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Natalie LeMay

Dr. Lester & Dr. Mathews

## The Implementation of Religious Literacy Curricula in American Public Schools

### Introduction

As a child, Christianity confused me. Not because of the fantastical elements, the foreign-sounding names and places, or the idea of a magical man in the sky (I was a huge superhero fan so all these came easily to me). Rather the people I encountered in religious settings confused me. My mother was raised in the Christian Reform Church, a subset of Protestantism mostly found in Michigan and along the upper West Coast, and, given that her father was a pastor, religion played a big role in our home life. After moving away from my mother's hometown and church, we moved from place to place following my father's military orders. To restore a semblance of normalcy, my mother picked out a new church at every new stationing. The nondemoninational Church in Georgia, the largely Catholic population in Rhode Island, and the Presbyterian churches in North Carolina and the Baptist one in Virginia, exposed me to multiple religious perspectives, but each made me grow more unsure of religion's effectiveness.

Growing up, the unspoken motto was 'to know God is to know God's Word'. Even as a preteen, I knew almost all of the tales in the Bible. Not just the staples like Moses and Noah, but of stories like Peter's three denials of Jesus Christ, the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus, and the friendship of David and Jonathon despite Jonathon's father's hatred. It seemed to me that the loudest voices in the church also knew the least about the Scripture itself. Sunday school and sermons were more about generalizations like "love your neighbor" or "form a personal relationship with Jesus". It was a stark contrast to the upbringing my mother had taught me. In my undergraduate years, I learned there was actually a term for this lack of basic

understanding of religious scripture and background: religious illiteracy and that several esteemed scholars, such as Stephen Prothero and Warren Nord, had detailed many Christians' illiteracy about their own faith, and that the Pew Research Center has quantified this illiteracy.<sup>1</sup> Even as my experiences were confined to the Christian faith, I had no trouble imagining it continued to hold true in other religions and areas. Though religious illiteracy is a term reserved for lack of knowledge about multiple religions, in my mind, I wondered how someone lacking understanding of their own religion could understand that of another.

The Religious Freedom Center, or the RFC, of the Newseum in Washington D.C. is in the heart of the United States, arguably the center of the free world. Yet often its focus is not on the Congressmen, lobbyists, businessmen, or government officials that populate the American capital, but rather the average citizen that lives far from metropolitan cities like D.C. The Georgia 3Rs project, which stands for 'Rights, Responsibility, and Respect' is proudly proclaimed on the RFC's website as "a three-year initiative designed to create demonstration models of religious literacy and [the promotion of] religious liberty in three Georgia public school districts".<sup>2</sup> The five key objectives of this project, according to the same webpage, are to engage schools, prepare leaders, publish resources, create partnerships, and to serve as a model for the nation.<sup>3</sup> However, the implementation of the project is unlikely to be without obstacles. Religion is a highly personal and private topic in the United States and many believe it has no place in the public sphere for fear of treading on the rights of others. To make their program a success, the RFC will need to overcome an inherent prudence towards religious matters and concerns specific to the state of Georgia and its citizens.

The state of Georgia and those who reside in it are in the center of the Bible Belt of the United States, a region well-known for its Christian conviction and conservative tendencies.

Though religious literacy is not a particularly partisan issue in and of itself, some of the characteristics of these courses may be presented to be at odds with the Christian evangelical faith. Many may take issue with the idea of teaching Christianity as a “viewpoint” and not as the factual representation of history. Other may see it as impeding on the parents’ right to decide their children’s understanding. To implement a course on all religions, regardless of the reasoning, may prove to be an uphill battle against this staunch group, but if evangelicals, the most active and influential section of Christians, can be won over, the Newseum’s program will likely succeed in these counties and others.

With the research and understanding that education on basic religious backgrounds and practices is necessary, the questions that remain are how to go about implementing such a change. This essay will outline past and current practices in combination with the stance of the legal system of the United States on the inclusion of religious educational curriculum in public schools. After this, one must explore religious attitudes toward religion in America, as well as the curriculum of the Georgia 3Rs project and social atmosphere of the counties in Georgia where it will begin. To do this, one must delve into the social and theological practices of evangelical Christians.

I am presenting my work as a best practices manual for promoting religious literacy. As it does in many other educational aspects, America falls behind the levels of our industrialized neighbors<sup>4</sup> when it comes to education on issues as pertinent as religious understanding. The average American only made a fifty percent on a questionnaire created by the Pew Research Center to test basic religious knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Several counties, school boards, and outside organizations have implemented or considered a course in religious literacy in the past, but missteps and unforeseen problems have occurred. Within this essay, I hope to educate the public

not only of the need for a basic religious background, but also how to craft a program, how to present it publicly to be garner support, and how to address the issues that will inevitably be brought against the course and its proponents. An understanding of the mindset of an evangelical believer is essential to do this, in part because of their prevalence in American citizens, and partly because of their immense political power and sway. With these cautionary tales and helpful tips in mind, a properly created and advertised religious literacy course will surely succeed.

### Religious Liberty and the Constitution

The RFC finds the basis for its work in the First Amendment of the Constitution, which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”<sup>6</sup> This phrasing, or perhaps conflicting ideas about what it means, has contributed to the misconception that it forbids the inclusion of religion in the public education system. Many believe that the teaching of religion in a state-sponsored setting (like a public school) would be a means of establishing religion. For example, a parent may believe that their own religious practices, or lack thereof, would be undermined if their child is obligated to learn about other religions as part of their school curriculum.<sup>7</sup> Other parents, and oftentimes many administrators and teachers, are of the mind that religion is too personal a subject to teach, that there are too many ways instruction on religion can go wrong and spark a controversy.<sup>8</sup> Numerous public debates and media scandals in the past decade or so, particularly those that involve the religion of Islam<sup>9</sup>, bolster this viewpoint.

Yet the Religious Freedom Center stands firm in their tenets. Pioneered by scholars like Warren Nord and the RFC’s own Charles Haynes, a sizable group of activists and scholars now advocates religious literacy for the civic and educational benefits of the students themselves. As

future citizens of the United States, a racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse nation, children must be exposed to disparate religions and viewpoints from a young age. Only then can they learn to respect individuals from different religions and backgrounds, who they are certain to encounter all throughout their lives.<sup>10</sup> Ashley Berner, the Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, believes that there is no such thing as a ‘neutral education’. All educational systems are based on selection and segregation, for a district is often divided based on income and zip-code, on racial or socioeconomic lines, or by curriculum and educational practices.<sup>11</sup> Once one has accepted this as true, curriculum changes can be readily supported; for if one knows that a curriculum is biased as it currently stands, why not attempt to offer a broader scope of information?

For these and other reasons, Nord and Haynes assert that children should not be coddled, educationally speaking. A proper liberal arts education makes a wide range of world views and theories available to be dissected and debated; that is the way humans learn. Let children make up their own minds, say Nord and Hayes. Expose them to controversies and contradictions, but never keep them in the dark.<sup>12</sup> To the belief that curriculums involving religion would violate the freedoms laid out in the First Amendment, Nord responds that excluding religion equally goes against the spirit of the First Amendment.<sup>13</sup> Haynes too maintains that the Amendment was not at all intended to keep religion out of schools but instead to neither promote one religion over another nor remove all religions entirely.<sup>14</sup> This concept of neutrality in the curriculum has been upheld as constitutional in 1963 by the United States Supreme Court in *Abington Township v. Schempp*. The majority determined that the teaching of religion was allowed in public schools so long as the school and its employees were not involved in the practice, preaching, or indoctrination of the students. In addition to not favoring one religion over others, religion must

also not be favored over ‘non-religion’ or secular viewpoints and theories.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the writer of the majority decision, Justice Clark, wrote “we do not agree, however, that this decision in any sense has that effect [of affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion]. In addition, it might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization”.<sup>16</sup> Charles Haynes has authored a number of books, given a great deal of speeches, and sponsored multiple projects that are based on the necessity of including religion into the systems that reach and educate American children. Haynes is fully confident that doing so is good for all religions, for all cultures, and for all peoples<sup>17</sup>, and even better, that it is much less likely be misused if it follows a curriculum similar to that laid out by the Religious Freedom Center, which was created with these concerns in mind.

### The History of Religious Literacy in America

As just about any elementary school student can tell you, many of the first settlers in the New World came in search of religious freedom.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the Puritan mindset regarding literacy and biblical learning, the public school systems of newly christened America firmly implemented reading skills and literacy in the doctrine of the Bible and the Protestant church.<sup>19</sup> Stephen Prothero, author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Should Know and Doesn’t*, makes it clear that, while there were ‘pious’ schools (private, religiously funded and run institutions) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries<sup>20</sup>, the common (public) schools were often just as religiously influenced. He writes “common schools were very much a part of an unofficial yet powerful Protestant establishment...[and] were religious in their leadership faculty, curricula, and aims. Their textbooks called the Bible the Word of God, and their teachers endeavored to turn out not just good citizens but good Protestants”.<sup>21</sup> Though such practices were highly

unconstitutional and obviously lacked any attention to other religions or belief systems, this was not the reason for its later demise.

Prothero cites the rise of ‘nonsectarianism’, also called ‘nondenominationalism’, as an underlying cause of secular schools. In essence, efforts to create a Christian curricula that satisfied a variety of Christian sects led to a general moral tone rather than actual doctrine. Many Christian citizens believed that such a curriculum was too watered down and lacked the Christian values they most desired in their child’s upbringing.<sup>22</sup> Tensions between Roman Catholics and Protestant groups erupted into the ‘Bible Wars’, violent riots in Philadelphia in 1844, over the movement of Catholics in advocating for private Catholic schools.<sup>23</sup> Prothero claims there were four main effects of the ‘Bible Wars’.<sup>24</sup> The most important of these was the removal of references to, the teaching of, and the practices of religion from public schools. In making the decision to “cede the topic of religion to Sunday schools”, replacing religious ideals of good and bad with the more neutral concept of morality. These changes were not readily accepted by all of the public, and their objections led to the creation of parochial schools, especially from Catholic communities.<sup>25</sup>

The next big shift regarding religion occurred after the 1950s, where, as Putnam and Campbell put it, “one major shock and two major after shocks have shaken and cleaved the American religious landscape, successively thrusting a large portion of one generation of Americans in a secular direction, then in reaction thrusting a different group of the population in a conservative religious direction”<sup>26</sup>. The 1960s was a time of political unrest, sexual revolution, and social restructuring. The young people coming of age in the sixties moved away from the institutionalized religion of their parents: “religious institutions suffered a dramatic loss of confidence and self-confidence”.<sup>27</sup> With many losing faith in the church and ideas like ‘Is God

Dead?’ circulating, many turned to spiritualism and smaller religious trends.<sup>28</sup> Statistically, the fraction of all Americans who said that religion was “very important to them personally” fell from 75 percent in 1952 to 52 percent in 1978.<sup>29</sup> Though many young Americans embraced these changes, equally as many vehemently opposed what they viewed as the degradation of society, coined by Richard Nixon as “the Silent Majority”<sup>30</sup>. In the 1970s, this group reasserted itself in an “upturn in conservative religiosity”<sup>31</sup>, especially among college age youths. By Ronald Reagan’s presidency in the 1980s, this second group would become the Religious Right. During this period, there was an increase in individuals identifying as evangelicals, although Putnam and Campbell are quick to point out the significant growth ended in the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> Though America is currently in what Putnam and Campbell deem ‘youth disaffection from religion’<sup>33</sup>, religion still plays a very important role in identity politics, especially in relation to political ideology.

### Inherent Religious Convictions

The topic of religion is one that is held near and dear to many American’s hearts and a person may often feel it is their moral obligation to place more emphasis on his or her own religion than another. This often stems from the belief that the United States is a historically Christian nation, built on Christian ideals and values, thus that it should remain the predominant belief system of its citizens. For example, the city of Austin, Texas erected a monument commemorating the Ten Commandments of the Bible, and, when protested, claimed that the statue represented the “people, ideals, and events that compose Texan identity”<sup>34</sup>, thus not violating the First Amendment. At Haralson County High School, in Georgia where the RFC hopes to institute its program, official invocations by Christian clergy before football games continued until 2012 despite a Supreme court ruling 54 years in *Engel v. Vitale* before that

banned such practices<sup>35</sup>, and the more recent ruling in *Santa Fe Independent School v. Doe* (2000) affirming the same principle.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the prayers were only put to an end after Frank McIntire, an attendee at one of the games, contracted Americans United to question the school on its constitutionality<sup>37</sup>. Here, it seems that the United States government, be it on the local, state, or federal level, is willing to turn a blind eye to the provisions in the First Amendment if it befits the values that it personally holds.

Linda Wertheimer, a journalist and author, experienced this mentality firsthand as a child in the Ohio public school system. The school she and her brothers attended after moving to the Buckeye state in the 1950s was one that hosted weekly education courses on Christianity, covering Bible stories and Christian values<sup>38</sup>. The Hancock County Religious Association, the organization that paid and assigned the teachers for these religious courses, was founded because religious leaders in the county believed that the children that did not regularly go to church missed critical information on the message of the Bible and the values they imparted.<sup>39</sup> Without this instruction, they could be a harm to themselves in their own lives or a negative influence on society. However, it was not this organization which was inherently at fault in this situation. If the HCRA had decided to host its own private educational courses, that would be fully within its constitutional rights. The school board, on the other hand, broke the law when it accepted this proposal to implement the courses in public schools during school time and by making them essentially mandatory for all students. In 1948, the US Supreme Court ruled in the case of *McCullum v. Board of Education* that states could not use their public school's tax funding to promote a religious agenda.<sup>40</sup> In Wertheimer's case, this practice of Christian courses was able to continue until 1974 because the majority of the county identified as Christian or found no issue

with the courses. Religious minorities, like Wertheimer's family, chose not to object for fear of being singled out or angering members in their community.<sup>41</sup>

The sentiment that Christianity is the religion of most Americans has also been impressed upon members of minority groups residing in the United States, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. Emile Lester discusses how, in his time researching Modesto, California, adherents to Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam avoided attending public events or performing behaviors that would draw attention to themselves. Each of these groups, and to some extent, their Buddhist and Jewish counterparts, did not feel as though they were accepted as full members of the community they lived in.<sup>42</sup>

Ironically, many Christians, particularly those who identify as evangelicals or fundamentalists, feel the same way. Evangelicalism describes a subset of Christianity that are "theologically conservative Protestants who stress the experience of conversion...view the Bible as the inspired and authoritative word of God, emphasize [proselytizing], and believe that salvation comes by faith in atoning the death of Jesus Christ".<sup>43</sup> Fundamentalism, though similar to evangelicalism, is distinct, though both terms are often used interchangeably. Fundamentalists maintain that the Bible is factual on all areas not just those of religion, such as history and science. This is emphasized in their disdain for modernity, of altering or moderating doctrine for the sake of appeasing modern-day congregations as they view the evangelicals have. However, because each sect is often lumped together into a single group, it is important to mention their similarities. Evangelicals and fundamentalists are against premarital sex, abortion, and homosexuality and push to prevent the degradation of morality and family values in America. There are many divergences from this definition across the nation, probably as many as there are congregations, and they cannot be painted with one brush; readers should keep this caveat in

mind to properly understand the references to the evangelical faith throughout the rest of this paper.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, the traditionally evangelical Protestant sects, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, continued to dominate the social and geographical countryside: “Baptists continue to represent about half of the church-affiliated population of the South, Methodists about a quarter, and Presbyterians ten percent”.<sup>44</sup> However, with the growth of the Southern Baptist Convention, an “increasingly a corporate-dominated bureaucracy...closely allied with the South’s power structure”<sup>45</sup>, fundamentalists have gained ground. They have “taken over institutional control of the [Baptist] denomination, establishing creeds for the enforcement of orthodoxy, reshaping its educational institutions to narrow the range of teaching options, emphasizing the primacy of the inerrancy of the Bible, and moving away from traditional Baptist support for separation of church and state to support, among other government-enforced social causes, prayer in schools”.<sup>46</sup> In reading this, it becomes clear that the main opponents to a religious literacy course would be the fundamentalists, but for the sake of clarity and in understanding that fundamentalist and evangelical agendas and often individuals are one and the same, they will be referred to as evangelicals hereafter.

The documentary *Jesus Camp* follows an evangelical and fundamentalist summer camp and the attendees of various ages. Many of the parents interviewed stated that they had decided against sending their children to public school in favor of homeschooling because of the curriculum. Evangelical values were not properly represented in the schoolwork their children would have to complete, and would be outright contradicted in some cases, particularly on subjects like evolution and global warming. In fact, evangelical Christians make up seventy-five percent of homeschooled children in the United States as of 2005. To facilitate the switchover to

homeschooling, evangelical churches and organizations have designed and produced videos, pamphlets, and workbooks that give parents the educational tools to ensure a proper evangelical upbringing<sup>47</sup>.

One of the key motivations behind the switch from public education to homeschooling in evangelical circles is the idea that “public schools mistakenly tried to empower children at the expense of teachers’ authority”<sup>48</sup>, that the children are not being taught to respect traditional paths of authority the way they once were. One conservative activist against the public school system, Connie Marshner, wrote “parents’ rights come from God by way of the natural law; the existence of the family unit presupposes parental rights’ continuation of civilized society presupposes the existence of the family unit”.<sup>49</sup> Here lies the root of the whole issue: if strong parental rights and lines of authority are a prerequisite of ‘civilized society’, then any attempt at disrupting the authority of the parents is an attack on American culture and society. America is championed as God’s chosen land by many evangelicals. Christian schools were founded to ensure that “patriotism and faithfulness went hand in hand”.<sup>50</sup> This line of thinking needs several underlying evidences and factual understandings in order to remain logical. As Seth Dowland asserts in his 2015 book *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*: “In order to assert that students must respect the government, Christian schools needed to establish that America possessed religious foundations”.<sup>51</sup> This puts the Georgia 3Rs project in a precarious position; it must encourage evangelical and conservative Christian parents and community members to allow a religious literacy course without contradicting the narratives detailed above. The program must walk the line between educating the children of Georgia and not offending the sensibilities of Christian and their view of American society.

The perception that the Christian faith is declining has sparked a revival and a surge in evangelical numbers. As described by Christian Smith and his research partners, “evangelicalism thrives in pluralistic modernity, we suggest, because it possesses and employs the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant groups, short of becoming countercultural”.<sup>52</sup> In essence, evangelical Christianity has become a refuge for those uncomfortable or off put by the direction of modern culture, returning instead to something that echoes of the familiar past. Yet evangelicals do not advocate turning one’s back on society entirely; there is a strong message of political activism in their doctrine. Evangelicals aid the lobbying and disseminating information on what they consider to be the truth of abortion, gay marriage, teaching evolution and global warming in schools among other issues. A key motive behind their efforts is to enlighten the American public, and especially new generations, that have not been exposed to the truth of Christianity. One method to achieve this is the election of politicians into prominent positions that can bring publicity and validity to the evangelical cause. Many evangelicals considered President George W. Bush as the best example to reintroducing the American public to evangelicalism and Christianity at large.<sup>53</sup>

#### Why or Why Not Teach about Religion in Schools

There are many reasons that members of American society, both prominent educators or researchers and parents and everyday citizens, believe religion should be reintroduced into the public school system. There are an equal number of dissenters on the left and the right who believe that doing so would go against the spirit of the First Amendment and would never be applied neutrally or adequately. On the side of promoting religious education, Prothero explains that an unexpected benefit of Protestant-based education was a ‘common culture’. This term references E.D. Hirsch’s work, especially his infamous 1987 book *Cultural Literacy*. In this,

Hirsch bemoans the loss of common culture from American society, blaming the education reforms of the early 1900s. The effects of this was “a gradual disintegration of cultural memory”, which caused in turn “a gradual decline in our ability to communicate”.<sup>54</sup> Prothero posits that there is a similar decline in religious understanding, one that is “certainly more dangerous”<sup>55</sup> than cultural illiteracy. Without a basic understanding of religious philosophy, practices, culture, and vocabulary, Americans will be unable to correctly interpret the world they live in. As Prothero puts it, “how are we to understand international conflicts in the Middle East and Sri Lanka without reckoning with the role of Jerusalem in the sacred geography of the Abrahamic faiths and with the difference between Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia?”.<sup>56</sup> Nord and Haynes echo the same logic in their book advocating for the reintroduction of education on religious subjects in schools. A student cannot be considered a fully equipped member of a democratic society if their education is lacking in one of the most fundamental areas of human identity; they will be inherently unable to understand people of a different culture or religion without this knowledge.<sup>57</sup>

However, some advocate for the inclusion of religion for reasons apart from a child’s educational experience or general knowledge. Christian Smith has spent years researching the impact religion on the lives of adolescents. According to his research, religion has “a significant presence in the lives of many U.S. teens”<sup>58</sup>. Many are attracted to religion as a wish to understand life’s purpose or to have a guiding force in their lives throughout their tumultuous teenage years. Smith identifies nine factors of a religion that can benefit the lives of young people: moral directives, spiritual experiences, role models, community and leadership skills, coping skills, cultural capital, social capital, network closure, and extra-community links.<sup>59</sup> A sense of community, of counselors able to give advice and guide young people through their

problems, is perhaps the most important aspect of religion. Familiar morals and instruction is another; structure is essential in the lives of children. Smith maintains that teenagers that are firm in their beliefs and actively involved in their community of worship are more likely to express happiness in their lives and greater coping and interpersonal skills.<sup>60</sup> What Smith supports is less of a “choose your own religion” course, and more education on the importance of religion in daily life. Many, including religious studies expert Dr. David Gushee, have argued that public schools offer “little to no treatment on religion”.<sup>61</sup> Religion, as Smith contends, is often an irremovable aspect of a person’s personality and life as a whole.<sup>62</sup> Gushee agrees, asserting that religion is entwined with the development of cultural, historical, and contemporary social problems, and that how one perceives the world depends on their religious convictions.<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately, a drawback of this plan echoes the concerns of those who do not want religions in schools. Some religions, like evangelical Christianity, believe that their belief system is the only truth and allowing others to adhere to any other religion would put their immortal soul at risk<sup>64</sup>. These people would not support allowing children to learn about multiple religions that they deem to be false. Nord and Haynes would also object that religions must be taught in something closer to a historical and cultural sense, not encouraging students to convert or choose one. Smith would also agree with this concern. This would violate the First Amendment by promoting religion over non-religion, establishing an inequality in treatment.<sup>65</sup>

### How to Teach about Religion in Schools

Clearly, there are all manner of opinions on how religions should be taught in schools, but how are teachers and administrators currently dealing with this complex subject? Throughout Linda Wertheimer’s travels, she encountered many disparate ways of approaching the study of religion all across grade levels. In some areas, schools mandated that all lessons on the subject

should be based on the textbook and given through lectures. These restrictions came after parents objected to multiple attempts by teachers to immerse students in another culture and then were picked up by the media and transformed into a public scandal. Wearing traditionally religious articles of clothing, touring a place of worship, participating in a religious service not of the children's own religion, having a controversial speaker give a guest lecture, teaching children about religion too early in their lives<sup>66</sup>, all of these led to changes in school policy as a result of the backlash and criticism of the individual teachers and administrators, as well as the district at large. Cultural and social settings also factor into not only the curriculum regarding religion, but how the community reacted to certain parts of the courses.

For example, the community of Lumberton, Texas, visited by Wertheimer, was wary of including studies of what they considered to be 'foreign religions' such as Islam, but felt no qualms when aspects of their overwhelmingly Christian town were referenced subtly (or not so subtly – as the school and even the principal's office contained Christian icons like the cross) in the school setting.<sup>67</sup> Wellesley, Massachusetts, hosts a largely liberal population and had no issue with a diverse religious education. However, after an incident in which students were participating in a prayer service at a mosque, some wondered whether touring places of religious worship toed too closely to the line in terms of religious establishment<sup>68</sup> Another school system that came under fire from concerned parents and interest groups was in Wichita, Kansas, where elementary students, beginning in the first grade, learn the basics of the major world religions. This new curriculum led to issues on both sides of the controversy, teachers struggling to include so many cultural and religious holidays and events in their daily classroom routine and parents irate that their six or seven year old was exposed to something as complex and personal as religion.<sup>69</sup>

In an effort to address these qualms, Diane Moore has built a framework for teaching about religion, called the ‘cultural studies’ approach. Moore describes this approach as “multidisciplinary in that it assumes that religion is deeply imbedded in all dimensions of human experience and therefore requires multiple lenses through which to understand its multivalent social/cultural influences”.<sup>70</sup> It also views religion as something essential to explain history, politics, and human experiences, and asserts that “all knowledge claims are “situated” claims in that they arise out of certain social/historical/cultural/personal contexts and therefore represent particular and necessarily partial perspectives”.<sup>71</sup> Practically speaking, this means that the curriculum cannot value one religion’s truth over another and that teachers must confront their own biases and recognize that all individuals will espouse different viewpoints due to their beliefs. Moore also stresses “issues related to power and powerlessness... “what worldviews or perspectives are prominent in particular contexts and what social mechanisms are in place that give legitimacy to certain views over others? What perspectives are missing or marginalized and why?”.<sup>72</sup> This realization is crucial to encouraging critical thought in students. Moore maintains a student’s education cannot be considered complete if he or she is not exposed to the concept that “learning is never a neutral activity and all knowledges are formed in the service of (sometimes multiple) ideological claims”<sup>73</sup>. While a student need not study this concept in depth, especially in lower grade levels, it is important that teachers at the very least make clear to their class that religious ideas, displayed as truth or fact by some, does not represent the viewpoints of all people.

For obvious reasons, teachers are the essential piece to this model. Moore begins her plan for the training of teachers by reiterating the goals of public education, and thus of teachers. “I believe that schools should provide students with the skills and experiences that will enable them

to 1) function as active citizens who promote the ideals of democracy; 2) act as thoughtful and informed moral agents; and 3) lead fulfilling lives”.<sup>74</sup> As previously stated, Moore’s view is that religious literacy is needed to fulfill these objectives. To rectify the lack of attention paid to religion in the training of teachers, Moore suggest an approach like the one used in the Program in Religion and Secondary Education (PRSE) used at Harvard Divinity School. Here, prospective teachers take courses titled ‘Religion, Democracy, and Public Education’, ‘Colloquium in Religion and Secondary Education’, ‘PRSE Teaching Practicum’, ‘PRSE Research Seminar’, as well as a course in adolescent psychology and courses required for the state licensure as an education professional.<sup>75</sup> Similar courses and workshops should be created and offered for current teachers as part of their professional development requirements. Another approach is the Peer Scholar Seminar strategy. Moore summarizes this approach by stating that “teachers work in partnership with each other and resource scholars from a participating university in a learner-centered format aimed at deepening content understanding and retention while simultaneously allowing educators to shaper their own explorations in ways that are relevant for their teaching contexts”.<sup>76</sup>

In Modesto, California, the principles used to create religious literacy courses has been dubbed the ‘community consensus approach’. This method focuses more on the exposure of public school students to religious practices they have not encountered in their lives.<sup>77</sup> The cultural studies approach proposed by Moore instead operates under the assumption that students have been biased toward and against a variety of viewpoints by the time they reach high school.<sup>78</sup> This is why the PRSE curricula emphasizes the weighing of viewpoints and which may have been favored. The community consensus approach could be described as more realistic: parents and teachers would presumably object to the dissection of religious beliefs and doctrines.

While one could certainly argue that students should think critically about something as identity-shaping as religion, doing it in an educational setting with a possibly diverse classroom may well devolve into criticism and ridicule of religious beliefs or practices.

### The Georgia 3Rs Approach

The Georgia 3Rs project aims to address all these concerns and more, uniting advocates of religious liberty with those of religious literacy. There are multiple curricula with a similar goal of the 3Rs project that have proven successful in the past and served as a model to the Religious Freedom Center as they designed the courses. In Modesto, California, a world religions course was introduced that gave all high school freshmen a basic understanding of the tenets, beliefs, vocabulary, and culture of the major world religions. A pre- and post-survey conducted by Emile Lester showed that students scored higher in instances demonstrating passive tolerance of religious groups.<sup>79</sup> Passive tolerance, in this context, is a term used to describe the recognition that an individual has the right to practice and believe in their own religion, even if it differs or contradicts that of another individual or group. More students were also recorded agreeing with the statement that they would “defend a student whose religious beliefs were insulted by another student” after the course<sup>80</sup>, exhibiting active tolerance. Unfortunately, Nord and Haynes’ hope for more civically involved students was not entirely realized as statistics do not uniformly show an increase in civic and political engagement after taking the course.<sup>81</sup> Overall, the average student absorbed, and often maintained, numerous vocabulary and basic facts about religion, and three fourths of the students surveyed found the course interesting or very interesting.<sup>82</sup> This is the aspect of religious literacy that Stephen Prothero claims is essential to participating in a diverse and globalized world; a basic

understanding of the background of main religious groups that can inform educated debate and discussion.<sup>83</sup>

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Charles Haynes led another project called the 3Rs program also based in Georgia, this state chosen because much of the funding and interest originated in the Peach State. This project clearly had ties to the similar long-running programs in the West<sup>84</sup>, but the original interest in this project began with the signing of the Williamsburg Charter in 1988, which was written

“to celebrate the uniqueness of the First Amendment religious liberty clauses; to reaffirm religious liberty—or freedom of conscience—for citizens of all faiths and none; to set out the place of religious liberty within American public life; and to define the guiding principles by which people with deep differences can contend robustly but civilly in the public arena”.<sup>85</sup>

With the curriculum based on these goals and titled, “Living with Our Deepest Differences”, the course was meant to reimplement the study of religion into the school system while maintaining impartiality. The First Liberty Institute at George Mason University, the sponsor of the project, helped create a constitutional and legal framework, as well as designing materials and guiding principles of the courses. Traveling to Georgia, Haynes and his partners taught parents, teachers, administrators and religious leaders about the history, legal framework, and gave an overview of the curriculum they hoped to implement. While there were inevitable obstacles, from groups like atheists and Jewish organizations afraid of the reintroduction of a Christian-based doctrine into public schools to conservative organizations wary of the implications of teaching foreign cultures and religions. Yet Haynes and his coworkers were not dismayed by these concerns, for they made clear that their own project was good for religions of all sorts, not for one or another.

Haynes speaks often about the First Amendment and the misconceptions that a shocking number of the American people have about it. One is that the constitutional guidelines laid out in the First Amendment prohibit the inclusion of religious materials in the coursework of public schools<sup>86</sup>. Yet the exact language simply states that “no religion shall be established by law, nor shall the equal rights of conscience be infringed”<sup>87</sup>, meaning that there is still a constitutional middle ground where religion is neither promoted nor excluded. Establishing an understanding that teaching about religion was not only allowed, but also encouraged by the powers that so-called ‘removed’ religion from schools in the first place; “many...are simply unaware that the [Supreme] Court has repeatedly and explicitly given a constitutional seal of approval to teaching about religion “when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education””.<sup>88</sup> Despite all the benefits of the George Mason program, it could not last forever. From its inception, the funding was only meant to last a defined number of years, and the in-person training could only reach those who had chosen to attend the workshops. Furthermore, the project had been specifically designed to be voluntary for Georgia administrators, teachers, and school districts, meaning the overall incorporation of religious literacy into the school and county culture would be minimal. In addition, there was never a formal study founded to follow up on the lasting effects of the program except anecdotally, so it would be difficult to advocate for the institution of a similar project.

In diagnosing the efficacy of the Georgia 3Rs approach, we return to Diane Moore’s suggested paths of education.<sup>89</sup> The 3Rs project most closely mimics the PRSE approach, in that it offers professional development courses for prospective and current teachers.<sup>90</sup> Yet while the method may be similar, the goals are substantially different. However, it also incorporates courses for students, exposing them to elementary background on the major world religions.<sup>91</sup>

The motivation behind this is the idea that there is no time to waste. Training teachers how to properly address the subjects of religion will not show immediate effects as time would be necessary to fully implement changes in curriculum or teachers' attitudes. This is particularly important because, as one study shows, "education majors are the most religious students on our nation's campuses".<sup>92</sup> Brad Bryant, the former superintendent of the state of Georgia, has also mentioned his observations of this trend: "Many of our teachers, particularly in the K-12 setting, still believe teaching is a calling and see their work as an extension of their faith, i.e. putting their faith into practice".<sup>93</sup> Teachers, like all human beings, have their own sets of internal beliefs and biases. To be given the critical task of equally presenting major world religions, teachers must be capable of putting their own thoughts aside and unbiasedly facilitating discussion amongst their students. By also placing emphasis on the students' levels of knowledge, religious illiteracy can be more directly tackled.

#### Gwinnett & Bleckley County, Georgia

It should be made clear that the Religious Freedom Center did not choose the state of Georgia or the counties of Gwinnett and Bleckley county because these places were particularly troubled in terms of religious problems. Discriminatory episodes are par for the course throughout the United States, which means there is only room to improve everywhere in the area of religious literacy. For example, in Gwinnett County, Georgia, there has already been controversy surrounding a law that is perceived by some as an attempt to reintroduce religion into the public school system, particularly that of the Christian faith. In 1994, a law was passed by the Georgia state legislature created a special period lasting for a minute at the beginning of each school day, meant to be used for 'quiet reflection'. The bill was sponsored by an African-American representative in an attempt to draw attention and contemplation to rampant violence

among youths. In fact, the law explicitly states that the law “is not intended to be and shall not be conducted as a religious service or exercise”.<sup>94</sup> However, one teacher disagreed with this statement. To Brian Bown, a teacher at South Gwinnett High School, this law was meant to endorse prayer in schools, something he and his lawyers justify by citing the testimony of the state senators when debating the law. Teachers, administrators, and community members all felt differently regarding the constitutionality and the usefulness of the law. Even critics of the law, like Arthur Kropp, the president of The People for the American Way at the time, admitted that “polls show that from sixty to seventy percent of Americans responded favorably to the notion of some form of school prayer”.<sup>95</sup> The question that remains is whether or not introducing a neutral version of religious education would be as readily accepted.

While a reader may think that Brian Bown was looking at motivations that were not actually present behind the passage of the law, one would be foolish not to research the context of religion and education in Georgia. In 2006, the Georgia State Senate voted to institute Biblical elective courses in high schools. While this in and of itself may seem perfectly reasonable, it was the first of its kind in the United States that required the Bible to be used as the primary text in the classroom, not a Department of Education or school board approved textbook<sup>96</sup>. The use of a religion’s sacred text in the classroom blurs the line between education about and the proselytization of religion to students. Some defenders have claimed the law will have little effect on students because, in the past, when religion classes are offered as electives, they are rarely chosen, and thus it is not worth debating. Others employed in the school system are of the mind that few teachers will volunteer to teach the course due to its controversy and the scrutiny sure to follow whoever takes up the class. Still more onlookers believe that the law would be overturned by the courts if ever implemented based on the First Amendment<sup>97</sup>. Yet none of these

concerns get at the issue at hand, which is the underlying support for laws that clearly undermine the neutrality of the First Amendment. As further evidence of this phenomena, Haralson County High School, also in Georgia, performed official invocations by Christian clergy before football games until 2012 despite a Supreme court ruling 54 years before that banned such practices. In fact, the prayers were only put to an end after Frank McIntire, an attendee at one of the games, contracted Americans United to question the school on its constitutionality<sup>98</sup>.

Perhaps the most detrimental attack on religious multiculturalism in Georgia was the introduction of a religious freedom bill to the Georgia state senate. Similar to the 1993 federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act, it would “requir[e] the government to prove a “compelling governmental interest” before it interferes with a person’s exercise of religion”.<sup>99</sup> This act, if passed, would prevent the sanctioning of “faith-based organizations including those opposed to same-sex marriage”<sup>100</sup> “[and who] deny services to those who violate their “sincerely held religious belief” and preserve their right to fire employees who aren’t in accord with those beliefs”.<sup>101</sup> While most of the opponents of the law argued against the bill on the grounds that it would allow discrimination against same-sex couples, the language of the proposal opens a doorway to discrimination along religious lines as well. Fortunately, Georgia governor Nathan Deal vetoed the 2016 iteration of this bill because it did not “reflect Georgia’s welcoming image as a state full of “warm, friendly and loving people””.<sup>102</sup> However, one cannot depend on the next governor to feel the same way meaning a new Georgia version of RFRA may soon become law. These episodes demonstrate the support Christianity must have in the state legislature to have passed this bill into law, and the community to have not protested explicitly Christian prayers. Those of minority faiths would certainly sense favoritism and partisan politics in this decision.

Another controversy to shake the Gwinnett county community was the attempt of the Hindu citizens to build a temple in suburban Atlanta in 1989. Ajodia Persaud, a member of the Greater Atlantic Vedic Temple Society, had bought the plot of land in 1988 and later decided to use it as the site for a new temple. During the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners meeting where Persaud was requesting a special permit, about a hundred of irritated residents came to protest the permit's approval. At first, such an unexpected display or opposition seemed to the members of the Vedic temple members as an issue with their faith or their non-white ethnicity. After all, Gwinnett county was not so long ago ninety-five percent white, a percentage much higher than in the demographics of the state as a whole.<sup>103</sup> After interviews and discussions between the proponents of the temples and those that disagreed, it became clear that the point of contention was not the religion involved, but was rather the potential loss of property value for the surrounding houses, a change in traffic patterns, and, oddly enough, anger over the clearcutting of the trees that had previously occupied the land.<sup>104</sup>

Yet if the Vedic temple members had not made an effort to discover the root of the problem, this would surely have been chalked up to religious discrimination or racism. The Hindu people themselves stated that "the long-term effects of such tactics is only to harden feelings and prevent true amalgamation with the community"<sup>105</sup> and that "it may well be necessary to re-educate people about Hinduism".<sup>106</sup> This exact incident could be much assuaged with more attention to religious literacy, the understanding of those from different cultures and belief systems. It is quite lucky that the Hindu population of the county were able to resolve their dispute calmly and with an emphasis on understanding and explanation, but this is not always the case. Should the Hindu population have assumed the opposition was because of their religious identification, they would not have been pulling a story from thin air. Often, complaints are filed

against institutions or buildings affiliated with minority religions over routine or basic issues. For example, in 2015, a mosque congregation in Spotsylvania County, VA, hoping to expand their location to meet demand were faced with a variety of objections, such as ‘traffic issues’ and ‘concerns about refugees and illegal aliens’.<sup>107</sup> However, many of these same residents that offered reasons against the building of a new mosque, supported the right of a Spotsylvania resident to fly a large Confederate flag in full view of the major highway through the county.<sup>108</sup> These objections, on many occasions, veil the true feelings of the complainants, and prevent the attacked population from proving that they are being discriminated on the basis of religion. Yet it also reinforces the feeling of not belonging in the community or feeling ‘un-American’ and unaccepted to those that do not identify as Christian and white.

In a similar incident, the documentary film *Dhamma Brothers* follows a 2002 vipassana meditation course and retreat implemented in a maximum-security prison in Alabama, a neighbor to the state of Georgia. Though the inmates and employees at the prison all reported improvements in behavior and morale, the community of Bessemer near the prison objected to the program. The Christian chaplain of the prison lobbied to have the meditation course ended because “it is turning my prisoners into Buddhists”.<sup>109</sup> This was a fundamentally inaccurate accusation; Buddhists do practice meditation but meditation is not inherently a Buddhist practice. However, the program directors were unable to win over the public and the program remained closed.<sup>110</sup> This example and that of Hindu temple draw attention to the same issue of religious illiteracy. Rather than placing the responsibility on the minority faith to educate the majority and to dispel misconceptions, the American public ought to take it upon itself to institutionalize better educational norms.<sup>111</sup>

Bleckley County has faced similar challenges, not directly related to religious practices in schools, but to traditionally Christian values and their impact on public policy. This issue came to a head in 2010 when Bleckley County High School student Derrick Martin was told that he could not bring his boyfriend to the prom. Martin related that the principal told him “Bleckley County was not ready for ‘this’”<sup>112</sup>, this meaning seeing a gay couple in public. Though the superintendent later allowed Martin and his boyfriend to attend the prom, situations like this are not uncommon and are most likely to occur in the rural parts of the South. Martin and other LGBT activists have spoken out about policies in such school districts that either deny or try to conceal teenagers who identify apart from typical Christian norms. Yet it must still be recognized that this occurs because Christianity is the dominant religion in the Peach State. According to the Pew Research Center, seventy-nine percent of adults in Georgia identify as Christian. In addition to this, thirty-eight percent of Georgia residents further self-identify as evangelicals.<sup>113</sup> (In fact, the numbers of evangelicals may actually be higher because forty-three percent of evangelicals convert before the age of thirteen and therefore would not be surveyed).<sup>114</sup> However, it is critical that one does not overstate the presence of evangelicals in the state of Georgia and in the Bible Belt as a whole. A population of seventy-nine percent Christians indicates that at least twenty-one percent identify as part of another religious group, or as non-religious. Dr. David Gushee attests to this, stating that “homogeneity in the south is not as strong as it appears”<sup>115</sup>, that there are very few communities, even the small ones that would agree on everything related to religion.

#### Evangelical Christianity and Religious Literacy

Here lies a potentially great obstacle to the Georgia 3Rs project, the sentiments of many evangelical Christians. The term evangelical is used to denote groups of Christians who are

conservative theologically and who, in the past, “sought to soften the hard edge of fundamentalism and reengage with American society”.<sup>116</sup> Putnam and Camp classify evangelicals as “people who report identifying with one of a large number of denominations that generally endorse the tenets of evangelicalism”<sup>117</sup>.

Why would evangelical Christians oppose religious literacy courses? One might logically assume that the inclusion of religious instruction back into the curriculum would be championed by a group deemed one of the most religious in the nation.<sup>118</sup> Robert P. Jones posits that it is a profound sense of anxiety and instability that drives the thinking of many evangelicals. A decrease in white Christian Protestant church attendance and devotion has prompted infighting and fear: “White mainline Protestants blame evangelical Protestants for turning off the younger generation with their antigay rhetoric and tendency to conflate Christianity with conservative, nationalistic politics. White evangelical Protestants, on the other hand, blame mainline Protestants for undermining Christianity because of their willingness to sell out traditional beliefs to accommodate contemporary culture”.<sup>119</sup> This fear is exacerbated because of the dominance of white Protestant Christianity nearly all, if not all, of American history, leading to the colloquial term, White Christian America. WCA is described as a “golden age...June Cleaver was its mother, Andy Griffith was its sheriff, Norman Rockwell was its artist, and Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale were its ministers”.<sup>120</sup> A strong sense of institutional and social homogeneity was the norm for so long that multiculturalism, diversity, and social change evokes feelings of insecurity and defensiveness in many members of WCA. These people have been dubbed ‘nostalgia voters’ for their determination to reinstate their ideas of the past.<sup>121</sup>

The 2016 presidential election was a culmination of these sentiments, as Donald Trump presented himself as “the last change for Republicans and conservative white Christians...to

preserve their power and way of life”.<sup>122</sup> However, Jones posits that this is “the death rattle of White Christian American rather than its resuscitation”.<sup>123</sup> With its base declining (“Americans who identify as white and Christian fell eleven percentage points”<sup>124</sup> in the last eight years) and many evangelical congregations in turmoil over the decision to support Donald Trump (given his three marriages, appearance on Playboy Magazine, and graphic and rude language<sup>125</sup>). However, despite the prediction that evangelicals may no longer be the national majority or deciding vote, it does not mean that they do not make up a large population in many areas, especially Southern states. Their viewpoints remain just as valid despite a decline in numbers.

The documentary *Jesus Camp*, referenced above, allow viewers a look into the mindset of some members of evangelical Americans. Many of the parents interviewed stated that they had decided against sending their children to public school in favor of homeschooling because of the curriculum. In their eyes, evangelical values were not properly represented in the schoolwork their children would have to complete, and would be outright contradicted in some cases, particularly relating to subjects like evolution and global warming. In fact, evangelical Christians make up seventy-five percent of homeschooled children in the United States as of 2005. To facilitate the switchover to homeschooling, evangelical churches and organizations have designed and produced videos, pamphlets, and workbooks that give parents the educational tools to ensure a proper evangelical upbringing<sup>126</sup>. However, those evangelical parents who did not decide to remove their children from public schools would probably vehemently oppose the implementation of religious literacy courses, something that could potentially lead to interest in religions besides the Christian faith. In fact, it was the perception that the Christian faith is declining that sparked a revival and a surge in evangelical numbers. As described by Christian Smith and his research partners, “evangelicalism thrives in pluralistic modernity, we suggest,

because it possesses and employs the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant groups, short of becoming countercultural".<sup>127</sup> In essence, evangelical Christianity has become a refuge for those uncomfortable or off put by the direction of modern culture, returning instead to something that echoes of the familiar past. If the Newseum's 3Rs project can successfully win the support of staunch evangelicals in the Bible Belt, it seems likely that it can be accepted and implemented nationwide.

Yet evangelicals do not advocate turning one's back on society entirely; there is a strong message of political activism in their doctrine. Evangelicals aid the lobbying and disseminating information on what they consider to be the truth of abortion, gay marriage, teaching evolution and global warming in schools among other issues. A key motive behind their efforts is to enlighten the American public, and especially new generations, that have not been exposed to the truth of Christianity. One method to achieve this is the election of politicians into prominent positions that can bring publicity and validity to the evangelical cause. Many evangelicals considered President George W. Bush as the best example to reintroducing the American public to evangelicalism and Christianity at large.<sup>128</sup> The roots of white Christian America's political activism lie earlier in the century though. In the 1980s, small evangelical organizations organized into the multi-million dollar and quarter of a million-member Christian Coalition.<sup>129</sup> The core mission of this group was "to mobilize and train Christians for effective political actions".<sup>130</sup> By 1992 (with the election of Bill Clinton), the Christian coalition boasted 1.6 million members and a twenty-five million-dollar budget. These plentiful resources have been cited as a factor in the nine-million person jump in voter turnout for the 1994 midterm elections<sup>131</sup>, proving the social might conservative Christians have in this nation. However, it should be mentioned that some of

the victories attributed to the Christian Coalition by themselves and others “came on issues where its views coincided with those of economic conservatives”.<sup>132</sup> Though the height of evangelical and Christian right influence was in 2005<sup>133</sup>, the rise of nostalgia voters has shown that a comeback, perhaps against religious literacy courses, is not out of the question.

However, as Emile Lester learned while researching a similar religious literacy course in Modesto, California, he found a different effect amongst the evangelical population: encouragement of a religious literacy program. Many of the evangelicals in Modesto were actually supportive of the course being offered because it gave their children a chance to not only learn about the religions of their classmates, but also to strengthen their own faith.<sup>134</sup> Linda Wertheimer discovered the same effect with students in religious classes across the country; students who often felt ashamed or protective of their religious beliefs felt that their fellow students had a better understanding and respectfulness toward unfamiliar belief systems.<sup>135</sup> This is how Charles Haynes overcame concerns of the Christian population in Georgia during the first iteration of the 3Rs project; he actively preached that the program would be to the benefit of all religions.<sup>136</sup> Children could still be exposed to the teachings of the Christian faith, but in a scholarly manner. Oftentimes, this was enough for the so-deemed moderate Christians, even if the evangelical community was not entirely appeased. Yet with activist norms institutionalized in the evangelical church, organized opposition to a religious literacy course should be anticipated just in case.

The phenomena Wertheimer touches on above is not a new idea. Though de jure segregation is now a thing of the past, de facto separations and the effects of prior settlement patterns still ring true today. A Public Religion Research Institute survey from 2013 found that “on average, the core social networks of white Americans are a remarkable 91 percent white and

only one percent black...fully eight in ten white evangelical Protestants and 85 percent of white mainline Protestants have entirely white core social networks”.<sup>137</sup> Without being in personal proximity to a variety of religious traditions or ethnic groups, how are American students to be exposed to the practice of unfamiliar religions? As stated previously, there are many positive effects that follow a developed understanding of other religions, both in terms of citizenship and preparation for entering the world. If white evangelicals are not regularly exposed to other religious groups, perhaps it is logical that they do not place a priority on religious literacy. A white Christian family in the middle of a white Christian county in Georgia may wonder why his or her children need to learn about Buddhism when there is not a Buddhist temple in sight. But here lies the importance of religious literacy in our modern, technologically advanced world. A town is no longer the center of a person’s life as it once was, the news can inform us of happenings around the world in just minutes. A general understanding of all religions, or at least the major religions makes for a competent, aware global citizen. And that is an ideal to strive for.

### Georgia 3Rs Curriculum

The courses offered in the Georgia 3Rs program follows two distinctive routes. The first targets the issues the average teacher would face in his or her classroom when the topic of religion arises. The available online courses include “Addressing Controversial Topics”, “Critiquing World Religions, “Harassment, Bullying, & Free Expression”, “Religion and Sexuality”, “Religious Holidays”, and “Teaching about Religious Identity”<sup>138</sup>. There are a number of other courses to choose from, but this except shows that any selection made by a teacher can only bolster their skills in the classroom. One of the key hurdles is that there is often widespread confusion about what teachers can talk about regarding religion and in what context. Because of this, teachers feel underprepared to lead proper discussions with their students on

topics including religion.<sup>139</sup> Kate Soules, one of the educators for the Georgia 3Rs program is proud of its voluntary choice component, meaning those enrolled are not overwhelmed by the workload in addition to their daily lives and jobs. This allows teachers, administrators, and other staff to take courses they are interested in, feel they need additional training in, or perhaps just take to learn more about the backgrounds of their students<sup>140</sup>. Religions like Sikhism or Hinduism may be unfamiliar subjects to school employees, even if students in the school are of those faiths. Courses detailing the general background and beliefs of the main world religions are useful for students as well as their elders. Students are meant to focus on the curricula that gives an overview of religion and its daily impact, such as “Civil Dialogue”, “History of Religion & Public Schools”, “The Establishment Clause & Public Schools”, and “Science, Religion, Evolution, & Creationism”<sup>141</sup>.

The Georgia 3Rs project is not meant to be the end all, be all of religious literacy in the public school system. The Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute would like nothing better than extend the program nationwide. Charles Haynes spoke of his hope that one day the RFC would need not advertise their courses, that school districts would see a religious literacy training and educational course as a staple<sup>142</sup>. The diversity across the United States does not facilitate this dream, but the rewards that would follow make it worth aspiring toward.

#### Suggestions for the Georgia 3Rs Implementation

One way that the Georgia 3Rs project can stave off controversy and garner good will in the counties they are implementing their program in is to involve and educate parents in the curriculum and the resources that students will use. Well known activists that worked against the public school system, Mel and Norma Gabler, rounded up followers and created a nationwide school when they ‘outed’ their school district for utilizing “revisionist and liberal” textbooks.<sup>143</sup>

In 1961, the Gabler's son Jim brought home his textbooks and complained that the things he learned from them was sometimes at odds with what his parents taught him at home. This prompted his parents to begin an advocacy campaign against the public school system. Gabler's trips to the State Department of Education open forums drew attention from across the country, an action she was allowed to take because "her status as mother of an aggrieved son lent her important rhetorical standing".<sup>144</sup> By allowing parents to view the textbooks, and by explaining the necessity of each inclusion, even the controversial ones, the 3Rs project may be able to get ahead of complaints from the school community, as Gary Lopez, the Modesto school board president testified. "You can defuse a lot of the controversy about what it is and what it's not, and what you're trying to accomplish.... if you give [community members] ownership in it".<sup>145</sup>

This path has already been utilized in the formulation of the religious literacy course in Modesto, California: "While administrators and teachers were responsible for writing the course's curriculum, administrators subsequently submitted the course for review to an advisory council of Modesto's religious leaders including Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, Sikh, Jewish, and Greek Orthodox representatives".<sup>146</sup> However, there are limits to outsiders involvement in the basic foundations of a curricula. One of the duties of all educational institutions in a democratic society is to "gently nudge students into affirming values essential for a functioning democracy like civility towards and respect for the civil and political rights of those with all different types of religious beliefs and with none".<sup>147</sup>

In past experiences with religious literacy courses, parents from all faiths and ends of the political spectrum have raised concerns about religious texts and beliefs being taught to their children.<sup>148</sup> Some parents are concerned that their child will be drawn away from the beliefs held in the home, and non-religious parents are worried their child will feel compelled to claim a

religion through teacher or peer pressure. However, from a theological standpoint, this has often been the subject of debates. For example, in reading the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, he often seems, when speaking of Scripture, that “he wants to integrate both how God gave the Scripture, as Scripture, and how that Scripture is received by human beings...he puts all those things together in one package and refuses to separate them”.<sup>149</sup> For proper understanding, it should be noted that “by contrast, Calvin separates them so that he insists the Scripture is true and given by the Spirit of God even if nobody accepts it”.<sup>150</sup> In essence, Barth argues that the Scripture, until it is accepted into the heart of a believer, is merely words on a page. By emphasizing that the inclusion of excerpts from religious texts is only for historical background and to show basic religious principles, the Georgia 3Rs curriculum can sidestep many accusations of trying to convert or sway children’s religious beliefs.<sup>151</sup> Without the fear of children becoming insecure in their family or community’s religious atmosphere, the objections of many parents or community members can be assuaged. Barth’s theological standpoint won’t be enough to convince everyone, and some might reject his assertions outright, but, at this point, the 3Rs staff and proponents should cite current examples of religious literacy courses in Modesto, California and other places.<sup>152</sup>

One can further extrapolate this theory to mean that no one, impressionable student or not, can read a religious text and find themselves unwillingly swayed by its message; to read the Bible as a Christian or the Quran as a Muslim is a different experience than a Christian reading the Quran or a Muslim the Bible. Hopefully, this interpretation, with more research and study, can begin to reassure parents that their children’s religious affiliations are secure.

With the question of whether or not religious literacy should be included in the education of the average public school student clearly settled by the past and current research on

the subject, the only thing left to consider is how to go about achieving this. Keeping prior case studies in mind and following the advice of academic professionals is certainly included. But public perception is one of the most important aspects of a challenge like it. For a challenge is what it is. It is challenging the unspoken supremacy of Protestantism, particularly white Protestantism, in the public school system and society on the whole. To avoid confrontation and controversy with the evangelical and devout Christian population in Georgia is one thing, but to be able to justify the curriculum on a national or global stage, as the past has shown controversies often reach is a different story. While the research is there to support diverse religious teachings, many do not care for such academic talk. Here is where the emphasis on understanding evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity comes into play, this group must not be treated as a fringe group, or as the residents of sleepy, non-modernized towns. For a project like the Georgia 3Rs program to succeed, they must prepare for any challenge, both valid and completely unsound.

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