



12-1-2000

Religion and U.S. Culture

James L. Heft

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Heft, J. L. (2000). Religion and U.S. Culture. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 4 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0402032013>

This Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email JCE@nd.edu.

RELIGION AND U.S. CULTURE

JAMES L. HEFT, S.M.

University of Dayton

After reviewing the history of the interplay between religion and culture in the U.S., this article explores important facets of contemporary American society that color the experience and meaning of religious faith. Among these are excessive individualism, a heightened awareness of the need for personal integrity, and the desire for personal religious experience. While religion is often treated as a "classroom pariah" at universities, the author argues that there are numerous possibilities for a more full integration of religion into university life and overall American culture.

"Religion and U.S. culture," a topic both broad and complex, makes adequate treatment of it in a single article impossible. Even at book length, the challenge would still be formidable. What is more, the subject matter, be it "religion" or "culture," constantly moves, is dynamic, and appears in many different forms. And if it were not a sufficient deterrent that this subject is both vast and dynamic, one only needs to recall, as Niebuhr (1955) did more than 40 years ago, that "whenever we consider the historical drama, we confront...the fact that the observers of this drama are invariably themselves involved in the flux which they are trying to survey" (p. 53). More recently, a neo-orthodox Christian, Arthur S. Link, wrote that

the ego in its unredeemed or natural state is not able to see history apart from itself.... Over and over I have found from my own experience that my own ego drives inexorably towards its own control, that is to say, it seeks to impose its own pattern upon events, selects its own evidence, and discards evidence when it is not useful, in short, writes its own history. (Carter, 1997, p. 195)

And for anyone who thinks that a personal religious commitment inevitably distorts one's capacity to be "objective" about any subject, and perhaps even more so since our subject includes religion, then still another reason exists for me personally as a Roman Catholic priest to think twice before taking up this subject with any hope of actually shedding light on it.

I am enough of a postmodernist to realize that we inevitably play a role in the construction of our own knowledge; yet, I am a bit more optimistic than Link. I believe that we can in fact approximate with some accuracy a description of the things we see and experience. But given the vastness of this topic, I must set certain limits. I have divided my remarks into four areas: (1) a brief history of how we have gotten to where we are culturally and religiously; (2) a singling out of a few dimensions of contemporary culture that affect deeply our religious sensibilities and self-understanding; (3) a description of the exclusion of religion from the academy, and consequently from many of our schools and the textbooks we use; and (4) several areas we ought to face up to as people interested in private schools and in strengthening the religious dimensions of our culture. At different points in this article, I will make a few suggestions about areas and topics that need further research. My thesis may be stated as follows: There is both good news and bad news when we look at religion and U.S. culture. The good news is that the secularization hypothesis has proven untrue, for religion in multiple forms continues to exercise a strong influence on many people in the U.S. The bad news is that the forms in which religion most typically expresses itself today are mainly individualistic and focused too exclusively on "religious experiences."

HOW WE'VE COME TO THIS POINT

Two movements have deeply affected the shape of much of religious practice in the U.S. The first movement, beginning in the 17th century, underscored the importance of the freedom from persecution, especially by the state and established religions (such as those that existed in medieval Christian Europe and even in the modern confessional nation-states that emerged after the Reformation). The colonists of Rhode Island, Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania made it clear that religious freedom would constitute one of the cornerstones of our culture. The second major movement, the Enlightenment, spanned both the 18th and 19th centuries, and liberated reason from the control of faith, established the scientific method of knowing as more reliable and objective than religious belief, and stressed the autonomy of the individual. Combined, these two movements made religion voluntary, a personal or private matter of the individual person, and something separated from daily life—or at least surely from public life. The legal

structure that has facilitated these developments is the separation of church and state. The First Amendment in our Bill of Rights protects freedom of religious beliefs by forbidding the establishment of any Church: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." As a consequence, "[T]oday's Americans are among the first people in history not to consider their religions as primarily shared and public" (Portier, 1994, p. 49).

The potential for more radical religious pluralism, though existent from the foundation of this country, began to be felt in the 1830s and 1840s with the first large-scale influx of Irish and German Catholics. Until then, most Americans believed that they were God's chosen people, that their country was Protestant, and that even God was Protestant. But the Protestant grip on American culture began to loosen, and continued to loosen over the next century, except for brief but strong periods of influence for fundamentalists in the 1920s and the 1980s:

Protestants had battled with heretical movements such as Deists, Owenites, and Unitarians. Serious divisions were caused by the Civil War and the war on modernism (e.g., Darwinism, higher biblical criticism) with the "private party" of fundamentalism and the "public" party of liberalism. (Randall, 1997, p. 67)

In the 1880s and 1890s, large numbers of immigrants began to arrive in the United States, first from northern and then southern Europe, followed in the last few decades by Asians and increasing numbers of Hispanics. All immigration was drastically curtailed from 1921 until well after World War II. Most recently, Muslims, who today number more than the Episcopalians, constitute the fastest growing religious group in the United States.

Religious pluralism, ensured and protected by the First Amendment and legally supported by the separation of church and state, has led in the latter part of this century to the separation of religion from public life and public institutions. In recent decades, school-sponsored prayer, the reading of the Bible, and the display of the Ten Commandments in public schools have been declared unconstitutional. The Supreme Court, through a series of judgments, has extended further and further the formal exclusion of religious expression in public institutions. The exact significance on the public expression of religion of the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), and the recent striking down of that act by the Supreme Court in *City of Boerne v. Flores* (1997) remains to be seen. Members of Congress have promised to enact a successor to the RFRA. Stephen Carter (1993), a Yale law professor, struck a chord with his widely read book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, subtitled unambiguously *How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*. Among other persuasive examples of his thesis, Carter showed

how frequently the press reported Martin Luther King's vision for racial equality as based on a commitment to civil rights rather than on his Christian conviction that all people, regardless of race, were God's children, and therefore should be treated with the dignity and respect due to them. Even before King was a civil rights leader, he was a minister of the Gospel. Had he not been such a dedicated religious believer, it is hard to imagine that he would have been the courageous civil rights leader that he was. But, as Carter demonstrates, his religious roots have been trivialized, if not completely removed from sight.

In summary then, we have as a country moved from a time when we were dominantly main-line Protestants to the present, when we have greater and greater religious pluralism to which we have responded by privatizing religion, that is, by eliminating for the most part the public expression of religion, particularly in public institutions and higher education. Nevertheless, the so-called secularization thesis, namely that with the advent of modernization religion would cease to exist, has been proven false (Berger, 1998; Casanova, 1994).

If this driving of religion from the public square has left it bland and uniform, or naked as one of our religious commentators has claimed (Neuhaus, 1984), the variety of expressions that religions have taken in the nonpublic institutional setting has in no way been reduced. The expressions of religion differ from region to region, from the northeast to the southwest, from rural to urban and suburban settings, from within the various levels of affluence and religious perspectives. Even more diverse are the expressions of our many religious cultures, whose terrain is uneven, mountainous in some areas, smooth valleys in others, carefully protected among the Amish, easily accessible through some TV evangelists, esoteric with some New Age forms, vibrant among some Pentecostals, deeply tied in with family and community among Hispanics and African Americans, deeply traditional in some synagogues, deeply divided over fault lines of biblical interpretation, and highly visible in some mosques newly built along interstate highways.

We have not been well served by those writers who have presented the current tensions in our culture as simply a battle between the liberals and the conservatives, the left and the right. Perhaps one of the most widely read books that perpetuates this polarized version of what is happening is Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, subtitled, *Making Sense of the Battles over the Family, Art, Education, Law and Politics* (1991). There is no doubt that there are some people on each end of the spectrum; there are also, however, a good number of people in the middle whose views and significance accounts such as Hunter's leave out. This is certainly true when it comes to American Protestantism. Jacobsen and Trollinger (1998) argue persuasively that the notion of a Protestantism divided into two mutually exclusive and hostile camps collapses in the face of the actual real-

ity: namely, numerous Protestants and Protestant groups (e.g., Lutherans, Mennonites, Black Baptists and Methodists) who cannot be neatly forced into a liberal or a conservative party. Moreover, the fact that the fault lines within American Protestantism are constantly shifting ensure that no single or simple bifurcated division of faith exists.

Andrew Greeley (1997) also disagrees with the portrait of American Catholics as deeply split to the right and the left. He recently commented on the "Common Ground" project launched by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin to overcome the factions that are dividing Catholics in the United States. The official *Common Ground* statement begins: "Will the Catholic Church in the United States enter the new millennium as a Church of promise, augmented by the faith of rising generations and able to be a leavening force in our culture? Or will it become a church on the defensive torn by dissension and weakened in its core structures?" While remaining in favor of constructive dialogue, Greeley produced statistical evidence that supported a profile of the Catholic laity who are largely in agreement on major issues of Church teaching, and in a good relationship with their pastors. However, the reactions to the *Common Ground* statement by high-ranking American prelates, including cardinals, indicate that there may be more public disagreement not among the majority of the laity, but rather among a number of the bishops, than at any time in the history of American Catholicism since the turn of this century (Untener, 1996).

Despite the tendency of the media and others to polarize the positions of people with regard to religion, it can be said with some confidence that if there is not deep polarization, there is nevertheless extensive religious pluralism in the United States today.

SOME FACETS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE

To make this article manageable, I shall limit myself to four characteristics, two negative and two positive. First, let us look at the negative characteristics: excessive individualism and the focus on religious experience. I have already mentioned briefly the combined effect of the colonists' quest for religious freedom and the Enlightenment emphasis on the individual. By the time we get to the 20th century, sociologists of almost every persuasion agree at least that American culture has emphasized the individual. While there are some positive consequences of this emphasis, most thinkers have seen the lack of community as a growing and very serious problem in our culture. Robert Putnam's widely read article "Bowling Alone" (1995) documents the significant decrease of various forms of political participation over the past two decades, and the decline in participation in religious groups, neighborhood organizations and, as the title suggests, bowling leagues. Putnam lists

among the causes of this trend towards social disengagement the many millions of women who, given lower real wages, have moved out of the home and into paid employment. Moreover, he points to the increase in the number of divorces and fewer children, both of which have had a negative impact on social engagement since "married, middle-class parents are generally more socially involved than other people" (p. 75). Under the heading of the "Technological Transformation of Leisure," Putnam locates still another major cause: technological trends that have radically "privatized" and "individualized" the use of our leisure time. Studies in the 1960s demonstrated that the amount of time devoted to watching television

literally dwarfed all other changes in the ways that Americans spent their days and nights. Television has made our communities (or rather what we experience as our communities) wider and shallower. Rather than playing football on weekends, we watch other people play it half a continent away. Rather than confide in close friends, we watch Oprah discuss astonishing intimate matters with total strangers on TV. (Putnam, 1995, p. 75)

And even though Americans now spend more actual time listening to classical music and to jazz, they do not do so in concert halls or small clubs. Through cassette tapes, compact disks, and the ubiquitous Walkman, people have their musical entertainment when they want, by themselves, and in just the selection they prefer. Cable TV has made an immense selection of channels possible; and pay-TV allows us to order the film we wish to see when we want to see it. In summary, according to Putnam, technology and consumer culture are creating a huge gap between individual interests, which can now be met more easily and immediately, and the interests of the community, which are less demanding and more distant.

Putnam's thesis has not gone unchallenged. For example, Thomas Rotolo (1999), using data from the General Social Survey (1974-1994), has shown that although aggregate voluntary association participation decreased from 1974 to 1984, participation increased in the later half of the time period. Another writer has argued that people watch TV because they are exhausted from the extended work week, thus making increased hours before the TV not the cause of disengagement, but the consequence of overwork (Schor, 1991).

The social philosopher Michael Walzer (1994) recently wrote that:

weakness is a general feature of associational life in America today. Unions, churches, interest groups, ethnic organizations, political parties and sects, societies for self-improvement and good works, local philanthropies, neighborhood clubs and cooperatives, religious sodalities, brotherhoods and sisterhoods: this American civil society is wonderfully multitudinous. Most associations, however, are precariously estab-

lished, skimpily funded, and always at risk. They have less reach and holding power than once they did. (p. 187)

What all this adds up to is the isolation of most persons from an engaging experience of community with other people, and all too frequently, with the members of their own family. Siding with Walzer and Putnam is Robert Wuthnow (1994), the Princeton sociologist of religion who described the tenuous relationships that characterize most support groups:

The kind of community [these small groups] create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past. These communities are more fluid and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual. The communities they create are seldom frail. People are cared for. They help one another. They share their intimate problems. But in another sense small groups may not be fostering community as effectively as many of their proponents would like. Some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding members together asserts only the weakest of obligations. Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticize. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied.... We can imagine that [these small groups] really substitute for families, neighborhoods, and broader community attachments that may demand lifelong commitments, when, in fact, they do not. (pp. 3-6)

Excessive individualism, however, does not aptly characterize a rapidly growing and increasingly influential group of Americans located mainly in the southwest. I am speaking of the Hispanic citizens of the United States whose strong sense of community clearly sets them apart from most of the rest of the citizens who, as Bellah has written, have adopted the individualism that lies at the very core of American culture (Bellah et al., 1985). Hispanic theologian Goizueta (1995) makes this point in his discussion of the relationship between Jesus and Mary. Instead of seeing Mary as the autonomous questioning woman, as many feminists do, or Jesus as the strong individual man "for others," he pictures Mary as "the symbol of the preexistent, involuntary community which defines and constitutes the individual person we call Jesus" (p. 66). And since community is constitutive of the person, "then to know Mary, the mother of Jesus, *is* (at least partially) to know Jesus. Conversely, one *cannot* know Jesus without also knowing Mary" (p. 66).

The fact of American excessive individualism suggests an area that needs further research: namely, we need to do more research on ways in which we learn in groups and in communities what we might not learn were we to stress learning only as individuals apart from groups and communities. More

specifically, we need to study more what happens to the significance and practice of religion when excessive individualism becomes the filter through which everything must pass. Such research can be done in fields of philosophy, religious studies, history, and the psychology of learning.

A second negative effect of modern culture, especially as it relates to religion, is the reduction of religion basically to the religious experiences of individuals, and generally only very intense and extraordinary ones. In this sense, religion possesses little cognitive content. It is not so much that American forms of religion are typically anti-intellectual; but they are frequently a-intellectual, that is, understood to be not about truth, but about deeply felt emotions. Much of this development, of course, can be traced to the Enlightenment whose proponents, including Thomas Jefferson, thought of religion as inherently sectarian, and therefore necessarily relegated to the private and personal sphere. What is not sectarian—that is, what is open to all persons of good will—is not a particular faith but rather the products of reason. Everyone uses reason, including the atheist (Wilkins, 1995). But even before the Enlightenment, as early as beginning with the Puritans in the 1630s who had to demonstrate to the members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony that the Holy Spirit had in fact wrought a change in their hearts, and extending through the powerful first and second great awakenings, the emphasis on religion as a deeply emotional experience has moved large proportions of the population (Hatch, 1989).

But our secular public culture views religion not only as sectarian, but also as a matter of deeply held feelings, convictions that elude all empirical verification or reasonable validation. Two authors, one a sociologist, Rieff (1966, 1972), and the other a philosopher, MacIntyre (1981, 1990), have written insightfully about the way in which religion has become therapeutic, emotive, and private. These authors show the change in the content of religion from something that was considered true, to something that was considered a value (that is, worthwhile because it is useful to me), and finally to something that is mainly therapeutic, that is, a value for my personal wholeness and well-being. During this evolution, the priest, minister, and rabbi have been replaced by the psychologist and therapist. The “emotivist,” writes MacIntyre (1981), “the peculiarly modern self...in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end” (p. 32). Another rapidly growing suburban form of this subjective and a-intellectual approach to religion is the movement to separate “spirituality” from religion, and especially from normative communal practices.

The pervasiveness of this preoccupation with personal religious experience suggests a second area of research, one which may be described mainly in epistemological terms. Robert Bellah and his associates, in their most recent book, *The Good Society* (1991), make five suggestions to enable

schools in our society to be more “life-enabling,” among which is the suggestion to rediscover an “enlarged paradigm of knowledge, which recognizes the value of science but acknowledges that other ways of knowing have equal dignity” (p. 177). We need more research on how art, literature, and rituals and practices of religious traditions provide moral insight every bit as valuable as scientific knowledge.

If two of the negative dimensions of contemporary culture are individualism and a preoccupation with religious experience, what are two positive dimensions? Not surprisingly, the flip-side of the negative dimensions. First, if contemporary culture emphasizes the individual, it also has heightened our awareness of the need for individual integrity. Indeed, while the case could easily be made that humankind has always demonstrated a lack of integrity, beginning with the dissimulations in the Garden of Eden, there seems to be less tolerance today for dishonesty. Democracy seems to require more virtue among individuals. I am not just pointing, for example, to the difference between what reporters agreed to ignore about John F. Kennedy’s private life in comparison to the near-obsession reporters today have with William Clinton’s private life. I am also referring to the greater sensitivity, admittedly hard to document, to the search many people seem engaged in today to find what is truly their calling. Many people today enjoy more choices than did their parents and grandparents. And more reflective people seek to find more authentic ways to be their true selves (Taylor, 1992). Part of the high divorce rate in this country might be attributed to high expectations of marriage, particularly when they are cast in terms of personal happiness and satisfaction. Today, many people in our culture seem quite aware of the importance of discovering and living according to their true self, but the self that they seek is less and less often one that is developed in the midst of a community rooted in a religious tradition. Nevertheless, the way in which many young people find their way back to a religious practice within a community context is through a search for what is most authentically themselves.

A second positive dimension of modern culture is the desire for personal religious experience, for feeling what one believes, rather than simply going through the motions, attending the rituals, saying the set prayers. We should not assume that formalism in matters of religion ever satisfied those who sought to live the truth. I am suggesting, though, that more and more people seek today to find ways actually to experience either what their religious traditions have affirmed for centuries, or to feel what they value, rather than value something just because they are told that they should. It is difficult to understand what the younger generation seeks in drugs and music other than an *experience* that will seem real, immediate, full rather than empty, and make them feel connected with others, even if they remain isolated in their own blissful consciousness. Quoting the late German theologian Karl Rahner, Louis Dupré (1997), a philosopher of religion, recently said that Christianity

in the future will be mystical or it will not be at all. It is important to note that by "mystical" neither Dupré nor Rahner intended extraordinary experiences of God's presence, visions and exceptional moments. Rather, they intend experiences that are neither private nor extraordinary, but rather those that see the deeper meaning in scripture, the sacraments and in prayer, and, to paraphrase the final lines of the musical *Les Misérables*, the experience of seeing the face of God whenever one truly loves another person. In less religious terms, John Dewey (1923) in our own century placed particular emphasis on the role of experience in learning, relying heavily though on scientific models of knowledge which emphasized verification and collaboration.

In summary then, if we look at modern culture and ask what are some of its characteristics that we should take note of, particularly as we consider the matter of religion, we noted two negative ones, individualism and an exclusive focus on religious experience as ecstatic moments, and two positive ones, the desire for authenticity and an emphasis on religious experience as a part of daily life. These characteristics are much more complex than these brief remarks have indicated, and other characteristics could have been discussed, such as the greater sensitivity to human rights and to the needs of people suffering in virtually any part of the world, characteristics that, (if they are not merely the result of exaggerated individualism and greater exposure to the situation of the peoples of the world afforded through television), can constitute building blocks for a strengthening of religion in our own day (Heft, 1999b).

THE ACADEMY AND THE EXCLUSION OF RELIGION

In recent years, a number of major studies have been published that chronicle the history of higher education, concentrating particularly on how since the time of the Civil War religion has been excluded from the curriculum, and allowed to remain, especially at the collegiate level, if at all, only in the form of extracurricular activities (Reuben, 1996). Marsden (1997), for example, shows through extensive historical studies how several 19th-century religious colleges became major prestigious universities in the 20th century, and found it necessary in the process to exclude traditional religious viewpoints, which, however, he admits, "had been given an unduly privileged place in earlier academic establishments" (p. 12). In essence, Protestant liberal academics began to adjust the study of religion to the requirements of the increasingly powerful scientific method until religious concerns, at the turn of the century, were incorporated into the social sciences, reduced to morality and social reform, and eventually relegated either to professional preparation programs in divinity schools set off from the rest of the university or to extracurricular

activities for students in need of character development. In almost all cases, liberal Protestants who had shed their mentors' evangelicalism exemplified this secularizing movement, and passed on to the next generation a desire for a sort of universalism that eventually labeled religiously grounded perspectives as sectarian. Marsden explains:

As late as 1870 the vast majority of these [Protestant colleges] were remarkably evangelical. Most of them had clergymen-presidents who taught courses defending biblicist Christianity and who encouraged periodic campus revivals. Yet within half a century the universities that emerged from these evangelical colleges, while arguably carrying forward the spirit of their evangelical forebears, had become conspicuously inhospitable to the letter of such evangelicalism. By the 1920s the evangelical Protestantism of the old-time colleges had been effectively excluded from leading university classrooms. (1997, p. 4)

Today, those who share Marsden's thesis, and there are a growing number of writers who do, point to the virtual exclusion of the treatment of religion as a serious part of the academy's responsibility. In 1990, for example, Garry Wills accused intellectuals who write about the history of this country of ignoring America's religious communities: "[How can so many scholars] keep misplacing such a large body of people? Every time religiosity catches the attention of intellectuals, it is as if a shooting star had appeared in the sky" (Boyer, p. 115). Mitchell, a professor of government at Georgetown University, noted in an article published in 1996 in *Academe* that "the scholarship of the last generation concerned with modern political thought, for example, scarcely mentioned the religious writings of the canonical thinkers of the period, even though the works are often extensive" (p. 30). In that same issue of *Academe*, Martin Marty tells how Scott Appleby, with whom he co-directed a six-volume study of militant religious movements, reported that the U.S. State Department right up through the time of the Iranian revolution in 1979 tended to ignore religious faith in doing political analysis. One of the consequences of the exclusion of the serious study of religion in the academy is the neglect of similar study done in public primary and secondary schools, and this despite encouragement from official bodies to teach about religions. For example, in 1964, the American Council of School Administrators stated:

A curriculum which ignored religion would itself have serious religious implications. It would seem to proclaim that religion has not been as real in men's lives as health, politics, or economics. By omission, it would appear to deny that religion has been and is important in man's history — a denial of the obvious. As an integral part of man's culture, it must be included. (Boyer, 1997, p. 119)

Again, in 1982, another official body, this time the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, issued "Religious Studies Guidelines," and though it warned against "indoctrination" forbidden by the Constitution, it nonetheless encouraged the teaching of religion:

[T]he schools surely cannot fulfill adequately their educational function without including instruction concerning the impact of religion upon people, cultures, political systems and world history.

If the public schools are truly to educate for responsible citizenship.... they certainly cannot ignore the influence of religious values in forming democratic institutions and in shaping contemporary society. (Boyer, 1997, p. 120)

Despite such exhortations, religion remains absent from the textbooks that are used in our public primary and secondary schools. The call for the study of religion has fallen, for the most part, on deaf ears; if it has been heard, it has evoked only "timid actions on the part of publishers, principals, parents, and teachers.... Religion remains a classroom pariah" (Boyer, p. 120). In the view of the historian Boyer, the reasons for this exclusion are manifold. First, many people confuse analysis with advocacy; that is, many people confuse explaining the role that religion might have played in a historical period with advocating religion. Moreover, teachers and principals naturally want to avoid conflict; unfortunately, religious topics treated in public schools have frequently become flashpoints of controversy in local communities.

Pedagogically, most historians favor the "presidential synthesis," and concentrate on "the Age of Jackson" or the "the Age of Eisenhower" rather than the impact of the Second Great Awakening or the growth of Methodism in the first half of the 19th century. More to the point, Boyer believes that most historians actually accept, if only tacitly, the secularization thesis of U.S. history, and may also concentrate not on those features of history which remain permanent, but those which change—though it has to be said here that a close study of the history of religious groups in the United States includes not just continuity, but considerable change as well. After surveying a number of reasons for the religion's exclusion from textbooks, Boyer explains:

To suggest *reasons* for the failure of many textbook writers and survey-course teachers to treat religion adequately is not to *justify* that failure. To begin to correct this record of neglect, we need to treat religion not only as an adjunct of political and social change, but on its own terms: as the foundation of great and enduring social institutions, as a force for continuity as well as for change, and as a source of meaning and solace for hosts of Americans in the past and the present. (1997, p. 135)

Who then should be included in America's religious history? Boyer states that beyond the familiar triad of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, an adequate coverage of religion in the United States will have to include "Mormons, Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Buddhists, New Age Mystics, Eastern Orthodox, and—yes—the agnostics, the atheists, the indifferent and those shadowy but much-vilified 'secular humanists'" (1997, pp. 135-136).

These comments on the teaching about religion in schools suggest still another area of research. We have to date few studies on private education in general. Some religiously affiliated private schools, for example the Catholic schools, have produced studies—but not enough studies—on their own school systems (Convey, 1992). Christian schools and especially Jewish schools have grown rapidly in the past few years. What do we know about them? We should know more about them than just the size of their enrollments. What about the private nonreligiously affiliated schools as well? Obviously, a great deal more research is needed to understand the size, quality, impact, and distinctiveness of private schools, primary and secondary, in our country. Some helpful information may be found in the newsletter produced by the Council for American Private Education, but more basic research is needed on private primary and secondary schools in the United States.

Earlier in this article, I claimed that our culture has helped to transform religion into a form of emotional experience, something personal and private. I also mentioned that many Hispanics have retained a more communal dimension to the practice of their Catholic and Protestant traditions. Similar things should be noted about African Americans and their approach to religion. In general, African American churches and now some mosques clearly manifest a public expression of their religion. Gospel choirs, for example, provide some of the most direct and publicly moving expressions of religious beliefs on otherwise completely secular campuses. Major American political figures, such as Jesse Jackson, Patti LaBelle, and Cornel West, all have strong and well-known religious commitments. Consider too the special emphasis on lay leadership and initiatives among African American Catholics, who until the 20th century were banned in the United States from the priesthood, and, as a consequence, founded several religious communities of sisters in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Davis, 1990; Ochs, 1990).

Anyone who has participated in Hispanic and especially African American worship services has experienced a stronger expression of emotion. Until very recently, emotions have been typically understood as non-cognitive or even anti-cognitive experiences. Consequently, little to no attention has been paid to the emotions by academics whose primary allegiance is to a type of quantitative knowledge produced through the scientific method. When we add to this epistemological prejudice the often controversial nature

of religiously based views, we begin to understand some of the reasons why religion has been excluded in this century from the academy, and why the study of religion has been largely absent in the last 40 to 50 years from our primary and secondary schools. While it is true that religion has not been excluded from Catholic, evangelical and fundamentalist colleges and universities, most of these institutions are not considered by the leaders of the major secular universities to be truly open universities, that is, centers of academic freedom and critical thinking. They simply don't measure up as real universities (Heft, 1999a).

AREAS RELIGIOUS PEOPLE AND SCHOLARS NEED TO WORK ON

In this last section, I single out four areas for further reflection. First, I ask that all religious people be more dedicated to scholarship—not the view of scholarship that assumes that a religiously committed person is incapable of fairness and balance, but to that view that accepts rigorous standards and hard intellectual work. To the extent that religious affiliated colleges and universities have retained a strong sense of their religious tradition and their calling for demanding intellectual work, we can expect the quality of scholarship about religion in general to improve.

But such improvement will not in itself address the second area in need of improvement. Because of the privatization of religion referred to earlier, too many religious scholars have written and published primarily only for those in their own religious communities. A service has been performed by such scholarship, but its scope needs to be expanded. In other words, if more religious scholars took up issues that face the nation, indeed that face the world, and did so in dialogue with those scholars who typically address such issues, then religious perspectives would more likely be included in the national conversation. A formidable challenge awaits those religious scholars who try to enter this national dialogue. First, they must study carefully the work of scholars who have been tilling this soil for decades. And second, they must learn to express their interpretations of national events in language that people of other beliefs, and even of no belief, can recognize as addressed to them, and to do so without losing their own religiously grounded perspectives. Mainstream historians largely ignore the work of religious historians, seeing their work mainly as of only parochial interest. Although there is undeniably a secular bias among mainstream historians, the insularity of concern and scope of the work of many religious historians as well as theologians also contributes to their absence from the national discussion.

Third, religious believers, especially Protestants and Catholics, would be immensely helped if they learned how to work toward greater mutual understanding. The same thing could be said of Jews in this country, who divide

themselves among the main categories of reform, conservative, orthodox, and secular. Islam is now the fastest-growing religion in the United States, and is projected to outgrow Judaism as the second most commonly practiced religion in this century. A serious dialogue among Muslims, Jews, and Christians will only contribute to the strengthening of the role of religion in our pluralistic society. Though for the most part a Western phenomenon, dialogue between religions presupposes a genuine respect for people of other beliefs, distinguishes between proselytizing and witnessing, avoids coercion totally in all matters of conscience, and welcomes the freedom of religion for which we can thank the Enlightenment. At the same time, many religions in the West now seek a public expression that will neither antagonize nor polarize members of other religions. The Enlightenment marginalized religion because it polarized peoples; if religion seeks to have a greater influence in the culture of the United States, it needs to learn how to assume a public role that brings people together and contributes to stronger communities, even as it respects genuine differences of belief.

Finally, besides serious scholarship, entering more fully into the national debates, and strengthening mutual respect among religious groups, people of religious commitments need not only to talk the talk, but to walk the talk. This last point is almost too obvious to mention, but paradoxically therefore needs stressing. If religious people in the United States are to help shape the culture of the 21st century, then they must reflect in their attitudes and actions the religious beliefs they affirm. The consequence of repeated failures by religious people to embody their beliefs in practices will be nothing less than the unraveling of society itself. On the other hand, if the religious people of this country rise to this challenge, then trust will deepen, and our institutions, both public and private, will be strengthened. This has all been put quite forcefully by the chief rabbi of London, Jonathan Sacks, who said recently:

Without a strong civil society, even political and economic structures fail. The Japanese have shown us that business cannot thrive without relationships of trust. We know that many of the most successful companies are driven not by the profit motive alone, but by the integrity of the relationship between producer and consumer, between employer and employee. We know that schools fail without the support of families. We know that families fail without the support of communities. We know that communities fail without neighborliness and the obligations that flow from fellow feeling. Neither the free market nor the liberal democratic state can survive without internalized constraints that prevent us—from a sense of honor, or fidelity, or decency—from doing certain things which it may be in our advantage to do. These are moral relationships. They are covenantal rather than contractual. They belong to a different narrative, one told by our great religious traditions.

Society has a spiritual dimension.... We encounter God not only in houses of worship and moments of prayer, but also in the grace we bring to personal relationships.... The renewal of civil society is a spiritual task—a true challenge for the millennium. (Sacks, 1996, pp. 54-57)

More and more people are beginning to recognize the important role religion should assume in shaping our public life together as a nation. Private schools are positioned to contribute to religion's public role by educating their students for a citizenship that is religiously informed, and precisely because religiously informed, more apt to contribute to the common good.

REFERENCES

- Bellah, R., et al. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bellah, R., et al. (1991). *The good society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Berger, P. L. (1998, August 26). Protestantism and the quest for certainty. *The Christian Century*, 115(23), 782-796.
- Boyer, P. (1997). In search of the fourth 'r'. In B. Kuklick & D. G. Hart (Eds.), *Religious advocacy and American history* (pp. 112-136). Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans.
- Carter, P. A. (1997). Seldon's choice: Variations on a theme by Asimov. In B. Kuklick & D. G. Hart (Eds.), *Religious advocacy and American history* (pp. 190-208). Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans.
- Carter, S. (1993). *The culture of disbelief: How American law and politics trivialize religious devotion*. New York: Basic Books.
- Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- City of Boerne v. Flores. (1997). 521 US 507.
- Convey, J. (1992). *Catholic schools make a difference: Twenty-five years of research*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Davis, C. (1990). *The history of black Catholics in the United States*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Dewey, J. (1923). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Dupré, L. (1997, July 16). Seeking Christian interiority: An interview with Louis Dupré. *The Christian Century*, 114(21), 655.
- Goizueta, R. (1995). *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino theology of accompaniment*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Greeley, A. (1997, February 22). Polarized Catholics? Don't believe your mail! *America*, pp. 11-15.
- Hatch, N. (1989). *The democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Heft, J. L. (1999a, February 18). Academic freedom: American and Catholic. *Origins*, 28, 614-623.
- Heft, J. L. (Ed.) (1999b). *A Catholic modernity?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hunter, J. D. (1991). *Culture wars: The struggle to define America: Making sense of the battles of the family, art, education, law and politics*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jacobsen, D., & Trollinger, W. V. (Eds.). (1998). *Re-forming the center: American protestantism, 1900-present*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1990). *Three rival versions of moral inquiry*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press.

- Marsden, G. (1994). *The soul of the American university: From protestant establishment to established nonbelief*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marsden, G. (1997). Christian advocacy and the rule of the academic game. In B. Kuklick & D. G. Hart, (Eds.), *Religious advocacy and American history* (pp. 3-27). Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans.
- Marty, M. (1996, November/December). You get to teach and study religion. *Academe*, 82, 15.
- Mitchell, J. (1996, November/December). Of answers ruled out: Religion in academic life. *Academe*, 82, 30.
- Neuhaus, R. J. (1984). *The naked public square: Religion and democracy in America*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans.
- Niebuhr, R. (1955). *The self and the dramas of history*. New York: Scribner's Publishing Company.
- Ochs, S. (1990). *Desegregating the altar: The Josephites and the struggle for black priests*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Portier, W. (1994). *Tradition and incarnation*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65-78.
- Randall, E. V. (1997). Culture, religion and education. In T. C. Hunt & J. C. Carper (Eds.), *Religion and schooling in contemporary America: Confronting our cultural pluralism* (pp. 59-82). New York: Garland Publishing Company.
- Reuben, J. A. (1996). *The making of the modern university: Intellectual transformation and the marginalization of morality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rieff, P. (1966). *The triumph of the therapeutic: The uses of faith after Freud*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Rieff, P. (1972). *Fellow teachers*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Rotolo, T. (1999). Trends in voluntary association participation: A research note. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 28(2), 199-212.
- Sacks, J. (1996, July/August). Social contract or social covenant. *Policy Review*, 78, 54-57.
- Schor, J. (1991). *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. New York: Basic Books.
- Taylor, C. (1992). *The ethics of authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Untener, K. E. (1996, October 19). How bishops talk. *America*, pp. 9-15.
- Walzer, M. (1994, Spring). Multiculturalism and individualism. *Dissent*, 187.
- Wilkens, R. (1995). *Remembering the Christian past*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans.
- Wuthnow, R. (1994). *Sharing the journey: Support groups and America's new quest for community*. New York: The Free Press.

An earlier version of this address, given at a conference on "Private Schools: Partners in American Education—A Research Symposium" at the University of Dayton November 5-7, 1997, was later printed in Origins 27:30 (January 15, 1998), pp. 506-512.

James L. Heft, S.M., is university professor of faith and culture and chancellor at the University of Dayton. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Rev. James L. Heft, S.M., Chancellor, The University of Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH 45469-1549.

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.