The Misplaced Fear of Religion in Classrooms

Many people, whether they are parents or lawmakers, seem surprised that it’s legal to teach about different religions in public schools.

A new school year inevitably brings new faces, new subjects, new opportunities, and increasingly in some communities, new storms of protest over religion on public K-12 campuses. In just the last several weeks, a Mississippi teacher was accused of belittling atheism in class, parents in Georgia raised a ruckus over a middle-school social-studies homework assignment about Islam, and a bill introduced in Tennessee would ban the teaching of “religious doctrine” in elementary- and middle-school classrooms. Critics are labeling that legislation anti-Muslim bigotry, while supporters are calling the historical lessons on Islam indoctrination.

An old rule of etiquette often taught to children from a young age is to never talk about religion in polite company. This sentiment carries over into public schools, where teaching about the world’s religions often sparks controversy and charges from some parents and activists that classrooms are an inappropriate place for this discussion. Yet educators frequently counter that a public-school curriculum is incomplete without religious literacy, which the American public sorely lacks. According to a 2010 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey, in a country of many faiths and beliefs, there is a stunning absence of knowledge of the world’s religions. And where better to discuss a thorny topic like religion, some say, than in a public-school classroom; they note that discomfort is a natural and essential part of the learning process.

This ongoing ideological struggle is the basis of a new book, Faith Ed: Teaching about Religion in an Age of Intolerance, in which Linda K. Wertheimer, a veteran education writer and editor, examines the friction and sometimes outright confrontation over teaching religion in public schools. She recently shared some insights and observations with The Atlantic. The interview that follows has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Anderson: “Teach, not preach” was a common refrain as a guiding principle for how schools should introduce the teaching of religion. Talk about the inherent tension between teaching students about religion and the credible fear expressed by parents especially of proselytizing.

Wertheimer: Some parents feared that if their children learned about another religion, they might fall out of love with their own faith. Or if a child came from an atheist or agnostic family, maybe he or she might suddenly want to embrace a religion. However, I wouldn’t describe that fear as credible when referring to world-history courses that wrap in instruction about different religions. The courses I observed teach students basic information about three or more religions to help them understand the geography, history, politics, and culture of a country or region of the world. Teachers were not asking students to pray or perform religious rituals.

If anything, schools are in a better place than they were in the 1950s and 1960s, when it was commonplace for teachers to lead children in prayer and recite Bible verses as part of the morning routine. The 1963 court ruling prohibiting teacher-led prayer gradually led to bigger efforts to educate children about many religions.