

## The trouble with teaching about religion

By DENNIS L. CUDDY

The State Board of Education is considering whether the public schools should teach about religion. Concern was focused on the issue of religion in schools a few years ago when I was at the National Institute of Education in Washington.

In a study conducted for the institute, Dr. Paul Vitz found that many of the facts regarding the role of religion in our history had been excised from textbooks. For example, in one text the Pilgrims were simply described as "giving thanks" at Thanksgiving, but the book did not say they gave thanks "to God."

Recently, a diverse coalition produced a brochure titled "Religion in the Public School Curriculum," which defined "teaching about religion" as including "consideration of the beliefs and practices of religions." As a former history teacher in our public schools, I see nothing wrong with presenting students with historical facts about particular religions — for example, dates of origin. But teaching about the religions themselves would be very dangerous, possibly resulting in lawsuits claiming religious discrimination. Frankly, I have heard no great public outcry about students' lack of knowledge pertaining to Buddhist chants,

### Point of view



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Islamic rituals or Jain prayers.

One parent of a student in a local high school recently recounted how a teacher had used incense as part of his instruction about a particular religion. Another par-

ent told me that at a different high school, a teacher had asked the students to meditate as part of the instruction about Hinduism. The problem with this is that if the Supreme Court recently declared even a "moment of silent meditation" unconstitutional because it "might be" religiously related, then certainly the aforementioned instruction in our public schools would be unconstitutional as well.

Many proponents of teaching about religion in our schools say they simply want to end religious intolerance by having students develop "respect for" the beliefs of others. While it is in the best American tradition to respect the right of others to hold whatever beliefs they choose, I do not believe this translates into an obligation to respect all of the beliefs themselves of all religions. Jews, for example, should be under no obligation to respect the atheistic views of Adolph Hitler.

Some years ago, the World Religions Curriculum Development Center in the United States developed a course titled "Religion in Human Culture," to develop attitudes of respect for the legitimacy of others' beliefs and practices, "safeguarding against dogmatic 'right answerism.'" Yet, religion by its very nature is about what is morally right and morally wrong, what is spiritually true and spiritually false. Thus, if

one of our state's teachers were to lecture public school students concerning reincarnation, would the teacher as a part of non-biased instruction also note the biblical statement, "It is appointed unto men once to die"?

How would classroom discussion regarding religion be handled? When a student says that according to his or her religion one will go to hell unless certain beliefs are followed, would the teacher say that is just one view, thus questioning the student's beliefs? What about censorship? Would some minority religions be excluded? And what about equity? Would an occult religion such as witchcraft (recently given tax-exempt status by the U.S. government) be given as much class time as Catholicism, Judaism or Protestantism?

Teaching historical facts about religion in American or world history classes as they were taught years ago is appropriate. But if the state goes beyond this and teaches about the beliefs and practices of religions, it will not only violate the often cited "separation of church and state," but it will also find itself either questioning, undermining or neutralizing students' religious beliefs. That is not the state's business, especially when it has not even taught the three R's well, as evidenced by recent test scores.