

Daniel Dennett - Teach Our Children Well

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In my recent book, *Breaking the Spell*, I argued for compulsory education about world religions in all schools, public, private and home schoolers. This is what I said:

"Maybe people everywhere can be trusted, and hence allowed to make their own informed choices. Informed choice! What an amazing and revolutionary idea! Maybe people should be trusted to make choices, not to make the choices we would recommend to them, necessarily, but the choices that have the best chance of satisfying their considered goals.

"But what do we teach them until they are informed enough and mature enough to decide for themselves? We teach them about all the world's religions, in a matter-of-fact, historically and biologically informed way, the same way we teach them about geography and history and arithmetic.

"Let's get more education about religion into our schools, not less. We should teach our children creeds and customs, prohibitions and rituals, the texts and music, and when we cover the history of religion, we should include both the positive – the role of the churches in the civil rights movement of the 1960's, the flourishing of science and the arts in early Islam, and the role of the Black Muslims in bringing hope, honor and self-respect to the otherwise shattered lives of many inmates in our prisons, for instance—and the negative – the Inquisition, anti-Semitism over the ages, the role of the Catholic Church in spreading AIDS in Africa through its opposition to condoms.

"No religion should be favored, and none ignored. And as we discover more and more about the biological and psychological bases of religious practices and attitudes, these discoveries should be added to the curriculum, the same way we update our education about science, health, and current events. This should all be part of the mandated curriculum for both public schools and for home-schooling.

"Here's a proposal, then: As long as parents don't teach their children anything that is likely to close their minds -- through fear or hatred or by disabling them from inquiry (by denying them an education, for instance, or keeping them entirely isolated from the world) then they may teach their children whatever religious doctrines they like.

"It's just an idea, and perhaps there are better ones to consider, but it should appeal to freedom-lovers everywhere: the idea of insisting that the devout of all faiths should face the challenge of making sure their creed is worthy enough, attractive and plausible and meaningful enough, to withstand the temptations of its competitors. If you have to hoodwink—or blindfold—your children to insure that they confirm their faith when they are adults, your faith ought to go extinct." (p327-8)

In the year since my book was published this proposal has generated a lot of discussion, and first let me say that I was not surprised to find that many religious spokespeople, including some very conservative ones, have come out in favor of it.

They are not at all afraid of exposing the children of their members to a large, balanced dose of facts – not values, not propaganda – about all the world’s religions, including their own. They agree with me that this is, in effect, a public health measure: by opening the minds of all the young people and giving them a shared store of mutual knowledge about all religions, they protect all those minds from the toxic forms of religion that spring up in every tradition.

But there are a number of objections that need to be answered.

First, people want to know how on earth the curriculum could be fixed. Who would ‘dictate’ which facts were required and which could be omitted? Surely, people think, this would ignite a political firestorm.

Not so, I reply. If we can devise a political process that is not only transparent and fair, but readily seen to be transparent and fair, we should be able to reach a stable consensus on what goes into the curriculum and what stays out – and this would be adjustable over time as we learn more and more about religions, since the political process would be self-maintaining and self-correcting.

All the major and minor religions would be invited to participate, as well as representatives from the non-religious minority, which outnumbers many of the major religions in the United States. There are at least 749 million atheists in the world today, twice as many atheists as Buddhists, 40 times more atheists than Jews, and more than 50 times more atheists than Mormons, according to a recent study by Phil Zuckerman (2006).

All major religious and non-religious groups would be invited to propose self-portraits, in effect, of their traditions, including all the material they would want others to know about them, within agreed-upon length limits. No religion has a majority in the world, and to a first approximation--subject to adjustment by the political process itself--time and space in the curriculum should be proportional to the number of adherents worldwide.

These self-portraits would be subject to challenge on grounds of factual inaccuracy, and other representatives (and scholars and other interested parties) would have an opportunity to propose important facts left out of the self-portraits. These disagreements about facts could then be resolved in something like a legal trial, and this process would go through several iterations, no doubt, before compromise drafts could be approved.

We know how to do this. There are plenty of checks and balances available to prevent religions from censoring shameful but undeniable truths on the one hand, and to prevent religions from ganging up to vilify minority religions on the other hand. It will take political will to make it happen, but who today does not see the importance of shining the light of rational inquiry on these issues?

(Notice that the truth or falsity of any religious doctrines would not be included in the curriculum, since not a single point of religious doctrine is agreed upon as straightforward fact by the world community.)

Another oft-expressed objection supposes that it is highly unrealistic to expect private school teachers and home-schoolers to do a good job teaching this curriculum, since many of them could be expected to find it deeply antithetical to their worldviews.

I agree, and no doubt a significant proportion of public school teachers would be unsympathetic purveyors of this curriculum as well, but I don't think it matters. I am content to let teachers say to their students: "This compulsory curriculum is garbage, the work of Satan, a miserable political compromise rammed down our throats by an unsympathetic state." But they had better add: "Still, you're going to be tested on it, and if you don't pass the test, your school credentials are in jeopardy."

Mere exposure, however biased, to the assertion that most people in the world believe these to be the facts should succeed in inoculating many children against the toxic viruses of some religions. The credibility of the teachers will also be in jeopardy if they rail against the curriculum, and the better we make the curriculum, the harder it will be to sustain such an opinion. A few major television series on the new curriculum, and ample web sites, would also be there to balance the effects of those who would try to discredit it.

Perhaps the most serious challenge I have heard is that the curriculum in schools is already packed. What would I remove to make room for this? That is another tough, political question, but those of us who believe that the widespread ignorance about religion – especially given the emotional power of this ignorance – is a dangerous condition if it persists will just have to help educators decide how to prioritize the issues and shoehorn this material in. We already have the three Rs. Does anybody think this fourth R is less important in the 21st century?

Finally, I have been amused to see some opponents of this proposal call it "fascistic" or "totalitarian," when in fact it is refreshingly libertarian: you may teach your children whatever you want about religion without any interference from the state, as long as you teach them these facts as well.

How much more freedom could one want? The freedom to lie to your children? The freedom to keep them ignorant? You don't own your children, like slaves, and you have no right to disable them with ignorance. You do have an obligation to let them have the mutual knowledge that is available to every other child, as a normal part of growing up in a free society.

Besides, this knowledge will enrich their minds in uncountable ways, since it will acquaint them with some of the greatest music, art and literature that the world has to offer, and give them the sort of perspective on their own lives that you can only get from comparing your life with the lives of others.