Christian Privilege and Public Education.

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ABSTRACT
AMY E. SIMPSON: Christian Privilege and Public Education.
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Is Christianity under attack? Are schools hostile to the Christian religion? Is religion being ‘kicked out of schools’? Christian conservatives would answer yes, and often mislead the populace into feeling that, as a result of the hostile anti-Christian dogma of schools, Christians are unable to practice their religion freely. However, this author contends that schools, while perceived as secular institutions, are far too generous to the dominance of the Christian faith, often at the expense of religious minorities and non-believers. Schools are wholly filled with religion, albeit just one religion, generally speaking, the Christian religion. Christianity and its adherents benefit from a series of privileges which establish Christians as a dominant group while conferring a subordinate and discriminatory status on non-Christians and non-believers and devaluing other religions. This thesis explores the nature of some of those privileges.
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INTRODUCTION

Ask a random group of people what comes to mind when they think of religion and public schools. Someone might immediately bring up the ongoing debate surrounding the promotion of intelligent design over or alongside evolution – a scientific tussle that has been going on for more than eighty years with no apparent end in sight. The furor regarding religious prayer in schools or the posting of the Ten Commandments in public spaces may be items of discussion; someone might cite the Establishment Clause, which prohibits Congress from endorsing or establishing state-sponsored religion; or she may even reference several landmark cases, such as *Scopes v. State*, *Epperson v. Arkansas*, or *Lemon v. Kurtzman*. Moments of silence, the recitation of the phrase “one nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, school vouchers and school choice, Thomas Jefferson’s historic Wall of Separation letter – the list of popular topics enveloping the religion/school controversy is near endless. What is interesting is that each of these cases, while citing a well-known instance of religion and public education, refer only to examples regarding Christianity and public education. The reason for this might be a simple matter of Christianity being the dominant, or most widely practiced, religion in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2007). But there also seems to be this idea that public schools are sites of secular learning which repress, or squelch,
individual religious freedom and expression and each of these popular topics reflect examples of this trend.

Is Christianity under attack? Are public schools “godless” institutions hostile to Christians (Limbough, 2003)? Over the last fifty years, the courts have seen an abundance of lawsuits related to some aspect of Christianity and the public schools, and litigations range in content from Bible distribution to graduation ceremonies to censorship of curricular materials and books. Conservative Christians are up in arms proclaiming “child abuse in the classroom” (Simonds, 1994, p. 12) and that “schools are run by the enemies of God” (Pinckney & Shortt, 2004, p. 2). The Center for Excellence in Education is urging Christian parents to withdraw their children from public schools by 2010, and a similar initiative was recently passed by leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention (Pinckney & Shortt, 2004). Both organizations strongly believe that the secular public educational system, by virtue of being a secular educational system, is detrimental to the well-being and moral upbringing of Christian children.

However, I believe that schools, while portrayed as secular institutions are, in actuality, far too generous to the dominance of the Christian faith, often at the expense of religious minorities and non-believers. Schools are not “godless” institutions, but more to the contrary – schools are wholly filled with religion, albeit just one religion, generally speaking, the Christian religion. This is not to say that conservative Christians are paranoid for believing their religion is under attack. Instead, I’m suggesting that the “attack” is in essence a perceived drop in hierarchical status accompanied with the realization that Christianity is ‘on its own’ among other religions, no better or no less than all the rest.
The controversial court-room battles embroiling public schools mislead the populace into feeling that, as a result of the hostile anti-Christian dogma of schools, Christians are unable to practice their religion freely. This prevents a further, more critical analysis of the ubiquitous presence of Christianity in today’s public schools, as well as examination of the many privileges from which Christians benefit on a day-to-day basis. For example, note how the repeal of biblical instruction for all public school children is promoted as an insult to the religious freedoms of Christians (Limbaugh, 2003), rather than regarded as the imposition of one religion and its teachings over and above other religions. Drawing attention to this alleged “attack” on Christian customs helps subvert attention back unto Christians by camouflaging the discomfort suffered by non-Christians had the tradition not been declared unconstitutional and removed from practice.

It is not my intent to denounce the litigations listed in the paragraphs above as unimportant or to minimize the gravity of any legal proceeding regarding the First Amendment. Rather, I’m raising issue with the energy and fire with which these popular cases are contested by political pundits and religious leaders as examples of ‘religion being kicked out of schools’ or how Christianity is being undermined by special interest groups, such as gay & lesbian alliances and advocates for multiculturalism and social justice. This fervor creates a feeding frenzy for playground zealots like Ann Coulter, whose inflammatory rhetoric spawns fear and hatred (Coulter, 2003; 2006). The presence and free exercise of Christian privilege undermines any attempt at an inclusive curriculum, and the resulting cultural domination of the Christian religion prohibits our students from deep and critical learning, learning about themselves and learning about other people and other cultures.
In the following section, the terms “Christian” and “Christianity” will be defined as I will be using them for the purpose of this article. From there, I will introduce a “history lesson” as told by conservative Christians, and examine how this particular retelling of the past impacts religious minorities and non-believers. A discussion and definition of Christian privilege follows, based on the model first set forth by Peggy McIntosh (1988). I turn to three manifestations of Christian privilege (treatment of holidays, identification within a dominant group, and the curriculum of the public schools) to highlight the presence and existence of privilege in public schools, since conservative Christians often claim that schools are hostile to the Christian faith.

**CHRISTIANITY AND CHRISTIANS**

Christianity is easily the most practiced religion in the United States. Studies show that Christians represent about three-fourths of the adult US population (Green, 2004; Kosmin & Mayer, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2007). Its members uphold a monotheistic view in which Jesus Christ is believed to be the Son of God. This is, of course, a very basic and generic description – as Christians are a multi-varied group of believers – but most uphold that practicing the teachings of Jesus Christ can lead them to eternal life after death. The life and teachings of Jesus are chronicled in the New Testament of the Bible, a canonical set of religious writings. According to Christian doctrine, Jesus was born of a holy birth: he was conceived by the Holy Spirit to the virgin Mary, wife of Joseph. After being crucified, Jesus arose from the dead three days after his burial in a tomb and ascended into heaven, where he joined God, the Father.
Christianity is generally divided into three branches: Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism. The last of these can be further divided into two groupings, that of mainline (or liberal) Protestantism and fundamental (or conservative) Protestantism, which taken as a whole is generically known as the Religious Right (Green, 2004). Fundamentalists, combined with Evangelical Protestants, are defined by their adherence to the following five beliefs as characterized by Gaddy et al. (1996): “inerrancy of the Scriptures, the deity of Christ, his Virgin Birth, the Substitutionary atonement of Christ, and his physical Resurrection and coming bodily Return to Earth” (p. 30). Evangelical Protestants account for one quarter of the US population, thus making them one of the largest Christian groups (Green, 2004) and an influential and formidable political contender in the so-called “culture wars” regarding public education.

While acknowledging the breadth and scope of the diversity of its adherents, for the purpose of this article, I will most often refer broadly to Christians as a base set of collective believers, except for instances where specific sects must be attributed directly. My motivation for this is contingent upon three factors. Firstly, Christianity is not only the most numerically dominant religion in the United States, it is also the most culturally dominant. Its members have widely divergent views about what it means to be Christian, but are unified under a commonly held belief in Jesus Christ as the son of God, participation in and the practice of Christian holidays, and the religious iconography which accompanies this faith, including but not limited to the ichthys, crosses and crucifixes, angels, and other religious icons. Secondly, although conservative Christians are responsible for most of the charges levied against public schools regarding the free exercise of religion and religious freedom (Gaddy et al., 1996; Gribbin, 1995; Spring,
the challenges to public education are done in consideration of all Christians and their collective belief systems (Limbaugh, 2003). Many objections concerning the public schools and its curriculum are targeted at secular humanism, a humanist philosophy that conservatives criticize for being anti-religious, or anti-Christian (Baer & Carper, 1999; Gaddy et al., 1996; Gribbin, 1995; Limbaugh, 2003; Spring, 2002; Troy, 1999). My third, and final, justification for generically grouping Christians is that ultimately, no matter the denomination or branch, Christians benefit en masse from the immunities granted by their privileged status as part of a dominant religion in the United States (Beaman, 2003; Blumenfeld, 2006; Clark et al, 2002; Schlosser, 2003). All school-age Christians receive Good Friday off from class and understand the holiday’s significance, regardless of whether they are Catholic or Protestant, conservative or liberal, mainline or fundamentalist.

A HISTORY LESSON

One interesting element of American history missing from high school textbooks is the revelation that Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and possibly even James Madison were deists (Ehrenreich, 1989; Lambert, 2003; Noddings, 1993). Nel Noddings (2006, pg. 258) notes, “People who refuse to accept even the possibility that some of the founding fathers were deists often react to the charge with fear and indignation,” and she goes on to ask, “What causes this reaction?” This “reaction” – that of “fear and indignation” – is quite simply a defensive response to a perceived attack on Christian beliefs, beliefs that include the founding of this country by Christians. To posit
that the given Christian narrative surrounding the establishment of our nation is inaccurate is to poke holes in the heavily reinforced armament of Christian dominion that enables Christians to justify themselves as founders of this “great nation.”

Protestant fundamentalists often proclaim that America was established specifically as a Christian nation. Jerry Falwell (1980) wrote that “our great nation was founded by godly men upon godly principles to be a Christian nation” (p. 29), and according to a recent article in USA Today, more than 55% of citizens believe that “the Constitution establishes a Christian nation” (2007, pg. 1). Timothy LaHaye, author of the best-selling Left Behind series, wrote in an article for The Atlantic Monthly (2007): “this nation was not founded by atheists, secularizers, or monarchists…America’s founding was based more on biblical principals than any other nation’s on Earth – and that’s the main reason this country has been more blessed by God than any other nation in history” (p. 46). Writes M. Stanton Evans (2007), “The American nation at the era of founding, in sum, was a place where God was worshipped, the Bible honored, and the tenets of Christian faith supported as a routine affair by governments at every level” (p. 24).

David Limbaugh, brother of radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh and author of Persecution: How Liberals are Waging War against Christianity, posits that it is “imperative” to ultimately and firmly establish the United States as a Christian nation by disproving claims that this nation was founded upon secular ideals. Limbaugh believes that “our freedom is a byproduct of a largely Christian consensus and Christian principles,” thus “it would behoove us to mindful of those realities” (2003, p. 300). By asserting that “American freedom is a direct outgrowth of the Christian religion” (2003, p. 299), Limbaugh joins a host of other conservative Protestant fundamentalists who
believe that the United States should “reclaim its Christian heritage and administer its
government according to Christian biblical principals” (Chancey, 2007, p. 557).

Ironically, most advocates for a return to “Christian roots” do not propose that the
United States become a theocracy or that its citizens adhere to one national religion.
Instead, conservatives wish to emphasize the importance Protestantism has played in the
historical founding of this “great nation” (Chancey, 2007; Evans, 2007; LaHaye, 2007;
Limbaugh, 2003; Stone, 2007). By reclaiming the “true” intent of the founding fathers,
and establishing the Constitution as a Christian document (Stone, 2007), Christians are
thus able to advocate a return to Christian values in public school including Bible
instruction and public prayer. This position was framed by Limbaugh (2003):

We should remember that when the Constitution was written, Christian religious
instruction was the primary purpose of education. To the extent that we can imagine
public schools being endorsed by the founders, we can be certain that they would not
have objected to religious instruction, but would have insisted upon it. If the founders
could have anticipated that our schools would become a government near-monopoly
and that the Establishment Clause would be stretched beyond recognition to prohibit
Christian instruction, I think it’s safe to say they would have opposed public education
altogether. (p. xii)

This push is a direct and intentional move to advance one religious view over and
at the expense of all others by legitimizing Christianity as the intended and “true” religion
of the United States. Howard (2006) explains that “dominant groups tend to claim truth
as their private domain” (p. 54). This truth-claiming enables the claimants to designate
their own perspective as actuality, or fact, thus denouncing opposing views as hostile and
providing a rationale for dominance. By mounting “evidence” regarding the “true” intent
of the architects of this nation – intent that favors the dominant religion – Christians
would then be in a powerful (and privileged) position to grant permissions
paternalistically to religious minorities and non-believers alike according to a Christian-
specific dogma. This would allow the dominant religion to invoke its views upon all citizens and advance its principles with arrogance, simply because adherents would be able to prove that “truth” was on their side by pointing to evidence that the founding fathers did not intend for government to be separated from religion. Based on this “assumption of rightness” (Howard, 2006, p. 54), Christians would be able to assume that everyone should be or act like them, the majority. The potential ramifications would be disastrous to the current status of the “land of the free,” since acknowledgment that diversity exists would be unnecessary and/or unappreciated. Eck (2001) cautions, “the invocation of a Christian America takes on a new set of tensions as our population of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist neighbors grows. The ideal of a Christian America stands in contradiction to the spirit, if not the letter, of America’s foundational principle of religious freedom” (p. 137).

Fortunately, no matter the intent – true or otherwise – the collaboration of the founding fathers resulted in the completion and ratification of a document that allows for the freedom of religion and religious beliefs with guaranteed protection for both the majority and the minority. Melvin Urofsky, author of Religious Freedom: Rights and Liberties under the Law, writes of the First Amendment:

The protection of the First Amendment is invoked when the majority attempts to use the power of the state to enforce conformity in speech or in religious practice. Very often, to protect that one dissident, that one disbeliever, the majority may be discomfited; that is the price the Founding Fathers declared themselves willing to pay for religious freedom (2002, p. 149).

Why all the fuss and furor over the supposed intent and religious beliefs of the founding fathers? Because litigation after litigation has shown that the Constitution is an immobile rock which refuses to allow Christian instruction in public schools, and there is
an old saying: if you cannot get in the front door, try the side door. That seems to be the strategy here. Nel Noddings (1993) notes, “…those who insist that democracy is necessarily rooted in religion (in Christianity) are no doubt afraid that, if religion is allowed to fade away, certain cherished values will also disappear” (p. 52). By arguing the alleged purpose of the Framers in favor of the dominant religion, Christians can advocate a school curriculum that verifies a need for greater attention to Christianity and supports and upholds conservative values: parental authority, abstinence, traditional male/female sex roles and innate gender differences, heterosexuality, Intelligent Design, and a host of other issues.

CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE

A small body of work on Christian privilege has grown out of the landmark effort to identify and define “privilege” initiated by Peggy McIntosh in her seminal piece, “White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies,” first published in 1988. McIntosh (1988) discusses the phenomena of White privilege and its parallel, male privilege, and I believe it is helpful to look to her model for understanding the nuanced ways in which Christian privilege operates. Initially, in the years following McIntosh’s publication, discussions of privilege centered on the advantages and benefits that were conferred upon whites and males, but as the topic grew, scholars began to identify different strands of privilege, such as those afforded to able-bodied individuals, English-speakers, and heterosexuals (Johnson, 2006). Privilege came to be loosely defined as “exist(ing) when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups
they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do” (Johnson, 2006, p. 21). Conventionally characterized as a social categorization, privilege is placed or conferred on the members of a dominant group based on society’s perception of their status or inclusion within that group. Privilege grants members of the dominant group the promise of acceptance and inclusion within society, and McIntosh “suggested that this type of privilege operated in any situation when one group was in power and dominant” (Schlosser, 2003, p. 45). This acceptance allows those who benefit the ease of “passing” through the world untroubled by their identity or association with the dominant group.

Johnson (2006) noted that privilege relies solely upon society’s perception of a person’s membership of a certain group, rather than who that person is as an individual. For example, if a female were able to pass successfully as a male, she would become the recipient of benefits that males receive on a daily basis, such as being charged lower prices for cars and automotive repairs or being granted the ability to dominate a conversation. This was recently well documented when a female journalist went “undercover” as a man for eighteen months and wrote a book about the differences between the lives that men and women lead (Vincent, 2006). A Native American colleague of mine has often discussed how she feels that she is living caught between two worlds, knowing that she is an ethnic minority but presumptively assumed by most to be a white scholar. I once witnessed an interesting twist on this when she was confronted by a white male and asked to show her “race card” (Native American tribal document), or otherwise prove that she was, indeed, Native American. The male in question had obviously surmised that my colleague was white, like him, and apparently, her appearance did not concur with what he envisioned a Creek Indian to look like!
In 2001, Lewis Schlosser and William Sedlacek published a research report for the University of Maryland, College Park, which outlined suggestions for religious diversity as a result of the increasing heterogeneity of religious affiliations on campus. This report examined the role of religion in students’ lives, and offered a critique of campus policies surrounding religious holidays. Schlosser and Sedlacek, while not naming Christian privilege, do describe several of the advantages Christian students can expect to receive on campus, such as time off for major religious holidays. The authors highlight school policies biased toward Christian students, and offer recommendations for the school that might more truly constitute an appreciation for religious diversity, such as the incorporation of religious diversity into campus policies and the distribution of religious holiday calendars that are reflective of all religions (2001).

Schlosser draws out this line of thought in his next article when he joins with Christine Clark, Mark Brimhall Vargas, and Craig Allimo to work on diversity initiatives for higher education (2002). This group of colleagues name Christian privilege as a specific benefit for those adhering to Christianity, and using Peggy McIntosh’s formula of identification, list forty instances of Christian privileges which parallel those first offered by McIntosh in her examination of white privilege, and that are “encoded into the individual’s consciousness and woven into the fabric of our social institutions” (Blumenfeld, 2006, p. 195). Christian benefits work to establish Christians as a dominant group while conferring a subordinate and discriminatory status on non-Christians and non-believers and devaluing other religions (Blumenfeld, 2006; Schlosser 2003). These privileges are practiced day to day in U.S. society writ large, such as the certainty with which Christians can assume that the god mentioned or discussed on television or the
radio is their (the Christian) god (Clark et al., 2002; Schlosser 2003). Schlosser (2003) notes that “significant numbers of people from non-Christian religious backgrounds live and work in US society and have the experience of being a minority in terms of their religious group identification” (p. 46). This is one of the central facets of Christian privilege: Christians benefit by not being marked as “other.” They enjoy the luxury of institutional settings curtailed around their faith and belief structures and don’t experience their religion as backward or linked synonymously with violence.

However, not all Christians describe themselves as belonging to a privileged group. An interesting study was conducted recently at two universities located in the heart of the “Bible Belt.” The Bible Belt is an idiom for most of the Southern United States, where evangelical Protestantism is the dominant religion. The evangelical Christian students interviewed for the study used descriptors such as “misunderstood” and “out-voiced” to characterize their feelings about campus life (Moran et al, 2007, pg. 28), and portrayed themselves as members of an oppressed minority group since their religious convictions were not widely upheld by the student body or faculty (Moran et al, 2007). The authors found that “although some of the evangelical Christian students in this study shared some of the isolated experiences of antagonism, as of yet, no evidence exists that evangelical Christian students are suffering ‘systematic mistreatment’ as a result of their religious identity” (p. 35). Moran et al. continue to note that while the particular students in this study failed to place their membership in a dominant group, Christianity holds a privileged status in that region of the US, and it considered the “dominant religious group on college and university campuses” (2007, pg. 35). This rejection or denial of their advantaged status hearkens back to McIntosh’s discussion of
Whites not viewing their skin color as an asset (1988). Johnson (2006) suggests that “dominant groups have no idea of how their privilege oppresses others” (p. 69). And indeed, Limbaugh (2003) expresses this ignorance when describing how public schools have begun to limit the scope of one-sided celebrations during what is traditionally known as the Christmas season: “This obsession not to offend is remarkable, considering that it’s hard to comprehend how the celebration in song of a holiday for one religious group (a very large one at that) would threaten those of other religions” (p. 43). Note how Limbaugh draws attention to the strange “obsession not to offend,” which is, in other words, a public school’s valiant effort at pluralism; Limbaugh instead chooses to camouflage this action as hostile and anti-Christian, rather than the much-needed recognition of and attention to oppressed groups.

The decision to restrict Christmas celebrations in schools has angered many conservative Christians (Lerner, 2005; Limbaugh, 2003), and in the following section I will highlight the treatment of holidays in schools for ways in which Christians benefit. Next, I examine the boons Christians receive as part of their identification with a dominant religious group, and then I turn my attention to the curriculum of public schools in an effort to problematize the decidedly Christian agenda in place there.

**Holidays**

McIntosh (1988) calls attention to the fact that privileges are “conditions of daily experience which are taken for granted” (p.10), and it is helpful here to remember that because these experiences are “taken for granted,” or assumed as natural states of being or the way things are, privileges are not always readily apparent to those who benefit
from them. As a child, one of my much favored traditions was watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas* every year on CBS, coupled with telecasts of the animated special, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. I could visit Santa at the mall, catch candy thrown out during the Christmas parade, and witness the lighting of the town’s Christmas tree. My holiday customs were universal, that is, everywhere and shared by everyone, or so I thought. It wasn’t until I became an adult that I began to understand how the prevalence of holiday music and television specials serves to marginalize those who don’t share in these traditions. Radio stations devote their entire broadcasts to holiday music, and from November through December, it is virtually impossible to eat, shop, or watch television without being inundated with Christmas advertising gimmicks or other financial pressures enjoining people to embrace the “season of giving.”

Moderate attempts are made during the winter holiday season to include other religions, such as the placement of a menorah or dreidels alongside a Christmas tree. However, this misrepresents Chanukah as the “Jewish Christmas.” Chanukah actually commemorates a successful guerilla campaign against the Maccabees (Lerner, 2005). As such, Chanukah was not initially a significant Jewish holiday. It later gained significance as American Jews, under the pressure of cultural oppression, submitted to acculturation and bought into the consumerism of December (Lerner, 2005). The well-intentioned practice of incorporating other religious symbols into Christmas holiday displays is, unfortunately, just a reiteration of Christian dominance, based on the mistaken assumption that other religions are also celebrating significant religious holy days which place emphasis on gift-giving. To not be aware of the customs or practices of people outside the dominant group is what Howard calls the “luxury of ignorance,” and goes on
to note that the luxury of ignorance is “not available to members of marginalized groups, whose lives demand expertise in translation and transition between their own culture and the culture of dominance” (2006, p. 61-2). This misinformed spectacle of festivals also further alienates non-believers of any faith, as well as those who do fit within the traditional image of a nuclear family (Lerner, 2005), by emphasizing an imagined communal holiday season which they might not be invited to celebrate in.

With regard to the treatment of holidays in public schools, the academic calendar itself is especially curtailed to the needs of Christians. Religious observance of significant Christian holidays, such as Easter and Christmas, regularly (and conveniently) coincide with spring and winter “breaks,” offer several consecutive days off, and do not conflict with the school calendar. Most schools even observe Good Friday, the Friday before Easter, even though it is not a federal holiday. It goes without saying that the same is not afforded to religious minorities, who must make arrangements – often with Christian school authorities (Clark, 2006; Clark et al, 2002; Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2001) – to be absent from school to observe their own religious holidays. Minority religions don’t get “days off,” which is to say official, formalized recognition of their holy days, taking the form of school-wide permission not to attend school in order to attend religious worship outside of school. Nor are minority religions celebrated by school-wide performances featuring songs or plays, or ostentatious decoration.

Clark (2006) also points out that school authorities are in a unique position to legitimate or deny the request for an excused absence. Since being absent from school equates to missed lessons and make-up work, Schlosser & Sedlacek (2001) note the extraordinary lengths religious minorities must undertake in order to simultaneously
juggle their faith and academic pursuits, often presenting a logistical nightmare of time management, religious belief, and scholarship. In this example, Christian school authorities are able to set the standard to which all others must abide. It is hard to imagine a scenario where the roles might be reversed and Christian students were compelled to arrange to be absent from school on the twenty-fifth of December.

In schools, Christmas is often treated as a universal, secular holiday (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2001), replete with door-decorating contests and school-wide festooning of tinsel and garland. The first of December marks the few remaining days until winter break, but it also signifies a time of exclusion for some coupled with the marginalization of non-Christian perspectives. Since Christmas is viewed as an innocuous secular holiday overrun with commercialism, those who do not partake in the celebrations are decidedly outside the mainstream and can be viewed as “odd” or looked upon with pity by Christians. One of my former (Christian) colleagues once commented on the “poor little Jehovah’s Witness girl” who didn’t get to join in the Christmas festivities program at our elementary school, thus seeing her religious observance as a hindrance rather than a legitimate practice and system of belief.

This harmful convention produces a marginalized label which adheres itself to the non-observer as “different” or “other.” As Johnson (2006) points out, “reducing people to a single dimension of who they are” – in this case, non-Christian – “separates and excludes them, marks them as ‘other’, as different from ‘normal’ people and therefore inferior,” therein compounding the initial difference – simply that of an alternative religious belief or unbelief – by branding the non-Christian student herself as ‘weird’ for her particular practice and re-inscribing the majority of other “normal” students as
superior, or worse – as right. We are taught to fear that which we don’t know or understand, and Johnson (2006) says of this myth that it “justifies keeping outsiders on the outside,” making it an easy move from here to religious intolerance and bigotry. How, then, do our students learn to deal with difference? The “poor little Jehovah’s Witness girl” doesn’t get to go to birthday parties, so she shouldn’t hang out either. This attitude inhibits the development of genuine kinship and understanding of people who fall outside the perceived “norm.”

Last spring, I received an email from a classmate that was sent to the class listserv on Easter morning. In it, the classmate extended his hope and blessings for his classmates and the wished for all of us a “rich sense of God’s presence in our lives”. With the simple transmission of this email, my classmate exhibited three advantages he receives as a Christian: he is able to “talk openly about his religious practices without concern for how it will be received by others”; he can “assume that there is a universality of religious experience”; and finally, that he can “share his holiday greetings without being fully conscious of how it may impact those who do not celebrate the same holidays” (Clark et al., 2002, p. 53-54). My colleague, while aware of some of the religious beliefs of his classmates, cannot be sure of knowing everyone’s religious intentions. As a non-believer, I couldn’t help but feel angered, and yet, convention has taught me that this type of email was sent with “good intentions.” Why must this be read as a benevolent act?

I felt silenced and displaced as a non-Christian, an outsider unable to express my true feelings – and this inhibits my interaction with the class as a whole. If I were to speak out, would I be one against many? And if so, how can I be sure that my solitary
voice will be heard and understood? This dogmatism contributed to me feeling devalued on the basis of my outsider status. Schlosser (2003) notes, “making that assumption (that everyone is Christian) is offensive to people from minority religious backgrounds, that it contributes to ethnocentrism and it decreases the amount of interaction among people form diverse backgrounds” (p. 50). In an environment where learning so inherently depends upon the freedom of expression and the exchange of ideas, an email such as the one I received had the ability to set the tone and the agenda for the rest of our class sessions. That, in and of itself, is privilege.

Identity

Teaching is a political act (Apple, 1979), and as such, educators must remember that “every individual’s myriad social identities are present all the time” – that is, “we can not check our race, gender, sexuality and so forth at the door of our classrooms or work environments any more than we can check our religion, spirituality, faith, or secularity there” (Clark et al, 2002, p. 57). Educators’ personal histories and private lives are very much a part of their teaching methods, no matter how separate she or he might intend them to be. While teachers generally choose not to disclose their religious identity, it is unlikely that this information will not be revealed by the unassuming cross or crucifix dangling from a pendant around their neck, holiday sweaters and lapel pins, prayer calendars or other forms of Scripture posted around their desk, a passing reference to Sunday school or Sunday services during class, or even bumper stickers or license plates proclaiming their religion located on their personal vehicles. But what are the
implications for non-Christian colleagues or students who encounter these subtle declarations of faith?

On my first day as a very green middle school teacher, my assigned mentor introduced herself to me as “a Christian.” I was immediately floored by her pronouncement, and I ruminated on this for weeks thereafter. What did she mean, and what was entailed in her self-description as Christian? I realized that she meant to identify herself as giving and loving, God-fearing and presumably self-disciplined – traits that are generally ascribed to members of the Christian faith. It was only later that I began to question her declaration as somewhat insidiously self-serving, and began to examine what assumptions were being exploited by her statement. My mentor, Mrs. C., must have supposed that I, myself was a Christian, or else that I accepted her definition of Christian as expressing the traits I enumerated above. Mrs. C did not consider that there are contrary characterizations of Christians, and that I might possess some of these judgments. However, because she operated on assumption, I – a non-Christian – reacted strangely to her pronouncement and instantly felt alienated from her, my assigned guide who was expected to evaluate and assess my teaching performance. How could I then identify myself as different? Mrs. C. believed the appellation “Christian” equated with some form of “goodness” and her assumption signified that to be different was to be un-Christian, that is, not giving and loving, God-fearing and self-disciplined.

My mentor and others like her are operating under the full privilege of non-discriminatory self-disclosure that is guaranteed to Christians in this nation, especially in parts of the southern United States. For a member of a religious minority to act in the same manner is almost next to unimaginable. There is a never-ending array of stereotypes
and prejudices associated with other religions and faiths – Jews are “greedy bankers,” Hindus are “idol-worshipers” lacking in social values, Muslims are “terrorists” who “hate America” – which often inhibit similar religious disclosures. Had I returned my mentor’s introduction with “Hi, I’m Wiccan,” or “I don’t believe in God,” she might have immediately associated me with devil-worship or other sinister acts (and might have even expressed to the administration her concerns of my involvement with ‘innocent’ children). My status as a non-Christian could thus become a liability for me (Johnson, 2006). Non-Christians do not share in the same protections and “accepted” status of Christians, and can be victimized by persecution or other forms of xenophobic violence (Blumenfeld, 2006). For students from non-religious or non-Christian backgrounds, public schools can be daunting sites of obligatory acculturation or oppression as they attempt to navigate the seas on which their Christian peers sail.

Returning to the discussion of repugnant stereotypes, it should be noted that Christians can safely assume that the media will not portray their religion negatively (Clark et al., 2003; Schlosser, 2006), just as Mrs. C. was able to safely assume that I would not associate negative judgments with her because of her introduction. If and when the media sensationalizes other religious minorities, such as in the case of Warren Jeffs, or the racial profiling of Muslims in transit, or even the ridicule of Scientology, children of these sects bear the immediate scorn of their classmates. A child in Oklahoma was suspended because her classmates were “frightened” by her religious head scarf (Haynes, 2004). Johnson (2006) writes: “it isn’t what we don’t know that frightens us; it’s what we think we do know” (emphasis in original, p. 13). And considering the bias in the media against Muslims, it’s no wonder that a hijab might alarm some students.
Ann Coulter, a political pundit, publicly designated Ground Zero in New York the “world’s largest public display built in commemoration of Islam” (Coulter, 2003, p. 6). Such fear-mongering is typical of privilege at its worst, what McIntosh (1988) described as conferred dominance – or when one is privileged in such a way that it subjugates or oppresses others. Coulter, a self-proclaimed Christian, occupies a seat of power as a televised political commentator; therefore her words are especially pernicious. Coulter is able to reach a wider audience with her particular brand of hatred, and does so without fear of reprisal or attack simply because she can claim “rightness” as her ally, due to her dominant group membership.

Curriculum

As noted previously, many conservative Christians feel the curriculum of the public school is dominated by the ‘religion’ of secular humanism, and argue that schools are teaching material contrary to the tenets of Christianity (Baer & Carper, 1999; Edwards, 1998; Gaddy et al., 1996; Limbaugh, 2003; Marzano, 1993). Counter to what Christians have posited (Edwards, 1998; Limbaugh, 2003), prayer is allowed in public schools across the nation: students are able to voluntarily pray as they wish, however, they simply aren’t able to publicly enjoin or coerce others to join them. Students are also able to read the Bible on school property, so long as it doesn’t interfere with direct instruction. David Limbaugh’s testament to the fallacious ‘war on Christianity’ would have people believe otherwise (2003). Because the school’s curricula teaches anti-racism, anti-sexism, self-esteem, and sex education, critics argue that public education is hostile to the
Christian faith. This is, yet again, another argument devised to repaint efforts at social justice and multiculturalism as a movement to brainwash students and set the stage for the coming of the Anti-Christ (Marzano, 1993). Frosty Troy (1999) somewhat humorously observed that “just because teachers can’t pin on a church label and baptize the students doesn’t make public education any less spiritual” (p. 21). Toward the charge that John Dewey’s brand of secular humanism is a religion, it is helpful to look to Nel Noddings’s explanation of Dewey’s position on religion:

His secular humanism is, by his own admission, religious, but he did not want it to become a religion. In his characteristic approach, he rejected religion as a noun; he wanted to be rid of organizations devoted to anything supernatural, dogmatic, or doctrinal. But he wanted to retain the ‘religious,’ an adjectival label for experience that inspires us to surpass our present selves toward something better. (p. 107)

Dewey believed that students might gain cultural enrichment by engaging with diversity, and because of this he became an advocate for the curriculum of the common school (Pring, 2007). Christians also look favorably upon the common school’s curriculum (Baer & Carper, 1999), although for a staunchly different reason. Horace Mann, in planning the first common schools during the nineteenth century, established a ‘non-sectarian’ curriculum. However, to Mann, “non-sectarian” essentially meant reading from the King James Bible without comment (Tyack, 1974). Spring (2002) points out that both Catholics and Protestants referred to these public schools as “Protestant schools” (p. 68), and Tyack (1974) describes how Catholics felt like “second-class citizens” as a result of Protestant domination in schools (p. 86). This was an ideal curriculum for many Christians who believe that Protestantism is the consummate version of Christianity. However, contestations over the Protestant nature of the common schools eventually led to the Catholic boycott of public schools, and as a result, the
eventual removal of biblical instruction. Strangely enough, Limbaugh (2003) blames Mann for introducing secularism to public schools and credits him with the “decreasing focus on religious instruction” (p.16). Apparently, for Limbaugh, Protestant teachers and textbooks are not enough to ensure Christian dominion over the curriculum; he writes:

when you consider that the first common schools in this country were established for the purpose of Christian instruction, the current climate of hostility toward all things Christian in the public school environment is sobering (2003, p. 36).

As Kliebard states in *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* (2004), “curriculum in any time and place becomes the site of a battleground” (p. 98). Christians have struggled vociferously since the conception of the common school to maintain a decidedly Protestant agenda in schools (Spring, 2002; Tyack, 1974), and it’s my belief that this particular agenda remains still today. Consider the following questions: Why isn’t the canon of English literature a subject of hot debate, when high school students are reading overtly Christian material such as Dante’s *Inferno* and Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*? The former denounces homosexuals and the prophet Muhammed, while the latter takes issue with single mothers and brands a woman for “sinning,” i.e., having sexual relations outside her absentee marriage. Instead, *The Grapes of Wrath* is challenged for “taking God’s name in vain” and characterizing people from Oklahoma as “dirty scum” (Edwards, 1998, p. 105-106). Granted, readers in Oklahoma might be offended by Steinbeck’s portrayal of their ancestors, but this pales in comparison to the hatred and viciousness a gay, lesbian or bisexual teenager might face on account of the prejudice demonstrated by Dante’s pejorative placement of homosexuals on the fiery sands of the seventh circle of Hell.

The history of colonial America is retold again and again as one of “settlement” by people seeking (Christian) religious freedom, instead of excoriating the racist abuses
of missionaries and the forced conversion of thousands to the Christian religion. Why isn’t this history being re-examined as one of privilege and domination? M. Stanton Evans (2007) writes of how Congress appropriated money for the Christian education of the Indians, and adopted the Northwest Ordinance governing the territories beyond the Ohio River, saying it did so, among other reasons, to advance “religion and morality…As to the repeated efforts to subsidize and promote the religious education of Indians, John Quincy Adams would explain the project this way: ‘They were considered as savages, whom it was our policy and duty to use our influence in converting them to Christianity…we had the good fortune of teaching them the arts of civilization and the doctrine of Christianity (p. 24).

To ‘kill the Indian and save the man’ has typically been the mantra of assimilation since the drive began to settle and dominate the West (Grande, 2004; Howard, 2006), yet Limbaugh (2003) lauds the measures taken to give Indians a “Christian education” (p. 45). In direct contrast, Grande (2004) considers the actions to “Christianize” (p. 11) Native Americans part and parcel of the mis-education provided by the American school. These are opposite positions which could be explored by students and teachers alike in schools, and given careful attention to the diversity of viewpoints, could foster a potentially rich opportunity for critical thinking skills and development. Noddings (1993, p. 45) writes, “not only do students leave school with a faulty impression of history but they miss entirely the special opportunities for reflection.” I agree with this sentiment. Students could gain an informed response to the disparate portrayals of our nation’s history, rather than reading a one-sided account which glorifies the “birth” of this nation. Christianity need not be vilified in order for students to explore its influence in the construction of thought across the centuries, nor does special attention need to be paid to the abuses of Christianity alone. Other major world religions have shared in the persecution and destruction of people through the ages, and there is no reason for
Christianity to shoulder that burden. There is good and bad on every side of the religion debate. As Noddings points out, students could learn about the starkly different (and sometimes ambiguous) views that Christians upheld regarding slavery (1993). Many abolitionist leaders were Christian, and in contrast, there were slave ships after Jesus (Noddings, 1993). The emphasis placed on hyper-patriotism by fundamentalist critics would be challenged, true, but it’s my belief that students, as future citizens and policy-makers, deserve a full account of the abuses suffered in the establishment of this country.
CONCLUSION

Schlosser (2003, p. 48) asks, “Why are individuals so unwilling to explore religious issues?” This unwillingness on the part of Christians to hear about or discuss other religions is indicative of the privileges held by this group. By denying voice and justification, Christians are thus able to set the platform, tone, and mood of discussion. Exposure to ideas which contradict or stand in stark contrast to one’s own is not the same as infringement of one’s religious freedoms. Christians must recognize this power and adjust themselves accordingly. Whether or not the pundits and zealots will admit to it, Christianity holds a powerful place in today’s school systems. The pervasive presence of Christianity can be found in the large Christian faculty and student body, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes or other religious organizations for athletes, and Bible clubs. Christianity is present on those early mornings when students meet and join hands for prayer around the flag pole. While there are policies discouraging such events, the Lord’s Prayer is often recited within huddles before athletic games, with non-Christians mouthing the words and other religious minorities looking on. Christianity is present and privileged every day that schools are in business and operating, and no amount of secular humanism or other philosophy will dislodge it from its dominant position. Religious minorities and non-believers will continue to suffer oppression and discrimination until efforts are made to include these outliers within the public discussion.

Schlosser (2003) states that, “because of their numerical superiority and long standing political positions, Christians have more power than all of the minority religious
groups combined” (p. 46). As such, it is my belief that Christians are in a unique position to identify and confront their dominant status. It has been noted by Richard Nixon that it would “be impossible for a confessed nonbeliever to win election to the American presidency” (Noddings, 1993, p. 42), and this idea is substantiated some thirty years later with the confusion surrounding Barack Obama’s religious affiliations during his presidential bid. It is helpful here to return to McIntosh’s model and discussion of privilege to understand how Christians might play a part in deconstructing the dominant paradigm regarding the privileges put forth by Christian group membership.

Peggy McIntosh (1988) describes two different manifestations of privilege. The first of those, unearned entitlements or advancements, occurs whenever one group has something that should be shared by members of every group, such as safety or acceptance. For example, men are able to freely walk the streets at night without fear that harm will come to them simply because they are walking around in the dark by themselves – a privilege that women generally do not have. From the discussion above, we can see that Christians receive a good number of unearned entitlements that should be offered to all members of our community. Everyone should be able to celebrate their religious holidays in any manner that they choose, without having to be concerned that their grades will be affected by school absences or that their job will be in danger if they take time off. People should be able to freely identify themselves in whichever manner they wish, without fear that someone will attack them verbally, cause them bodily harm, or shun them socially as a result of their disclosure. And there are multiple viewpoints and histories to be explored in the curriculum of our schools; preference should not be given to one perspective.
The second form of privilege is known as conferred dominance. This occurs whenever one group is privileged in such a way that oppresses or subjugates another group. These privileges can be based on sex, race, or, as I’ve shown here, religious affiliations. The history of the United States is one fraught with the denial of rights, the oppression and devastation of large numbers of people, the enslavement and torture of Blacks and Native Americans, and yet still today the story of the US is considered one of advancement and is touted as an exemplar of modern civilization. Christians have benefited in numerous ways as a result of our history, and benefit still to this day. However, this particular form of privilege carries with it an adherence to arrogance based on the assumption of rightness. For instance, the promotion of Christianity over and above all other faiths is an overbearing and pompous position. While Christians are justified in believing that their particular beliefs are well-founded and grounded in Scripture, there is no rationale that can justify the persecution, belittlement, or criticism of another’s belief or unbelief. Noddings enjoins us to remember that Puritans bored holes through the tongue with a hot iron and killed women in the name of religion (1993). These abominations against human differences cannot continue, especially when a hot iron can be exchanged for a grenade launcher.

With regard to the collision of differences in the American cultural sphere, it is imperative that citizens become mindful and tolerant of the diversity of our community. This is not to say that one must respect or show admiration for someone whom they dislike, but rather, that one must show compassion for that person’s ideas and beliefs, whether those ideas are similar or divergent from our own. Christians, in recognition of the benefits and immunities of which they are a part, might help to establish an
appreciation of those beliefs which differ from their own. This might take the form of a sectarian greeting card around the Christmas holiday, or something as manageable as resisting the impulse to send “good wishes” to one’s classmates on Easter morning. I’m not encouraging people to alter their beliefs, rather, I’m simply asking for a straightforward acknowledgement that not everyone’s beliefs coincide with one’s own.

Religion often skims under the multicultural radar (Schlosser, 2003) due to the primary focus on the triumvirate of race/class/gender, and I believe it’s time to examine the nuanced implications that a dominant religion deposits on society writ large. Future work should be done to explore the intersections of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and religion. Green (2004) notes that most churches in the United States are still segregated. Why? Why do hierarchies still exist within the Christian tradition (Blumenfeld, 2006)? These questions and more exist pertaining to religion, and not just the Christian religion. Can religions coexist peacefully? How might school curriculums be designed to incorporate religious diversity? Is there a way to achieve religious advancement without coercion and assimilation? As we look toward a globalized future, it is my hope that some of these questions might be answered and some of these issues resolved once and for all. Christianity is not under attack, schools have not ‘kicked out’ religion, and so it will no longer suffice for Limbaugh and others to continue to cry “foul.” The gig is up.
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