

Can We Teach Patriotism in Schools?

by Michael W. Ledoux and Thomas Marshall

Abstract

The disestablishment clause of the U.S. Constitution has led educators in the United States to establish guidelines about addressing religion in the classroom. As a basic rule, districts have allowed teaching about religion without encouraging or supporting a particular religion. This article suggests that patriotism and patriotic expressions are, in fact, religious and that encouraging or supporting patriotism may be tantamount to establishing a state religion in the classroom.

Religion Cannot Be Established in Schools

The debate over the role of religion in the public schools is unceasing. Depending upon the school district in which one finds oneself, a teacher may not be permitted to wear a Noah's ark pin, set up a Christmas tree, or wear a head scarf. The First Amendment's disestablishment clause has been the source of those concerns:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (U.S. Constitution 1791)

For educators in compulsory educational settings, the dividing line between the acceptable and the unacceptable is that teaching about religions and religious traditions is acceptable, but that promoting or catechizing them is not. That distinction often leads to difficulty when the ideas do not fit neatly into one category or another. Topics such as creationism and evolution, health education, and values education in schools often touch on religious sensibilities or doctrinal beliefs. The question this article wishes to address is whether patriotism itself is a religion: if so, is it then forbidden to

teach patriotism? That is, should schools teach about patriotism and patriotic activity without encouraging or supporting them, the same way they treat recognized religions?

Patriotism

One role of compulsory public education in the United States has been fostering pride among future citizens. That curriculum, intentional and unintentional, has consistently provoked conflict and scrutiny (Apple 2003). Whether schools attempt to instruct students in critical analysis of the nation's sociopolitical history, infuse a "superpatriot" sensibility with an "America, love it or leave it" mentality (Schmuck and Chesler 1967), or find some sort of middle ground, one goal has been creating an informed citizenry and inculcating the values of the culture to students.

At what point, however, does fostering national culture become nationalistic? Is there a point—one might consider Nazi Germany—at which national pride becomes destructive to the values of the very country it seeks to support? Is patriotism then a goal or an offense? In part that is a semantic argument. Virolo (1995) seeks to distinguish between the terms *patriotism* and *nationalism*, although acknowledging that in common and scholarly works they are often used as synonyms. Others seek to present the elements of the patriotism-nationalism spectrum in either moral or attitudinal terms (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989; MacIntyre 2003). For the purposes of this work, patriotism will be defined as the "degree of love for and pride in one's nation" (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989, 271).

However, the manifestation of that love and pride, the rituals, symbols, ideologies, and exclusionary history, can lead to understanding patriotism either as a religious expression or as nationalism. For instance, Sen. Lamar Alexander, a former U.S. secretary of education, warned several years ago that "students should not be exposed to competing ideologies in historical texts but be instructed that the United States represents one true ideology" (Alexander, cited in Westheimer 2008, 48). If that pride is manifested so that it becomes exclusionary and superior, if the symbols and rituals promote a "better than" mentality, or if dissent from those expressions is thought anti-patriotic or anti-American, such patriotism might qualify as a religious experience that should be barred from the classroom.

What Is Religion?

Many would argue belief in God as essential to a definition of religion. That definition, however, could exclude atheists, agnostics, and even Unitarians. Thus, "religion" for our purposes must be

defined in a manner *inclusive* or *exclusive* of definitions of God or deity, i.e., in terms of its worldly practices and traditions.

1) An *inclusive* definition of religion “emphasizes the universal nature of religion, seeing man as intrinsically *homo religio*” (Jones 2006). Ergo, one who teaches would necessarily be religious, and thus all activity—including teaching—would be religious. Because the inclusive definition does not establish any particular religion, teaching it would not violate the Constitution.

2) The *exclusive* definition of religion, by contrast, enumerates “specific theological teachings. Some of these teachings include: the spiritual realm, the deity(ies) dispensing . . . reward and punishment, cosmology, symbols, and an historical tradition” (Jones 2006, para. 4). Note below how closely the elements of this definition of religion parallel the practice of patriotism (provided in brackets):

[Typically the term refers to an institution [*the government of the United States*] with a recognized body of communicants [*the citizenry*] who gather regularly for worship [*ceremonies, events, patriotic assemblies*], and accept a set of doctrines offering some means of relating to what is taken to be the ultimate nature of reality [*Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights*]. (Reese 1980, 488 [authors’ insertions])

A reexamination using Jones’s definition also shows that the American religious experience is easily expanded to include other manifestations of civic piety. The teachings of the American spiritual realm include the need to identify the will and intention of the founders; calling upon the spirit of the great leaders; and channeling or searching for the spirit of our predecessors to “set nature right.” There is a pantheon of American deities, each with his, and more recently her, own temples: Lincoln, Jefferson, Washington, Kennedy, Anthony, Tubman. Beyond the natural realm of privilege awarded to those who have served the country militarily (GI Bill, health and pension benefits), there is regular remembrance of fallen heroes at such times as Memorial Day, Patriots Day, and Independence Day. Chapters could be devoted to the symbols of the American patriot (eagles, flags, medals, uniforms, pins). Even the mystical and gnostic elements of this patriotic system endure in the folklore of symbols on the dollar bill, alleged connections to Masonry, and the popular fiction of the contemporary movie *National Treasure*.

Beyond the pageantry and symbols, the real test of patriotism as a religion is in its soteriology, its power to save. Does the patriotic curriculum insist that the American experience is the model for

all others to follow? Do our observances of flag and founders go beyond a treatment of the historical context and political realities and “catechize” children in compulsory education? And is there an understanding of superiority and exclusivity, bordering on nationalism, inherent in that expression? If so, the curriculum of patriotism is indeed religion.

The idea that patriotism is actually religion or that the two are inextricably intertwined is not new. Treatises such as Mathews’s (1918) have proposed that patriotism fulfills religion and religion is fostered by patriotism; more recently, the works of Bellah (1967, 1992 among others) have made “civil religion” famous. Eastman (1917), a Marxist opponent to such patriotism, wrote:

Patriotism has, like other religions whose object of worship is a little open to question, its extreme sensitiveness, its fanatical intolerance. The ceremonial observances are enforced with zealotry, and those who blaspheme with unassenting presence are likely to be thrown out bodily or confined in jail.

Our own parlance suggests that military service is considered a sacred duty and that an oath in court is seen as especially significant. The respect and honor given to the American flag designate it a sacred object. Even robes help to set apart judges in their role of upholding law. The responsibilities of a citizen of the United States—paying taxes, serving on a jury, registering for the military, voting, and obeying the law—are regarded as sacred within the context of citizenship. To be seen as an American, one must dedicate those duties to a particular cause.

Patriotism Fits the Definition of Religion

Patriotism, then, fits within what could be termed religion. The question then becomes: Can schools encourage patriotism? Should classroom time be dedicated to national hymns or sacred rituals, or are they actually antithetical to what it means to be a citizen? Americans have long fought over the disestablishment of church from state. Congregations such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Unitarian Universalists, and others have advocated true separation of church and state.

Today’s classrooms, with their heterogeneous groupings of faiths, provide educators another opportunity to reflect on the true American experience. Perhaps the disestablishment clause can be applied the way it is to acknowledged religions: to teach patriotism and avoid nationalism. But can we teach seven-year-olds a critical

approach to national identity that does not exclude other doctrines or national values? If we are dedicated to the values of democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion, is it time that we stop evangelizing our students with patriotism, or do we need to revisit the role of religious expression in the United States as a whole?

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