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Nord, Warren A. (2010) *Does God Make a Difference? Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.

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Warren Nord, noted religious and education philosophy scholar, presents a culmination of his work on religion and public schools in his new book, *Does God Make a Difference? Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities*. Nord asserts that religious education, especially in public schools and universities, while controversial and contended, does belong and is required for a truly liberal education. Breaking the book into three parts, Nord addresses problems, solutions, and implications for his recommendations for taking religion seriously in both public schools as well as universities.

Today's culture wars over religion and public education have included everything from prayer in schools to the science controversy over whether to teach evolution or

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Intelligent Design. Even so, religion continues to be an important part of the lives of Americans and as a result, conversations and disagreements continue. Since the Supreme Court has handed down several decisions restricting religious expression in public schools, many public schools and universities have completely backed away from the teaching of religion at all. Warren Nord believes this is a mistake and that religion absolutely needs to be taught in these venues.

In his new book *Does God Make a Difference*, Warren Nord provides a structured, well-reasoned argument for taking religion seriously in public schools and universities, offering several ways this may be accomplished. The main point Nord proposes is that in order to be neutral, as is required by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, equal treatment of both religious and non-religious ways of making sense of the world in both public schools and universities is required. He argues that what we have now is basically secular indoctrination because students do not learn of religion and the importance of it as a live option today in schools.

Nord makes it explicitly clear that he is not a religious fundamentalist in the introduction of the book, focusing his attention on secular reasons for taking religion seriously in schools and universities. Nord states that because “religion continues to be such an influential force for good and for evil one simply can’t be an educated person without understanding a fair amount about it” (p. 5). He offers several forms of taking religion seriously, which include religious literacy, religious understanding, comparative perspective, teaching religion, and explaining religion.

What I found most intriguing is the arguments Nord proposes for teaching religion as a part of a liberal education. “A liberal education is not narrow, specialized, or merely vocational. It introduces students to other cultures and to a variety of subjects and disciplines” (p. 109). In today’s pluralistic world and with technology crossing borders at an amazing rate, his proposal for learning about other religions is very useful and makes a great deal of practical sense. Students offered a truly liberal education will be better prepared to deal with

others and understand the different worldviews that govern people's daily lives around the world.

The type of liberal education Nord advocates is one in which students are afforded the opportunity to learn about the majority of opinions on both controversial and non-controversial subjects. It is especially important, he contends, to teach students about the controversial topics, such as religion, and how to evaluate these issues in their own lives after acquiring a base of knowledge about it.

In backing up his arguments, Nord does an excellent job of speculating the problems his proposals may present and he addresses them in the book very well. In the solutions section, Nord addresses liberal education; moral, existential and civic arguments; Constitutional considerations; and complications and concerns related to his proposals. While he undoubtedly will not successfully address each potential problem with his solutions, he definitely provides several options to further the conversation.

While Nord is consistent throughout the book on the necessity of a liberal education and the relationship to neutrality, in the solutions section he wavers a bit. The only part of the book that is unclear is when Nord proposes that teachers should help students to determine which arguments are reasonable. He states that "teachers should guide their students, helping them to understand that some beliefs or theories, some intellectual or cultural traditions, are more likely to be true or more reasonable than others—and why" (p. 170). This is where the argument gets a little muddy, not in universities where academic freedom protects free speech of faculty, but in public schools where offering an opinion as to which religions are reasonable is not neutral.

A few pages later, however, Nord states that "As I trust is clear, taking religion seriously is not a matter of advocating religion... [but] the curriculum must be structured to take religion seriously" (p. 175). These two statements are somewhat contradictory, even in a university setting where academic freedom is extended to the point where the faculty member has demonstrated their competence. For public school teachers these statements are even more troublesome and it seems that this part of

the discussion may leave teachers more confused and likely to leave the subject of religion out of their classes and curriculum.

Nord uses a variety of sources to advance his arguments, including both primary sources such as Supreme Court Majority and Minority Opinions as well as numerous secondary sources that provide an assortment of interpretations of the issues at stake. He includes many opposing viewpoints on controversial subjects in order to give the big picture on the issue. It is clear that Nord is well-versed in the research and top intellectual thinkers in this area, as he includes such authors as Charles Haynes, Stephen Webb, and George Marsden to name a few.

While Nord may seem a bit idealistic in what he proposes at times, he is practical in his ideas for the implementation of his suggestions. The end result for Nord is the ideal of taking religion seriously in public schools and universities by requiring a one-year course on religion in high schools and one year of study in universities. He does, however, offer several small steps that can be taken by administrators, teachers, and parents while the more idealistic ideas are considered or discussed in the public domain.

These small steps toward the goal of a one-year religion course include teachers becoming better informed and integrating religion into curriculum more, schools developing a religion policy on the role of religion in the curriculum and classroom, faculty at universities teaching electives on religion and education, parents lobbying for elective religion courses in schools, textbook revisions and supplementation, and several other practical suggestions. This section offers several ideas that contribute to the conversation and that are less likely to draw criticism and ire of the public.

With the absence of religious reasons to take religion seriously in public schools and universities, Nord's proposals and arguments may not appeal to those who feel that religion belongs because of its importance. It looks as if Nord feels that religious reasons are even stronger reasons and he may not appeal to these reasons because he is trying to access the widest audience possible.

Overall, *Does God Make a Difference* provides a welcome voice to the group of writers who offer either fundamentalist rhetoric that does not appeal to the general public or writers who offer a completely secular view of the world and also do not appeal to the general public.

This book is useful for parents of children in public schools, teachers, administrators, as well as college students. By providing differing viewpoints and a specific, well-documented argument, Nord offers something in this book for the public to consider and serves as a pertinent discussion topic for a variety of venues. Nord offers a little bit of something for everyone concerned with education.

About the Reviewer

Brandon Moore is a PhD student in the School of Education, Baylor University. His research interests include sociology of education, veteran's education, results of NCLB mandates and consequences on schools and curriculum, civics education, and social Sstudies content.

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