

How schools overlook religious harassment and what to do about it

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January 18, 2016

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(RNS) My American history teacher spoke in a monotone as he read a few paragraphs from the textbook about the Nazis killing six million Jews during the Holocaust. The boy sitting behind me leaned forward and whispered in my ear: “Kike. My grandfather was in the KKK.”

I said nothing and stared forward, refusing to reveal just how much the slur stung. My high school teacher did not hear anything, and I never told him.

That incident happened decades ago, but I remember it as if it were yesterday.

In my rural Ohio school, where my two older brothers and I were the only Jews, I would face questioning by peers who knew nothing about Judaism. They couldn’t understand how I couldn’t believe in Jesus. Some outright condemned me to hell.

I never spoke about those experiences to teachers or school administrators. I just never thought they would or could do anything. I worry less about my nearly 8-year-old son having the same experiences today. We live in a suburban Boston town with people of many faiths and a fairly large Jewish population. And yet, it’s hard not to worry a little.

If anything, life for religious minority youths in America may be getting tougher. The U.S. Department of Education recently acknowledged that reality in an open letter to colleges and K-12 school systems.

Noting that recent terrorist attacks have led to increasing anti-Muslim sentiment, the education officials pointed out how such an atmosphere can lead to abusive name-calling, defamatory graffiti and physical violence directed at a student. They urged educators to pay attention to those most at risk, including students who are or are thought to be Syrian, Muslim, Middle Eastern or Arab as well as Sikhs, Jews and students of color. Sikhs commonly get mistaken for Muslims.

I read the federal education officials' ideas to decrease harassment of religious minority youths and thought of my own experiences and of the students I met in recent years while reporting for "Faith Ed.," my book on schools' efforts to teach about world religions.

I thought of Muslim children who told me of being asked if they had bombs in their lockers or if their fathers were terrorists. I thought of a Jewish girl who recounted how a fellow third-grader measured her nose with a ruler.

I thought too of a 22-year-old Sikh who could still recall teasing he endured in kindergarten. He had worn a patka, a head covering that resembles a mini-turban, and children poked fun at him. For Sikhs, it is a religious obligation to keep hair covered and uncut. To this day, he will not wear a turban. The memories are that painful.

I thought, too, of Bedford, Mass., a suburban Boston town where a series of anti-Semitic incidents took place in 2013-14. Someone etched a swastika and the words "Jews Kill Them All" on a playground slide. Around the same time, swastikas were scrawled on walls and doors in the boys' bathrooms at the high school.

Bedford school officials went public with the incidents. Many residents were shocked because they viewed their town as welcoming to all.

The high school principal held open office hours for students, and townspeople discovered how little they knew about the experiences of religious minorities.

The school system and the community responded beautifully, including working together to educate the mostly Christian town about Judaism. Educators began figuring out ways to include more lessons about religious diversity. A rabbi, with the Catholic police chief's help, led a challah-baking event for the town.

Maybe this letter by U.S. education officials can prompt equally heartfelt responses around the country. It's at least a start at raising more awareness about problems faced by religious minorities.

The letter touts the idea of exposing students to other cultures and faiths, but it's not enough to just provide exposure. Not all communities have much religious diversity.

Schools that teach about the world's religions in social studies and geography classes can help by doing more to provide in-depth, quality education about world religions.

Some teachers spend a few days teaching basics about different religions. Others devote half a school year. Teachers all too often lack the training to go deeper or to teach students how to have respectful discussions about religion.

I think back to that lesson on the Holocaust my history teacher gave and the opportunities missed. My teacher breezed through the genocide of Jews without explaining what a Jew was, without pointing out that Christianity in fact grew out of Judaism. If anything, the teacher depersonalized Jews by his omissions.

Back then, I didn't know much about my own religion. I couldn't defend myself against slurs nor could I educate my peers about my religion. With support, my teachers could have. If I had at least sensed they cared, maybe I would have told them what my classmate said.