

Teaching about Religion in Social Studies: The First Amendment and Academic Freedom

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This paper examines the educational importance, controversies, and legal issues associated with teaching about religion in secondary school social studies classes. Many teachers are hesitant to teach about religion in social studies because of a lack of content knowledge, they fear charges of indoctrination, or they are not cognizant of the relevant First Amendment cases. Thus, most American students are not exposed to the vital role of religion in American and world history and are unaware of the crucial impact of religion on law, literature, the arts, and contemporary international relations and domestic politics. Religious illiteracy is educationally unsound because it deprives students' access to a quality liberal arts education and hinders their ability to make reasoned and informed decision regarding important political and cultural issues. Teaching about religion in social studies course is essential to a comprehensive liberal education as it raises students' awareness regarding the intersection of history with the contemporary world. Teachers have First Amendment rights and academic freedom that allow them to teach about religion by following established Supreme Court decisions and the National Council for the Social Studies guidelines.

Key Words: religion, social studies, academic freedom, First Amendment, Constitution, censorship

Introduction

It is impossible for social studies educators to teach about history, geography, international relations, and contemporary global issues without offering a comprehensive examination of the world's most influential religions (Chapin, 2010; Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson, & Thomas, 2003; Nord; 1995). Students, for example, cannot comprehend the creation of the United States without a solid knowledge of Christianity and its influence on American culture, politics, capitalism, and law. The propagation of Protestant Christianity in the colonies, the evolution of democratic thought (with an emphasis on the idea that rights originate with God and not government), the abolition movement, prohibition, the creation of social welfare programs, and the civil rights movement were all deeply influenced by Christianity and its core tenets of equality, love, social justice, and compassion (Schweikart & Allen, 2004). An examination of colonial history shows that all 13 original colonies were preoccupied with Christianity as the Charter of New England, the Mayflower Compact, and the Massachusetts Bay charter all advocated for the advancement of Christianity (Schweikart, 2009).

An examination of American history textbooks reveals that religion is virtually ignored, distorted, or marginalized in many important historical events (Carter, 1994; Nord, 1995; Prothero, 2010; Schweikart, 2009). Students exposed to many textbooks, for instance, would not have any understanding of the importance of religion to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s (Prothero, 2010). The primary motivation for Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders was their unshakeable faith in a loving and just God who would guide them in their

difficult quest for equality and social justice. This critically important fact often is absent from the social studies curriculum and leaves students ignorant of historical truths. Religion, moreover, is not an important theme in modern education. Its virtual exclusion across the curriculum is educationally imprudent, especially in a world where religion remains a primary force in world and domestic politics.

Research studies and surveys show American students are ignorant about religion and its pivotal role in history, politics, international affairs, law, and culture (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010; Prothero, 2007). Many citizens are misinformed regarding judicial decisions on the proper role of religion in public schools continuing to believe that the separation between church and state is absolute and there is no role for religion in public schools or public spaces (Nord & Haynes, 1998). Here, I examine the reasons why religion has been omitted, distorted, minimized, or removed from social studies courses, as well as other disciplines. The harmful consequences surrounding the absence of religion from the curriculum are documented. Finally, the last section examines several First Amendment decisions, academic freedom, and teachers' obligations. In addition, this section will discuss policies that can offer teachers protection from charges of preaching about religion, indoctrinating students into specific religious beliefs, values, and practices, and creating a controversial environment in the classroom.

A liberal arts education requires students possess a strong knowledge base regarding religion and its role in history and contemporary political affairs. The social studies curriculum, particularly history and geography, must include a comprehensive examination of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism as well as recognition of other religions. Not only do these five religions play a critical role in history and contemporary world affairs, they also have had an enormous influence on art, music, philosophy, law, literature, and other disciplines (Nord, 1995). Religious literacy should not be an after thought in an era of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), high-stakes testing, and accountability; it should be a central component of a well-rounded liberal education that facilitates understanding human experiences in all of their dimensions. Religion should be taken seriously across the curriculum and infused in social studies courses, as well as literature and the arts (Nord, 1995).

The First Amendment: Religion and Education

Many Americans believe the Constitution places greater restraints on religious education in public schools than it actually does (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010). This belief could be because of judicial decisions over the past 50 years that have removed the practice of religion (school-sanctioned prayer, devotional Bible reading, celebrating holidays, and the inculcation of specific religious beliefs). Concurrently, significant majorities of Americans are concerned with the influence of religion in public life. Sixty-four percent of respondents in one survey said "religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections, and 54% stated that "religious groups should not advance their beliefs by being involved in politics and working to affect policy" (Dye, 2011, p. 40). Sixty-seven percent of respondents in one survey incorrectly further state teachers are prohibited from reading from the Bible as an example of literature, and 51% incorrectly state that teachers cannot offer a course on comparative religions (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010).

Surveys have indicated that large majorities misunderstand the First Amendment's protection of freedom of expression and religion: individuals have a right to express their

religious views and influence the political process according to their beliefs and goals (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010). This same right extends to secularists, atheists, and others regardless of the origin of their political perspectives. The Founders, suggests Nord (1995), would have been shocked at attempts to exclude religious viewpoints from political discourse. Much of what is labeled “the culture wars” is a struggle over the proper role of religion in public life and education (Dye, 2011, p. 41). The Supreme Court, for example, ruling in the *Board of Education of Westside Community School v. Mergens* (1990), asserted that secondary schools allowing “non-curriculum related clubs to meet on school ground must also allow religious and political clubs the same right, as long as these clubs are initiated and led by students” (Haynes, et al., 2003, p. 136). The Court reasoned that schools prohibiting these religious clubs were engaging in hostility towards religion and violating the First Amendment protections of free speech and the free exercise of religion clause for students engaging in private speech. Students are not government employees and have the right to promote or denigrate religion as private citizens, providing they follow established guidelines established by the First Amendment decisions and do not disrupt the educational process.

This right was established for elementary schools in 2001 when the Supreme Court ruled, in *Good News Club, et al. v. Milford Central School*, that allowing religious clubs to meet on school grounds ensures neutrality and provides equal protection to all citizens (Morrison, 2006). The Court argued that schools forbidding religious community groups from meeting on school grounds are engaging in unconstitutional religious viewpoint discrimination; the Court stated that “speech may not be excluded from a public forum because of its religious content or viewpoint” (Haynes, et al., 2003, p. 141). This 6-3 judicial decision reflects the competing interpretations of the First Amendment and the difficult task of balancing the “establishment clause” and the “free exercise clause” regarding public schools.

The increasing divide in the United States of American between religious faith and secular politics is manifested in sharp, and often bitter, disagreements over a wide range of public issues. The most religious people in America, for example, generally support bans on abortion (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2009) and same-sex marriage (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012), abstinence in sex education, and believe that the phrases “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance and “in God we trust” on our money should remain unaffected (Dye, 2011, p. 41). They also support the display of religious symbols in public places and assert that religion should play a significant role in public issues (Dye, 2011, p. 41). Many liberals, secularists, and atheists, however, argue that the First Amendment’s “Establishment Clause” prevents the display of religious symbols, such as the Ten Commandments and Christmas displays in public places, and believe in a strict separation between church and state. Generally, most liberals and secularists also support abortion rights, same-sex marriages, the teaching of evolution and a ban on creationism in Kindergarten-12 biology classes, and removing the word “God” from our money and the Pledge of Allegiance (Dye, 2011, p. 41; Gollnick & Chinn, 2013; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2009; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012).

Despite the widespread misconceptions about the First Amendment and the acrimonious struggle between the religious traditionalists and the secularists, teachers have a First Amendment right and an ethical obligation to teach about religion in Kindergarten-12 schools. While cases, such as *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963), removed school-sanctioned prayer and devotional Bible reading from public schools, students

have a right to be taught about world religions as part of a liberal education that encourages dissent, civility, respect for competing perspectives, and critical thinking. Schools can ensure fairness when they exhibit neutrality—not hostility—towards religion by creating a curriculum that includes the academic, objective, and advocacy-free study about religion.

Associate Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark affirmed the right of educators to teach about religion when, writing for the majority opinion in the *Abington School District v. Schempp* decision, he stated:

It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that the Bible or religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment (Haynes, et al., 2003, p. 51).

Associate Justice William Brennan, writing in a concurring opinion in the *Abington School District v. Schempp* case, argued that it would be “impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion” (NCSS, 1998, p.1). If students are to acquire an intellectually sophisticated understanding of history and contemporary society, as well as developing tolerance for diversity and respect for religious liberty, they must have knowledge of the basic beliefs, rituals, symbols, and historical role of the world's major religions (Haynes, et al., 2003; Nord, 1995; Prothero, 2010).

The Curriculum Wars and the NCSS Guidelines for Teaching about Religion

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1998) established specific guidelines, based on major Supreme Court decisions, for teaching about religion. Instruction must be academic, objective, balanced, and descriptive. The study of religion should focus on the influence of religion on history, the arts, culture, law, politics, economics, science, and contemporary issues; knowledge and understanding, not acceptance or conformity, as the major goal. Teachers should be qualified—knowledgeable, offer a professional presentation of material, be open-minded, and aware of the Supreme Court's decision regarding the study of religion in public schools—and establish a civil climate that is free from advocacy. Teachers should not promote nor denigrate religion (this is where keeping personal opinions out of the classroom is prudent for Kindergarten-12 teachers), and encourage students to read, think, and express themselves in a civil manner. Providing students with a comprehensive overview of the world's major religions—their origins, theological tenets, sacred narratives, social and educational institutions, role in history, structure, required rituals, and how they view social, economic, and political issues—and allowing them to develop their own views is an educationally and legally sound practice for public school teachers.

When teaching about Islam, for example, in world history, geography, or government following the 1998 NCSS guidelines will prevent or minimize legal problems and disputes among parents, students, teachers, and administrators. The following facts and concepts should be included when teaching about Islam: Islam is a monotheistic religion founded by Muhammad in 610 CE. The five pillars of Islam—declaration of faith, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and a pilgrimage to Mecca—are the central beliefs and practices that all devout Muslims must follow (Brown, 2009). Islam expanded rapidly throughout North Africa and Southwest Asia via conversion and conquest (Brown, 2009; Lewis & Churchill, 2009; Wheatcroft, 2004). Finally,

Islamic civilizations have made substantial contributions to world history (algebra, optics, geography and cartography, art and architecture, literature, and many other disciplines) and had a significant impact on Western civilization (Brown, 2009; Esposito, 1999; Lyons, 2009). These are well-documented facts that must be taught. An accurate video, an interactive lecture with guided notes, and oral reading are excellent methods for teaching factual material and avoiding stereotypes and harmful misinformation.

When teaching about more controversial topics in Islam, such as jihad or the status of women living under *Shari'ah* law, it would be prudent to present a wide variety of scholarly perspectives, competing narratives, and show students that dissent is a critical component of education (Brown, 2009; Feldman, 2003; Harris 2004; Lewis & Churchill 2009). It is vital students understand that Islam is not a monolithic religion and Muslim countries fuse politics and religion into different legal systems (Brown, 2009). Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, for example, are Muslim countries with different interpretations of Islamic law; Saudi Arabia is considerably more conservative in its application of Islamic law compared to the more liberal Indonesia (Brown, 2009).

While students have the freedom to express their opinions on religion, including harsh criticism, teachers must be more neutral (NCSS, 1998). Using phrases such as “most Hindus believe in reincarnation” or “according to the Qur’ān” are a safe way to avoid promoting or denigrating religion and offer neutrality. Neutrality, however, does not mean ignoring or distorting information about religions and their role in history; military conquests by Muslim armies, Christians killing other Christians during the Crusades, Hindu and Buddhist violence in Sri Lanka, and other information. Censoring historical information or competing ideas because they are offensive to religious adherents is unethical and educationally fallacious. This context was affirmed by the Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968) case asserting states cannot ban the teaching of evolution in public schools because it conflicts with religious beliefs. Abolishing historical information or controversial ideas because they are offensive or radical is anathema to the First Amendment and our ideals of freedom of thought and conscience.

At the same time, teachers should be very careful when choosing materials, activities, books, methods, and other resources; many textbooks are designed to inculcate specific religious or political beliefs by organizations with a specific agenda (Sewall, 2008). It is worthwhile, even considering the demands on teachers’ time, to research numerous scholarly works and offer competing narratives regarding religion and other controversial issues intrinsic in social studies classrooms. Creating a curriculum is an intensely complicated, competitive, and political process where various groups fight for their visions (which may be biased, historically false, distorted, or in violation of American laws) to be incorporated into textbooks and resources (Kliebard, 1986; Martorella, Beal, & Bolick, 2005; Oliva, 2005; Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein, 2007; Schubert, 1986).

History and the social sciences are settings for competing ideas. Reading, for example, *A People’s History of the United States*, a liberal interpretation of American history by Howard Zinn (1980), and contrasting it with the conservative perspective offered by Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen’s (2004) *A Patriot’s History of the United States*, demonstrates the controversies inherent in developing a history curriculum. The struggle for control over the curriculum is not simply an academic issue of importance only to scholars and educators who makes curriculum decision. What we choose to teach our students has profound national

implications for our national identity, economy, political institutions, and foreign policies. As such, teachers should be aware of the politics of curriculum decisions and use their professional judgments in choosing content, textbooks, and resources. In many cases, of course, the district or school administration will choose the textbooks and supplemental materials. In these cases, it is incumbent upon teachers to verify these books and resources for accuracy and balance; or at least for the presentation of dissenting views, as these may be the first casualties of the “curriculum wars.”

It may be argued that the struggle to control the curriculum is a continuation of politics as various religious, racial, and political groups compete for their narratives to be included in the American story. This is a highly contentious struggle with deep implications for the American character; the curriculum symbolizes the moral, economic, and political vision of the nation. The curriculum includes factual knowledge and skills, but it also includes the dispositions and behaviors that society has deemed most important in a modern democracy in a highly competitive global economy. The federal, state, and local governments, as well as corporate interests, lobbyists, secular and religious advocacy groups, and concerned citizens all have a vested interest in what knowledge, skills, and values are taught in public schools.

In a democracy, competing visions will collide and decisions must be made that will please some and infuriate others. Political ideologies and/or theologies matter to people, as they make decisions over important issues based on their most deeply held vision of a just and moral world. The battle over the proper role of religion in schools is but one example of how the democratic process of curriculum decision-making involves articulating constitutional arguments, dissent, public discourse, and balancing the rights of competing groups. Some, for example, advocate for the inclusion of issues and problems related to homosexuality in the curriculum including the contributions of homosexuals to civilization, the problems experienced by gay and lesbian students, and the discrimination that many face in employment, housing, and other legal and social domains (Nieto & Bode, 2012; Sears, 2007). Parents and students who object may base their objections to including homosexuality issues into the curriculum on their religious beliefs; these individuals allege that including sexual orientation in the curriculum is nothing more than an attempt to indoctrinate students into a lifestyle that is morally bankrupt and a threat to the social order (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013).

The bitter 2010 controversy in Texas regarding social studies textbooks and their treatment of the United States and its role in history—there were acrimonious ideological debates over America’s founding principles and figures, the role of God in our founding documents and history, and the degree to which America is an exceptional country and a moral force—was an example of a strong political divide in the country and schools are a primary battleground (Terrell, 2010). This battle is a classic example of the contemporary “culture wars” between liberals and conservatives.

Many conservatives on the Texas state school board (10 Republicans and 5 Democrats in 2010) wanted the social studies curriculum to reflect the view that the United States is a great country because of our democratic values and a force for freedom throughout the world (Terrell, 2010). They argued that liberals—including many textbook authors, professors, publishers, and some teachers—attempt to indoctrinate students in to secular humanism and denigrate traditional American values. For many conservatives, these values, such as a God-centered moral order that supports the nuclear family, law and order, individualism, personal responsibility, limited

governmental powers, and traditional sexual mores, are not reflected in the social studies curriculum. They alleged that removing the central role of God and religion in America's creation is unethical and historically deceitful.

Simultaneously, the five liberal board members argued that conservatives were attempting to obliterate the First Amendment's "separation between church and state" and inculcate Christian theology into the social studies curriculum, as well as biology courses as a counterpoint to the teaching of evolution via natural selection (Terrell, 2010). Liberals asserted that the conservatives supported a curriculum that whitewashes American sins—slavery, segregation, sexism, imperialism, and racism—and advocates unquestioned patriotism. A social studies curriculum that omits the contributions and tribulations of minorities, including homosexuals and women, is right-wing indoctrination.

The outcome of this battle has national implications because Texas is the second largest textbook market in the country and many states will adopt the Texas curriculum standards. Controversy, while it is a central component of history and politics, and contemporary social issues, horrifies textbook publishers because it can adversely impact profits as school districts avoid controversial topics in order to appease special interests groups (Sewall, 2008). While this may be smart business, it is educational malfeasance because students have a right to be exposed to historical information and controversial topics as they acquire the knowledge and skills required of citizenship. In the final analysis, what we teach students about United States history will impact our future; their collective vision of the country will influence voting patterns, laws, policies, political activism, and other behaviors that determine our national character.

It is imperative that teachers possess a solid knowledge of their community, parents, and the curriculum guidelines in their states and school districts. In the absence of a national curriculum, states or districts will establish curriculum guidelines in accordance with the dominant values and local cultural traditions. Like all political struggles, there are consequences for losing; teachers have been fired or disciplined for deviating from the prescribed curriculum or not fully understanding their rights and limitations under the First Amendment (Chapin, 2010).

Academic Freedom: Censorship, Speech Codes, and Politics

In conjunction with their First Amendment rights, social studies teachers also have academic freedom, defined by the NCSS (2007) as "the right and responsibility to study, investigate, present, interpret, discuss, and debate relevant facts, issues, and ideas in fields of the teacher's professional competence." Accordingly, teachers have a responsibility to teach about religion in order to produce a liberally educated citizen capable of understanding, and participating in, a world characterized by enormous diversity. Democracy demands that teachers and students be able to freely discuss the wealth of ideas, laws, values, attitudes, and beliefs that are inherent in all civilizations. This discussion includes controversial issues that will produce disagreements and conflicts. Such controversy is normal and healthy in a pluralistic democracy that needs all citizens to make wise choices based on multiple perspectives and factual knowledge. In fact, controversies, dissent, and complexity, often missing from history books, are vital to creating interesting and challenging social studies classes (Loewen, 2007).

Academic freedom can come under intense assault from both sides of the political spectrum. Lewis Menard once stated "the censor always rings twice" (Schlesinger, 1998, p. 163) and teachers and schools who run afoul of accepted orthodoxy risk consequences (attempts to silence heretics and threats of lawsuits). Attempts—some on the right have been able to remove

“offensive” materials or ideas from the schools and curriculum based on religious grounds, and the left has been able to implement codes preventing “offensive” hate speech in schools and colleges—at censorship are chilling to the notions of free expression and academic freedom (Oliva, 2005). All positions on the political spectrum can engage in efforts to censor ideas they despise and advocates of the First Amendment must remain vigilant against censorship regardless of its ideological origins (Schlesinger, 1998). Vigilance is necessary because it is difficult for people to tolerate ideas that they loathe and the urge to suppress freedom of speech is ubiquitous and powerful.

There are crucial disagreements among legal scholars, educators, and policy-makers regarding the First Amendment and prohibitions on “hate speech”, which is defined “as hostile or prejudicial attitudes expressed toward another person’s or group’s characteristics, notably sex, race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation” (Dye, 2011, p. 508). The United States, for example, is facing an interesting, and potentially dangerous, dilemma: Should freedom of expression protect individuals who are critical of religious beliefs and practices? Some may argue that religion must be protected from hate speech, negative and vicious stereotyping, satire, and criticism. Such restrictions are seen as necessary to protect the ideals of pluralism, multiculturalism, and tolerance. The nation is struggling with balancing First Amendment rights with the rights of individuals to be protected from bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

Several European democracies (France, Italy, England, and Switzerland) have established blasphemy laws criminalizing speech critical of religion. These laws have been particularly effective regarding criticism of Islam, which, in a few cases, has been dangerous (Lebl, 2007; Lebl, 2010; Spencer, 2008). The violence occasioned by the 2005 publication of political cartoons satirizing Muhammad is instructive: Shari’ah law considers blasphemy—saying or writing anything critical or negative about Allah, Islam or Muhammad—a crime punishable by death (Lebl, 2007). Thus, the Danish cartoonist and other critics of Islam, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2007) must go into hiding and take other extraordinary efforts to protect themselves from assassination, which befell Theo Van Gogh for making a film critical of Islam for its treatment of women (Spencer, 2008).

This tactic, silencing all criticism of Islam and other religions, has worked well in Europe. England’s 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act made it a crime to threaten or abuse any religion and charged a 15-year-old boy under this act for calling Scientology a cult. In 2009, Ireland passed a law calling for the prosecution of anyone who writes or utters views that are seen as insulting to religion (Spencer 2008; Turley 2009). Cartoonists, journalists, religious leaders, legislators, and comedians have all faced punishments for violating blasphemy laws. The Obama administration, furthermore, supported the efforts of the United Nations Human Rights Council “to recognize exceptions to free speech for any negative racial and religious stereotyping” (Turley, 2009, p. 2). Supporters of the blasphemy laws argue they protect all religious traditions and teach tolerance and respect, which are much needed traits in a highly diverse and contentious world.

Critics of the blasphemy laws avow that no religious beliefs, values, or practices should be exempt from criticism and dissent; advocates of this position condemn blasphemy laws as the ultimate practice of intolerance: criminalizing and oppressing free speech in the name of religious tolerance. These critics contend that blasphemy laws prohibit the discussion of historically accurate events, contemporary issues, and sacrifice the cherished ideal of freedom of

expression in misguided attempts to appease religious groups (Harris, 2007; Lebl, 2007; Turley, 2009). Individuals have the right to criticize any religion, political ideology or policies, laws, cultural practices, or anything else they choose; blasphemy laws, regardless of their motivating factors, have the effect of chilling freedom of expression, reinforcing authoritarian politics, and stopping dissent, which is essential in a democracy, and promotes the human inclination to search for truth.

Many higher education institutions and Kindergarten-12 schools have bans on hate speech in order to ensure civility and protect the rights of all students, including students from minority groups with beliefs and speech deemed offensive by certain groups (Dye, 2011). Some of the primary goals of hate speech bans include preventing students from being offended, feeling uncomfortable, or having their feelings assaulted by ideas or language that they consider “hateful.” Without much doubt, language can hurt, and many minority group members have been the targets of racial, sex, religious, and ethnic bigotry. Despite the noble intentions of these hate speech bans, the courts have ruled that they are an unconstitutional violation of the First Amendment (Dye, 2011). While schools have an obligation to protect students from discrimination (actual behavior), it is impermissible to proscribe speech because it is repugnant or insensitive to individuals or groups. Advocates of hate speech prohibitions in colleges and public schools (albeit, students in Kindergarten-12 schools have more limits because of their age and compulsory attendance) often fail to recognize that the First Amendment allows hate speech. The legal and pedagogically rational response to biased, intellectually primitive, ignorant, crude, or offensive speech is more enlightened speech based on facts, not the unconstitutional suppression of speech.

In 2001, the United States Supreme Court ruled, in *Saxe v. State College Area School District*, that schools may not create speech codes that prohibit all offensive or hurtful language; one of the core legal and philosophical principles of the First Amendment is that “government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea offensive or disagreeable” (Haynes, et al., 2003, p.70). Students may express views and opinions on politics, religion, law, and morality that may be offensive, radical, and controversial. When discussing religion, all students have the right to criticize or praise the religion, its beliefs, its role in history and contemporary politics. This decision affirms the primacy of the First Amendment and allows social classes to be characterized by dissent, criticism, debate, and inquiry. The teacher must play a pivotal role in establishing civility, a safe classroom (not only physically but safe for the free expression of ideas without threats and ridicule), and respect for law and historical evidence.

“Hate speech” has been defined as any speech critical of any cultural or religious belief, attitude, or behavior. If a student, for example, expressed his opinion—based on his Christian or Islamic beliefs that homosexuality is morally wrong, he could be charged with hate speech and subject to disciplinary action. Thus, many contemporary threats to academic freedom emanate from universities; historically, the staunchest protectors of free speech as essential to representative democracy, the advancement of knowledge, ensuring peaceful social change, protecting individual liberties and human freedom, and allowing the search for truth to proceed despite religious or political orthodoxy (Center for Civic Education, 2009; Dye, 2011).

It is vital to note that neither Constitutional liberties nor academic freedom are absolute. The judicial branch is constantly deciding First Amendment issues involving freedom of

expression and religion. The First Amendment and academic freedom are not a license for teachers to indoctrinate students into accepting a specific ideology, value, or belief. There are professional responsibilities to provide competing views, ideas, counter-arguments, and dissenting students are to be treated with respect. Kindergarten-12 teachers have less academic freedom rights and protections than university professors as their students are a captive audience, young and impressionable, and susceptible to indoctrination. Several teachers have been terminated, suspended, or disciplined for indoctrinating students or presenting only one view on controversial issues (Chapin, 2010). Prudence would dictate that teachers provide an open classroom where debate, dissent, knowledge, critical thinking (the ability to seek empirical data for truth claims, distinguishing between fact and opinion, balancing evidence, and recognizing bias and propaganda) and civility characterize the entire educational process.

Educators should become familiar with the important Supreme Court decisions on religion and the First Amendment, and the rights and limitations associated with academic freedom. Teachers must acquire a solid knowledge base regarding world religions and teach them in accordance with the NCSS guidelines; this will insulate them from charges of indoctrination, promoting, or denigrating religion. Democratic education demands that students know about world religions and their momentous impact on human civilizations and history; religion continues to be a major force in domestic and world politics in the early twenty-first century. Simultaneously, teachers must use caution when discussing any religion's core beliefs, practices, and role in history; even undisputed truths can offend some individuals. Educators at all levels should not be afraid to teach about religion in public schools; it is educationally indispensable, constitutionally sound, and imperative in a pluralistic democracy committed to producing civic-minded citizens capable of understanding a complex and diverse world.

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