Towards a Religious Studies Pedagogy: Civics and Plurality in American Public Schools

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Towards a Religious Studies Pedagogy: Civics and Plurality in American Public Schools

by

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
This thesis brings together the academic worlds of religious studies and education and attempts to contextualize the problems inherent in the debate over the study of religion in American public schools. The goal of this thesis is to provide a contextualized view of the disparate conversations surrounding the issue of the study of religion in public schools by offering theories and methods from both disciplines of religious studies and education. Themes addressed herein include arguments for including the study of religion in public school curriculums, the challenge of overcoming the religion/secularism divide, the “insider/outsider” dilemma and the effects of religious “othering.” Methods by which this might be accomplished are also included.

These themes are explored through a look at the history of public schooling, the separation of church and state, and the rise of American secularism on one hand, and a look at the academic study of religion on the other. The work of education scholars Warren Nord and Charles Haynes provide the bulk of the educational theory, while religious studies scholar Ninian Smart offers much of the theory from within the field of religious studies. Three particularly important topics include Smart’s informed empathy, world-view analysis, and bracketing. The discussion is rounded out with a variety of scholars from both fields, and ends by suggesting religious studies as an educational, civic, and democratic tool for overcoming religious “otherness,” while allowing, and indeed, celebrating religious plurality and difference.
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INTRODUCTION

According to the 2010 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll of religious knowledge, the average performance of 3,412 Americans questioned on their basic knowledge of the world’s religions was a meager 16 out of 32 questions correct, an F by any grading standard. The poll took religious background into account, showing that “large numbers of Americans are uninformed about the tenets, practices, history and leading figures of major faith traditions – including their own.”¹ These results speak to a need for broader educational reforms in the subject of religion, or more specifically, religion as a subject in the American public school system.

In 1997 the First Amendment Center published educator Charles Haynes’ *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools*. A resource for school officials, parents, and teachers in the public schools, *Finding Common Ground* promotes religious liberty while advocating that religion “be taken seriously” throughout the curriculum.² The Foreword contains Justice Tom Clark’s 1963 opinion in which he stated, “A person cannot be fully educated without understanding the role of religion in history, culture and politics…The law, constitutional or otherwise, is no impediment to the realization of this aim.”³ Indeed, as Haynes later comments, “(N)ot only are our schools a key battleground in the culture wars, they are the principal institution charged with enabling Americans to live with our deepest

In this sense, Haynes’ work is dedicated to clearing up misconceptions for both educator and student on the First Amendment legality of promoting religious expression and diversity in the classroom.

A second valuable resource, one coming from the discipline of religious studies in higher education, is the American Academy of Religion’s Religion in the Schools Task Force’s *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States.* Distributed throughout the public school system by the U.S. Department of Education and available through the AAR website, the guidelines are separated into four parts. The first asks the most important question: “Why Teach About Religion?” and is followed by “Religion, Education, and the Constitution,” “How to Teach About Religion,” and finally, the need for “Teacher Education.” The guide also offers a collection of documents for teaching and “Snapshots of Practice,” brief looks at how these activities can work in a range of classrooms.

The AAR Task Force provides a working definition of religious studies education, one that I will adopt herein, claiming that a religiously literate student must have:

> A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions and religious expressions as they arose out of and continue to shape and be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

But despite the proliferation of educational resources provided by scholars of education, scholars of religious studies, and First Amendment advocates, religious studies has yet to establish a

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6 “Guidelines,” ibid., 2.
permanent place in K-12 public school curriculums. Regardless of the thorough and well-argued texts dedicated to the subject of religious knowledge in public schools written by scholars such as Warren Nord, Charles Haynes, Stephen Prothero, Diane Moore, Martha Nussbaum, Robert Nash and Penny Bishop, Nord’s claim that “agreement on principles has resulted in few changes in practice” seems overwhelmingly correct.⁸ That is, these scholars have all concluded, through a variety of disciplines, that religious illiteracy can be combated through teaching about religion in a non-devotional way in American public schools, but this has yet to translate into widespread religious studies education.

Scholars such as Prothero, Moore, Nord, Haynes and others have provided thorough constitutional, civic, socio-cultural, educational, ethical, and moral arguments for including religious studies in public schools. Three particular texts, including Haynes’ *Finding Common Ground*, Nord and Haynes’ 1998 *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, and Nord’s 2010 follow-up entitled *Does God Make a Difference?* provide well-formed arguments from the perspective of education studies on including religious studies in the public schools, and I will engage them at length in the chapters that follow. My intention is to bring together thinkers from both education and religious studies in order to begin conceptualizing an interdisciplinary religious study for American public schools. It is my hope that this thesis contributes to both disciplines by offering a contextualized look at the topic of religious studies education, one that brings together the work of theorists of religious studies and education.

The absence of religious studies in the public school curriculum can be explained in part because the study of religion as a disciplinary subject is relatively new to higher education and the liberal studies academy. Indeed, the 1963 Supreme Court case *Abington v. Schempp* is

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generally acknowledged as officially sanctioning religious studies as an academic field in American public institutions of higher learning by prohibiting the practice of religion from the classroom, particularly classroom prayer and bible reading. One key effect of the Abington v. Schempp case that has been explored by many scholars of religion, law, history, and education in the United States has been the establishment of a secular study of religion opposed to the theological study of the nature of God, religion, and religious belief, often from within a particular religious tradition.

As an effect of the case, religious studies as a discipline was based on its establishment as a non-practice-oriented study. A religious studies education based on the academic discipline is thus focused solely on learning about religion. Religious studies programs in higher education should be borrowed from, Nord believes, because “it is their task to use the fully secular methodologies of the humanities and social sciences to understand religions as historical, cultural, and sociological phenomena.”

Indeed, the disciplines of higher education have “had an enormous impact on public schools,” Nord writes, as they are “passed on to teachers and educators as part of their educations.”

I therefore suggest in this thesis that higher education can provide a foundation for a K-12 religious studies pedagogy (per the AAR’s Guidelines), and that teaching about religion and the world’s religions is most effective when designed in conjunction with progressive educational practices and theories.

In order to address the need for a religious studies component in K-12 curriculums, this thesis proceeds in three parts. The first chapter of this thesis begins with a discussion of secularism and democratic neutrality in American culture, particularly Nord and Haynes’ claim

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9 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 79.
10 Nord, ibid., 79.
that the prevalence of secularism in the schools amounts to an extreme anti-religious bias. After briefly addressing the history of the separation of common and parochial schools and Horace Mann’s common school movement, the chapter turns towards Nord, Haynes, and Justice Arthur Joseph Goldberg’s interpretations of the First Amendment. The chapter ends with the *Abington v. Schempp* Supreme Court case and its impact on religion in the schools.

Focusing on providing a theoretical background for the study of religion, the second chapter explores elements of a religious studies pedagogy in which the study of religion acts as a lens through which students come to understand the role of religion in the world. As an interpretive tool, religious studies enables students to share the experience of the other and to “think” like a religious studies scholar, adopting a perspective of the world that takes religion into account. Call them religion-colored glasses, if you will. Another principle element addressed in this chapter is known as the “insider/outsider issue” within the academic study of religion. Here this topic is considered in terms of a public religious studies curriculum.

The third chapter offers methodological tools for a non-secular, non-religious pedagogy of religious studies, borrowing from a variety of educators and religious studies scholars. Nord and Haynes’ work provides a solid foundation for practical application, as does the work of Stephen Prothero, Diane Moore, and Ninian Smart. The insider/outsider issue is approached in terms of methodology, and Smart’s dynamic phenomenology offers a number of useful techniques including world-view analysis, epoche, and informed empathy. For good measure, the chapter ends by offering critiques of the phenomenological method.

Theories and methods from both religious studies and education must be united if we are to develop a pedagogy of religious studies that satisfies the First Amendment, school boards, and the wishes of religious and secular parents. A study of religion designed to meet the needs of the
K-12 grades, one that is neither secular nor sectarian but democratic in its adherence to religious liberty and the First Amendment, requires approaching the subject of religious studies with a “pragmatic willingness to treat pluralism as a serious hypothesis.”

11 William James, Pragmatism and Other Writings (New York: Penguin Group Inc, 2000), 129.
Chapter One: Separation and Secularization in American Life

Introduction:

This chapter begins with a look at the concepts of pluralism, secularism, and neutrality before turning to American education. In particular, it addresses the shift from parochial to publicly funded schooling in the 18th and 19th centuries, the conflicts between Protestant and Catholic agendas, and Horace Mann’s common school movement. The chapter then looks at interpretations of the First Amendment in the context of education, and includes a discussion of the 1963 Supreme Court case Abington v. Schempp, widely considered to have solidified the status of religion and religious studies in public centers of higher learning. Justice Arthur J. Goldberg’s dicta in the ruling, in particular, is offered here as a strong endorsement of religious studies education.

Pluralism and Secularism at Play:

This section looks at three primary issues in the discussion of religion and religious studies education in the United States: the reality of religious diversity in the United States, the complex relationship between the concurrent worlds of “religious” and “secular,” and neutrality in the separation of church and state in terms of publicly funded education. The sheer plurality of viewpoints and beliefs in the United States cannot be ignored when discussing the place and role of religious studies education in public schools.

Diana Eck of Harvard University’s Pluralism Project offers four attributes of pluralism that this thesis holds to be true, beginning with the claim that “pluralism is not diversity alone,
but the energetic engagement with diversity.” Second, “pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.” Third, she writes, “pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments,” that is, pluralism is not “sameness,” but is more-so reflective of an adherence to individuality and difference combined with a focus on encountering religious “others.” Finally, Eck writes, “pluralism is based on dialogue…and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism.” Agreement, for Eck, is far from the goal. Instead, Eck’s understanding allows for difference, “not in isolation, but in relationship to one another,” that is, pluralism in which diversity is viewed as strength.12

The views of philosopher Charles Taylor are also useful in understanding plurality as a reality that must simply be accepted irreducibly. Taylor’s acknowledgment of plurality is the foundation of his thoughts on secularism, which he believes can largely be understood as the minimization of the influence of religion “in terms of public spaces.”13 Taylor also suggests, and this thesis agrees, that secularism implies that “conditions of belief” are a “move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”14 The process of secularizing our public spaces is a “move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”15 That is, religious belief is one of many alternative options available in the public sphere as a matter of choice.

14 Taylor, ibid., 3.
15 Taylor, ibid., 3.
Secularism first requires, Taylor states, a separation of church and state. Second, secularism requires “some kind of neutrality” or neutral space in which religious options are easily accessible.\textsuperscript{16} Taylor suggests that there are three principle “goods” of a secular society, liberty, equality and fraternity, and this thesis argues that a religious studies education reflects these goods. The study of religion promotes these goods: (1) religious liberty, or the right to chose one’s own faith; (2) advocates equality between religions and religious people; and (3) promotes fraternity between religions in the public sphere, allowing each student’s voice to be heard. Although these goods often come into conflict, secularism is an “essential feature of religiously diverse societies, aiming to secure freedom of both belief and unbelief as well as equality between citizens.”\textsuperscript{17}

During the French Revolution, the French term \textit{laïcité} arose to describe a secularism based on independence, self-sufficiency, and the prohibition of religion from the public sphere.\textsuperscript{18} The same concept can also be useful in understanding secularism and public schooling. According to scholar Talal Asad, “the terms ‘secularism’ and ‘secularist’ were (re)introduced into English by freethinkers in the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century in order to avoid the charge of their being ‘atheists’ and ‘infidels,’ terms that carried suggestions of immorality in a still largely Christian society.”\textsuperscript{19} The emergence of secularism in the West, according to the multi-authored text \textit{Is Critique Secular?} served as “a vehicle for protecting against some form or other of religious domination.”\textsuperscript{20} In the time since, in taking on political, governmental, and ethical

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Charles Taylor, forward to \textit{Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship}, by Gregory B. Levey, and Tariq Modood (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xi.
\item[18] Taylor, ibid, xx.
\item[19] Butler, Judith et al., \textit{Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech} (Berkeley: University of California, 2009), 7.
\item[20] \textit{Is Critique Secular?}, 7.
\end{footnotes}
connotations, the term has almost developed into a system of its own in which religious convictions are absent, and it is this understanding of secularism that has been positioned in opposition to religion in the public sphere.

In terms of the place of religious studies education in public schools, Nord and Haynes believe that “the purpose of studying the Bible or religion must be educational, not religious.” Their focus is particularly on balance, or neutrality, between religion and non-religion, or secularism. The two argue throughout Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum that privileging non-religion over religion violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Indeed, they suggest, a sort of educational secular indoctrination has been taking place throughout the public school system.

Although Supreme Court cases such as McCollum v. Board of Education Dist. 71, Abington School District v. Schempp, and Edwards v. Aguilard have made clear that public schools are public, and therefore secular spaces, Nord and Haynes believe that neither public schools nor universities are actually neutral. American public education is radically secular in its approach to religion, and neither secular nor religious indoctrination, according to the two, belong in public school curriculums. This thesis will continue to address their arguments with a closer look at the implications of a secular bias in our public education system.

The neutrality Nord and Haynes refer to is based on their nuanced interpretation of the First Amendment, in which “the core idea of neutrality is that of not taking sides when we disagree.” The two propose that neutrality can be understood in two different ways. The first is a non-sectarian approach to dealing with numerous religions concurrently, and focuses on

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21 Nord and Haynes, 165.
22 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 84.
neutrality *between* religions. The second refers to neutrality *between religions and non-religion*, or between religion and secularism in the public sphere. For the purposes of this thesis, I argue that both understandings of neutrality must be addressed in order to negotiate the role of religious studies in public spaces in which all manner of religious and secular traditions coincide.

Neutralit[y as called for in Nord’s interpretation of the Establishment Clause “requires fairness, and fairness requires that various religious, as well as secular interpretations of the world, and the subjects of the curriculum, be taken seriously.”23 Achieving a relative fairness might be more realistic than achieving neutrality. It can also be understood in terms of impartiality in the face of disagreement, rather than as the complete avoidance of disagreement at all. “If public schools are to be built on common civic ground,” Nord states, “they must be neutral when we disagree; they must take everyone seriously.”24

Pluralism, secularism, and neutrality are intertwined in our discussion of religious studies education in public schools, and as we will see this discussion is indeed far from a new one. Indeed, non-parochial schools and the public school system engaged these ideas from an early point, and the effort to provide free education to American children quickly established public schools as secular, non-religious spaces. But how do these three concepts impact education and the question of a religious studies education in particular? This chapter will proceed with a brief look at the history of the public school movement with an eye towards questioning the history of pluralism, secularism, and neutrality in American schools.

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23 Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 6.
Early Public Education in America:

The notion of providing free schooling to American children began to emerge in the American colonies early in the 17th century. The effort was supported more so in New England and the Northern states, and less so in the South. At the time, the Bible served as the primary textbook, providing reading practice as well as opportunities for moral lessons. The development of a new educational system was part of a larger chance to create what Puritan colonist John Winthrop spoke of as “a City upon a Hill.” Indeed, Winthrop stated upon arrival in the colonies, “the eyes of all people are upon us,” quoting directly from Matthew 5:14-15.26 The idea of the City represented an opportunity for the Puritans to create a new society in the literal “wilderness” of the New World, and free education for all children was one means by which this was to be accomplished.

Church operated parochial schools began to lose the support of the state during the 1820-30’s, around the same time as funding for non-sectarian, state-run schools began rising.27 The idea of public rather than church-funded education emerged in response to the diverse religious views of immigrant children entering the educational system. The effort to provide simultaneous moral and civic instruction through the Protestant bible became increasingly difficult at this time given the religiously plural nature of the student body.

Enter Horace Mann, named in 1837 as the first secretary of the first official state-run board of education in Massachusetts. Central in the movement to provide free, “common” schooling to American children, Mann believed that education was “beyond all other devices of human

27 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 63.
origin...a great equalizer of the conditions of men.”

Teaching those virtues “necessary to preserve republican institutions and to create a political community” also served to transmit the ethical ideals of democracy. The movement was both religious, predominantly Protestant in its focus on ability to read scripture in order to learn morality and faith, and nationalistic in its effort to “Americanize the school population – to make ‘of many, one’.”

Despite Mann’s belief that “religious instruction in our schools, to the extent which the constitution and the laws of the State allowed and prescribed, was indispensible to the students’ highest welfare, and essential to the vitality of moral education,” the schools were careful to exclude theological or religious indoctrination. Although they continued to use the King James Bible, Mann believed that it should “speak for itself” and advocated a non-interference policy in terms of students’ personal biblical interpretations. Traditional Protestants and Catholics both rejected Mann’s distinctly generic interpretation of Protestantism, and in response, many Catholic communities developed their own privately funded parochial schools around this time, many of which continue to thrive today.

According to Nord, “by the year 1900...there was little religion left in schools,” claiming that “true, some prayer and Bible reading took place in many schools. But [religion] was no longer to be found in the heart of education, in the curriculum or in textbooks.” This shift towards nationalism over religiosity in the schools also reflected the growing need to address the increasingly diverse nature of American citizenry. An increasingly religiously and culturally

29 Greenawalt, 14.
32 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 63.
33 Nord, Religion and American Education, note 1 supra, 63.
diverse citizenry necessitated an educational system in which “the goal wasn’t simply eliminating what was divisive, it was teaching what we had in common.” In this sense, nationalism unfolded in the public schools as a primary method for inculcating civic and cultural values, replacing the role of religion and Bible use in the public schools.

As the idea of education for civic or democratic purposes became more widely accepted, according to humanist philosopher Sidney Hook, schools became the public staging-ground for the development of those “shared human values which must underlie all differences within a democratic culture if it is to survive.” By speaking of a “common faith,” Hook referred to none other than his own teacher, John Dewey. “Where churches and sects and nations divide,” Hook said, “the schools can unite by becoming the temples and laboratories of a common democratic faith.” Hook’s view of public schools as the “common ground of a democratic ethos,” rather than as “nothing but an elaborate apparatus for conditioning slaves to the efficient performance of their rounds and duties” echoes the progressive educational movement driven by Dewey himself.

*Interpretations of the First Amendment:*

Moving forward three decades, we find a situation in which the public schools stand accused of biasing secular over parochial education to such an extent that educators such as Warren Nord, mentioned earlier as an expert in education and the First Amendment, are openly decrying the absence of religious studies in American education as “superficial, illiberal and

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34 Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 64.
36 Hook, 115-16
37 Hook, 113.
The absence, Nord dramatically claims, “should be recognized for what it is, a scandal.” The absence of religious studies and religious holidays and the absolute silence concerning the religious lives of students has led to the inoculation of public schools against religion in any form. The classroom has become the new public square, from which any discussion of religion has essentially been banned. This silent treatment fails to accurately reflect the very real presence of religion in the private lives of children. According to Nord, current public schooling amounts to secular indoctrination, and neither secular nor religious indoctrination has any place in public schools. The only educational “indoctrination” that might in any way be acceptable is civic and democratic.

Teachers often fear inadvertently violating the First Amendment and their students’ religious liberty by teaching about religion, despite the bounty of resources available on the subject. As Diane Moore has pointed out, “one of the manifestations of widespread religious illiteracy is the equation of religion with devotional practice.” This, and other misunderstandings of the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses represent a widespread failure to take the arguments offered by scholars from the disciplines of education and religious studies seriously. At the very least, we can distinguish between the study of religion and the devotional practice of religion, and specify the lines between religious instruction and secular religious studies education.

We must also keep in mind that certain 20th century terms like neutrality are themselves a type of legal rhetoric and require questioning. A closer look at the First Amendment will clarify a number of these interpretational issues. The First Amendment to the Constitution initially  

38 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 5.
39 Moore, 55.
applied only at the Federal level until after the Civil War. At this point, the Fourteenth Amendment passed as part of a national effort to restrict the powers of the state. The First Amendment contains two clauses that serve as the basis for Supreme Court cases concerning religion. The first, the Establishment clause, dictates that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” and maintains the freedom of individuals and institutions from state supported or mandated religion. Second, the Free Exercise clause, states that the government shall not prohibit the free exercise of religion, and has been interpreted as granting public school students the right to religious liberty in the schools.

The clause governs the actions of public schools in terms of prayer, dress, holidays, and food requirements, but has been infrequently applied to the study of religion in the schools. One possible interpretation highlighted by Nord and Haynes, and one that I would like to promote is the right to neutral treatment of religions in relation to one another. Neutrality, as the two claim, “requires fairness to religion.” This type of interpretation of the Free Exercise clause allows for an ever-expanding American religious plurality, as well as the freedom of citizens to differ in the ways in which they profess belief and practice.

The Impact of Abington v. Schempp:

An important Supreme Court case that has helped to determine the place and role of religion in public schools is the Abington Township School District v. Schempp case of 1963. Although not the first or only Supreme Court case to deal with religion and the schools, the 1963

40 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 151.
42 Nord and Haynes, Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum, 18.
case utilized the Establishment clause to argue that the *practice* of religion be banned from public schools. One consequence of this categorical distinction was to delineate a study of religion that was not practice-based, but rather focused on teaching students *about* religion and religions. Indeed, through this case it became clear that teaching about religion is entirely constitutionally permissible when taught objectively rather than theologically.

In 1963, Unitarian Universalist Edward Schempp brought a case against his daughter’s Pennsylvania public school in which he challenged bible reading in her classroom. He argued that even if school bible reading was presented as voluntary, the act of requiring a choice was itself a violation of his daughter’s First Amendment rights. The court agreed, and ruling in favor of Schempp and his daughter, Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg included a side note or dicta in which he clearly differentiated between religious education and teaching about religion. Goldberg believed that dicta, interpreted in conjunction with the First Amendment, might serve as an endorsement of public religious studies education:

> 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…Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

The *Abington v. Schempp* case opened the door for the academic study of religion, one that according to Justice Clark “do(es) nothing that has a primary effect of either advancing or

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44 A dicta is a “statement made by the court which (is) not necessary to the decision and therefore (is) not binding and ha(s) no precedential value,” Clark, 113.

45 Nord and Haynes, 24.
inhibiting religion” in public schools and universities. As Clark also argued, “the government may not establish a ‘religion of secularism’ by opposing or showing hostility to religion…(and) neither should neutrality be taken to mean that the curriculum must exclude religion.”

Emerging out of the Schempp case, I argue that the academic study of religion is neutral in terms of teaching about religions. A neutral study of religion can be designed for K-12 curriculums if we work towards a similar treatment of the world’s religions.

Conclusion:

A brief look at the concepts of secularism and neutrality shows how deeply ingrained religious freedom has been in the formation of the United States. Our Constitution grants us both the right to choose and practice the religion of our choice without interference from our government, and it is often argued that teaching about religion in public schools is a violation of the First Amendment. This is simply not true.

Since the state began funding K-12 schooling in the United States, the presence of religion in the schools has become an increasingly complex legal issue. As this chapter has discussed, with the disestablishment of religion from the government in the 19th century and the Abington v. Schempp case in the 20th, public support for teaching religion or about religion in the schools has grown even more complicated. Today, we find an even greater deal of disagreement over the responsibilities of a public school system and the place of the study of religion, secular or otherwise, in public classrooms.

Through the work of Nord, Haynes, Greenawalt, and others, it has become clear that the

46 Clark, 120.
need for an academic study of religion in public schools is implicit in a democratic commitment to civic and democratic education. The discipline of religious studies in higher education was defined by the *Schepmpp* case as a secular rather than religious activity, as indicated by both the ruling and Goldberg’s dicta. What this definition accomplished, in part, was the beginning of the field of religious studies as a discipline in higher education.

“What may be most striking,” Nord rightfully claims, “about all of this is the vast indifference of educators, parents, and mainline religious leaders to the secularization of education. For all our supposed religiosity, we have, most of us, become settled, perhaps naively, in our secularity.” By avoiding a conversation about religious studies, public schools not only fail at neutrality, they fall prey to fears of conflict and argument, key steps in the democratic process. By not taking both religious and secular worldviews seriously, public schools fail in their efforts to create civic and democratically responsible citizens.

The next chapter explores the educational contributions of the academic study of religion and the theories and methods used by religious studies scholars in higher education. The work of Nord and Haynes continues in this chapter to focus our conversation on the place of religious studies within the K-12 grades. A central theme is Nord and Haynes’ promotion of a subjective understanding of religion “from the inside” perspective of a practitioner, rather than from an objective, or purely “outside” source. While I strongly agree with the majority of Nord and Haynes’ arguments, incorporating subjective experiences as educational tools into the study of religion represents a step away from a secular presentation of the topic, and veers into territory

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48 Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 79.
49 Nord and Haynes, 50.
that few religious studies scholars care to venture into. It is into this space between that the second chapter will go.
Chapter Two: Theories for a Hermeneutic of Religious Studies

Introduction:

This chapter brings together the work of theorists of education and religious studies alike to aid in constructing a hermeneutic, or interpretive worldview through the study of religion. One of the most important theoretical issues raised here is the idea that religion can and should, according to Nord and Haynes, be understood from the inside. What this means, the two claim, is that “they must let the advocates of that religion speak for themselves, using the cultural and conceptual resources of their own traditions.”

Nord and Haynes offer Ninian Smart’s informed empathy as an example of learning about religion in an inside sense, and we will discuss Smart’s concept in greater detail.

But, I argue in this chapter, the two fail to give the topic the attention required to understand this concept in either Taking Religion Seriously Across The Curriculum, or Nord’s 2010 follow-up solo work, Does God Make a Difference. Indeed, many scholars from both education and religious studies neglect, or perhaps avoid, the insider/outsider problem in terms of its impact on teaching and learning about religion. There are, on the other hand, a number of religious studies scholars who have delved into insider/outsider theories. This chapter focuses on their work, the role of insiders and outsiders in religions, and in the study of religion as well.

This thesis views the insider/outsider issue in light of three particular issues in the contemporary academic study of religion. Each is intrinsically related to the challenge of teaching and learning about religions in the public schools. The first points to the critical

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50 Nord and Haynes, 50.
distinction between inside and outside perspectives in religious studies, the second, to binary differences between the self and “other” in a pluralistic country, and the third questions distinctions between subjective and objective types of knowledge in learning about religion.

By bringing attention to the inside/outside issue, this thesis argues for definition and classification as the primary method of constructing others and otherness. Religious studies confronts the “other” in terms of nuanced processes of definition and classification, while educational theorists seem to focus largely on difference in terms of facilitating an amiable pluralism in the classroom. The dilemma of subjective and objective knowledge impacts scholars of religious phenomena as well as those in the fields of anthropology, history, sociology, and political science. All must similarly ask themselves how to best experience and communicate the worldview of others.

Introduced in this chapter is the work of John Dewey, Paul Hirst, Mark Edmundson, Martha Nussbaum and Gert Biesta, reformers of the traditional liberal arts curriculum. Providing a greater understanding of the context of educational philosophy, their work aids in establishing a philosophical foundation for promoting knowledge of religions. The second half of the chapter introduces religious studies scholars Jonathan Z. Smith, Walter Capps, Russell McCutcheon, Robert Orsi, and Thomas Tweed, looking particularly at the usefulness of their theories for a K-12 curriculum.

Contributions from Religious Studies:

Before the academic discipline of religious studies can contribute to demystifying the insider/outsider problem in studying and learning about religions, a few questions must be asked: What does a public neutral curriculum imply? What are the particular factors that must be
approached neutrally? Can we trust the distinction between religion and secularism? Or are terms like non-religion, or spiritual-but-not-religious, better suited to define for us what religion is not?

One of the greatest moves in the history of 20th century religious studies was Jonathan Z. Smith’s critique of Mircea Eliade’s belief in religion as an essential human phenomenon. Religions, according to Eliade’s understanding, possess an essential or universal quality that distinguishes general over particular religiousness. In Eliade’s work we see early efforts to categorize the sacred as the essence underlying the phenomena of religion, though, as Smart and others have argued, “he had an ideology behind his phenomenology.”51 In his critique of Eliade and essentialism in the academic study of religion, scholar Russell McCutcheon states, “the presumption that there is a distinct insider perspective as opposed to an outsider view…is itself a product of an essentialist viewpoint.”52 Against this sort of essentialist thought, Smith earlier argued that the differences, rather than the similarities, make up the primary content of what a religious studies scholar ought to study. In support of this position, Smith proposes that these differences might be studied through their classification and relationship to one another, rather than through the overlapping traits that Eliade elevated to the status of the *sacred*. According to Smith, the appellation *sacred* gave rise to a duality between this *sacred* and, according to Eliade and others, its antithesis, the *profane*.

We cannot fail to attend to the consequences of defining phenomena as either religious (or sacred), or non-religious (or profane). As the *New Oxford American Dictionary* gives the term, the act of definition serves to “state or describe exactly the nature, scope, or meaning of;”

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give the meaning of, make up or establish the boundary or limits of,” and second, to “mark out the boundary or limits of; make clear the outline of; (to) delineate.” Classification, according to Smith, achieves the assimilation of the unknown “other” through description and subsequent categorization, a result of numerous previous acts of definition. To briefly clarify between the two terms, the act of classification is to “arrange in classes or categories according to shared qualities or characteristics; assign to a particular class or category; designate as officially secret or to which only authorized people may have access.” A closer look at their roots shows that the word define itself comes from “a variation on the Latin definire, from de- (expressing completion) and finire “finish” (from “finis” or “end”), while classify comes from the Latin “classis,” or “division.”

McCutcheon, following in the footsteps of Smith, claims “it gets increasingly difficult to see classification as merely a natural, neutral, or innocent activity. Instead, classification seems fraught with interests, agendas, and implications.” The act of defining and classifying serves, as Smith and others have argued, to mark numerous boundaries that have been, in the long-term, accepted by scholars of religion, finding their way into American culture. As Smith states in “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” the proximate-other, or the near-other is more threatening to religious identity, in this case, than the distant, or radically other. Applying the

55 McCutcheon, Studying Religion, 12.
spatial conceptions of near and far to notions of “inside” and “outside” aids in understanding the
difficulty of understanding the complexity of American religious diversity.

Smith also suggests that “a ‘theory of the other’ requires those complex political and
linguistic projects necessary to enable us to think, to situate, and to speak of ‘others’ in relation
to the way in which we think, situate, and speak about ourselves.”^{57} Thus, he argues, the *We-
They* relationship between adherents of different religions is an echo of the binary *I-You*
relationship between self and other. What differs in terms of relationships between religions is
an expansion of this into a *We-They* relationship in which whole groups are made other, are
made *profane*.^{58} This concept is helpful for education because it shows how religious studies
works to highlight both similarity and difference, break down traditional boundaries between
religious groups, and support religious diversity.

If division, completion, and ending are the aims of definition and classification, then how
might we understand the impact of those definitions and classifications established long ago?
How might we engage in re-describing the phenomena that long-deceased Western European
Christian scholars defined as religion? How might we comprehend the impact of definition in
light of authenticity and religious claims, and the legal system’s treatment of non-normative or
“profane” religious groups? What possibilities for interreligious dialogue emerge from such a
redescription?

A much-needed non-locative approach to religious dwelling in a liminal, declassified
space allows respectful differences to coexist in a plural religious society. The issue of difference
lies at the core of this thesis’ argument for a religious studies presence in the public schools, for

^{58} Smith, ibid, 259.
the meaning of difference, of differing, is based on the Latin *differre*, from *dis*—“from, away” + *ferre* “bring, carry.”

The purpose of differing is thus a move towards removing, or distancing. According to these terms, and those earlier provided, a focus on difference is on separation and otherness.

According to scholar Robert Orsi, the power of the other stems from its ability to provoke and stimulate, but difference, he claims, need not be otherness. “The challenge facing the discipline today, however,” Orsi states, “is not to find new others…but to get beyond ‘otherizing,’ as its basic move.” Religious studies education combats the act of making other, this thesis claims, through religious studies curricula focused on a plurality and celebration of difference, as well as on overlapping religious phenomena. Returning to the words of Smith, “otherness is not so much a matter of separation as it is a description of interaction,” and it is this interaction that can be affected through education. “Real progress,” Smith states, “has been made only when the ‘other’ ceases to be an ontological category.”

**Contributions from Education**

The particular lineage of educational reform suggested by this chapter takes John Dewey’s progressivism as its starting point, and moves through a selection of reforms, ending with the work of Gert Biesta. The primary themes of this chapter include non-essentialism, representing the shift away from idealism, *sui generis*, and *a priori* notions of truth in the study

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61 Orsi, 198-9.


63 Smith, ibid, 275.
of religion. Interdisciplinary knowledge based on the use of the various methods of the disciplinary milieu, and the integration and contextualization of subjective and objective types of knowledge are also discussed.

John Dewey begins our conversation by representing a turning point from traditional liberal education towards more diverse notions of knowledge, particularly experiential. A key component to John Dewey’s naturalistic “philosophy of educative experience” was a progressive notion of biological growth fueled by a Darwinian hope in the ability of mankind to evolve. Education, in this view, came from “within,” rather than from outside influences. He rejected idealism and essentialism on grounds that evolution did not necessarily represent movement towards a perfected state, that is, growth “is its own end.” Education, he believed, functioned, in the pragmatic sense, as “both ends and means.”

According to Dewey, education depends upon both experiential and vocational knowledge. The concern of child-centered education with knowledge gained through “experience” is largely because for Dewey, “every one of the constituent elements of a social group, in a modern city as in a savage tribe, is born immature, helpless, without language, beliefs, ideas, or social standards.” Understanding, in this context, comes from and through life experience, rather than through accepting a static knowledge dependent on the past, or an ideal as a source of knowledge or wisdom.

Another advocate of non-essentialist educational theory whose work we might appeal to comes from Paul H. Hirst, who in “Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge” bases his

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67 Noddings, 27.
revision of liberal education on a Deweyan understanding of the traditional Greek conception of knowledge. Disregarding the conception of knowledge “for the mind,” Hirst’s view of liberal education is non-hierarchical, non-metaphysical, and non-dual, an anti-philosophical perspective based in part on Dewey’s notion of education through experience. Hirst’s interdisciplinary philosophy advocates rational and objective knowledge, in which “each form of knowledge, if it is to be acquired beyond a general and superficial level, involves the development of creative imagination, judgment, thinking, communicative skills, etc…as a way of understanding experience.”

Hirst’s conception of education focuses on the mind’s ability to think effectively, communicate thought, judge wisely, and “discriminate among values.” Indeed, the rational individual might now “give reason” to their actions, based on knowledge of commonly understood public symbols. Initiation into this reality involves the ability to hold multiple individual worldviews simultaneously, and the ability to switch between them as needed to understand divergent perspectives. Indeed, “it is the ability to recognize empirical assertions or aesthetic judgments for what they are, and to know the kind of considerations on which their validity will depend, that matters.” An important thread running through progressive theories of liberal education is the role of education in the cultivation of democratic and ethical citizens.

In the tradition of Dewey, neither rejecting nor accepting liberal education as is, Martha Nussbaum promotes a progressive education for democratic ends, based in the psychology of human development and the notion that “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human

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70 Hirst, 122.
71 Hirst, 128.
72 Hirst, 132.
The Socratic method of argumentation and critical inquiry “is important in any democracy. But it is particularly important in societies that need to come to grips with the presence of people who differ by ethnicity, caste, and religion.” Nussbaum’s philosophy leans heavily on the critical questioning, argumentation, and self-examination of liberal education, all of which assist in the cultivating of positional thinking, or “the ability to see the world from another creature’s viewpoint.”

Nussbaum’s “viewpoint,” like Ninian Smart’s “worldview,” focuses on education in part for the cultivation of empathy, derived from the Greek term empatheia, a conjunction of “em-,” or “in” and “pathos,” or “feeling.” Empathy through education promotes a sense of solidarity, and cultivates “mutual respect for reason,” one that is “essential to the peaceful resolution of differences.” Smart’s empathy, as adopted by Nussbaum, is a sort of “‘feeling in’ the other: entering imaginatively into the other’s feelings, as well as her beliefs and so on.”

Arguing against the assumption that education is a process of knowledge commodification, production and socialization, Gert Biesta questions the essentialist understanding of the humanist subject. Biesta’s philosophy requires, indeed is based, upon the presence of plurality and difference in society, and the opportunities provided therein for the subjectivity of the individual (the student) to emerge. In what Biesta calls a “community-without-community,” the simultaneous existence of different cultures and belief systems, “we

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74 Nussbaum, ibid., 54.
75 Nussbaum, ibid., 36.
can only relate to each other through responsibility, and it is through these relationships of responsibility that we are constituted as unique, singular beings."\(^79\)

Emmanuel Levinas’ insists that face-to-face encounters evoke a responsibility towards others, one that he claims is “older than the a priori.”\(^80\) It is a reaction based on no prior relationship or sense of knowing the other. For Biesta, Levinas’ encounter between two individuals is important because it both provokes and demands a response from the other. In this way, the question of what it means to be human in an “ethical relationship, a relationship of infinite responsibility for the other” ultimately grounds Biesta’s educational philosophy.\(^81\)

The teacher’s relationship with the student, in the same way, is one of responsibility “for the subjectivity of the student, for that which allows the student to be a unique, singular being.”\(^82\) It is in his conception of learning as a response rather than as an acquisition that the strength of religious studies is apparent. In its rejection of Western essentialist views of what it means to be human, religious studies can engage in an exploration of diverse objective and subjective experiences of religious phenomena.

**Summary:**

This chapter has worked to offer theories from both disciplines of religious studies and education by introducing the insider/outsider problem as a theoretical issue in the discussion of religious studies in the public schools. The distinction between sacred and profane, itself at the


\(^{81}\) Biesta, 50.

\(^{82}\) Biesta, 30.
root of the understanding of religion promoted by early scholars like Eliade, reinforces the dualism applied to religious and secular, subjective and objective, private and public.

John Dewey’s understanding of the student as an individual subject with an inside perspective provides a solid basis for this thesis’ argument for a religious studies that includes experiential elements. Introducing an example of non-dualist philosophy in education, Paul H. Hirst builds upon Dewey’s experiential model and argues for applying the imagination, critical thought, and communication theory to the process of learning. Both empirical and aesthetic judgments assist in Hirst’s understanding of realms of knowledge as worldviews, and can be applied to religious studies in the form of experiential learning and first-hand accounts from inside the tradition.

According to Martha Nussbaum, a plurality requires an effort at getting along, at pluralism. Grounded in traditional liberal theories of education, Nussbaum advocates self-examination, viewpoints (similar to worldviews), and empathy as a democratic characteristic. Gert Biesta provides a more post-modern critique of education, arguing for a subjectivity of the student that emerges through opportunities for democratic and civic behavior. Education in this vein is through democracy, rather than for it. Promoting the responsibility of Emmanuel Levinas, Biesta’s philosophy rejects Western essentialist humanism, by and large, in favor of ethical knowledge, democratic education, and the development of students into “unique, singular beings.”

In this chapter I have attempted to offer insights into what the academic study of religion can offer students, particularly a deeper understanding of the importance of religious knowledge in a democratic country. Teaching religion from a non-essential, interdisciplinary,

83 Biesta, 27.
contextualized and democratically neutral perspective is absolutely necessary to this endeavor. Meeting the educational needs of a religiously and culturally plural country requires educational theories that can attend to international forms of democracy in the 21st century. By taking the presence of the “other” seriously, the discipline of religious studies in the public schools can be a study of responsibility for the other through civic engagement and the study of ethics.

Despite the futility of eliminating the category of the other, a critical theory approach to religious studies shies away from its use as a pejorative method of gaining power over others. In support of a relativistic view of the other and an understanding that we are all an “other” from one perspective or another, this thesis argues for the illuminating power of education to dispel religious othering. A plurality of religious views in the public school classroom is an opportunity to introduce students to the lived religions of their fellow students, as well as to religions that may not be present in the classroom. Students thus learn about themselves, their neighbors, and about the religious identities of students in K-12 schools around the world. Applying religious studies theory to the study of religion as an insider/outside relationship interprets diversity in the K-12 schools in light of Smith’s theories of the proximate other. Allowing difference to be highlighted as an educational tool promotes diversity as an educational tool in the public schools.

Nord and Haynes discuss educational opportunities to teach about religion in the schools, including religious holidays, the disciplines of history, literature and the arts, and the sciences. The inclusion of a number of diverse guest speakers is suggested within each of these disciplinary frameworks. In the study of history, textbooks have far to go towards more fully and accurately depicting a number of traditions - “getting inside,” as Nord and Haynes call it,
requires an exploration of both experience and traditional knowledge.\(^8^4\) There are also ample opportunities to showcase multiculturalism in public schools, and learning about religion through American and international history is one of those moves that provide critical multicultural education for students.

The subjects of civics and economics also provide opportunities for learning about religion. In particular, teaching about religious liberty and American independence, the Constitution and the separation of church and state, as well as the current political milieu require a certain level of knowledge of religion. As part of a civic education, issues of morality and politics, individualism, plurality, authority and allegiance all offer opportunities to discuss the role of religion in a secular democracy. Nord and Haynes also suggest incorporating religious studies into discussions of economics as a discipline, Neoclassical theory and philosophy, issues of economic poverty, wealth, and consumerism, the environment and economic growth, as well as contextualizing studies of capitalism.

Literature and the arts are full of opportunities to incorporate religious studies education, including studying texts and languages, artistic depictions of religious figures and scenes, and in discussions of poetry and fiction. According to Nord and Haynes, the teaching of literature and the arts allows for a personal interpretation and critical reflection, just the sort of *inside* understanding promoted by the two.

Even the sciences, they claim, provide situations in which discussions of religion can arise through discussions of the relationship between science and religion, evolution and biology, the Big Bang theory and cosmology, nature and ecology. Although I must acknowledge here the widespread disagreement over discussing creationism in the schools, Nord and Haynes are bold

\(^{8^4}\) Nord and Haynes, 86.
in offering suggestions for addressing these conversations in science classrooms. Despite the current constraints, they believe that “by ignoring the controversy, and by ignoring religion, science education implicitly takes sides, teaching students uncritically to believe either that science always trumps religion or that they are independent endeavors.”

In the following chapter, I will continue by exploring pedagogical methods from the academic study of religion. Many of the methods and techniques to be discussed have already found their way into contemporary theories of education, and it is their origin in the discipline of religious studies that will be the focus of our discussion. The chapter concludes by acknowledging a number of critiques of the phenomenological method coming from within the discipline.

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85 Nord and Haynes, 141.
Chapter Three: Methods for a Public Study of Religion

Introduction:

In the words of religious studies scholar Walter Capps, "religious studies is not the sociology of religion, or philosophy of religion, or history of religion, or anthropology of religion, and so on, but it is comprised of the cooperation between all of these." One of the strengths of religious studies is this “composite nature: it consists of all of these methodological operations, and all of these selective foci of interest, working together." Capps suggests that the methods available to religious studies scholars - descriptive, phenomenological, hermeneutical, historical, functional, analytic, or critical - be “selected on the basis of the nature of the investigative task to be performed.”

This chapter focuses on the phenomenological and hermeneutical methods of religious studies in particular, although other methods are suggested at points. Leaning heavily on Nord and Haynes’ educational methodology and Smart’s dynamic phenomenology, epoche, informed empathy, and world-view analysis are offered as tools for overcoming religious difference in public schools. This chapter also offers a number of critiques of the phenomenological method, including McCutcheon’s statement that “ironically perhaps, our almost exclusive reliance on the phenomenological and hermeneutical methods as the means for securing our intellectual and institutional turf have ensured that scholars of religion have no voice in the public forum.”

87 Capps, 336.
88 Smart, Religion and the Western Mind, 93.
Methods from Religious Studies:

In the year 2000, American Academy of Religion president Ninian Smart gave a talk in which he addressed “The Future of The Academy,” suggesting in particular that informed empathy is but one “talent” of religious studies scholars. Smart called for a “rediscovery of the phenomenology of religion and by the same token a recognition of the importance of comparison,” claiming that, “without it, religious studies is not a fruitful subject.” According to Smart, the phenomenological method assists in understanding religious traditions in terms of description and redescription. Smart also decried the prevalence of specialism within religious studies, arguing, “general knowledge is more important than any specialism. It is the prerequisite of phenomenology.”

How might we respond to Smart’s claim that “the revival of efforts in phenomenology will restore the vision of a scientific approach to religious studies?” In his 1999 work, Dimensions of the Sacred, Smart calls for a dynamic and dialectical phenomenology that includes comparison and allows for difference as opposed to earlier Eliadian “synchronic and static” understandings of Essence and the Other. Smart’s focus is rather on “degrees of overlap between ideas and experience in varied cultures” evident despite ongoing changes and differences between religious phenomena.

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91 Smart, ibid., 544.
92 Smart, ibid., 545.
93 Smart, ibid., 545.
Smart’s phenomenology, largely assimilated from the work of Gerardus van der Leeuw, offers religious studies three particularly helpful tools: worldview analysis, epoche and informed empathy. A brief example from Smart exemplifies how the phenomenological method works in transforming student perspectives. “If we assume,” Smart claims, “that Paul was practicing a devotional form of religion in the life of prayer and worship that he commended, and if we see a strong overlap with the life of bhakti in medieval Hinduism…it helps to explain why both expressed a doctrine of grace.” Although simple, such comparisons (and contrasts) between worldviews both stimulate student minds and provoke the conceptual connections needed for understanding religious plurality. Smart’s work on the dimensions of religion allows for both phenomenological analysis and comparison of manifestations of those dimensions throughout religions and belief systems, and thus, I argue, can serve as a model for K-12 education.

Worldviews, according to Smart, consists of a plural, cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary study of the other through which each student’s individual perspective is oriented in context. The study of worldviews as a hermeneutical study focuses on more than simply religion, and often includes secular, atheist, and political, social, and cultural views. Aimed at a neutral understanding, worldview analysis works to describe the perspectives of others according to his six dimensions of religion: doctrinal, mythic, ethical, ritual, experiential, and social - such that “the modern study of religion presents a perspective on the whole of human life.” According to Smart, “the natural outcome of pluralistic philosophy of worldviews is a tolerant

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98 Smart, ibid., 544.
100 Smart, Worldviews, 11.
attitude.” Indeed, “the study of worldviews,” he states, “in a tolerant and analytical manner would be a sign of democratic ideology, and a distinguishing feature of democratic over against alternative worldviews.”

The phenomenological “method” of *epoche* consists of a succession of systematic, singular acts of suspension, or bracketing, and allows for personal judgment and subjectivity to be set-aside in a willing suspension of belief or disbelief. Greek for “suspension,” Smart’s epoche “tries to bring out the nature of believers’ ideas and feelings” and involves “walking in the moccasins of the faithful” in order to see the other as it is according to itself. This perspective allows the student to “observe, (and) describe…phenomena like these - first from *emic* (or insider) perspectives, and from *etic* (or outsider) ones as well, by inductively determining a yet more complex pattern based on all emic perspectives.”

Informed empathy represents another successful tool, according to Smart’s pedagogy, with which students understand the worldviews of others and share in “what the religious acts mean to the actors.” Empathy, a state of sharing “in” the pathos, or feeling of another, in this discussion, is not simply based on sympathy for the other. Rather, “the point is not for students to sympathize with a religion, but to understand it.” Sympathy on the other hand, refers to a state of *pathos* shared “with” the other. Sharing “in” rather than sharing “with” the other can lead to quite different outcomes.

101 Smart, *Religion and the Western Mind*, 21.
102 Ninian Smart, forward to *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, by Peter Connolly (London: Continuum, 2007), xi.
104 Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred*, 2.
An informed empathy through religious studies, according to Smart, attempts to develop a sense of compassion in students, one that is based on empirical knowledge and understanding of the other. Through first person experiences, students are to gain an “inside understanding,” of the ways in which “the symbols and narratives, the art and rituals, the institutions and traditions of a religious culture…get inside the hearts and minds of people.” Smart argued forcefully for placing worldviews side by side with traditional religions, in order to enable critical thinking. In this way, the student learns to self-reflectively understand conceptions of difference in terms of a larger global context, as well as in their own lives.

According to Tweed’s notions of crossing and dwelling, “when it’s effective, teaching and learning means moving back and forth between the familiar and the strange, and the familiarization of the other generates a limited but transformative empathy, which is one mark of the educated person, the humane neighbor, and the effective citizen.” Accordingly, pedagogical positioning, self-consciousness, and reflexivity apply not only to students, but also to the teacher and the information itself. Similarly, for McCutcheon, the study of “whether, and to what extent, someone can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words, or actions of another,” can also be viewed as a study of position in terms of human cognition, of crossing boundaries between individuals, traditions, and locations. We must persist in de-centering binaries, for we may yet uncover new theories and methods for understanding the religious worldviews of others.

106 Nord and Haynes, 50.
107 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 238.
108 Tweed, 180.
There are those who have critiqued the phenomenological approach, although it must be said that most of these critiques refer to methods that predate Smart’s dynamic phenomenology. McCutcheon, who both supports and criticizes the method, has argued that the phenomenological “family resemblance” theory in the study of religion falls short of providing an adequate understanding of the subjective qualities of religion, although he agrees to the usefulness of Smart’s dimensional approach.\textsuperscript{110} Although Smart’s conception is most closely in line with my own views, this thesis has also taken into account a number of historical critiques of phenomenology from religious studies and beyond.

Speaking out against phenomenology as a sort of “reality dividing,” Clifford Geertz advocates viewing people as “part of a total pattern of social life,” rather than as “outlines waiting to be filled in.”\textsuperscript{111} Though it is surely no surprise, Eliade also rejected phenomenological methods as anti-reductionism amounting to “data” gathering and disregard for the “history of the human spirit.”\textsuperscript{112} Other critics, including philosopher Douglas Allen, have argued that “the assumption of the irreducibility of the religious limits what phenomena will be investigated, what aspects of the phenomena will be described, and what meanings will be interpreted.”\textsuperscript{113} In the same sense, Allen claims, phenomenology of religion stands accused of failing to “meet minimal empirical, historical, scientific, inductive criteria, including rigorous criteria for verification and falsification.”\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{110} McCutcheon, \textit{Studying Religion}, 60.
\textsuperscript{114} Allen, 219.
Through these critiques, it is clear that the old essentialist notions of phenomenology must evolve into something new. Smart’s shift away from the old static patterns of similarity to dynamic patterns that reflect sameness or difference in any given moment has allowed for the sort of liminal, boundary-shifting approach to the other similar to that advocated in this thesis. Moving beyond “origin and essence,” Smart’s phenomenology as method focuses largely on description, while allowing for critique. Most importantly, the discordances between religions are not excluded from this conversation, that is, both comparison and contrast are welcome.

Methods from Education:

In distinguishing between religious literacy and religious knowledge, Nord considers literacy to be a repertoire of “simple and straightforward religious facts, symbols, stories and history,” while religious knowledge deals with the more personal aspects of understanding. According to Nord, religious knowledge is also focused on the understanding that “people within a religious tradition have of their own tradition and of the world as it appears from the vantage point of their tradition.” One of the key contributions of Nord’s conception of religious knowledge is this addition of the experience of the practitioner as an educational tool. In this sense, the strengths of both traditional knowledge and personal experience combine to form a more complete understanding of religion, religious practitioners, and belief systems.

An academically rigorous and experientially rich religious studies curriculum, according to the work of Nord and Haynes, does not teach students how to be religious. Rather, it exposes students to a plurality of worldviews, to others, to the non-religious, as well as to those who,

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115 Capps, 121.
116 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 82.
Nord claims, “experience the world religiously.” Endeavoring to bring about a more nuanced understanding of teaching about religion, as Nord states, the goal is “to balance the scales, to restore neutrality to a curriculum that implicitly favors secular over religious ways of making sense of the world.” A religious studies curriculum in the vein of Nord and Haynes’ civic model of public schools must provide both religious and secular types of knowledge. The two suggest integrating religion into the public school curriculum, including elementary education, history, civics and economics, literature and the arts, the sciences, the bible and world religions, particularly through the use of primary source texts.

The study of religion, for Nord, provides students with both subjective and objective experiences of religious phenomena. Nord suggests working with religious worldviews as “different way(s) of interpreting reality.” An in-depth study of religion, Nord claims, must also present religion as a “live option” for students, as a possible mode for understanding life and operating within it. In this way students come to understand the impact and influence of religion on themselves, others, and current events. The religious studies envisioned by Nord is uniquely positioned as a study of responsibility, one that rejects essentialist views of what it means to be human, openly exploring both objective and subjective religious phenomena and experience. Students learn that religion is a subject that must be taken seriously.

As presented by Nord and Haynes, understanding religion from the inside entails letting “the advocates of that religion speak for themselves, using the cultural and conceptual resources of their traditions…to hear what they say and see what they do in the context of their own

117 Nord and Haynes, 131.
118 Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 238.
119 Nord, ibid, 83.
120 Nord, ibid, 83.
beliefs, experiences, motives, and worldview – from the inside, as it were.”

The “as it were” acknowledges the impossibility of actually standing in the shoes of another, while ultimately allowing students to experience the religious worldviews of others based on their own self-understanding, rather than “how we understand [religions] given our preconceptions and values.”

Using a civic model to argue for religious studies, Nord and Haynes have both worked to facilitate nationwide community discourse and the establishment of ground rules that reflect the shared civic principles and responsibilities of parents and educators. Their work together suggests addressing religion as it arises within the disciplines beginning as early as the first grade, as well as stand-alone electives throughout the grades, and a year long, mandatory religious studies course during high school. The two, leaning heavily on Smart, call for the incorporation of religious topics into existing courses, as well as the establishment of separate religious studies courses, based in part on Smart’s dimensions of religion (doctrinal, mythic, ethic, ritual, experiential, aesthetic, and social), and the building of “informed empathy” through reading primary sources, site visits, and class visitors, by “let(ting) the advocates of that religion speak for themselves.”

Conclusion:

This chapter has argued that Ninian Smart’s dynamic phenomenology offers valuable methods for use in public school religious studies programs of the kind suggested in this thesis.

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121 Nord and Haynes, 50.
122 Nord, Does God Make a Difference?, 110.
123 Nord and Haynes, 66.
124 Nord and Haynes, 50.
Other methods including: hermeneutical, historical, socio-cultural, functional, analytical, and critical - are employed by scholars of religion. Worldview analysis, bracketing (or *epoche*), and informed empathy are presented in the first half of the chapter as the methods of Smart’s dynamic phenomenology. These phenomenological tools assist in understanding both inside and outside perspectives, and the space between the self and other. A pedagogy of religious studies for K-12 grades requires attention to these distinctions and to the problem of using antiquated definitions and classifications.

Nord and Haynes offer a number of methodological tools, arguing first for religious knowledge rather than literacy in their civic school model. Focusing on both the inside and outside elements of learning about religion, the two borrow heavily from Smart’s work, particularly worldview analysis. As Nord points out, “a truly liberal education would devote sufficient time and effort to religions to enable students to understand them, from the inside, as live options for making sense of the world, and would be allowed to contend with secular positions.”

Despite critiques from Geertz, McCutcheon, and Allen, the phenomenological method, and Smart’s dimensions of religion in particular, are well suited to the study of religion. It is one method that must be included in religious studies curriculums that promote both subjective and objective learning experiences. Breaching the “chasm of otherness” between worldviews, although challenging, can be facilitated in part by establishing the classroom as a neutral and pragmatic space in which multiple viewpoints can be held simultaneously.

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125 Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 285.
126 Peters, 193.
Conclusion

“The task of democracy is forever the creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.” – John Dewey

The establishment of the discipline of religious studies and the secularization of the American school system are both contributors to the current absence of religious studies education in the public schools. Despite efforts on the part of the American Academy of Religion, the First Amendment Center, and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, religious studies as a subject has yet to find a secure place within the K-12 curriculum. Scholars such as Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, Diane Moore, and Stephen Prothero have offered thorough civic, constitutional, educational, ethical and moral arguments in favor of introducing religious studies into the curriculum. And yet, religious studies education remains limited to high school elective status.

The primary argument presented in this thesis is that the religious diversity of our population is not being adequately addressed by current public school curriculums, and that religious illiteracy leads to a type of social differing, or “othering” based on religion. The act of othering throughout public education is more than problematic within a democracy claiming to be founded on religious liberty. The discussion focuses on a distinction made primarily by Nord and Haynes that religious studies education must include contextualization of religion from both “inside” and “outside” perspectives. This thesis has attached the subjective experience of education to the inside, and the objective experience to the outside.

Both subjective and objective perspectives of religion must be included in a successful religious studies education. A unique pedagogy of religious studies allows space for both objective and subjective experiences while being attentive to the First Amendment. A curriculum such as this must incorporate Deweyan experiential philosophy, theological and contemplative subjective elements, and lastly, a traditional liberal arts focus on the discipline of religious studies.

In terms of a more specific classroom approach, there are three primary components mentioned throughout this thesis: contextualization through objective knowledge, first-hand subjective experiences, and, in addition, the time and space for personal reflection on both outer and inner experiences. Resources for the development of such a pedagogy includes traditional liberal studies and progressive education, and the second and third chapters of this text speak to just that, the comingling of theory and methods from the fields of education and religious studies.

Dewey wrote that “only a large number of inquirers working at the same general question, under different circumstances, and from different points of view, can reach satisfactory results,” and I believe this to be true in the case of religious studies in the public schools.\(^{128}\) A fresh approach will serve our purposes here, in order that, as Smart believed, “we may all be able to learn something from every worldview. This is a basis for friendship between religions.”\(^{129}\)

In this thesis I have attempted to bring together a tremendous amount of information and methodology from the disciplines of religious studies and education. My aim has been to present a collaborative view of the issue with a focus on the experiential benefits of learning about

religion from both traditional scholarship and personal experience. In particular, this thesis suggests religious studies as an educational, civic, and democratic tool for overcoming religious “otherness,” while allowing, and indeed, celebrating religious plurality and difference. In the United States, I have argued, the sheer number of religions coexisting requires, no, *demands* acknowledgement on a public level, one that extends into our public spaces, particularly into our public schools.
BIBLIOGRAPHY:


