
AT ISSUE

Shalt/Shalt Not

On the whole, the arrangement wasn't bad. Sex you learned about mostly on the streets, long before you were caught off guard one day by a parent who had found the courage to be straight-faced about the mechanics and their ("Take my word for it") spiritual dimension. The details, such as they were, resembled what you already knew about as much as a stick figure resembles a Reubens.

And religion you learned about mostly in school (theory) and church (practice). The Seven Deadly Sins, how to tell a mortal sin from a venial (the feathers of the former fan out like a peacock's), how to avoid specialized offenses like sins against the Holy Ghost, how to ratchet up an indulgence from partial to plenary without exhausting yourself in the process—none of these prickly matters was a welcome guest at the dinner table. But they and their countless thorny cousins were the second family we consorted with at school, between all the proper academic stuff like reading and spelling and arithmetic and geography and history, which generally made their claims free of doctrinal bias or color. True, the size of the Catholic population of a country was integral to a geography lesson, and there was sometimes a trace of nunnish wistfulness about what might have been had Spain or France K.O.'d England in the fight for North America. God's plan became notably inscrutable when it stiffed the Spanish Armada.

What else should one have expected in a Catholic school but religious indoctrination, and of a specific and dogmatic sort? Heaven was up, hell was straight down; purgatory was down too but not so far, and limbo a little over to the side, set off by a fence that screened all disturbance. Immediate seating in all areas. Seven-and-a-half years of this sublime marination were interrupted for me by six months in a New York City public school, and I found the drying-out process oddly unsatisfactory.

Of course there was no religious instruction in the public school, but there did exist a submerg'd religiosity, which I have since decided was the well-meaning generic Protestantism that probably passed as an unofficial American religion for 150 years. This all-purpose religiosity, whose watchwords were a sourcebook for samplers—self-reliance, honesty, hard work, and respect for your neighbor—surfaced principally at Tuesday morning school assemblies, where exhortations to good citizenship alternated with interludes of silent prayer and noisy song in praise of a distant one-size-fits-all Creator. Accustomed to a deity so close and invasive no piddling sin escaped him, I had difficulty warming to a God who would have needed the Palomar telescope to spot a dirty thought.

The spare Tuesday ceremonies were bland, well-meaning, and harmless (and the traditional virtues they endorsed by rote, let us not forget, were yeast to the nation's mighty rise). Who knew we were

being unconstitutional? Shouldn't national transgression have carried more of a rush? In the boundary-obsessed '90s, those vacuous weekly assemblies would carry the emotional resonance of Nuremberg rallies and educate even the Old Testament God to the niceties of official wrath.

Sex today has curricular status in public schools, and parents are off the hook (though there will always be some who reserve to themselves the prerogative of showing kids the chilling, blurred Polaroids of the birth). If only a fair exchange had outlawed religion to the streets! "Psst, kid, over here in the alley. Ever wonder where gods come from? Wanna see a picture of the Buddha? And check out this Confucius."

Even a back alley may be too public a place for religion in America these days. Children who attend sectarian institutions, and Sunday schools or their equivalent, may still plot their lives by the sacred road maps they learn to read in school and church. But what of children who attend public schools and no church, whose

WQ

parents are indifferent to religion and barely capable of New Age moral instruction? (Find your essence, ride the wave, live the dream.) What sense will they have of religion's power to master lives and to alter history?

At a time when portions of the globe seem to be fracturing like pond ice along radiating lines of difference, even modest palliatives have a claim. So should we consider educating the young about religions—quite apart from the education many of them may receive in a religion? Is there a case to be made not for teaching religion in public schools, which is plainly impossible, but for speaking formally about religions in a historical and cultural context, which is merely very difficult? The goal is not to make the young better but only to make them smarter.

The consequences of belief—and refusal and difference—are writ large in the histories of East and West, and microscopically in the behavior of anyone who ever struck or shunned or went to the aid of another human being out of a determination to do God's will. Much of the world's history—past and current—is meaningless without an understanding of the religious motivations that fueled wars, toppled empires, and staked a claim to continents, or sometimes just to neighborhoods.

And how does one make sense of Western cultural expression—in painting, sculpture, music, literature, architecture—without some understanding of Christianity, if only as the presence that has inspired as much rebellion as deference? Even religious art may hide mischief in its mystery: the painter who inscribes the face of his catamite on a floating cherub tweaks the tradition and extends it too. But you cannot notice if you do not know.

Objections to the notion of teaching religions in public schools leapfrog each other in their determination to be heard. "What need is there to tamper with current arrangements? Let children whose parents wish them to receive religious instruction attend the institutions that provide it—and let public schools bus kids to museums if culture is the issue." But a sectarian school by definition pays no attention to other religions. It is a religion school, not a religions school. It does nothing to advance the larger cause. Its ethos, one expects—one hopes—will be fundamentally

prejudiced. It believes in the superiority of its own product and does not advocate that we sample others before making up our minds. There is no feel-good ethic of egalitarianism. Martyrs have a cause, and those who kill them implicitly recognize its threat when they pay them the caps-off tribute of death.

"And about what religions do you propose to teach? Someone in the classroom is bound to feel slighted—marginalized, demeaned, and litigious." This is reasonably predictive, and not just because immigration has brought to America so many new residents from portions of the world beyond the boundaries that were once comfortable to the West. There is the additional risk of having in the classroom a sprinkling of adherents to shiny neophyte faiths. After all, what does it take to start a religion nowadays? A rule or two, a goal or two, a god or two—and the god no longer has to inhabit heaven but maybe just Beverly Hills.

So you begin to draw the lines: no class time for revelations that postdate World War II, or for a religion whose founder has appeared on a TV talk show. A music appreciation course is likely to overlook von Dittersdorf but not Mozart; a poetry course may slight Southey for Wordsworth; a fiction course forgoes Krantz for Kafka; a driver's ed class probably seats you in a Ford, a Chrysler, or a Chevy, but not in all three at once. Education is always about choices. There's time for just so much, and the essential thing is that sane and defensible criteria inform the decisions that give the nod to this and the hook to that. Limit religions instruction to religions that have had some major historical impact. Sounds simple enough.

In their imperialistic heyday, slick magazines like *Life* would sometimes take on topics that they decided were "important enough to warrant an entire issue." Entire libraries would not have been space enough to consider these topics adequately—among which figured "The World's Great Religions"—but the editors were unfazed. They recklessly distilled the essentials of each great religion—history, theology, influence—into a compact text and then scattered the words among pages of gorgeous pictures. We may marvel today at the

editors' boldness, but instructive popularizing deserves some admiration too. They didn't agonize over which religions have had the most profound consequences for civilizations; Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and maybe Taoism are my clouded memory's candidates. I keep the list alphabetical to avoid hierarchical debate.

You could do worse than start with that list as the basis for a high school religions course. It seems appropriate to recognize as well the religious practices of native inhabitants of the Americas, whom European missionaries labored to convert, and of the African peoples who were displaced and brought across the sea against their will. Remember, we are not talking about instruction in theology or about setting in motion the engine of any religion, which only faith can do, merely about examining the locked components of the engine while they are quiet and cool: some dates, some doctrine, some sense of growth and accomplishment, of claims on territory and the artistic imagination rather than on souls.

The goal is to understand a bit better not just how the world has worked but how it still works. The motive is not pious but rational. You cannot understand what is happening in American politics even as I write if you ignore the religious impulse behind the enthusiasm of many Americans who demand change. Nor will you adequately comprehend events in other parts of the world without a sense of their vital and compelling religious traditions.

We are suckers in America for the theme park sentimentality that insists "It's a small world"—and of harmonizing voices at that. If there is a family of man, a lot of evidence, in Bosnia and India and Algeria and Iraq, argues for its being terminally dysfunctional. And religious difference fuels much of the discord. Wistful and conciliatory, we are apt to say "It's not important *what* you believe but only *that* you believe." Ripe matter for Rodgers and Hammerstein, but it will

not deflect the sword from slicing the infidel who thought of himself as a harmless Anglican.

Is the schools' project even remotely doable? Good sense argues no. How do you present all this material without tipping your hand? What do you do with even the most familiar, the Judaeo-Christian tradition? How do you incorporate Judaism in its several varieties and Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism's extended family of sects not on speaking terms with one another? How summon equal measures of dispassion for Christ, the Buddha, Muhammad, Henry VIII, and Joseph Smith? Won't the least arch of an eyebrow, however involuntary, signal a judgment final as Dante's? Who is qualified to teach these things, and, perhaps more important, who is qualified to learn them? If students can't locate Turkey on a map, will it matter to them that there was once an Ottoman Empire and that we live still with the consequences of its collapse? If they can't find India, will they notice the blood in Kashmir?

The entire enterprise may be simply another instance of the old wanting to take hold of the young by the shoulders to say, "Listen, there is so much you should know, so much you will learn too late, so much you will never know. I know things that will make your progress through the world less puzzling and painful. Laws govern physical nature, and to recognize them is to gain a power over nature. Laws—religious, civic, social, psychological—govern much of the rest of life, and they can be comprehended too. We are talking of partial comprehension only, but that's not to say the understanding is trivial. For example, civilizations have a lifeblood, and they draw it richly from their notions of the divine."

"Huh?"

Ah, well. Thou shalt have a lot of strange gods before you as you move through the world, but thou shalt not admit any of them to your neighborhood school.

—James Morris