

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY EDUCATION

Opening Windows on the World

Some years ago, I was visiting Adventist churches in Northern Ireland. One local member had a list of people to whom she regularly delivered our church magazines. One day, she visited a regular contact, a Protestant woman, who unexpectedly refused the magazine. The Adventist woman asked whether something in the last issue had offended her. “No, but you know why!” the woman said angrily. “You’ve been taking lessons from a driving school owned by a Catholic!” That was enough to close the door. Generations of mistrust and suspicion had built a wall of segregation and intolerance.

Unfortunately, throughout history, indoctrination, in both the home and the school, has contributed to negative and destructive relations between people, religious bodies, and even countries. We have only to remember the generations of young people in Ireland, Palestine, and Germany who were taught to see certain groups as the enemy—to be despised, fought, and even exterminated. In America, most of the white settlers treated the Indian tribes in a similar manner. Many other examples could be given.

Adventist schools should provide truthful information about other religions.

By Bert B. Beach

Education Is the Key

It does not have to be this way. It is becoming unmistakably clear that education is the key to positive interpersonal relations. The role of education in fostering liberty and friendship is recognized in Article 13:1 of the 1966 *United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*: “Education. . . shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. . . shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups.” This ideal and purpose of education is also mentioned in Article 26:2 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as “the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental free-

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doms”—of which, Adventists consider religious liberty to be one of the most fundamental.

State Schools and Religion

First, let's look at the role of public schools in regard to religion and religious liberty. Then, we shall examine in greater detail at the role of Adventist schools.

State schools should not teach religion—and even less so, one established religion. However, government schools *should* teach general information about religion. This should include objective, accurate descriptions of the world's religions, including their history, general teachings, and local setting. This instruction should emphasize tolerance and non-discrimination, equality before the law, and freedom of thought and belief. Teachers should point out times when intolerance held sway, producing some of the worst crimes in history.

Students should also read the United Nations documents calling for tolerance and full freedom of religion, as well as relevant constitutional provisions in the country where the

school is located. Public schools should use these documents to promote a culture of religious freedom and respect for religious minorities.

Opening Windows on the World

We move now to Adventist education—the central concern of this article. In contrast with public schools, denominational schools can and should teach religion, specifically Seventh-day Adventism. However, this does not mean denigrating other religions or sowing seeds of contempt, which could grow into intolerance and opposition to the full religious liberty of others. On the contrary, Adventist schools should provide truthful information about other religions. Of course, this teaching will be shaped by an Adventist historical and doctrinal perspective, but the instruction should not foster bigotry or blind dogmatism. As Adventist schools offer instruction regarding human culture and ideologies, this will open for the students windows on the world and further their understanding of their fellow human beings.

The Two Faces of Religion

Because religion can be a two-edged sword, it can easily be misused. Religion can lift people to great heights of devotion, spirituality, love, and tolerance, but it also can be used to teach prejudice, intolerance, and religious extremism—even xenophobia. Adventist educators must provide balanced information that helps reduce ignorance, racism, and hostility toward those with different beliefs. Lack of knowledge creates fear of the unknown and fosters false and harmful stereotypes. Fundamentalistic Islamic extremism and its support of indiscriminate terrorism is an example of religious ignorance run amok.

A Culture of Tolerance

Every Adventist school should seek to develop and promote a culture of tolerance and respect for human rights. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. Intolerance can sometimes raise its ugly head even in “Christian” educational settings. With the best of intentions, some educators and pastors give the impression that religious liberty applies in practice, if not always in theory, only to the true church and those holding orthodox biblical views. Not so, for while error may have no rights, human beings do, and no one has the right to persecute or ostracize a person whose beliefs deviate from the norm.

If they are not careful, private schools with a specific religious orientation can run the risk of fostering a “better than thou” exclusivity and even of showing disdain for other beliefs and religious bodies. But this does not need to be the case. Adventist schools must avoid any such sectarian tendencies. The curriculum in our institutions should include teaching and activities promoting pluralism, openness, tolerance, and respect for the right of every person to freely choose and to act upon his or her sincerely held religious convictions.

Religious Liberty Is for Everybody

Adventist schools should inculcate in their students not only the right to religious liberty for themselves, but also for everyone else, even for those with whom they strongly disagree. Religious liberty is not only for “good people” (e.g., Adventists), but for *all* people. We need to teach the fundamental concept that a person can be totally committed to his or her faith, and yet respect those who practice other beliefs. There seems at times to be an underlying assumption or hidden fear that tolerating the rights of someone to practice “false” beliefs is a form of compromise and may indicate a lack of faith commitment. Students must be taught that there can be no authentic and mature faith without recognizing and respecting the God-given right of every human being to worship according to conscience, or even not worship at all. God cannot accept a homage that is not freely given. That is what religious liberty is all about.

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Religious Liberty—The Fundamental Right

Adventist educators must be in the forefront of promoting freedom, respect for personal convictions, and the right of conscience. Adventist schools should teach that every human being has an innate dignity and is entitled to basic human rights, of which religious liberty is the fundamental right undergirding all others.

In every Adventist school, the concept of religious liberty

(including non-discrimination, equality, and minority rights) should be integrated into the curriculum at various levels and not taught only in religion classes. The size or “historical status” of a denomination should never be the determining factor in whether it is entitled to rights and privileges, as is unfortunately the case in many countries.

Seventh-day Adventist schools should be sensitive to the religious-liberty rights of all students, including those who are practicing believers of other Christian or non-Christian faiths. Such students should be allowed to leave the campus to worship in their church or house of worship, if they wish to do so. We must be willing to grant to them what we ask for Adventists studying in other schools, not only for our witness to be consistent, but because religious liberty is a vital human right. Adventists must be seen as foremost in upholding this right for everyone.

One might wonder why non-Adventists would want to enroll in an Adventist boarding school, with all the religious life this implies, if they wish to travel down a different religious road. This issue should be dealt with in interviews prior to accepting students, so that there will not be misunderstandings regarding the nature and standards of the school. While generally, enrollment in an Adventist school is based on free choice, in some places, Adventist schools carry out a function of general education, with government recognition and support. In such cases, students may have few other educational choices. They may not be looking for a clearly Adventist education, but simply high-quality schooling. Adapting to this situation demands a delicate balancing act: implementing the school’s mission while respecting the religious and other fundamental rights of such students.

Key United Nations Instruments

Adventist schools should acquaint their students with the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), especially Article 18, which gives this succinct definition of the dimensions of religious liberty: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Our schools’ curricula and textbooks should systematically present and teach the universal rights and values contained in this Declaration. Reference should also be made to the United Nations 1981 *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance Based on Religion or Belief*,¹ which contains the important statement (especially for Seventh-day Adventists) that every person has the right to observe days of rest in accordance with the precepts of his or her religion.

In countries where the constitution has codified certain religious liberty rights, every Adventist school should teach

about this to its students at various levels. This will help to develop and reinforce a culture of respect for non-discrimination, tolerance, and peaceful living in community.

Some Basic Religious Liberty Principles

Here are some of the religious liberty principles Adventist schools should teach and practice:

- The nature and inalienable right to practice freedom of conscience, subject only to respect for the equivalent rights of others.
- The right to choose one’s own religion and the recognition that others have the same right.
- The right to freely worship and practice one’s religion individually or in community with others.
- The right to teach one’s religion and freely but respectfully witness to others.

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- The evils of religious discrimination and religious hatred.
- The need to respect the views of others and, where necessary, to respectfully disagree.
- Legislative and other governmental acts that unite church and state are contrary to the interests of both government and church.
- The right to establish and operate schools and other appropriate institutions, to solicit or receive voluntary financial contributions, and maintain free communication with fellow believers at national or international levels.

Fostering a Culture of Pluralism and Diversity

Adventist schools should advocate, wherever possible, a climate supporting a free market of religious, political, economic, and ideological ideas. In the age of the global village

international travel, and multinational and international organizations, Adventist education should help provide a *culture of pluralism and diversity*. Respect for diversity is a central tenet of religious liberty. Countries and religious groups that, in the name of unity, try to stamp out diversity are waging a costly but losing battle. Through cooperation in diversity and recognition of differences, new achievements will be realized, such as the creative interaction between humankind and nature. Adventist education should teach openness toward other people and that which is different.

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Dealing With Persecution

It is important for Adventist schools to address the issue of persecution—past and present. Teachers should find ways to deal constructively with how to avoid such regrettable assaults on the dignity of the human person, created in the image of God. Instruction can explain the setting that caused or allowed such violations. This will mean acquainting students with their cultural heritage and the ups and downs of history—the great deeds, but also the sad machinations of leaders throughout the centuries. The use of narratives, appropriate to different grade levels, can be powerful tools for religious-liberty education. Riveting stories of human-rights

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violations can be drawn from current events or church history, and even from literature.

An important part of religious-liberty education is gaining accurate knowledge regarding one's own religion, as well as comparative information regarding other belief systems. This education should include the historical emergence of human rights and religious liberty, and references to the tragedies that have occurred when religious liberty has been trampled upon. This could very well include biographical references to the problems and sufferings of martyrs and others who have been denied basic freedoms. Cole Durham has made the useful suggestion that curricula refer to the national, regional, and international norms of religious liberty. He also suggests "role play" in schools, in order to help students understand and empathize with the suffering caused by discrimination and persecution, "analysis of causes of religious intolerance," and "teaching about aspects of various religious traditions that promote tolerance and understanding."²

Teacher Education on Religious Liberty

Adventist colleges need to incorporate information on religious liberty into the teacher-training curriculum. Currently, no such preparation is being done in an organized and focused manner. The new International Center on Religion and Government at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan,³ could be helpful in providing seminars and workshops for teachers. Teachers already employed in the classroom also need training regarding religious-liberty rights and their practical application in the workplace and school setting.

Religious liberty should not be taught simply as an abstract concept, such as separation of church and state, but as a gift from God, a living concept governing human relations. The dignity of every person requires religious liberty. Without respect for the inherent dignity of each child of God, there can be no fruitful interpersonal relations.

Religious Liberty Within Adventist Schools

A question arises sometimes regarding religious liberty *within* Adventist schools. The very existence of church

schools and colleges is the fruit of a climate of freedom, pluralism, and tolerance for different views. Therefore, our schools should be all the more sensitive to religious-liberty issues within their own walls.

Personal convictions and conscience need to be protected everywhere. Of course, an Adventist school is a community that operates within the framework of a biblical worldview, as understood by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Every one of our schools was established—and continues to be operated—with the express purpose of upholding this worldview and sharing Adventist fundamental beliefs with the next generation, usually at considerable cost to the church. While respecting the right of students to hold different views and religious beliefs, an Adventist school must have the right to protect itself against religious agitation and propagation of views that hamper, undermine, or even destroy the school's mission and *raison d'être*.

Religious Liberty and Evangelism

Since evangelism is the very essence of authentic Christianity and is very much a part of the Adventist psyche, both teachers and students need to understand the theoretical and pragmatic link between evangelism and religious liberty. This is especially important today, since there are those who claim to support religious liberty but exclude the right to *evangelize or proselytize or change religion*.

There are, in this connection, two fundamental rights:

1. The right to evangelize and “tell the story of Jesus,” sharing the message of salvation and the distinctives of our faith.
2. The right of privacy—to be left alone and not to be evangelized.

Adventist religious-liberty education must recognize that these rights coexist. Normally, there should be no conflict between them, as long as proper methods are used in sharing our faith. There should be, in evangelism, no undue pressure, cajoling, offers of material inducements, or false information given regarding other churches or religions. Honesty, transparency, and fairness should be taught and practiced.

Ideal Religious-Liberty Education Atmosphere

While the philosophy and principles of Adventist religious-liberty education are anchored in Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White, Article 5:3 of the United Nations 1981 Declaration summarizes the needed and harmonious atmosphere for religious-liberty education in Adventist primary and secondary schools:

“The child shall be protected from any form of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, respect for

freedom of religion or beliefs of others, and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men.” ✍

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1. Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance Based on Religion or Belief, Article VI, paragraph H.
2. *Religious Freedom, Tolerance, and Non-Discrimination in Education*, published by the University of Extremadura School of Law and the Ministry of Justice General Director of Religious Affairs of Spain (2001), pp. 65, 66.
3. For information on the International Center on Religion and Government, contact Dr. Gary Land at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104 U.S.A. or by E-mail at land@andrews.edu.