face of the globe without referring to religion—it can't be done.

But how do we *teach* religion? Good question, and by my experience it's a question no easier to answer in a public than a Christian school.

Wertheimer wonders whether her own seven-year-old son shouldn't be learning about Islam, about Buddhism, about Christianity, even if what he learns is really only rudimentary stuff, like varying definitions given by Jews and Christians to the word *sabbath*. "No, we can't expect kids to grasp all the nuances of the major world religions and the controversies surrounding them," she says, "but if we're preparing kids to be thoughtful citizens of the world, they should know something about people in their community who may be different from themselves."

Wertheimer's little boy attends a private and religious school. No matter, she says.

My son has been attending religious school since kindergarten. He knows the major figures in Judaism as well as the holidays. But ask him what Easter is about—other than bunnies and colorful eggs—and he really has no idea. I'm happy that he knows his own religious heritage, but I also

want him to know more about his peers' different traditions.

Don't kid yourself. It's not an easy job. But I think she's right. Somebody's got to do it.

*Originally posted at [Stuff in the Basement](#)*