

*Between Church and State*, by James W. Fraser

Reviewed by [Brett H. Smith](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

The often uninformed and partisan climate of the current dialogue about religion and public education makes this book, which provides a sane historical context for the debate, especially valuable. James W. Fraser succeeds in shedding light rather than heat on this potentially contentious issue.

Fraser's positions--pastor of East Boston's Grace Church, Federated, as well as professor of history and education and dean of the school of education at Northeastern University--make him uniquely qualified to write on the topic. Because Americans have always disagreed about religion in public education, the democratic inclusion of all voices--even those we think are wrong--is the best option for ensuring mutual sharing and the fruition of a diverse and welcoming public religious landscape, Fraser argues. American common schools, he writes, should not support a particular religious expression; but neither should they be entirely secular. For Fraser, either extreme yields bad public policy. And he believes that history supports his view.

Citing gratitude to his former Columbia University professors, luminaries like Lawrence Cremin, Robert Handy, Robert Lynn and Douglas Sloan, Fraser endorses their view of history. The story is familiar enough: colonial religious hegemony gave way to disestablishment; Unitarians in the east and evangelicals in the west advocated public education on their own theological terms; a Victorian unity was forged by McGuffey's readers; and that consensus was unraveled in the 20th century by a growing federalism and its court decisions, ranging from the *Scopes v. Tennessee* evolution trial to *Abington v. Schemp*, which disallowed school-sponsored prayer and Bible reading. Along the way, Fraser reminds us, various sects dissented and established parochial schools. And he contributes something new to the account, building upon his mentors' legacy by adding long-overdue discussions of African-American, Native American and Jewish educational histories, as well as mention of the unique histories of ethnic groups who have immigrated to the U.S. during the 20th century.

Fraser holds to the importance of education's role in cultivating morality, civilization and citizenship according to consensual, democratic standards. Whenever tolerance has reigned, he implies, things have been good. But when sectarian dominance in any form has reared its ugly head, things have been bad. He reminds us, too, of religion's importance in education, emphasizing the missionary zeal of various religious groups to educate their constituencies, and the key role those sects have often played in even the public education of Americans.

*Between Church and State* deftly accomplishes two goals. First, it provides an excellent, thorough yet concise history for a general readership. Any pastor or educator interested in the issue would do well to start here. Second, it discusses the contemporary situation, identifies potential battles and offers solutions that could bring grace to all the parties involved. Fraser anticipates continued disagreements over school prayer, vouchers and the teaching of creationism. He suggests that public school educators and curriculum developers should move toward integrating religion into the curriculum. He suggests that teachers be trained to present religion without advocacy and to be sensitive to--and understand--the theological challenges posed by the rapidly growing diversity of their student population.

Fraser offers multiculturalism as the solution for incorporating our nation's rapidly increasing religious varieties into mutually beneficial educational experiences. It is one thing, he says, to disagree among Christian denominations but quite another to democratically honor a multitude of religions. He condemns discrimination or oppression of any kind and advocates an embrace of religious diversity, which requires that we do not hold our own conception of the divine as the only true way. But religions with exclusivistic beliefs would be unable to participate in such a multicultural approach to religion in public education. That leads us back to two historically tried options. One, the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, would be disastrous, Fraser argues, since it denies a vital aspect of human existence. The other, the kind of pluralism advocated by the likes of Roger Williams or Thomas Paine, where we agree to let people choose the truth as they see it even if we disagree with them, may still be the best option. If multiculturalism means syncretism, then religious conservatives of all faiths will certainly opt out. But the authentic multicultural pluralism that Fraser wisely recommends may be the golden mean, leading us out of our present impasse and toward a fair and productive inclusion of religions in a public education that welcomes all Americans to the discussion.