

Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America. By James W. Fraser.
Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016. Pp 296. \$30.00 (paper). ISBN: 978-1421420585.

American education has been and continues to be a primary locus of the nation's major religious liberty battles. The reasons are chronicled in the second edition of the classic book *Between Church and State*. Author James W. Fraser draws upon his expertise as a professor of history and education at New York University, the founding dean of Northeastern University's School of Education, and an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. He argues that the contemporary multicultural education movement can create the necessary common ground for reconciling America's historic conflicts surrounding religion, education, and law.

Accessible and comprehensive, *Between Church and State* is a widely used textbook in schools of education and theology for teaching about issues of religion and American education. Fraser begins the new edition by reflecting on the American public's confusion and conflicting messages regarding the contemporary issues of school vouchers, tax credits, and the teaching of intelligent design. He states, "A thoughtful observer can be relatively certain that battles about church and state, and more specifically about religion in the schools, will characterize the first century of the new millennium as they have for the last two centuries" (2).

Beginning with the colonizing period, Fraser details how diverse Christian doctrines and demographics resulted in a variety of religious establishments. Religion "played a central role in the schools of every colony, but the understanding of religion differed substantially from colony to colony" (3). This religious and cultural diversity, in turn, led to a federalist compromise wherein the U.S. Constitution established no national church and administered no religious tests for federal office. Paradoxically, the new federal government subsequently employed Christian missionaries to convert and "civilize" Native Americans. Meanwhile, slave states prohibited African Americans from learning to read, even as abolitionists and black churches used the Bible as a primary tool to promote literacy.

After the Civil War, the relative similarities between Protestant churches inspired leaders such as Horace Mann and Catherine Beecher to promote their vision of "common schools" that used readers to promote a "common creed." In doing so, Fraser argues, America's emerging education system was "pressed to serve as a new kind of national church" (3)—a de facto Protestant establishment that led Catholics to create their own private schools, which fueled debates about public funding for private religious education. See, for example, the failed Blaine Amendment of 1876. These conflicts persisted as a fledgling reconstructed nation became more religiously, racially, and ethnically diverse via immigration and other demographic shifts.

In the early twentieth century, the public school became the battleground over the teaching of evolution, to which Fraser adds a fascinating new section in this second edition about contemporary legal conflicts over the teaching of creationism—a "debate that will not go away." He argues that the "failures of efforts to introduce more equal time for religiously inspired alternatives to the teaching of evolution" resulted in "a withdrawal on the part of some conservative religious people from the public school" (212). This contributed, Fraser argues, to a rise of faith-based education in the forms of private schools and homeschooling. He tracks these developments into the late twentieth century, when many leaders of white Evangelical schools rejected "a new mixture of issues—changing sexual mores, school integration, and what seemed like antireligious [public] school policies" (173). These culture wars—embroiled in issues of religion, race, and

sexuality—resulted in the conservative religious misperception that “God was kicked out of public schools” (177) and the secular misperception that religion is not welcome in American education.

To counter these claims, Fraser features landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions that reject this false dualism and, instead, promote laws that support the academic study of religion and religious freedom in public schools. In the second edition of *Between Church and State*, Fraser builds upon these cases by highlighting a landmark 2010 publication of the American Academy of Religion titled *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*.¹ Fraser begins by detailing the profound contributions made by the guidelines’ main author, Professor Diane L. Moore, founder of the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard University. He uses Moore’s method of defining religion—as internally diverse, dynamic, and embedded in all aspects of culture—to champion an academic rather than confessional study of religion in public schools. By promoting religious literacy across the curriculum, those who felt exiled by the church-state battles of the twentieth century may feel better represented and included, and thus feel more welcome in public schools. This approach is based on successful pedagogies implemented in places like Modesto, California, and Duluth, Minnesota. It also takes into account the dynamic changes in the religious composition of American student populations. Different religious traditions and groups will be more pervasive in different regions. This diversity requires deeper mutual understanding and appreciation of religious differences, without coercion or presumed agreement.

In essence, Fraser is advocating for the educational community to couple multicultural educational methods with increased religious literacy in order to reconcile issues that previous generations were unable to solve. His thesis is timely and apt insofar as multicultural educators have ignored religious studies, leaving large gaps in public school curricula. Indeed, many conservatives have rejected the multicultural agenda because of its failure to include religion as a cultural expression or identity marker. Fraser’s work seeks to bridge those divides and help educators reimagine a public space where “all have a right to a place at the table” and where “all have much to learn from and contribute to the ever-changing American culture” (237).

In addition to my praise for Fraser’s substantial contributions to the field, based on my experience as a religious liberty educator, I have two collegial recommendations for those who assign his book to students.

First, *Between Church and State* sometimes leaves undergraduate and graduate students with the mistaken impression that the First Amendment’s religion clauses represent a uniform doctrine that has been applied at all levels of government since its ratification in 1791. More than halfway through the book, Fraser briefly mentions that the Establishment Clause was not applied to state or local laws until the watershed case of *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947).² Neither edition of *Between Church and State* mentions the parallel case of *Cantwell v. Connecticut* (1940),³ in which the U.S. Supreme Court incorporated the Free Exercise Clause to the states. This is a crucial oversight that may distort readers’ historical understanding of the laws governing religion in education, especially since so much of American educational policy is made at the state and local levels. To compensate, I recommend that educators assign relevant case law and secondary sources alongside this textbook, and emphasize that the U.S. Supreme Court’s incremental application of the Bill of Rights to the states fundamentally changed the legal structure for litigating issues of religion and

1 AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force, *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*, American Academy of Religion, April 2010, <https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Publications/epublications/AARK-12CurriculumGuidelines.pdf>.

2 *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).

3 *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296 (1940).

education. This will help reinforce the critical lesson that, up until the 1940s, questions of education and religion fell under the religion clauses of state constitutions, which varied substantially. This also helps explain why groups such as the Christian Coalition and other states-rights groups, which Fraser features, have been so successful at mobilizing support for their causes since the late twentieth century.

Second, educators may also consider assigning another important companion piece, *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools*, edited by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver S. Thomas.⁴ Haynes and Thomas chronicle the process by which dozens of civil and religious groups found consensus on the seemingly intractable issues that Fraser analyzes—student religious expression and clubs, the Bible, religious holidays, creationism, and so on. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education distributed these *common ground* statements to all public schools in the country. These initiatives counter Fraser’s view that when it comes to religion and education, “a consensus does not exist. It never did” (2). These consensus statements, like Fraser’s book, offer a way for all members of the public, religious or not, to be welcomed in public schools. Readers will see that the *religious liberty* guidelines in *Finding Common Ground* reinforce Fraser’s and Moore’s proposals to use the academic study of religion to promote *religious literacy* as a form of cultural competency. This approach is advanced in the 2017 release of a new supplement on the academic study of religion added to the National Council for the Social Studies’ *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Frameworks* used by social studies teachers throughout the country.⁵

This dual approach—promoting both *religious liberty* and *religious literacy*—rejects the coercive indoctrination of children in what Fraser calls the “lowest-common-denominator Christianity” (6), as well as countervailing efforts of secular purists to scrub all references to religion from public school curricula. To bridge this divide, Fraser promotes “a common democratic culture” (6) through which our shared American educational system prepares citizens to be both “religiously tolerant and religiously informed” (7).

Read with these recommended companion sources, I believe *Between Church and State* will continue to be an esteemed educational tool to help the next generation of leaders ensure that public schools are places where people of all religions and none can live and learn together.

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4 Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools*, Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2007.

5 *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*, National Council for the Social Studies, 2017, www.socialstudies.org/c3.