



The Devil Is in the Details: Can I Really Say 'God' in America's Public Schools?

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Abstract

This presentation advances the argument that religious literacy must be included in the American public school curriculum as a means of ensuring social stability and that such inclusion in no way violates separation of church and state as mandated in the *U.S. Constitution*. Conflicts regarding separation of church and state in school have resulted in time-consuming and costly litigation; the result has been that American schools have, for the most part, systematically removed the study and discussion of religion in the classroom. However, in a religiously-pluralistic society, this move is disadvantageous to students because it affords them minimal understanding of the "religious other" and ill-equips them to negotiate the conflicts and tensions that invariably surface in a religiously-diverse society. As some scholars [Passe and Willcox, 2009; Rosenblith and Bailey, 2005] have argued, the time is long overdue to incorporate a holistic and intentional religious literacy program into the American public school curriculum.

Through discussion of the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause as articulated in the *U.S. Constitution*, as well as influential court cases that have set legal precedent and driven educational policy, the mandate of "separation of church and state" in the realm of public education is examined. Specific attention is given to the discussion of religious history and ideology in the classroom setting as well as tolerance for a student's right to freely exercise his/her religious beliefs through such venues as school prayer, holiday celebrations, and excusals. Voltaire's writings concerning religious pluralism and Rousseau's notion of civil religion are then explored as they provided the framework for the American founding fathers' decision to include a secular type of religion in their new nation state; Washington, Adams, Hamilton and Jefferson consciously invoked the power of civil religion to sanction state authority and award divine purpose to a country yet in its infancy. Secular in tone and prevalent in nearly all facets of American government, civil religion is included in presidential addresses as well as oaths of office and state prayers; it appears throughout the monetary system and comprises the national motto – "In God We Trust." However, this same civil religion has prompted considerable controversy in the realm of public education, burdening schools with time-consuming and costly litigation. The consequence is that public schools have unilaterally removed the study and discussion of religious history and ideology in the classroom. This move, understandable though it may be, is both short-sighted and misguided as it undermines the pedagogical integrity of American public education and precludes schools from meeting the needs of the pluralistic society they are meant to serve.

References

- [1] Passe, Jeff and Lara Willcox. "Teaching Religion in America's Public Schools: A Necessary Disruption." *The Social Studies* (May/June 2009): 102-106.
- [2] Rosenblith, Suzanne and Beatrice Bailey. "Cultivating A Religiously Literate Society: Challenges and Possibilities for America's Public Schools. *Religious Education*. Vol. 103 No. 2 March-April 2008: 145-161.