

Matthew Hicks



Matthew Hicks earned a master's degree in theological studies from Emory University and a master's degree in religious studies with a minor in education from the University of Georgia. He has taught in both high school and college settings. He recently developed a curriculum on the Hebrew Scriptures for public secondary schools (available spring 2002), and is now writing a volume on Christian New Testament (available summer 2002).

An adolescent's understanding of faith is deceptively simple. Ask most any fifteen-year-old to define his or her faith system, and you will likely hear a long-held, tacitly accepted, stock answer. Teenagers filter their encountered world through this simplistically understood system. Daily interactions with new people, ideas, cultures, and other faith traditions stretch their fragile conceptual web. Furthermore, in today's schools students hang suspended between an Enlightenment commitment to rational certainty and a Postmodern Weltanschauung that warns against meta-narratives: Seek the truth, but know that there are no "Truths." Vulnerability, whether outwardly expressed or not, reaches new heights during adolescence.

Cast the subject of religion into a teenager's curricular mix and a plethora of additional issues surface. Parents, religious leaders, politicians, and educators acknowledge the necessity of teaching about religion if students are to receive a "complete" education.¹ Yet, everyone concerned clings white-knuckled to a set of ideological convictions — religious or otherwise — when the subject of religion in public education is broached.

How best are educators to teach religious studies to secondary students while remaining sensitive to their compulsory exposure, and to parents' and faith leaders' legitimate worries? A couple of methodological suggestions and thoughts might provide some insights unique to this subject and, hopefully, prevent educators from inadvertently fanning the flames of a costly American culture war.

One recurring and difficult issue facing secondary educators is how best to handle the unquestioning acceptance of beliefs by fundamentalist students. Interestingly enough, one solution lies in acknowledging that all adolescents are, in some sense, “fundamentalists”: those willing “to do battle royal for the fundamentals.”² Most, if not all high school students uncritically orient themselves and their lives around a received set of doctrines to which they feel an allegiance. ³ These inherited teachings prompt students to operate within a religion-based or a secular/science-based paradigm. Regardless of the particular model, all students maintain a firm hold on a “faith” (i.e. allegiance) system.

Peer pressures, identity crises, cultural tensions, and real and perceived needs form a difficult course for teens to navigate. One compass they use is their faith system. Secondary students desire to be grounded in a system that provides a familiar safety net as they maneuver through the school day. According to J. W. Fowler, “the adolescent’s religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith.”⁴ The combined complexity of these factors adds special significance to courses in religious studies.

In religious studies courses, students inevitably reflect on their own faith systems vis á vis the encounter of other traditions. The study of religion provides a unique forum in which students can respectfully express their thoughts and hopes while developing an appreciation for other worldviews. This does not mean, however, that these basic beliefs should be scrutinized in secondary schools. Simply put, there is enough to be gained by exposure to alien traditions without asking adolescents to evaluate critically the arguments of their own faith traditions.

Not everyone agrees with this position. For example, Nel Noddings, after providing some beneficial ideas for teaching about existential issues, writes:

You [fundamentalists, and here she means Christian fundamentalists] are free to practice your religion as you see fit, but when you enter the public arena, your commitments and recommendations must be and will be subjected to the methods of intelligence. The public school is committed to these methods, and your children will necessarily encounter them.⁵

While Noddings tempers this edict at other places in her work,⁶ taking such an approach will only alienate a large segment of American parents. It is, in my opinion, an insensitive and unacceptable view of how to teach fundamentalists — Christian or otherwise. Noddings might consider that, whether students worship God, gods, or are Waiting for Godot, every student is, essentially, a “fundamentalist!”⁷

The premise that all adolescents have an “unshaking need for an unshakable God”⁸ (however they might define “God”), delimits the curriculum and pedagogical means of religious studies instruction. A useful methodology for engaging the topic of religion is to stratify lessons into three different, but related layers: historical, philosophical, and hermeneutical.

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In the first layer, students explore questions of historical context. For example, if teaching about the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, teachers might discuss that the Cyrus Edict was issued ca. 539 BCE., that power shifted from the Babylonians to the Persians, that the returning Israelites eventually built a new temple, and that they forged a tight-knit community out of fear of religious assimilation. Teachers must exercise caution when excavating this layer, differentiating between historical context (who, what, when, and where), and historicity (whether something really did happen). The majority of instructional time and effort is devoted to familiarizing students with this type of background knowledge. Note, of course, that teachers must not overemphasize rote learning of facts, or intellectualizing the subject matter. Engaging the emotional side of religion and of religious adherents is an enormously important facet of teaching this subject.

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In the second layer, questions of meaning are discussed. For example, what do Zen Buddhists believe about meditation, or why do Sufis practice dhikr, the act of remembering Allah? Or, continuing with our example from Ezra and Nehemiah, why do some Jews and Christians believe that they must live apart from peoples of other faiths? Philosophical questions are concerned with current existential meaning. Teachers should address these discussions through attribution, avoiding the use of first person language: Mormons believe X and Hindus believe Y, etc. This segment generates the most controversy among parents and students.

The third portion, the hermeneutical layer, addresses issues of modern-day relevancy. How are the ideas, topics, and readings applicable to broad societal issues and the students’ total learning experiences? Teachers can achieve effective curriculum integration in this portion of a lesson. Again using the example from Ezra and Nehemiah, U.S. immigration laws, or the historical effects and possible remedies of segregation and xenophobia in the US could be explored.¹¹ The possibilities for linking religious studies with other courses are innumerable. With so many instructional tie-ins available, the fact that most school districts place religious studies in the “null” curriculum is an educational tragedy.

The historical development of American schools has, unfortunately, yielded very few useful instructional materials in the academic study of religion. In short, public schools moved from propagating Protestantism (1840’s - 1960’s) to becoming altogether silent on the topic of religion (1960’s-present).¹² The result is that teachers can select only from an ample supply of Sunday School lessons or a library of textbooks that superficially mention religion. There have

been few attempts at creating age-appropriate religious studies materials for public secondary schools.

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Admittedly, writing religious studies curricula for secondary schools is enormously challenging.¹⁴ Creating appropriate materials for adolescents does not mean simplifying the vocabulary of a college textbook. The concepts, ideas, topics, and methods of instruction all have to be reshaped into a format suitable for teenagers. Also, unlike college students, all that does not flash and glitter is soporific in the world of teens. Due to the absence of materials, many teachers, myself included, spend countless hours preparing new lessons on an old subject. Others who would like to teach about religion do not because of the lack of available, age-appropriate materials.

Those best suited to write curricula and to teach about religion are, naturally, teachers who have taken courses in religious studies. A cursory survey of colleges of education reveals, however, that religious studies courses do not usually count toward teacher certification.¹⁵ Herein lies the paradox: many people agree that religion is a vital subject, but those who are trained have trouble entering the field of teaching. This should be no surprise, given that unnecessary litigation arises from the well-intended, but uninformed methods of those trying to teach about religion. Colleges of education and departments of religious studies must begin to dialogue if advancements in this area are to be made.

While noticeable challenges face secondary religious studies teachers, the final rewards far surpass the obstacles. Knowing that you fostered a new sense of awareness and empathy in a student is a satisfying accomplishment. When students state, "I understand, but I disagree," the ongoing preparation for democratic citizenship is taking place. When, in the same class, an Islamic student identifies you as a Muslim, or a Southern Baptist is certain of your Christian faith, a comfortable feeling arises in knowing that you have provided academically sound, religiously fair, and constitutionally permissible instruction. The students have grown intellectually, and their faith foundations have remained intact.

Endnotes

¹ See the pamphlet titled, *Religious Liberty, Public Education, and the Future of American Democracy: A Statement of Principles*, endorsed by twenty-four diverse organizations. The pamphlet is available by calling 1-800-830-3733 and requesting publication no. 95-F07.

² Curtis Lee Law coined the term in 1920. Quoted in Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion*

(New York: Basic Books, 1997), 36.

³ See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 162.

⁴ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 153.

⁵ Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 143.

⁶ Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief*, 28.

⁷ Again, the point is that all students share a received set of convictions with their parents, faith leaders, and so on. "Fundamentalist" should not be construed as a negative term, at least not when applied to adolescents.

⁸ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), 19.

⁹ I have borrowed these specific terms from Schubert M. Ogden, *Doing Theology Today* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 11-17. When I explain this concept to students, I use the words "meant, means, and application."

¹⁰ Ninian Smart, "A Curricular Paradigm for Religious Education," in Paul J. Will et. al. (eds.), *Public Education Religion Studies: An Overview* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 119.

¹¹ There is a danger that "presentism" trivializes religious sentiments. However, connections with other subjects need to be made in every course and the information, if it is to be learned at all, must be linked to the students' worlds.

¹² See James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin Press, 1999).

¹³ History textbooks have increased coverage of religion during the past ten years, however perfunctorily. See Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously across the Curriculum* (Alexandria:

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998), and Warren A. Nord,

Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 138-159.

¹⁴ At a conference at Vanderbilt University, Jon Butler, an editor and contributor to the *Religion in American Life*

series, commented on the challenges of writing for a secondary-school age audience. The 17 volume series, published by Oxford University Press, is an exceptional resource for high school teachers.

¹⁵ For example, none of my 31 religious studies courses count toward certification — an obvious hurdle for religious studies graduates who would like to enter the field of teaching.