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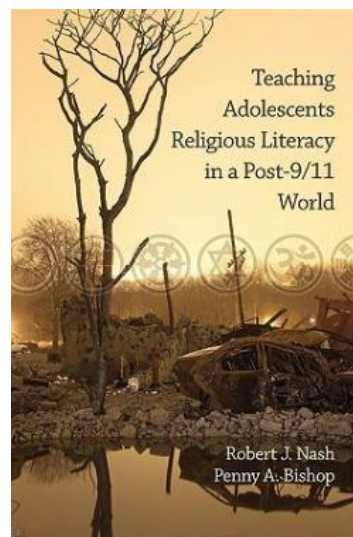
Nash, Robert J. & Bishop, Penny A. (2010) *Teaching Adolescents Religious Literacy in a Post-9/11 World*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing,

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Reviewed by Walter Feinberg
University of Illinois at Champaign, Urbana

Teaching Adolescents Religious Literacy in a Post 9/11 World (TRL) is designed to aid middle and high schools teach about world religions. While TRL will be especially useful for courses in comparative and world religions, and while this is its main audience, the authors also hope that the book can aid teachers in different subjects, from math and science, to literature and social studies, to address religious issues.

Even though it is Constitutional to teach about religion many schools, fearing controversy, have shied away from doing so. At this point there is an increased interest in offering these courses, but few teaching resources are available. Many who do teach these courses spend a great deal of time researching and developing their own material,



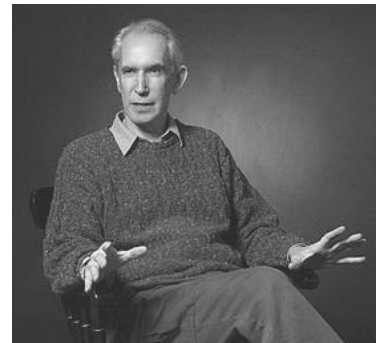
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and others, who might have an interest, likely give up for lack of guidance and adequate material. For anyone who believes that students should learn about religion, *TRL* will be a welcome and much needed resource.

The book is clearly influenced by the events of 9/11 and part of its purpose is to clear up destructive stereotypes of religions and to provide teachers and students with an accurate understanding of the better known (in the West) religions, especially, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. It also makes a persuasive argument for teaching about both smaller religions, including Neo-Paganism, and Native American Religions, and larger religions such as Confucianism, Taoism and Shinto that are not generally familiar to American students. One of the unique aspects of *TRL* is the sympathetic treatment given to atheism, agnosticism and Secular Humanism.

In addition to providing useful guidance to teachers, *TRL* advances a cogent case for world religion. The authors remind the reader that teaching about religion is Constitutional and give a number of reasons why it should be done. They argue that religion is a rich and important subject in its own right and that students have a genuine interest in religious questions. They also hold that it is a necessary aspect of multicultural education, and that it is critical for addressing stereotypes and misunderstandings, and for promoting tolerance and pluralism. In addition, the events of 9/11, the changing global landscape and the growing importance of religion in local and international affairs add increased urgency to the need for “religious literacy.”

The book has nine chapters and an appendix. In the first chapter the authors introduce themselves and make the case for teaching religion in the public schools. The appendix is a highly personal essay by Nash on “Constructing a Spirituality of Teaching” that movingly describes how he became involved in teaching religion courses to teacher education students.



Robert J. Nash has been a professor at the University of Vermont for 37 years. He specializes in philosophy of education, ethics, higher education, and religion. He holds faculty appointments in teacher education, higher education administration, and interdisciplinary studies in education. In 2003, he was named an Official University Scholar in the Social Sciences and the Humanities at The University of Vermont, only the second faculty member in the history of the College of Education and Social Services to be so honored.

Chapters two through six are each devoted to a separate religion-- Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Each of these chapters begins with a "Case Study" designed to highlight some issue that might arise about a specific religion. The case is followed by a discussion of concerns related to the specific religion under consideration, such as polytheism with Hinduism, or "Islamophobia" with Islam. Then the chapters provide an informative overview of "the core beliefs" of each religion and discuss its "narrative," "doctrinal," "ethical" and "the ritual" dimensions. The authors do a nice job of highlighting some of the differences between religions giving a sense of the uniqueness and individuality of each tradition. They also inform the reader of some of the important differences within each religion, allowing that pluralism exists both within and across the major religions. A separate chapter informs teachers of additional useful teaching material. This chapter includes a section on constructivism.

My colleague, Richard Layton in the Religion Department of the University of Illinois, and I have been researching public school courses in religion and have heard teachers complain about the lack of high school level material on world religions. While *TRL* is designed more as a teacher's guide than a textbook the chapters on the specific religions could, with some editing, be used to address this complaint. The writing is clear and straightforward and should be accessible to high school students. It would be an added service to the field if the authors abstracted their general descriptions of each religion and edited it so that it could be used as a short text for students. Given the increased interest in the study of religion at the high school level, this text would find a ready audience. This could be a relatively natural next step for the authors given that in preparing the book they maintained email contact with over 100 public school teachers, and the book was written with their responses in mind.

One of the reasons schools may be reluctant to teach comparative religion courses is the different sensitivities of members of the community, and difference over the questions about what should count as a part of a religion. For example the attitude of many religions towards



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homosexuality presents a dilemma. If the object is to provide a sympathetic treatment of the religion, then must the teacher also represent its homophobic views in the same sympathetic light? In other words, is there any room for a critical discussion of religion or must the treatment of each and every religion be a celebration?

In our limited experience teachers are very reluctant to offend anyone by offering any critical treatment of religion and hence they are reluctant to look at the dark side of religious practices. This is quite understandable given the age of the students and the need for wide public acceptance. Interestingly though some Catholic schools are quite open about the recent problems of the Catholic Church with the pedophilic priests even though their students are the same age as similar public high school students.

It is to the authors' credit that they confront some of the controversial sides of religion, although not the hot button religious teachings on sexual identity and preference. They *do*, however, include a reasonably sympathetic treatment of atheism, agnosticism and Secular Humanism and this balances their overall sympathetic treatment of theistic traditions. Also, their inclusion of Confucianism and Buddhism as religions provides students with an opportunity to ponder whether religion must necessarily involve a God.

In addition they devote an entire chapter to religious controversies and misconceptions where they address both some of internal tensions as well as external misconceptions. The influence of 9/11 is most evident in this chapter and especially in the section on Islam where the authors spend considerable time addressing Islamophobic stereotypes that have fueled the image of Islam as a "violent, fanatical religion that resorts to acts of terror . . . in order to impose a particular religious ideology on the world." (p. 117). The authors rightfully distinguish between Islam proper and small, violent extremist elements such as the Wahhabi-Saudi extremists and they remind the reader of the motives of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber to replace a "Zionist-occupied government . . . with a Christian one." (p. 117)

The treatment of Controversies and Misconceptions in Islam when compared to the treatment of other religions inadvertently reveals one of the tensions in teaching World Religions. Although *TRL* provides a sympathetic treatment of each religion, the chapter on controversies and misconceptions is also intended to be somewhat critical pointing out tensions within the religion as well as pointing out misconceptions and stereotypes from outside.

With the exception of Islam this intent is carried out and the authors discuss both tensions within and misconceptions from without in all of the other four religions. However the treatment of Islam addresses only external misperceptions and stereotypes. Here the authors combat negative, distorted stereotypes with positive but also distorted ones. These include such claims as: “There is almost no exploitation of women in the workforce in Islamic countries” (120); “Sexual harassment is virtually nonexistent in the Arabic workplace, unlike in the United States” (120); “how a woman dresses, behaves and interacts with others, including men, is entirely a woman’s choice” (121). “Those women who freely choose polygamy over monogamy do it, in part, as a protection against Western forms of woman’s liberation” (121). Categorical claims like these, some without even an attempt at documentation, are at the very least misleading and do little to promote the nuanced thinking that the authors otherwise claim to want.

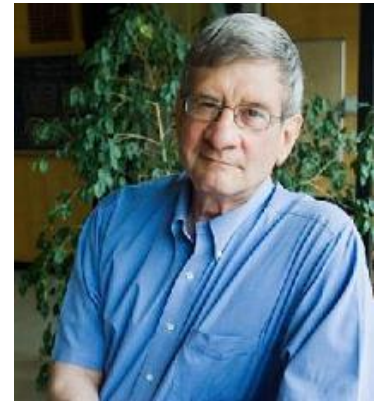
My guess is that the authors are motivated here by an educator’s understandable concern to address the official and unofficial negative responses to Muslims as a result of 9/11 (as the title of the book suggests). Nevertheless the categorical way they do this reveals a clear tension between the authors’ aim to celebrate differences, as multicultural education would have us do, and their aim to provide accurate and nuanced information.

This is not only an issue for the authors or for religion courses. Schools have a dual role of balancing a concern for tolerance and understanding, largely a concern of the heart, with a concern for truth and accuracy, largely a concern of

the head. This tension is present throughout the curriculum, but religion courses provide special challenges. One might hope that schools could find ways to overcome this dualism of heart and head. This book goes part of the way towards this end, but only part of the way.

About the Reviewer

Walter Feinberg is the Charles D. Hardie Professor, Emeritus of philosophy of education at the University of Illinois in Urbana. His work analyzes the role of public schools in liberal, pluralistic democratic societies. Feinberg has a number of essays that examines school choice policies and most recently published a book with Christopher Lubienski, *School Choice: Policies and Outcomes*, SUNY, where the editors and the authors examine Choice from both empirical and philosophical standpoints. Feinberg has received a number of awards. Most recently he shared the Literary prize of 2009, Literary Catalonia, in collaboration with Fondazione Etruria and Fondation Europe for his essay on religious education in liberal, pluralistic democracies. He has served as the Benton Resident Scholar at the University of Chicago and as a Resident Spencer Foundation Faculty Fellow. He is the author of a number of books and articles addressing the relationship between education and democracy, including *Understanding Education*, Cambridge University Press, *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities: Cultural Difference National Identity*. Yale University press and *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenry*, SUNY Press. He is co-editor of *Citizenship Education in Liberal Democratic Societies*, Oxford University Press. Feinberg has served as President of the North American Philosophy of Education Society and the American Educational Studies Association. He serves as co Founder of Fudan University's Institute of Philosophy of Education in China. Feinberg has lectured in throughout Europe, Asia and Australia, including keynote addresses in Japan, China and Korea. He has also keynoted the British Philosophy of Education Society meetings at Oxford, served to keynote the award ceremony for teachers in Tasmania, gave a major address at a conference in honor of Teddy Kollek, former mayor of Jerusalem, and has delivered the Butts lecture at the American Educational Studies Association and the John Dewey Lecture at the American Educational Research Society.



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