

Religion unsegregated

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [January 3, 2001](#) issue

*Education, Religion and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation about Religion's Role in Our Shared Life*, by Martin E. Marty with Jonathan Moore

During the recent presidential campaign, each candidate repeatedly promised to make education a national priority. But education is already a priority, if not a national preoccupation, and many of the most perplexing issues of contemporary political life are played out in microcosm in arguments over our schools.

When wealthy communities build lavish new schools and add expensive new programs while nearby cities struggle to meet their payrolls and repair decaying buildings, is justice violated? May public funds be used only for public schools, or should charter and parochial schools receive a share?

Is the gap between American standardized test scores and those of Asia and Europe a sign that our system has failed or merely a byproduct of our larger and more diverse secondary-school population? Some of the most heated arguments over education center on the proper place of religion in schools that serve a pluralistic society, and whether prayer, Bible study and moral instruction have a place inside school walls.

Martin Marty turns his attention to these topics in this small book with a large title. From 1996 until 1999 Marty directed the Public Religion Project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, a many-sided effort to "bring to light and interpret the forces of faith in a pluralistic society." Marty here distills the insights that the project yielded on religion and education. Project assistant Jonathan Moore has been his collaborator in this venture.

Marty observes that arguments about the state of schools often have less to do with education than with "the culture that education produces." The urgency that many bring to educational debates reveals that "when education in any way goes beyond mere technical training, it reaches very close to the very core of the ego, the self, the 'person in community.'" Those who would exclude religion from public education

believe that in doing so they are helping to preserve the integrity of each domain. But they are deeply mistaken, for religious ideas are inextricably linked to the most fundamental cultural values, and "to discuss such matters without paying attention to life's religious dimensions unfairly segregates education from the rest of cultural life."

Higher and lower education differ in many ways, Marty notes, having to do with students' critical capacities, patterns of funding and governance, and institutional history. For these reasons the issues affecting various parts of the education system are addressed separately. Marty devotes a chapter to the place of religion in public schools and another to religiously supported schools, a chapter to church-related colleges and another to public universities. But he points to the links between these differing domains.

Indeed, a "sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander" argument runs through the book. As a nation we have long acknowledged the importance of certain kinds of public support for religiously grounded higher education, Marty observes, and no one today interprets student loans or science grants as violations of the First Amendment. On the campuses of state-supported public universities, conversely, the academic study of religion is long established and (with occasional exceptions) generally accepted. Why, then, do educational leaders remain so wary of devoting any serious attention to religion in public elementary and secondary schools? The discrepancy seems to be rooted in politics and precedent, not principle.

The opening chapters lay the groundwork for the book by defining such key terms as "education," "religion" and "the common good" and comparing them to a nested series of concentric circles in which each individual finds his or her identity. In the third chapter Marty sketches the historical background. The brevity and generality of this sketch leaves many questions unanswered, and a reader may wonder why a scholar who has written so extensively on the history of American Christianity would devote only six pages here to its educational dimensions. But Marty moves quickly into the heart of his argument, or rather--to use his own term--to the "conversation" that he hopes will displace the heated arguments now raging between opposing factions.

Marty asks us to set aside the shrill charges and countercharges now exchanged between public school officials and voucher advocates, among others, and take a fresh look at how a greater openness to religion can improve education on every

level. One of the virtues of the book--and, indeed, of its author--is its discernment of the legitimate concerns and ideals that lie beneath the surface of current political debates.

"One solution to pluralism is to place all contending beliefs on an equal footing," Marty notes, "but many observers claim that this relativism creates a bigger problem than it solves." He sympathetically presents the findings of a few influential recent studies of education and religion, including James Burtchae's and George Marsden's histories of religious higher education, and Philip Jackson, Robert Boostrom and David T. Hansen's study of morality and education. He also points to the gaps and biases that raise questions about their conclusions. Throughout the book there is a spirit of fairness and generosity that is all too rare in contemporary discussions of either religion or education.

When Marty moves from diagnosis to prescription, he acknowledges the differing needs of various parties in the debate. In the realm of higher education he offers a lengthy list of probing questions, such as "Does America's spiritual diversity doom the impartial study of religion?" "Should universities enable students to critique religious traditions?" "What is the proper relationship between religious commitment and higher education?" These admit no easy answers, but addressing them is necessary if an institution is to have a healthy religious atmosphere for believers and skeptics alike. Marty observes that the study of religion "belongs in the classroom, library, and laboratory," but that "the chapel whose leaders are content with description only will have failed its own congregants." In a healthy academic community, religion is the focus of both intensive and often skeptical study and of lively and diverse practices.

Marty's proposals for the elementary and secondary level are broader because prevailing attitudes are so much less hospitable to religion.

First of all, he argues, study of the history and social structures of human societies, at home and abroad, must include careful and sympathetic attention to religious ideals and practices. "Where religion is relevant to a story or theme, it should be brought into the open and receive fair treatment," but instead today "in most cases, to avoid controversy, schools have too often avoided religion entirely, thereby distorting certain themes and miseducating children."

This book offers an instructive example of constructive Christian engagement in contemporary political issues. There is little here that will be new to scholars of religion and American society, and many of Marty's observations and recommendations are open to challenge. Yet the very brevity and moderation of his plea to open the doors of the schoolhouse and the college classroom to the study and practice of religion make this a volume worth recommending to administrators, politicians and parents.

"Religion," Marty concludes, "is too widespread and too deep a phenomenon not to be reckoned with in primary or at least secondary schools and thereafter." Believers may always feel that religion gets too little attention, while skeptics may draw the opposite conclusion. But in the end we must all recognize that "humans as individuals and in society are too full of passions, of intelligence, of mystery to be properly characterized" as members of a thoroughly secular social world. In our schools and our universities, we have only begun to acknowledge this truth. Marty's slender book will help bring it to fuller expression.