Spiritually Committed Public School Teachers: Their Beliefs and Practices Concerning Religious Expression in the Classroom

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Commitment, Calling, and Classroom Practice

Some researchers have suggested that public school teachers occasionally have incorrect views about the place of religion and spirituality in the classroom, believing that legal and institutional constraints are either more or less rigorous than they actually are.[1] The purpose of this study was to discover what a group of veteran public school teachers in a master's program in educational administration believed regarding religious expression in the public school classroom.

There has been a growing call for more research into public school teachers' spiritual commitments and how those commitments might impact their classroom practice in either useful or questionable ways.[2] In response to that call, this study examined how, if at all, a teacher's spiritual commitments—or lack thereof—might relate to a teacher's views and practices regarding religious expression in the classroom.[3] "Religious expression" was operationally limited for the purposes of this study to include these issues: Whether a teacher has a right to express his or her spiritually based perspective on an issue under analysis in the classroom, and, if so, under what conditions; whether or not the student has a right to express his or her spiritually based perspective on an issue under analysis in the classroom, and, if so, under what conditions; and whether or not the student has a right to pray in the classroom and, if so, under what conditions.

Another reason for examining a teacher's spiritual commitments is that these commitments may be significant if that teacher engages in "reflectivity"—or deep introspective processes about one's sense of calling and actual practice as a teacher.[4] For certain teachers, reflectivity may need to include spiritual considerations if is to be descriptively rich and existentially valid.[5] Indeed, in the United States, spiritual commitment tends

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to be widespread, with fully 94% of the people believing in God, 69% believing in life after death, 60% having a formal religious affiliation, and 40% attending a religious service on any given week.[6] There is no reason to suppose that these numbers would be lower for teachers. Given the service orientation of teaching, these numbers may even be higher; however, the growing movement toward reflectivity in both teacher education and teacher development tends to encompass only the biographical and political domains.[7]

Biographical reflectivity encourages teachers to examine the experiential determinants of their sense of calling as teachers, their classroom practices, and their overarching goals for both themselves and their students.[8] Critical reflectivity, rooted in the Marxist critique of United States education,[9] encourages teachers to examine their conscious and unconscious political assumptions and how those assumptions might be shaping what and how they teach.[10] These are important modes of reflectivity which have done much to broaden and humanize teacher education in recent decades. However, for the teacher whose sense of calling and purpose also has a spiritual component, "spiritual reflectivity"[11] may need to supplement biographical and critical reflectivity in order to address more fully the question of what makes that person "tick" as a teacher.

Spiritual reflectivity defines "spiritual commitment" broadly as "the pursuit of a trans-personal and trans-temporal reality that serves as the ontological ground for an ethic of compassion and service."[12] This pursuit may involve a specific religious commitment, and for the respondents in this study it did in all but one case. A better sense of the salience of such formal or non-formal spiritual commitments among teachers will allow those of us involved in teacher reflectivity to know how prominently, if at all, "spiritual reflectivity" should figure in our work with spiritually committed teachers. And, as in this present study, it can also play a crucial role in examining how a teacher's spiritual commitments may be affecting that teacher's practice in productive or problematic ways.

Before turning to how the teachers in this study responded to questions about their spiritual commitments and their classroom practices regarding religious expression, it will first be useful to summarize some of the most important legal cases and principles that inform this topic.

Legal Principles Informing Religious Expression in the Public School Classroom

For almost four decades courts have opined, in dicta, that it is constitutionally appropriate to study and discuss religion in the classroom when it is academically appropriate to do so and when teachers do not engage in proselytizing or indoctrination of students.[13]

For instance, regarding student prayer in the classroom, several courts have suggested, in dicta, that it may be permissible in some limited scenarios.[14] Other courts have stated that at a students' initiative, silent prayer may occur during a period that a teacher sets aside for the students when they may, if they choose, engage in quiet reflection[15] or meditation,[16] although "meditation" has itself tended to be defined by those courts discussing it as excluding such practices as repetition of a mantra or any other behavior that would visibly or audibly relate the meditative act(s) to a religious creed.[17]

Having noted the above principles, the fact remains that educators do not currently enjoy unmistakably clear legal guidelines regarding religious expression in the public school classroom. The new majority on the Supreme Court declared a "new understanding" of the Establishment Clause[18] and have begun to prove it by devising new tests which have yet to embody the relative clarity and stability of earlier tests. It used to be arguably less confusing when the three criteria of the venerable Lemon Test[19] could be invoked to determine whether or not a classroom practice regarding religious expression was consonant with the First Amendment. Three criteria have often been applied by the courts to religious expression in the classroom: 1) the practice must have the secular purpose of furthering the delivery of the official curriculum; 2) the principal or primary effect of the practice must neither advance nor inhibit religion; and 3) the practice must not foster an excessive government/institutional entanglement with religion.[20]

Recently, in *Mitchell v. Helms*, a four-member plurality of the court announced a new test that signals that past vigilance regarding establishment issues may have changed markedly.[21] This test asks two basic questions: First, is the funding or government program in question "neutral," and second, does it subsidize a particular selected religious group? This "neutrality" principle seems both simplistic and vague, but it may be the most currently acceptable standard. Further complicating matters, several state constitutions, such as those of Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Utah, have far-reaching establishment provisions that are more clearly and strongly worded than those in the United States Constitution. To date, most state and federal courts interpreting state constitutions have developed a jurisprudence coterminous with the contours of the Supreme Court's declarations. However, as the Supreme Court continues to iterate a changing standard and a lessened vigilance in patroling the so-called wall of separation between church and state, state courts and constitutions may begin to establish a separate line of precedent and tests.

It is obvious that great complexity surrounds the issue of religious expression in the public school classroom. Indeed, as the Supreme Court is

presently constituted, it is difficult to find more than four justices who will be in agreement on any given case regarding public schooling and religion. Nevertheless, a teacher is probably on safe ground with the following practical guidelines regarding a student's religious expression during classroom discussion: First, a discussion should generally relate to a topic or issue being discussed in the classroom at that time.[22] Second, the expression should not turn into harassment of one student or group of students by another student or group of students such that it would disrupt instruction—just as no student may engage in classroom speech or conduct that "materially disrupts classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others."[23] Third, to promote sensitivity to minority students as well as to foster an environment of intellectual fairness, the teacher should provide students who hold minority opinions an equal opportunity to express them.[24] However, "teachers should not solicit information about the religious affiliations or beliefs of students. Nor should students be requested to explain their faith or religious practices to the class. Such requests put undue pressure on students who may not wish to act as spokespersons for their tradition."[25] Indeed, such children may not be able to adequately represent or characterize their faith tradition. In brief, minority students must have a chance to express their views but they should never be identified, requested, or compelled to do so. Fourth, in general, it is advisable for the teacher not to express his or her religious beliefs in the classroom.[26] Students—especially younger ones—may too easily misconstrue a teacher's religious expression as the official position of the school and, by extension, the state.

In view of these issues regarding religious expression in the public school classroom, this study attempted to ascertain what a group of spiritually committed, veteran public school teachers in a master's program in educational administration at a religious university in the United States *actually believe and do* about their own and their students' religious expression in the classroom.

The Protocol and The Respondents

A semi-structured clinical interview protocol[27] consisting of three questions and assorted probes (given below) was used in this study in order to interview 14 veteran teachers who were enrolled in an educational administration masters program at Brigham Young University. The first two interview questions explored the respondents' practices and attitudes regarding the expression of spiritual beliefs by both their students and themselves.

A third question assessed the respondents' understanding of whether student prayer is ever permissible in a public school classroom—and, if so, under what circumstances. This third question was included because from a personal and a sociological perspective, when, where, and how one may pray is often an important element of religious expression.[28] This question is also important because of the intensity and ambiguity surrounding the issue of what teachers may and may not allow regarding prayer in their public school classrooms.

The Interview Protocol

Two researchers, who together have over 40 years of experience in clinical interviewing, asked the following questions, along with both planned and spontaneous probes, in sessions which lasted about thirty minutes each.

Question # 1. Do you think it is legally acceptable to express your personal religious beliefs in the classroom?

a. If no, why not?

b. If yes, do you ever do this? In what way and under what circumstances do you do this?

Question # 2. Do you think it is legally acceptable for students to express their religious beliefs in the classroom?

a. If no, why not?

b. If yes, then under what circumstances and in what ways can students' religious opinions be expressed in your classroom?

Question # 3. Do you think it is ever legally acceptable for a student to pray or meditate in your classroom?

a. If no, why not?

b. If yes, then under what circumstances and in what ways is student meditation or prayer acceptable?

The Respondents

The interviews for this study were conducted during Winter Term 1999 at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. The 14 respondents were graduate students pursuing a master's degree in the university's Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations in the School of Education. All claimed a high degree of spiritual interest and commitment.

Personal and Professional Data Profiles

Seven of the respondents were male and seven were female, ranging in age from 28 to 54 years old with an average age of approximately 35. The respondents' teaching experience showed an even more pronounced span, from one year to 31 years, with an average of about 10 years. Ten of the respondents already held the master's degree and were working on a second, and the other four respondents were working on their first master's degree. Five of the respondents taught in a high school, two in a middle school, and seven in an elementary school. There was thus wide representation in terms of age, educational attainment, and years and levels of teaching.

Religious Profiles

Brigham Young University is the flagship educational institution of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (members of which will be called Mormon or LDS in this article). In the present study, nine of the 14 respondents (about 64%) were LDS. Two of the remaining five respondents (about 36%) identified themselves as Protestant, two as Roman Catholic, and one as "searching."

The list below gives specific information about each respondent.

Number	Sex	Age	Level	Years	Religion	Race/Ethnicity
#1	M	32	HS	9	Evangelical	Caucasian
#2	F	29	Elem.	7	Lutheran	Caucasian
#3	F	55	Elem.	31	LDS	Caucasian
#4	F	41	Elem.	18	Catholic	African Amer.
#5	M	47	Elem.	18	LDS	Caucasian
#6	F	34	HS	13	Unaffiliated	Caucasian
#7	M	30	JHS	5	LDS	Caucasian
#8	F	46	Elem.	13	Catholic	Caucasian
#9	F	35	Elem.	9	LDS	Caucasian
#10	F	36	HS	12	LDS	Caucasian
#11	M	33	HS	7	LDS	Caucasian
#12	M	29	HS	1	LDS	S. Pac. Islander
#13	M	29	Elem.	5	LDS	Caucasian
#14	M	28	JHS	4	LDS	Caucasian

The Teachers Speak

Whenever a respondent is quoted, he/she is identified in the following manner: coding number, sex, age, teaching level, years of teaching, religious

affiliation, and race. The following abbreviations are used: 1) m=male, f=female; 2) elem=elementary school, jhs=junior high school, hs=high school; 3) prot=Protestant, cath=Roman Catholic, msl=Muslim, na=no affiliation, lds=Mormon; 4) so pac=South Pacific Islander, af am=African American, cauc=Caucasian. Thus, #13/m:29/elem:5/lds:so pac refers to the 13th respondent, a male who is 29 years old and has taught at the elementary school level for five years; his religious affiliation is Mormon and he is a South Pacific Islander. A further example is #4/f:41/elem:18/cath:af am. This person was the 4th respondent, a 41-year-old woman who had taught elementary school for 18 years; she is a Roman Catholic African American. The general distribution of responses to each question is also indicated in each section, with typical, less typical, and outlying responses also noted by representative quotes and paraphrases.

Question 1: "Do you think it is legally acceptable to express your personal religious beliefs in the classroom?"

Most of the teachers fully understood the strict prohibitions against a teacher's expression of his or her own religious beliefs in the public school classroom. As one respondent put it, "It is not [acceptable to talk about my religious beliefs in the classroom] because I am representing the school. To sanction such viewpoints is more or less preaching to a population that is very impressionable. So I need to retain my personal biases and keep them to myself."[29] Another respondent stated, "I believe school is a place to bring many ideas to the table and not necessarily promote one over the other, which is what I'd be doing if I started preaching my religion. Plus, I have a captive audience, and it's not legally right to hold them captive and say, 'This is what you're going to hear from me.'"[30] Another respondent, who had attended one of Warren Nord's well known seminars on religion in the classroom, offered what was (perhaps because of what she had learned at the seminar) the most concise and legally correct of all of the responses to Question # 1: "Teachers do have the right to teach *about* religion in the classroom; they just can't *teach* religion."[31]

These responses reflected ideas that have shaped many Supreme Court pronouncements about the teacher's expression of his or her religious belief—namely that: a teacher is representing the school and thus, by extension, the state; hence, to express his or her opinion would violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment because that opinion might too easily be misconstrued by students, especially younger ones, as a state-sanctioned position; because of compulsory attendance laws, public school students are a captive audience, which is one reason that there is more free-

dom of teacher expression at the university level, where students are there voluntarily; and children may be impressionable. The younger a child is, the more that child tends to accept what the teacher says as unerringly true.[32] About one-half of the respondents answered along these general lines. They also seemed to understand that "teaching about religion but not teaching religion" required that such instruction be curriculum-appropriate, age-appropriate, and delivered in an impartial manner by the teacher and in a way that left room for dissenting texts and voices.

At the same time, not all of the respondents were as clear and accurate as were the three respondents just cited. For instance, a special education teacher said that she is sometimes explicit about her religious beliefs in the classroom:

> I don't think that when you express your views that you are trying to recruit people. I think that it's a natural part of you…. I don't hesitate to say, 'I ask God to get me up in the morning.' I say that. I don't think, 'Well, there's a Jewish child; there's a Muslim child.' I just try to set up the scene to make all the students feel comfortable, to appreciate all of them…. I guess I've been pretty lucky that I haven't had a parent come in saying, 'You're preaching the Gospel!' Because that's not what I do. But if I have a kid who asks me a question [about my religious beliefs], it's my duty to answer. It's my moral obligation to answer a child if they don't have someone in their house who speaks to them and cares about what their feelings are. It's my job. And if I'm violating the law because I think the way I was taught, then I guess I'm just violating the law![33]

Interestingly, this teacher was one of the less active respondents in terms of church attendance. Yet, her opinion was similar to that of three other more formally active teachers, one of whom said that it was acceptable for a teacher to express a personal religious opinion "as long as the student asks and…as long as everybody in the classroom understands that this is a personal question, not my teaching moment."[34] Or, as another respondent noted, "I do [express my personal religious beliefs] if it comes as an answer to a question and I'm not trying to advocate it to them—if it's purely an expression of my belief and I state it as such."[35] "I think it's legally acceptable," asserted another respondent, "as long as you don't preach or try to influence anyone to go on with those beliefs…"[36]

Perhaps the most conflicted answer to this question came from an evangelical Protestant teacher who seemed torn between his understanding of legal constraints and his deep need to express his beliefs. He began by

asserting that "at times [it is acceptable to express your religious beliefs], but with severe limitations." Shortly thereafter, he seemed to be a bit more assertive: "When I think it is appropriate to the class material, I put in whatever I can." He went on to give an example: "On Easter I might say, 'For me, this is the most important day. Without this day, I wouldn't have much meaning to my life….' Or if my class asks, 'Can we have a Halloween party?' I answer, 'No, I don't believe in Halloween [because, as he explained earlier, he thinks it is satanic].'" As this respondent delved more and more deeply into his feelings on this issue, he became increasingly explicit about both his conflict and his practice:

> Even though I've been talking about the times that I do say [my religious opinion], 90% of the time I don't—although it's a huge part of me, so it's hard for me. It causes me disequilibrium a lot because I see a student having problems and I don't know what to bring in. And there are times I decide to share my beliefs at the expense of, maybe, legal ramifications against me. I've never had any complaint about it, ever, but there are times I could have! Now, that's never in front of the whole class. That's with specific people. Well, sometimes over the Halloween thing—that would be with the whole class.[37]

Overall, about one-fourth of the respondents clearly said that they do express their religious beliefs in response to student queries about their personal, spiritually based beliefs, especially regarding issues that the classroom is presently studying. Two of these respondents correctly understood that this was a legally marginal practice but felt that it was their moral duty to do so. The others incorrectly assumed that it was appropriate if the response was a curriculum-related answer to a student's personal question.

In sum, although one-half of the respondents understood the severe limitations on their personal religious expressions in the classroom, about one-fourth of the respondents erroneously believed that such expression was legally acceptable in response to a personal student question; and even though two of them did express some doubt about the legality of such a practice, they said that their moral duty to take a stand at certain times overrode the law. The remaining one-fourth of the respondents spoke more vaguely of "teaching spiritual values but without any explicit reference to religion."[38]

It is clear that far from overestimating the prohibitions on their expression of religious beliefs in the commitment, a considerable number of the respondents actually underestimated those prohibitions—or chose to find various ways to circumvent them. This was a surprising result in light of

the common belief that teachers often have an exaggerated notion of the constraints on religion in the classroom.[39]

Question # 2: "Do you think it is legally acceptable for students to express their religious beliefs in the classroom?"

The teachers in this study showed a consistently clearer understanding of the rights and limitations regarding student religious expression than teacher religious expression. It is unclear from the interview data in this study why this was the case. Indeed, it would be an interesting topic for future research to explore if this differential understanding is widespread among teachers and, if so, why. Despite the teachers' clearer understanding of a student's right to the expression of religious opinions in the classroom, no teacher in answering this question mentioned the three major aspects of this issue. Based on earlier discussion, if a student or students engage in religious expression in the classroom, then: the discussion should generally relate to a topic or issue being discussed in the classroom at that time; the expression should not turn into harassment of a student or group of students by another student or group of students such that it would disrupt instruction; and the teacher should, in order to promote sensitivity to minority students as well as to foster an environment of intellectual fairness, provide students who hold minority opinions an equal opportunity to express them but should neither request nor require those opinions so as not to put undue pressure on those students.

For instance, one respondent, juxtaposing the rights of teachers with those of students, correctly, but incompletely, observed, "Students have more freedom in discussing religion than a teacher does in a school, so I would say they do [have the right to express a religious opinion in class]."[40] Most of the responses contained a statement similar to the idea that "it isn't wrong for students to express their views as long as it doesn't infringe or sound like proselytizing to another student or to the group."[41] These responses showed a firm grasp on principle #2 above. Again, however, the evangelical Protestant male's response stood out:

> I don't think proselytizing always creates a negative atmosphere. For example, I would let a student explain that, as Mormons, they believe that they should be on a mission and that they need to convert people to their faith. To me, that's not proselytizing. Now, if you are aggressively persuading people, well, that's more like proselytizing to me. So, for the benefit of the whole class, I'm not going to let you go on forever, but I'll let you proselytize for a minute. There are limits—where it's no longer about education.[42]

Only two respondents mentioned principle #1—namely, that the student expression must relate to the topic under discussion. "I think it depends on the context," said one of these respondents, "that is, if it's relevant to the topic. If they are coming in to preach or that sort of thing, I would disagree with it, just like I would disagree with anyone coming into the classroom to preach."[43] Only one respondent mentioned principle #3: "If a student wants to share a religious idea—'This is the way I do my religion'—then I need to allow other kids to have the same opportunity to share theirs as well…"[44]

None of the teachers mentioned in this connection that the teacher should not personally privilege one student's religious perspective over another's, and it is not entirely clear why they did not do so. Perhaps they felt it was obvious. However, recall that one-third of the respondents did feel that they could express their own religious beliefs in the classroom—beliefs which, after all, might agree with those of some students and disagree with those of others, thus tending to marginalize the latter group. So, one cannot simply assume that all of the teachers neglected to mention principle #5 simply because they felt it was obvious. Indeed, these teachers might have been focusing much more on the pedagogical aspect of this issue than the legal one, simply seeing such even-handedness as part of what a good teacher always does with his or her students.

Hence, an interesting question for further study is whether teachers who feel that they may express their own beliefs in the classroom also tend to feel that they can explicitly (dis)agree with a student in the classroom when that student expresses his or her religious opinions. This would clearly be a violation of the Establishment Clause and Supreme Court decisions on this issue.[45]

Question # 3: "Do you think it is ever legally acceptable for a student to pray or meditate in your classroom?"

Student prayer in the classroom is acceptable if it does not disrupt classroom activities or instruction and is not done in such a way as to be offensive to other students in the classroom. Silent, individual prayer and meditation are acceptable under this definition, although the teacher may not explicitly dedicate class time for what he/she characterizes as prayer. All except one of the respondents correctly understood this point: "Well," she confessed, "the laws tell us we're not allowed to do it. But if I have a kid who puts his hands or head down and can explain to me what he's doing, then, yeah, I give him that time. We have to pick a time and place, though—one that's not basically interfering with the class."[46] Although this teacher,

overestimating legal constraints, felt she was violating the law, she was actually in line with it.

Perhaps the most striking response came from a native of Utah who remembered prayer being a typical feature of some Utah classrooms until the 1980's:

> When I first started teaching, we had prayer in the morning—before school started at the beginning of the day. Even though we [teachers] knew that wasn't acceptable, no one really challenged us. Of course, you didn't have to pray. It was voluntary. You know, it wasn't like it was your turn…. Then, probably around 1980, one of the teachers got their picture (about this big!) in the paper, and there started to be a lot of debate about it. So, consequently, we shied away from doing that. The ACLU then stepped in…. The prayers were very LDS—ones you'd give in the beginning of a Sunday School class. You know, 'Heavenly Father, bless us that we will be safe and that no one will get [sick]. Bless us that we will learn.' You know, that same repetitive sort of thing that you would get at the dinner table. And then we'd close the prayer 'In the name of Jesus Christ.' No one ever challenged us—no one really—until it became more public and the ACLU kinda wrote us and said, 'Please don't.' They never really pressed the issue—as long as we didn't continue. So we just somehow stopped—just started with the pledge and called it good![47]

In short, almost 40 years after the Supreme Court struck down teacher-led prayer in public schools,[48] it was apparently still occurring at certain sites in Utah. This is not surprising in light of the fact that such prayer still continues in many places.[49] College of education professors who have taught pre-service teachers from small, religiously homogenous areas across the United States may have heard similar stories from their students (as the authors of this study often have) about this still being a common practice in their hometowns. This was, however, the only report of such practices in this study.

Responses showed a clearer understanding of the principles governing student prayer in the classroom, although different teachers emphasized different things. "If a student is distraught or something," one observed, "if they say they want to go outside and pray, I would let them do it."[50] "If they're praying in their heart and I don't see it, it doesn't affect me. But if it's out loud, I wouldn't allow it," noted another.[51] Yet another respondent asserted that "it's o.k. so long as they don't try to impose their beliefs on

someone else."[52] The one respondent who had no particular religious affiliation was most firm in stating the limitations on student prayer, cautioning that

> the student should be tasteful and respectful of other students if he prays or meditates. Whether it's an athletic competition or in a classroom, if the student needs a moment of prayer, well, I hope he does it without a lot of attention.... What disappoints me is when students pray to draw attention to themselves—you know, to make a statement. I think the real reason for that kind of prayer is not to get peace of mind but to draw attention, and I think that's inappropriate.[53]

Of the three questions, then, the teachers had the firmest grasp on this last one. All of the respondents allowed student prayer in a legally appropriate manner, although one felt that she was breaking the law by doing so and the non-religiously affiliated respondent was more vocal in her statement of the restrictions that were the other teachers.

Summary

The responses indicated that the teachers generally had a fairly good grasp of the legal dimensions of religion in the public school classroom although their understanding was often incomplete and sometimes incorrect—with a few potentially serious errors. For instance, in response to the first interview question, about two-thirds of the respondents understood that generally it is not legally acceptable for a teacher to express his or her own religious beliefs in the classroom. However, one-third of the respondents mistakenly asserted that they could express their own religious beliefs in the classroom if it was related to the topic under discussion, solicited by a student, and not presented as a "teaching moment." Two of them even said they would do so in direct violation of the law because they felt a moral obligation to do so.

Regarding the second interview question, almost all of the respondents understood that students have a right to express their religious opinions so long as this does not turn into harassment and disruption. Nevertheless, many of the respondents seemed unaware of the other legal considerations regarding student religious expression in the classroom: the student expression of (non)belief in a spiritual reality must relate to the topic under discussion in the classroom; other students must also be given a chance to express their beliefs as well; and teachers must not endorse or in any other way privilege the religious or non-religious opinion of any student in the classroom because this tends to marginalize students with other worldviews.

Indeed, only one respondent stated that the expression must be directly relevant to the topic under discussion in the classroom, and only one noted that other students must also be given a chance to express their beliefs as well. None of the respondents mentioned that a teacher could neither explicitly agree nor disagree with the religious opinion of any student in the classroom. Although some of the teachers may not have mentioned these points perhaps because they considered them obvious or simply essential to good practice, it is not clear that all of the teachers necessarily felt that way—especially in light of the fact that the respondents scarcely mentioned the remaining three points at all, points which, after all, seem neither more nor less obvious as elements of good practice than those that the respondents did mention. The approximately one-third of the respondents who felt that they could, under certain circumstances, express their own spiritually based opinion, would clearly be running the risk of implicitly legitimating some students' spiritual perspectives and marginalizing those students whose views were not consistent with the teacher.

Regarding the final interview question about student prayer, most of the teachers understood the legal allowances and limitations on student prayer in the classroom although different teachers tended to emphasize difference aspects of this issue and one teacher seriously overestimated legal constraints on student prayer. Even so, the teachers knew that a student has a right to pray so long as he or she does so unobtrusively.

Specifically, the teachers in this study: tended to *overestimate* what they could say and do regarding their religious beliefs—with almost no evidence of them underestimating; generally understood that a student has a limited right to express his or her religious opinion in the classroom, but did not know more than one or two of the various criteria for determining what those limits are; and generally understood the sanctions and allowances regarding student prayer in the classroom.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Most of the respondents generally understood the legal dimensions of religion in the classroom. Yet, there were significant gaps in their understanding. This is troublesome because the respondents are graduate education students with years of public school teaching. For undergraduate preservice teachers who typically have little or no experience teaching and only cursory exposure to education law, such gaps and misunderstandings may well be even greater. These are misunderstandings that novice teachers will bring with them to the classroom in their first year of teaching—and which might cause them to conduct their classes in a legally questionable

manner regarding religious expression. Nord, Warshaw, and Kniker have voiced these very concerns.[54] This study suggests that those concerns are valid and that we must do a better job in colleges of education teaching about the constraints and allowances on religious discourse in the public school classroom.

Might the tendency of some of these respondents to overestimate the latitude of the expression of religious and spiritual opinions in the classroom relate to their self-proclaimed high degree of religious commitment? After all, this study took place at the largest religious university in the United States, where one would expect spiritual issues to be prominent in both attitude and practice. Perhaps the strength of these teachers' spiritual convictions sometimes causes them to be both more permissive and assertive regarding religious expression in the classroom than the law strictly allows. Indeed, as in several of the cases that were examined in this study, some respondents believed that it was a moral duty to do so—even when they knew that they were overstepping legal and institutional bounds. These are questions that should be considered in further research and in designing teacher education curricula, for they may be important not only for preservice teachers and administrators at religious as well as secular universities. Some of these students will almost certainly have similar types and degrees of religious commitment.[55] By doing so, teacher educators may help teachers avoid two serious errors in their practice.

First, a teacher may not encourage and allow students—or, at least, certain groups of them—to express their religiosity and spirituality in the classroom even when it may seem both appropriate and useful to do so. By sending the sub-textual message that a student's or a group of students' deeply held beliefs are irrelevant or even antithetical to the discourse and culture of the classroom, a teacher subtly forces such students to make the psychologically divisive and damaging move of "bracketing off" their spirituality from the rest of their social and cognitive reality.[56] In addition, since so many students' values rest on their deeply held beliefs, it is, in light of the move towards values education in the classroom ,[57] especially counterproductive to foreclose their expression of religious beliefs when it is neither legally nor psychologically appropriate to do so.

Second, if teachers do not understand the restrictions on their own religious expression in the classroom, they may, in voicing their convictions, unduly empower those students who share their beliefs and alienate those who do not, thereby marginalizing the latter students and threatening their academic and social growth. This is a distinct possibility and danger in the increasingly multi-cultural postmodern United States classroom, which must attempt to include and empower *all* students.[58]

In addition to putting more emphasis on the strictly legal dimensions, decisions, and case studies regarding religion in the classroom, examples of some of the many other ways that teacher educators might begin to address the need for consciousness-raising on this issue are provided by Nord and Warshaw.[59] Among Nord's several suggestions are these:

> Many events, movements, and texts are open to conflicting interpretations (both secular and religious). Teachers should be sensitive to religious ways of understanding them.
>
> Teachers…are neither to promote nor denigrate religion.
>
> There should be no official conclusions. Students should not be required to agree with the teacher in class or on tests.
>
> That there are no official conclusions does not mean that there are no right answers. Neither fairness nor the First Amendment require us to embrace relativism.
>
> Particular sensitivity must be shown to children who come from minority faiths, ethnic backgrounds, etc.
>
> If matters are very controversial, parents should be informed and teachers should consider instituting an excusal policy.[60]

Warshaw has argued that we must more fully and effectively include questions and scenarios regarding religion in the public school classroom in undergraduate foundations texts, lectures, and discussions. As teacher educators, a significant part of our job is to help our preservice students understand that "the teacher must be aware of, and adapt to, what [their future students will] bring with them to class [in terms of] levels of maturity and intelligence; their home backgrounds and biases; their religious information, misinformation, or simple ignorance…." Also, "the teacher must…be conscious of his or her own assumptions." This is a positive result of the kind of religious reflectivity that I advocated earlier in this article. And finally, "the teacher must set and maintain some ground rules: at the very least, no ridiculing of other people's religious beliefs, practices, or teachings—nor [any ridiculing] of pure secularism."[61]

In sum, this study underscores the need for colleges of education to follow the suggestions of Kniker, Nord, and Warshaw[62] to put greater emphasis on educating preservice teachers and administrators about the latitude and limits of religious expression in public school classrooms.

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33. #4/f:41/elem:18/cath:af am
34. #14/m:28/jhs:4/lds:cauc
35. #13/m:29/elem:5/lds:so pac
36. #10/f:36/hs:12/lds:cauc
37. #1/m:32/hs:9/prot:cauc
38. #6/m:47/elem:18/lds:cauc
39. Kniker, *Teacher Education*.
40. #2/f:29/elem:7/prot:cauc
41. #14/m:28/jhs:4/lds:cauc
42. #1/m:32/hs:9/prot:cauc
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