

Judith Johnson-Siebold  
Grace United Methodist Church, Ravena, NY, USA  
[johnsieb@mhicable.com](mailto:johnsieb@mhicable.com)  
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## A Feminist Christian Perspective on Teaching About Religion in American Public Schools

### Abstract

“Put prayer back in school!” is one of the rallying cries of the American Christian religious right, but if prayer and religious instruction are part of public school curriculum, they must represent public, multiple religious viewpoints, not merely those of the religious right.

However, research from literature-based methodology and insights from my community of practice (the United Methodist Church) demonstrate how problematic that representation would be, especially for feminists for whom some religious viewpoints would be abhorrent, as in faiths that promote the subjugation of women. While “learning about” is not the same as indoctrination, in actual practice instructors often do not provide a dispassionate presentation.

In addition, attempts to find common denominators among religions would make one faith indistinguishable from the other, giving the impression that it doesn’t matter what faith a student practices.

It follows, then, that state-mandated religious practice and/or religious instruction have no place in the American public school classroom.

In a country with compulsory education like the United States, any attempt to provide instruction about religion in the public school curriculum must represent multiple religious viewpoints in an increasingly multi-faith population. These perspectives are not what many on the American religious right have in mind. However, it is crucial that public education not be corrupted by attempts to teach religious instruction, a practice that belongs to families and places of worship

There are several reasons to oppose the teaching of religion in public schools. Among these are the inability to insure neutrality in religious instruction, the lack of consensus about what constitutes morality, the irresponsibility of offering up freedom from religion on the altar of saving public schools from student exodus, the need to put to rest the false claim that omitting instruction about religion in the public school curriculum gives the impression that religion is unimportant, the importance of discounting supposed common beliefs as reason enough to violate the Constitution, and opposing the claim that disagreement about religious views is no different than disagreement about political views.

This paper will briefly comment on each of these reasons for opposing teaching about religion in the public school. However, the reason with the greatest emphasis in this discussion comes from a feminist perspective.

**\*Neutrality:** While it is theoretically true that teaching “information about” is not the same as indoctrination, in actual practice many instructors find it difficult to be dispassionate. In addition, some instructors have a deliberate indoctrination agenda. Witness this recent (January 22, 2013) account of an overt religious and prejudiced agenda in several Texas public schools:

According to a recent report by the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, several public schools in the state are quietly teaching students a literal, right wing interpretation of the Bible.

Classes purporting to focus on the Bible’s impact on history are in fact evangelizing children with a literal interpretation of the Bible; namely, that the Earth is 6,000 years old, Judaism is a “flawed and incomplete religion,” and Black people are descendants of Ham. (Reported in [www.blackyouthproject.com/2013/01/texas-publicschools...](http://www.blackyouthproject.com/2013/01/texas-publicschools...))

In addition, anecdotal evidence from some of Florida’s public schools suggests that Texas is not the only state to flagrantly violate the prohibition against teaching religion in the public school, *and to not face prosecution*. That this is happening is appalling. It is also all the proof we need that opening the door to teaching about religion in the public school is opening the door to proselytizing. This may be no problem at all to the Christian religious right, but it is a very big problem to others.

There are some who claim that teaching religion in public schools does not violate the Constitution as long as the school is neutral in its teaching, and that neutrality demands that all religious views be taught. However, we know that we would not want to teach all religious views. Would we teach that the sacrifice of children is one of many neutral religious practices that students could choose in their religious quest? Of course not. Then what are the boundaries of the curriculum and who decides those boundaries? In addition, anyone who has ever been in a public school classroom knows how seldom neutrality is expressed. A roll of the eyes, a shrug of the shoulders, derisive laughter shared between students and teacher, all make short work of any attempt at neutrality presented by carefully-crafted curriculum.

A 1951 attempt at using a neutral prayer in New York State schools was ruled unconstitutional because its reference to “Almighty God”

does not suit those who believe in many or no gods; and a watered-down prayer that does not refer to Jesus offends some Christians who believe that true religion centers on Christ. Although states could give tax benefits to all religions, schools are incapable of discovering devotional practices that are equally acceptable to all religions. (Greenwalt 2005, 50)

**\*Character education:** Another supposed reason for teaching religion in public school is that religion forms the basis of character education. Claims that character education demands that

teachers model and teach the civic values beg the question “Whose civic values?” Is female deference to males a civic value? Many in our country would say “Yes.” Is the proper place for women in the private sphere, supporting men in the public sphere? Again, there are those who would affirm that position? Should females keep themselves covered up (and to what degree?) so they don’t tempt males? “Absolutely!” is the position of many in our country.

**\*Saving the public schools:** Saving the public school has been presented as another rationale for teaching religion in public schools. Some have opined that the exodus from public schools is fueled in large measure by dissatisfaction with how schools address issues concerning religion and values. If we act now to reverse that dissatisfaction, we can save the public schools. (Nord and Haynes, 9)

However, there are at least two things wrong with this line of reasoning. First, an alternative view of the reason for dissatisfaction with the public schools is that conservative parents do not want their children exposed to the supposed “liberal” positions of “promoting” homosexuality, racial equality, and the liberation of women from sex discrimination.

Second, providing or not providing education about religion in public schools is not an issue in service to saving them. Freedom from religious instruction should not be offered up on the altar of sacrifice for the health of public schools.

**\*False impression:** The claim that omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life is insignificant or unimportant is short-sighted. To the contrary, students can be told that facts about religion are *so* important and so varied that instruction in them is reserved for the family and religious authorities.

**\*Similiar core beliefs:** Attempts to find common denominators among religions, for example, “Don’t do to others those things you would not want done to you,” would result in such a watering down of doctrine that one faith would be indistinguishable from the other. This practice would give students the unfortunate impression that it doesn’t matter what faith people practice.

**\*Religious views like political views:** Claims that disagreements about religious views are no different than disagreements about political views completely miss the point that political views are part of a public education that prepares citizens in a democracy, whereas religious views are to be omitted from that discussion for very good reasons. Indeed,

(p)erhaps the teacher is better off stressing that he or she is only talking about political and secular moral ideals, that religion is a different subject, and that many excellent citizens adhere to religions whose structure and tenets differ significantly from the parallel norms of liberal democracies. (Greenwalt 2005, 41)

Debunking these myths about teaching religion in public schools would be reason enough for an outcry against it. However, for those with a feminist perspective, there are important additional reasons to strenuously object to any such attempts.

### **Feminist Concerns**

As a feminist I am located as an adult, white, middle-class, highly-educated, married, progressive Christian, parent, clergywoman, and United States citizen. From those perspectives it

occurs to me that claims that various Associations (“representing a broad spectrum of religious and political views”) have upheld the principle of instruction about religion in the public schools are meaningless to feminists such as myself who suspect that no feminist voices were invited to participate in those associations.

Feminists may or may not object to the usual sources of disagreement - sex education, religious holidays - but many do object very strenuously to other issues, some that proponents of teaching religion in the public school may have not even considered, such as exclusively male references to God and misogynist expectations of women.

To give one example, the American Academy of Religion Guidelines for Teaching About Religion published in 2010 doesn’t even mention what pronouns the teacher should use when referring to God. Even when there is no overt curriculum whose agenda is to persuade, there is what has been coined a “null curriculum,” (Boys, educating in faith, p.8) ) meaning those ideas that are omitted from the curriculum.

In *God in the Classroom* (Murray 2007) 304 pages are devoted to nine controversies associated with the issue of teaching about religion in public school classrooms. (Thomas 2007) Absent from the conversation is any acknowledgment of feminist concerns of the gender ascribed to God and misogynist depictions of women.

The focus of this paper is the necessity of rejecting attempts to teach about religion in the public schools because, from a feminist perspective, to do so would necessarily emphasize both the concept of a male God and misogynist descriptions of the role of women. Examples given are limited to issues within the Christian religion, itself, despite the applicability of similar issues within other faiths.

**\*Exclusively male references to God:** God is spirit, and spirit, by definition, does not have gender. Indeed

Because the word sex and the terms male and female have to do with biological characteristics, it is rightly said that God has no sex and that God is neither male nor female. (Duck 1991, 33)

Yet in our public discourse not only is God invariably referred to by the male pronouns *He* or *His*, but also to refer to God with the female pronouns, *She* or *Her*, most often elicits a hostile response. As a clergywoman offering my parish non-male images of God, I was rebuked by my bishop (a woman) who demanded I cease and desist. At first I was incredulous; then I was ashamed of how naive I had been when I had thought I could make changes within such a male-dominated institution.

While the Jewish and Christian scriptures do employ male terms for God, they also use female and genderless metaphors. God is reported as having created humankind male and female in God’s own image (Gen 1:27.) When Moses asked God what he should call the Holy One, God replied “YHWH,” whose translation is “I AM.” (Ex. 3:14 ), a genderless reply. Male Bible transcribers translated YHWH into English as Lord, a masculine term.

In the Bible, God has self-identified as a woman in labor (Is. 42:14 ), pregnant woman (Numbers 11:11-15), midwife, a female position at the time (Ps.22:9-10 ), woman who gave birth

(Deut. 32:18), mother (Is. 66:13), and mother eagle, (Deut. 32:11 ).

The Bible also refers to God with such gender-neutral terms as rock ( Ps. 31:3 ), advocate (Jn. 14:26 ), light, (Jn. 8:12 ), bread (Jn. 6:32 ), creator (Eccl. 12:1), first and last (Rev. 1:17), fountain (Jer. 2:13), lamb (1 Pet. 1:19), life (1 John 11:25), fortress (Ps. 31:3), and savior ( 2 Sam 22:3).

Yet, all these gender-neutral and female images for God have been jettisoned in public parlance in favor of male references. The fact that instruction about religion in public schools would undoubtedly refer to God as *He* reinforces the notion that God is male, and it omits the possibility that God can be thought of in female terms. It is appalling to even consider the possibility of the public school legally reinforcing those images.

**\*Misogynist expectations of women:** Feminists are rightly concerned about the misuse of sacred texts to support women’s subjugation and male privilege. One need look no further than the Jewish and Christian Bible’s second story of creation in Genesis 2 where “man” is created in God’s image and given power over the animals. Subsequently, the woman is created from the man’s rib to be his “helpmate.” According to the story, she is the one who is deceived by the snake, and she is the one who tempts the man, thus insuring their eviction from the garden. Not to worry, however, for she “will be saved through child bearing.” (1 Tim. 2:15)

This story has been used for centuries as proof text for women’s secondary position and as the rationale for portraying women as intellectually impaired, gullible, infantile, and in need of male guidance. The fact that there is a very different, more egalitarian creation story in Genesis 1, or the fact that other interpretations can be given to the second story, matter little, for it is this commonly-accepted understanding that has shaped much of the misogyny in Church and society.

Further “proof” of the proper place for women is found in the New Testament of the Christian Bible where one finds the assertions that women should be gentle and quiet (“very precious in God’s sight”) (1 Pet. 3:4), are to be subject to their husbands (1 Pet. 3:1), that women are the weaker sex (1 Pet. 3:7), that women should not teach men (1 Tim. 2:11), that a bishop must be a man (1 Tim. 3:4), and that women should be silent in the temple (1 Cor. 14:34). Those who would use these verses as indications of God’s will, fail to confront the reality that Christ, Himself, commanded a woman to “go and tell” (John 20:17), that bishops should also be married with children (1 Tim. 3:4) and that the contemporary reality is that Christians do not worship in the temple, and Paul’s prohibition to one or two talkative females in the first century does not apply to women today. Furthermore, those who oppose women’s ordination, on the grounds that Jesus’ disciples were male, conveniently overlook the fact that Jesus’ disciples were also Jewish, yet the Church today does not insist that its clergy be Jewish.

The system of patriarchy, itself, so prominent throughout so many religions, is problematic for many feminists. Patriarchy:

constitutes a form of structural or systemic violence against women by using the force of ideology and social structures in ways that harm women by failing, for example, to consider that women have the right to autonomy, including the right to construct culture, to control property, to maintain bodily integrity, to make their own decisions, and to express their own views. (Bowen 2006, 190)

The patriarchal issues we have identified here are a problem because they do not reflect the truth about the whole Biblical record. As has been mentioned, there is a wide variety of Biblical references for God, many of which are gender neutral and female. To emphasize only one male model to the exclusion of female and genderless models is to intentionally portray God in a way that favors only the male gender. This untruthful Biblical view has the effect of robbing women of a deity with whom they could have commonality as women.

There is also a wide variety of Biblical roles for women, many of which do not reflect Timothy's insistence that women should be quiet and gentle. One thinks of the boldness of Ruth (Ruth 3:9), the courage of Esther (Esther 7), and the enthusiasm of Mary of Magdala and Mary, the mother of Jesus (Matthew 28). Restricting women to a limited sphere and a narrow range of appropriate emotions and actions based on a biased view of a few Biblical writers has the effect of robbing women of opportunities and self-understanding enjoyed by men.

Words can be very powerful, and the words used in the Bible to describe the place of women and the nature of God can and do shape us. Writing in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World* (Day and Pressler, ed., 2006) Christine Cozad Neuger tells the story of a meeting at the Vatican to discuss inclusive language proposals for English liturgy. She writes:

A Representative of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith stated "The angry, irritated and resentful women of the United State are systematically attempting to change the gender of God." His words hung in the air, most of us were astonished. A representative of the highest doctrinal body in the Church was suggesting that God had a gender. How had this conviction formed in him? I submit that it was probably because of the power of words to shape reality. I suspect that language that regularly, consistently, and exclusively referred to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ in masculine terms led this man actually to conceive of God as masculine, as gendered. (Neuger 2006,161)

If someone with the education and religious conscience of this Representative of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith can be so blind-sighted about God by "mere" words, what hope is there for those with lesser credentials, including students and their teachers? And if only one conservative Biblical view of women is emphasized

how are we to understand the relation between civic equality for women and religious rules against ordaining females, as well as the traditional view of many religions that wives have special responsibilities within the family?" (Greenwalt 2005, 40 )

What is at stake in this discussion is the identity of who decides what beliefs are taught to our nation's children. Will girls and boys be taught the erroneous and crippling views that God is a man, and that females must dwell in a limited sphere because they are females? Will they learn that females are the weaker sex and are intended to be ruled over by males? These views have no place in public education in a democracy.

While the Christian religious right may want to use our country's public schools to proselytize young children to their point of view, that is not their prerogative. Indeed, they are expressly forbidden to do so by the very design woven into the fabric of our Constitution. No

reconceptualization of religious education as neutral instruction, character education, a panacea for saving public schools, concern for religion's reputation, an impression of similar core beliefs, or framing religious differences as no different than political differences, will change that fact.

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