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Public schools shouldn't preach. But they should teach kids about religion.

If we want kids to understand their world, they need to know the basics about different faith traditions.

By Linda K. Wertheimer September 8

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The day Jesus entered my fourth-grade classroom, my childhood forever changed.

It was 1974, and my family had just moved from western New York state to rural Ohio. I was the new kid, and all I wanted was to fit in. But one afternoon that first week, a woman hired by local churches walked into my public-school classroom and my regular teacher left. She stuck figures of Jesus Christ and his disciples on a flannel board, told us how Jesus could solve people's problems and, a little while later, asked us all to sing the hymn, "Jesus Loves Me."

Here's the thing: I'm Jewish.

I didn't know the song and I didn't believe in Jesus. I told my parents and they complained to the school, but the agreed-upon resolution was excusing me from this weekly religious instruction. My brothers and I were the only Jewish kids in the school system, and every week when it came time for religion class, my 11-year-old brother and I were, effectively, banished by our classroom teachers.

That was roughly 40 years ago, and if this sort of proselytizing were the norm today, I'd certainly understand why many parents remain skittish about outsourcing the teaching of basics about different religions to the public schools. But if anything, when disputes arise over teaching about religion as part of public school curriculum, educators wind up getting the message that they might be better off playing it safe and shying away from the subject, even at a moment when it's critical that children are equipped with an understanding of various religions and the role they play in today's world — particularly the religion that's so often misunderstood: Islam.

Take the example of Wellesley Middle School in suburban Boston. In the fall of 2010, a parent chaperone, concerned about a sixth-grade field trip to a local mosque, videotaped a handful of students who appeared to kneel and pray in

a line of male worshippers. The kids were only copying what they saw, but critics said the kids were effectively learning to "pray to Allah."

The idea of children praying in a mosque on a school-sponsored trip raised fears that the program was forcing religion on unsuspecting children. And the school system rightly acknowledged that the boys shouldn't have wound up participating in the prayer — they should have only observed. But for more than a decade, Wellesley has been getting it right when it comes to teaching about religion, and the school's detractors have come primarily from outside of the district. Most Wellesley parents I interviewed around the time of the incident appreciated that their 11- and 12-year-olds spent a semester learning about Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

Every year at Minneha Core Knowledge Magnet Elementary School in Wichita, Kansas, first graders learn about Judaism, Christianity and Islam over the course of several weeks — a curriculum the school has stood by, in spite of a misunderstanding two years ago about a bulletin board that illustrated the Five Pillars of Islam.

On occasion, yes, schools get into public messes over where the line is drawn between church and state — like recent reports of a "mass baptism" taking place on campus prior to a Georgia high school's football practice.

But in my travels around the country reporting for my book, "Faith Ed.: Teaching About Religion in An Age of Intolerance," I didn't see teachers trying to preach Christianity — or any — faith. I saw educators trying to provide kids with facts about the histories and practices of world religions, including faiths about which few students knew anything.

And the takeaway isn't that there's a danger our schools will veer toward religious indoctrination. It's that schools should do more to give religion a firm place in the curriculum, beginning as early as the elementary grades. That way, kids will be prepared, as they grow, to evaluate what they see every night on cable TV based on real information, rather than a set of stereotypes.

They should know the difference between Shi'a and Sunni Islam — not as a perfunctory nod to diversity, but because they'll be able to better form opinions about the Middle East conflicts that dominate the news. They should know the difference between Sikhism and Hinduism, considering that those are the respective religions of the last two prime ministers of India — the world's largest democracy. They should have a historical perspective on the differences between Catholicism and Protestant denominations when the pope visits their country, as he's doing this month. It's problematic, as Texas State University's Joseph Laycock notes, to wait for college to teach religion as a subject, because "many Americans never have the opportunity to go to college."

There are parents and educators who consider first grade too early to teach about religion in school, but as the parent of a 7-year-old, I believe it's the ideal time to start increasing children's awareness about our pluralistic society. Consider that in a Pew survey a few years ago, just 45 percent of Americans could identify Friday as the start

of the Jewish Sabbath. That's the sort of rudimentary knowledge that can, and should, be explained in elementary school.

No, we can't expect kids to grasp all the nuances of the major world religions and the controversies surrounding them, but if we're preparing kids to be thoughtful citizens of the world, they should know something about people in their community who may be different from themselves. My son has been attending religious school since kindergarten. He knows the major figures in Judaism as well as the holidays. But ask him what Easter is about — other than bunnies and colorful eggs — and he really has no idea. I'm happy that he knows his own religious heritage, but I also want him to know more about his peers' different traditions.

In my conversations with students about world religion courses, young people told me about their experiences being bullied because of their faiths. A 24-year-old Sikh man recalled the humiliation he felt at age 5 when fellow kindergartners made fun of his patka, his traditional religious head covering. A Muslim sixth-grader remembered a classmate's taunt from a few years before: "Do you have a bomb in your locker?" Muslims talk about being stigmatized every time a news story breaks about a terrorist who has a connection to Islam.

Unfortunately, there's no consensus about developing best practices for teaching about religion in public schools. At best, America's schools, which have long had a tumultuous relationship with religion, largely because of prayer-in-school battles, are in flux. The country has only one school system, Modesto, Calif., that requires a world religions course for graduation. Minneha, in Wichita, goes in a different direction, among roughly 1,200 private and public schools that utilize Core Knowledge, a well-known, but not widely adopted curriculum.

The First Amendment proscribes "establishment" of religion, but clearly leaves room for schools to teach about religion. And while 70 percent of Americans still identify as Christian and we still debate whether we're "a Christian nation," those who argue for the installation of religious values in public schools are on Constitutionally shaky ground — as are those who say instruction that explains religion has to be banned.

Educators and religion scholars of today generally agree that Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark did the most to elevate religion's place as an academic subject in the 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* case, banning teacher-led prayer, in which he wrote: "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." Yet many middle and high school teachers spend only a few days discussing religion as the topic comes up in social studies. It's unusual to do much of anything at the elementary level.

Despite efforts over the last several decades, moves to develop courses and training for teaching religion have begun and often fizzled, even though most states now have standards that call for a religion component in social studies and geography.

We need to resurrect those efforts, because the time to become a more religiously literate people is overdue.

After 9/11, wrote John Seigenthaler, founder of the First Amendment Center, "It is no longer a question of whether schools *should* teach children about Islam. They *must* teach them — about other religions as well. It is a responsibility, a duty." Nationally, we need to renew dialogue about the best way to teach about religion, how to better train teachers and how early the lessons should begin. We need an understanding that it's not only *okay* to teach about religion in schools, but *vital*. Too often, knee-jerk reactions to lessons on religion come from adults who harbor misconceptions they otherwise might not have if they, themselves, had a broader base of knowledge about different religions.

Education can't eliminate ignorance, but it can reduce it. The same Muslim boy who was teased in elementary school described how peers stood up for him in a later incident and chided a substitute teacher for claiming that all Muslims were terrorists. The students had remembered the lesson from sixth grade that it was wrong to stereotype based on religion.

Education is essential if we hope to facilitate a broader conversation. We can't effectively debate whether Islam is a religion of peace — as its defenders say — or if it is inherently bellicose — as its critics suggest — until we first have a body politic that knows the basics.

Education might have prevented what happened to me as a kid. I returned to my alma mater in 2013 to find my school system teaching about religion as part of social studies and teens respectful of other faiths even though few personally knew a non-Christian. The difference? In the '70s and '80s, my peers and I lacked what all schools should have today: teachers who can guide students through a healthier discussion about religious differences *and* similarities.