

# A Survey of Christian Religious Education in the United States

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## **Abstract**

Prior to the landmark Supreme Court decision of June 1963, which banned public prayer from the public schools, Christian religious education was often a routine part of the overt instruction provided by the American public school system. However, in the wake of that legal milestone, even though instruction in the Judeo-Christian interpretation of religious history continued to be taught covertly, American churches began relying more heavily on providing Christian religious education. This article briefly presents Christianity's contemporary status in the United States and reviews such religious education methods as Sunday school, vacation Bible school, Christian youth groups, catechism, private Christian schools, Youth Sunday, and children's sermons. The survey concludes with a look at the growing interface between such education and the lessons of psychology as well as training and certifying Christian religious educators.

Before reviewing Christian religious education in the United States, it is important to realize that Christianity has never been monolithic. In fact, internal sectarian divisions have existed since the first conflicts between Paul and the leaders of the Jerusalem Church. The Book of Acts reports that Paul made at least three trips to Jerusalem (36, 49, and 57),<sup>1</sup> and that each one was marked by dissension and disagreement between him and the actual disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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During his first trip, most of the disciples, who “were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26-30), rebuffed and rejected him. Acts 15:1-35, which consistently gives the most favorable interpretation possible to Paul’s actions and thoughts, reports that his second trip resulted in conflict over his unilateral decision to set aside much of the Mosaic Law for new Christians, regardless of whether they had originally been Jews or Gentiles. Although this book insists that Paul won that conflict, this assertion seems to be refuted by the events of his third trip: Once again he was accosted by the leaders of the Jerusalem Church for having set aside major provisions of the Mosaic Law, and had to perform penance by performing the religious rites of a Nazirite (Acts 21:17-26).

This conflict between the Pauline and non-Pauline branches of early Christianity was never resolved satisfactorily. Thus a fundamental schism between the Pauline church, to which most of contemporary Christianity traces its roots, and the non-Pauline church appeared. However, this is only one example of the diversity that has existed in Christian thought since the end of Jesus Christ’s earthly ministry. Scholars of early Church history talk about Judeo-Christianity (exemplified by the early Jerusalem Church, which maintained the Mosaic Law and for whom Jesus was not divine or part of any godhead), the Adoptionist movements (e.g., the Nestorian, Ebionite, and Arian churches, all of which rejected the concept of Jesus Christ as God’s “begotten”), and the various Gnostic movements (e.g., Docetism).

### **Christianity in the United States**

During the intervening centuries, Christian sects and denominations have proliferated steadily. There are now 23 Christian denominations in the United States with at least 1 million members, 33 with at least 500,000 members, and 49 with at least 200,000 members.<sup>4</sup> The 10 largest self-proclaimed Christian denominations are the Roman Catholic Church (59.9 million), the Southern Baptist Convention (16.4 million), the United Methodist Church (8.6 million), the National Baptist Convention USA (8.2 million), the Church of God in Christ (5.5 million), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (5.2 million), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ([Mormons] 4.5 million), the Presbyterian Church–USA (3.8 million), the African Methodist Episcopal Church (3.5 million), and the National Baptist Convention of America (3.5 million).<sup>6</sup>

In general, each denomination can be classified into one of three categories: Catholic (both Roman and Eastern rite), which in many ways are the

most accurate upholders of Nicene Christianity; mainline Protestant (e.g., United Methodist, Episcopalian, and the Presbyterian churches), which typically have become more humanistic and social-welfare oriented over the last 40 years, are the most lax in stressing the basic Nicene doctrines, and which often are influenced by an allegorical or nonliteral interpretation of the Bible and basic Christian doctrines; and the “religious right” (e.g., fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and Evangelicals), which typically insist on the Bible’s infallibility as God’s word-for-word divine revelation and are the most active in providing their own brand of religious education and idiosyncratic interpretation of Christianity.

When these three are joined with those who adhere to minor denominations and nondenominational churches, the United States now has perhaps more than 160 million Christians. In contrast, there are over 7 million Muslims in North America and 4.3 million Jews (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform).<sup>7</sup> Fourteen percent of all American adults profess atheism.<sup>8</sup>

A longitudinal examination of denominations between 1960-95 reveals several noteworthy trends. First, there have been significant demographic-based increases in the Eastern Rite Catholic church denominational membership (e.g., 164.9% for the Orthodox Church in America, 231.2% for the Armenian Orthodox, and 62.5% for the Greek Orthodox Diocese of North and South America). Second, there has been a relatively consistent growth in Roman Catholic Church membership (a 42.2% increase), and a marked decline in mainline Protestant membership (e.g., 19.9% for the United Methodist Church, 07.8% for the Presbyterian Church–USA, and 27.3% for the Episcopal Church). Also evident is a phenomenal rise in church membership in many “religious right” denominations (e.g., 346.4% in the Assemblies of God, 289.4% in the Church of God–Cleveland (TN), 185.7% in the United Pentecostal Church International, 1,011.1% in the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, 429.8% in the Christian & Missionary Alliance, 632.3% in the Evangelical Free Church of America, and 162.7% in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel).

Controlling for the population’s increase during 1965-95, results indicate a tremendous increase in denominational membership in “religious right” churches, a slow but steady increase in most Eastern Rite Catholic denominations, a relatively static growth rate for the Roman Catholic Church, and huge and disturbing decreases in church membership for most mainline Protestant denominations.<sup>9</sup>

Given this, it is not surprising that the “religious right” has started to impose its idiosyncratic beliefs onto most major governmental policy deci-

sions. Being well-organized, amply financed, and tending to dominate Sunday morning religious programming, this group has a major influence on the federal government's domestic and foreign policy, as well as on state and local governments. This is seen clearly in foreign policy decisions involving unqualified American support for Israel. Members of the "religious right" typically believe that Jesus Christ will return to usher in the Final Days only after the Jews rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Hoping to accelerate his return, its members ally themselves with Israel and the Jews' desire to rebuild the Temple.

A second conclusion concerns the massive decline in denominational membership among mainline Protestants. This would seem to lead to an inevitable decline in inculcating traditional Christian moral and social values into the nation's social fabric. Rising divorce rates, the mass proliferation of gambling,<sup>10</sup> the post-1950s increase in premarital sex, and persistent drug abuse would all appear to be symptomatic of this decline.

### **The Public School System and Religious Education**

In June 1963, the Supreme Court delivered an 8-1 ruling that effectively banned prayer from the public school system. Basing its decision upon the First Amendment's establishment clause, which prohibits the government from doing anything that would establish a religion,<sup>11</sup> the Court found in favor of the plaintiff, Madeline Murray O'Hair, an avowed atheist, who had filed suit on her son's behalf. (Ironically, her son is now a Christian evangelist.) However, even before that date, the separation between Church and state frequently was more illusory than real.

Prior to the Court's decision, each public school day began with the Pledge of Allegiance, a prayer led by the classroom teacher, and a group recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Teachers often referred to Bible stories, and classroom discussions of or instruction in moral behavior were grounded in the Bible. Christmas and Easter holidays often were accompanied by school programs, plays, and musical performances, all of which indoctrinated the pupils, who were assumed to be Christian, at a very early age in basic Christian beliefs.

At least overtly, this decision irrevocably changed the public school system's religious landscape, for now the separation of Church and state would be fought out in the public school system. Yet on a covert level, no real separation was realized, for whether consciously or not, the Judeo-Christian interpretation of religious history is still taught in all public schools.

For example, when I volunteered to teach junior high school social studies at a private Islamic school in 1997, I was given a textbook on the eastern hemisphere's history and geography. This textbook had been adopted from the local public school system in order to meet state course curricula requirements.<sup>12</sup> Among other indications of the subtle instruction of Judeo-Christian beliefs were the following statements: "Judaism was the first monotheistic religion" and "After a period of time, Muhammad came to believe that his visions were a revelation from God." Neither statement is an historical fact, and both represent a particular religious interpretation of history. The first statement clearly represents a Judeo-Christian interpretation, for an Islamic interpretation would argue that Islam was the first monotheistic religion. The latter statement subtly implies that Prophet Muhammad did not receive revelation, but only "came to believe" that he had. Compounding the problem, although the textbook was well in excess of 700 pages, less than 15 pages were devoted to Islam and Islamic history.

However, such covert Judeo-Christian proselytizing is not limited to social studies textbooks. Any math book that asks students to calculate the amount of money they will make by depositing their allowance in a bank savings account conveys the religious value judgment that receiving interest (*riba*) is permissible. If a word problem asks them to compute how much change the grocer will give them if they use a \$5 dollar bill to pay for a pound of bacon, they are receiving subtle instruction that eating pork is normal and allowed. Further, the absence of any overt religious instruction in the curriculum sends a powerful message that religion is not a legitimate educational and intellectual pursuit.

Nonetheless, the 1963 Supreme Court decision forced Christian denominations to explore other avenues of giving their young people a religious education. In what follows, the churches' goals and means of achieving that religious education are surveyed briefly. No attempt has been made to address these goals within the context of the public school system, where, at least theoretically, the separation of Church and state should obviate any Christian religious education.

### **The Goals of Religious Education**

In general, these goals are two-fold: to educate the youth about the Bible's teachings (both ethical-religious and historical) as well as those aspects of Church history (both ancient and denominational) that contributed directly to contemporary Christianity's formation, and inculcate in them a basic

sense of morality and religiousness (often summarized as teaching youth to live a “Christ-like” life). It is usually assumed, probably quite naively, that the second goal is achieved by fulfilling the first one.

Typically, a Christian religious education leaves out some important information, such as the accurate and realistic historical context needed to understand ancient Church history and Biblical stories and teachings, although the published educational literature of certain denominations (e.g., the literature published by Cokesbury and Abingdon Press for the United Methodist Church<sup>13</sup>) occasionally tries to remedy this despite the sometimes compromised traditional Christian understandings that result. Also omitted are the breadth of thought and fundamental disagreements among ancient Christian churches about key doctrinal issues (e.g., the nature of Jesus Christ [human vs. divine], the nature of God [unity vs. trinity], the status of the Mosaic Laws [abrogated vs. in force]), the ancient Church’s conflicts and disagreements over formulating a canon of scripture, and any realistic and accurate portrayal of non-Christian religions.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Modes of Religious Education**

Deprived by the Supreme Court of using the public school system as a vehicle for the overt teaching of Christian religious education, Christian churches were forced to fall back upon other modes of instruction. Generally speaking, these were Sunday school, vacation Bible school programs, Christian youth groups, catechism, private Christian schools, Youth Sundays, and children’s sermons.

*Sunday School.* The vehicle’s earliest use is not well documented, although interest in it was prevalent during the late-seventeenth-century German Pietist movement. Its champion was Philip Jacob Spencer (1635-1705), a Lutheran minister who is usually credited with founding German Pietism. However Robert Raikes, who founded the modern Sunday school as an innovative experiment in Gloucester, England, in 1780, is usually credited with originating this vehicle. His educational experiment quickly came to the attention of the brothers John and Charles Wesley, the former being the founder of Methodism and the latter being a noted writer of Christian hymns. Through their interest, as well as that of William Wilberforce and others, it spread quickly throughout Europe and America and became a staple of Christian religious education.<sup>15</sup>

Sunday school takes place in local churches and usually consists of an hour of morning instruction either immediately before or after the regular

worship service. Most churches have a Sunday school superintendent who supervises the curriculum, ensures that all classes have an assigned teacher, and orders and distributes all educational literature and instruction books. Typically, he or she has no particular job qualifications aside from zeal and the willingness to volunteer. However, churches with a large membership may have a superintendent who has earned a baccalaureate (B.R.E.) or a master's (M.R.E.) degree in religious education.

Likewise, most Sunday school teachers have no particular training, but are simply selected from the available volunteers. Frequently, the minister teaches the adult Sunday school class, and large churches often will hire a youth minister, if they can afford to do so, to teach the high school Sunday school class. In rare cases, Sunday school teachers actually have professional training (B.R.E. or M.R.E.).

Sunday school classes are determined by age, with small churches tending to collapse classes across two or three school grades in order to assure an adequate number of students in each class. Almost without exception, children begin Sunday school classes when they are 5 years old; however, churches with large memberships frequently provide one or more preschool classes. In addition, most churches maintain one or more adult Sunday school classes.

Text and curriculum are typically determined by the availability of suitable publications. Larger Christian denominations often have their own publishing house and educational task force to develop and provide a national curriculum for their affiliates (e.g., Cokesbury/Abingdon Press for the United Methodist Church). However, small denominational and non-denominational churches usually rely on a non-denominational publisher of Sunday school material (e.g., David C. Cook).

*Vacation Bible School.* Vacation Bible school has a long tradition in this country. Churches with large memberships frequently host their own program, while smaller churches will sponsor a community-wide vacation Bible school. Superintendents, teachers, and curriculum literature are selected in much the same way as that outlined above.

Classes are typically held during June, after the academic year ends. In most settings, the students range from kindergarten to the eighth grade. However, classes may be extended upward in some situations. Students often attend morning-only classes each weekday for 2 to 4 weeks. If necessary, classes might be held in the afternoon as well.

*Christian Youth Groups.* There are two basic types of youth groups: those affiliated with a major Christian denomination or a local church (e.g.,

the Methodist Youth Fellowship [MYF]), or a national non-denominational organization (e.g., the Fellowship of Christian Athletes [FCA]).

Denominational or church youth groups are usually geared toward junior high and high school students, although some churches attempt to include a larger age range. Such groups provide social and recreational activities, an opportunity to do socially meaningful volunteer work, and religious instruction. Instructors are typically church members who volunteer to conduct the meetings, which are usually held once a week.

Non-denominational nationally based youth groups are not easily categorized. Frequently, they take the form of clubs associated with (but supposedly independent of) public schools, such as the FCA, which is active in high schools and colleges across the nation. This organization seeks to provide a Christian framework and education for school athletes, in part because such students are often prominent role models for their peers. At the high school level, adult sponsors of FCA clubs are often one or more school coaches, and meetings are typically held at the school. When I was a youth, most FCA meetings were held weekly and supplemented by a yearly program featuring a prominent athlete brought in as a motivational speaker. This evening event was well-publicized and open to the general public. A formal curriculum is almost nonexistent, the student program chairman usually selects the topics, and student athletes serve as the primary instructors and discussion leaders.

*Catechism.* Originally, this referred to the oral instruction given by the ancient Christian churches prior to adult baptism, the original sign of membership in a church (e.g., the church at Jerusalem, Corinth, or Ephesus).<sup>16</sup> At that early date, it consisted of a very general religious education and an exhortation to follow the “way of life” as opposed to the “way of death.” Catechesim was usually accompanied by self-denial and exorcism (i.e., casting out any devil or demon that might reside in or possess the new Christian), and was distinguished from the more formal post-baptism religious instruction.

However, as infant baptism became more common, catechism gradually was associated with acquiring formal church membership, as opposed to membership based upon baptism. During this transition, Church bishops were the primary religious instructors. However, over time this role devolved upon local parish priests. The history of catechism curricula can be traced through the early handbooks of religious instruction prepared by such Church Fathers as Augustine of Hippo,<sup>17</sup> John Chrysostom,<sup>18</sup> and Cyril of Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> During the medieval period, catechism manuals were rela-

tively simple affairs, often consisting of no more than the Apostle's Creed,<sup>20</sup> the Lord's Prayer,<sup>21</sup> and the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments).<sup>22</sup>

Traditionally, the catechism or confirmation class enabled a person to acquire the knowledge necessary to become a church member. Since church membership is usually restricted to those who have reached puberty, most catechism class students are junior high and high school students, as well as young adults. At least in theory, catechism provides a working knowledge of basic Christian doctrines and beliefs, an understanding of that particular church's history, and instruction in its specific doctrines.

With regard to this last point, the Mennonite Church is historically one of the so-called Peace Churches (e.g., the Society of Friends, the Church of the Brethren, and such Mennonite denominations as the Old Mennonite Church, the Mennonite Brethren Church, the General Conference Mennonite Church, the Holdemans, and the Amish), and therefore stresses absolute pacifism. It also grew out of the Anabaptist tradition, which maintained that a person must have reached the "age of reason" (typically post-puberty) before the sacrament of baptism can be administered. As such, both pacifism and the Anabaptist position are stressed in a Mennonite catechism. One would not expect the Roman Catholic Church, which stresses infant baptism, to say include anything about the Anabaptist position in its catechism, and non-Peace Churches probably would omit any instruction in pacifism from theirs.

Given the above, catechism classes vary greatly across denominations. Only a few denominations provide a formal curriculum. Depending upon the proclivities of the denomination and the church minister, who typically teaches the catechism class, catechism may run the gamut from a highly structured and formal, or a casual and very informal, set of instruction. Likewise, class lengths and frequencies may differ widely from one denomination to another, and from one minister to another within the same denomination.

*Private Christian Schools.* This section explores the pre-college instruction associated with the phenomena of private Christian schools. Historically, such schools were mainly Roman Catholic. Elementary school teachers typically were nuns, while monks and priests would supplement them at the high school level. However, some non-Roman Catholic churches established their own private schools based upon a common ethnic heritage, a set of beliefs that diverged from the majority Christian view, or for another reason, for they wished to remain a people "set apart." One example is the Mennonite Church, whose members historically represented a German-

speaking background, where pacifist and Anabaptist beliefs dominated, and where civic responsibilities (e.g., voting and jury duty) were seen as a secular corruption of the preferred other-worldly lifestyle. In contrast, mainline Protestant churches generally are not involved in establishing private Christian schools at any pre-college level, although they have been active in the field of liberal arts colleges.

This historical picture began to change radically after the 1963 Supreme Court ruling. In fact, it is still changing. At present, Roman Catholic parochial schools are less prevalent. In part, this decrease in prevalence is secondary to financial constraints. However, it also is influenced by the difficulty of finding future priests and nuns. Mainline Protestant churches continue to show little interest in establishing and developing private Christian schools. However, as the Roman Catholic presence in private Christian schools shrinks and as mainline Protestant churches continue to be uninvolved, the emergence of private “religious right” Christian schools has become ever more prevalent.

As presently constituted, private pre-college Christian schools range from preschool to high school. In most cases, the curriculum is principally determined by state board of education requirements, and there is little room for alteration. However, private Christian schools can supplement state-mandated curricula with additional courses and have some say in how they present certain subject matter. In what follows, both points are considered.

Almost all private Christian schools require supplemental Bible studies. In addition, many of them require attendance at formal daily or weekly chapel services. Occasionally, they may even require instruction in Latin or Greek, beginning in junior high or high school. In the lower grades, Bible courses are usually thematically oriented (e.g., God loves you and Jesus loves you). However, as students move through the system, Bible courses sometimes become structured around a given Biblical book or set of books (e.g., the Synoptic Gospels, the Book of Acts, the Pauline epistles, Old Testament survey, and New Testament survey). In other cases, this thematic approach might be supplemented with prominent Bible characters, Christian marriage and family, Christian relationships, the Bible’s scriptural authority, and so on.

In addition, private Christian schools usually can teach certain state-mandated courses from a perspective consistent with the belief and doctrine of the church or organization controlling the school. For example, a world history course may focus on church history and interpret historical

events in a manner that emphasizes the church's role and development while minimizing non-Christian contributions (e.g., geopolitical issues or ethnic conflict). As a specific example, consider the Crusades, which are presented in the West as a series of military conflicts. Typically, the public schools present these campaigns in a way that reflects Christian propaganda. One should expect this to be even more so in private Christian schools, where "valiant and godly Christian Crusaders" are pitted against "the infidel worshippers of Muhammad," who would be portrayed as an anti-Christ figure advocating aggressive warfare and sexual license.

Courses in earth science and biology are likely to emphasize the Genesis account of creation, while giving little, if any, attention to Charles Darwin's theories, paleontology, and archaeological discoveries at variance with that account. Likewise, human psychology courses may devote more time to the concept of Original Sin<sup>23</sup> than to the theories of Sigmund Freud.

Typically, private Christian school teachers are certified or licensed teachers in the state in which the school resides. Instructors in Bible and related courses may hold either a B.R.E. or a M.R.E.; however, this is usually not a prerequisite. At private Christian high schools and junior colleges, such degrees are more prevalent.

*Youth Sunday.* Not every Christian denomination or church features a Youth Sunday program, although it can be a highly effective pedagogical device. Simply stated, this event involves turning the Sunday worship service over to the youth (usually limited to junior high school and high school students) for one Sunday each year. They have to plan the entire worship service; select the hymns, responsive reading sections, Biblical passages, an appropriate affirmation of faith, and a sermon topic; write the public prayers and sermon; and assume the minister's and lay leaders' leadership roles. In effect, this serves to groom them for learning and conducting formal worship services as adults.

*Children's Sermons.* The minister typically decides whether or not a children's sermon is provided during the Sunday morning worship. If it is presented, the minister frequently calls the children (usually elementary school) to sit in the front pews, and then leaves the pulpit in order to stand right in front of them. The sermon only lasts for a couple of minutes, and involves teaching some simple and basic moral principle or cornerstone of Christian theology in child-appropriate language. Simple magician's tricks and other visual aides are commonly used to make the point. Immediately afterwards, the children are asked to go sit with their parents.

### **Presentation and Content of Religious Education**

*General History.* In the more distant past, Christian religious education gave little thought to providing age-appropriate content and presentation of course material. For example, the 1537 catechism developed by John Calvin<sup>24</sup> was intended to instruct children, but was so hard for them to comprehend that it had to be simplified as early as 1542. Furthermore, if any age-appropriate content was considered, it was typically done so in an uninformed manner. Thus, 3- and 4-year children were being taught about Noah and the ark (Genesis 7:1-8:19), because they were almost always interested in animals. However, these early educators did not consider that a vengeful God's destruction of humanity by a flood was a psychologically traumatic event that such young children could neither comprehend in any religiously meaningful way nor cope with psychologically. This, in turn, led to various psychopathological responses.

*The Interface with Psychology.* In the early twentieth century, Christian religious educators began to interface with developmental and clinical psychologists to develop a more age-appropriate curriculum. This effort, which picked up substantial momentum during the mid-twentieth century, is dominated by two basic concepts: what type of material is appropriate at each stage of emotional and cognitive development (to minimize psychological trauma) and what type of material can children comprehend adequately at each stage of cognitive development?<sup>25</sup> Several concrete examples may bring these two concepts into better focus.

In regards to the first concern, I once knew a 4-year-old Muslim girl who was traumatized while receiving Islamic religious education. She was quite precocious, bilingual in Arabic and English, extremely well-mannered and behaved, and quite loving and caring. Within the limits of her developmental capacity, she also was a devout Muslim. She had been easily toilet trained at an early age and had had no difficulty with enuresis. However, shortly after enrolling in an Islamic weekend children's education program, she began to suffer from enuresis several times a day. What had happened?

Careful and emphatic talking with her revealed that her teacher had told the children that Satan often resides in the bathroom. Given her age-defined emotional development and stage of cognitive functioning (pre-operational thought), her understanding of the universe was marked by centrality, a highly personalized and egocentric concept of the world around her. Thus, if Satan were in the bathroom, he must be there to get her when she entered that room. An overwhelming phobic response to bathrooms quickly ensued,

and her terror caused her enuresis. Once this was understood, the problem was resolved easily. Nonetheless, this example clearly illustrates how age-inappropriate material can psychologically traumatize a young child.

As regards the second concern, one might consider death. Understanding this, which is crucial to acquiring the religious concepts of death and resurrection, requires concrete operational thought. However, as this ability only begins to develop when children are about 6 or 7 years old, children who have not reached that stage typically will not understand the concept of death or, if they acquire an idea of it at all, it will be very distorted.

*An Age-appropriate Curriculum.* The following general discussion is limited to classes specific to Christian religious education *per se*. With the exception of catechism, Youth Sunday, and children's sermons, it applies to all modes of Christian religious education presented previously.

The two primary thrusts of an age-appropriate curriculum are an age-appropriate presentation of material and age-appropriate classroom content.

In the first case, several general points can be made. At the preschool, kindergarten, and perhaps first grade levels, course material often is presented through behavioral activities (e.g., drawing a nativity scene), group singing, and simple easy-to-understand paraphrased Bible stories. The mnemonic value of singing rhymed lyrics is a powerful form of indoctrination at this stage. Long after lessons learned much later in life have been forgotten, these rhymed lyrics still prowl through the unconscious and conscious minds of middle-aged adults who sang them as young children. For example, although I can no longer recite all of the Bible's books from rote memory, I could do so while in the middle grades of elementary school. And although I may stumble occasionally while reciting the Apostles' Creed and other staples of Biblical memorization (e.g., Psalms 23, the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the Lord's Prayer), I can recite at the drop of a hat the lyrics to such staple childhood songs as "Jesus Loves Me," "Jesus Loves the Little Children," "For God so Loved the World," and "The B-I-B-L-E."

As children move into the first or second grade, the group singing of rhymed lyrics continues to be used as a primary and highly effective pedagogical and mnemonic device, although the content of the lyrics becomes more age-appropriate. For example, Christmas carols are used during the holiday season. Rote memorization of selected Bible verses begins, and paraphrased Bible stories become a much more stressed part of the curriculum.

As a child advances into middle elementary school, junior high school, and high school, Christian hymns replace childhood songs, paraphrased

Bible stories are replaced increasingly with the English translation of the actual Biblical texts, and memorization of Bible passages becomes more prominent. Likewise, the presentation of course material increasingly conforms to the same lecture format used by teachers in other courses. By junior high school, the presentation method begins to adopt the classroom discussion model. During high school, students often are assigned the task of presenting and developing lesson material themselves, thus again grooming them to become leaders in some future congregation.

As to age-appropriate content, the following outline provides some understanding of what has resulted from the interface of Christian religious education and psychology. At 3 years of age, the content focuses on God's love and forgiveness, Jesus' love for children, and a few Biblical stories of Jesus as a baby and as an adult. At ages 4 and 5, content may highlight stories about how Jesus helped others and showed God to others, and how prominent Biblical personalities demonstrated love for and a desire to serve God. At ages 6 and 7, as children enter the developmental stage of concrete operational thought, content may begin focusing on the Christian understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection, Biblical stories about how God works in people's lives, and Biblical lessons in basic morality (e.g., the Ten Commandments and some of the sayings attributed to Jesus).

At ages 8 and 9, instruction in the Bible's structure and how it came to be written may begin. In addition, short biographies of prominent Biblical people and early Church leaders may begin to be taught, and the child is exposed to a much fuller exposition of the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus' life. At ages 10 and 11, the child is increasingly exposed to those aspects of early Church history that are consistent with contemporary Christianity (e.g., Paul's mission and ministry). Furthermore, by this age the child's sense of space and time has developed to the point where appropriate geographical and chronological considerations may be introduced.

Junior high youth often are beginning to struggle with issues of personality development that involve self-discovery and personal identity formation. As such, religious education begins to emphasize one's personal relationship with God, the nature of God, and a personal awareness of oneself as an autonomous and morally responsible individual. Supplemental content might focus on the role and nature of the Church. By the time the youth enter high school, the Christian understanding of the meaning of life

is typically a firm part of the curriculum. Such issues as moral and responsible sexual behavior, assuming the responsibilities of being a role model for younger children and what it means to be a morally responsible and Christian adult are normally included.<sup>26</sup>

### **Training Religious Educators**

*Education.* As noted earlier, Christian religious educators often have no specific training. However, two different degree programs have long been in place for training them. The baccalaureate in religious education (B.R.E.) degree is a 4-year undergraduate degree program, which usually leads to state certification or licensing as a public school teacher with an emphasis on Biblical studies and Church history. This basic degree may be supplemented with a master's of religious education (M.R.E.) degree, which requires 1 or 2 years of postgraduate schooling. In essence, the degree program is similar to that of a M.Ed. degree, but again has a pronounced emphasis on Biblical studies, Church history, and some basic training in theology. Teachers with such degrees are found primarily in the private Christian school system, although some may work in churches with large memberships and in denominational offices that prepare religious education curricula and instructional material.

*Certification.* While there are a few professional societies for teachers of Christian religious education, there is no formal certification process that carries any universal weight.

### **Evaluation and Assessment**

To date, almost nothing has been done to develop standardized evaluation and assessment techniques to measure the effectiveness of Christian religious education. This is true both in terms of documenting moral and religious development in the child's personal life and functioning, and in terms of measuring his or her intellectual mastery of basic curriculum content. However, the pioneering work of James Fowler, 27 based in large part upon Lawrence Kohlberg's work in the developmental psychology of moral reasoning, offers some potential for a standardized assessment of a religious faith's development. Furthermore, and at least theoretically, Fowler's work is not confined to measuring the development of Christian faith, but purports to be a system for measuring the development of faith across religious traditions.

## Summary and Conclusions

Over the years, and especially since the 1963 Court decision banning public prayer and overt religious instruction in public schools, American Christians have been forced to develop and/or strengthen a variety of forms of religious education. This paper has provided a general review of how they have sought to provide Christian religious education to their youth. As the issues facing Muslim teachers who want to provide a religious education to their young people are not so different from those of their Christian counterparts, perhaps Muslim educators can learn something from the history of successes and failures of the Christian experiment to give their young people a religious education.

## Endnotes

1. G. B. Duncan, "Chronology," in C. M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971).
2. Since this paper focuses exclusively upon Christian religious education, which presupposes a Christian understanding of persons and events, I have followed the customary Christian patterns of referring to Prophet Jesus and all other Prophets, except for Prophet Muhammad.
3. For the same reason as outlined in endnote 2, I have used "God" instead of "Allah."
4. Most, but not all, Christian denominations limit church membership to post-adolescents. As such, most denominational membership figures do not include young children.
5. Some of these denominations are not considered by other denominations.
6. "Christian and Jewish Religious Membership in the United States: 1960 & 1995." Online at: [www.publicpurpose.com/dm~relig.htm](http://www.publicpurpose.com/dm~relig.htm).
7. Ibid.
8. G. Niebuhr, "Studies suggest lower count for U.S. Muslims," *New York Times* (25 October 2001).
9. "Christian and Jewish Religious Membership."
10. C. Lambert, "Trafficking in chance," *Harvard Magazine* (July-August, 2002), 32-41.
11. The Constitution's First Amendment, ratified on December 15, 1791, states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."
12. State law often governs assigned course curricula at each grade and mandates the requirements needed to become a state-certified teacher. Failure to meet these standards typically result in the school either not being certified or los-

ing its certification. In addition, depending upon the particular state's law, criminal prosecution may be initiated for failing to have children attend a certified school.

13. I recall being pleasantly surprised, while serving as a youth minister in the summer of 1968, by the revised Sunday school literature for high school students then being distributed by the United Methodist Church. This literature was making extensive use of the Dead Sea Scrolls to provide a realistic, historical context for understanding Judaism's sects and the setting of Jesus' ministry. Unfortunately, even though this literature was the United Methodist Church's official educational material for high school students, many individual churches refused to use it because the congregations and/or minister found it too "controversial" (i.e., too much of a threat to traditional Christian teaching and understanding).
14. Despite having attended catechism, 8 years of vacation Bible school, and 12 years of Sunday school, I received no instruction about any non-Christian religion other than a somewhat distorted introduction to Judaism. From conversations with others who have attended private Christian schools, it appears that any instruction concerning Islam is either nonexistent or extremely distorted.
15. L. P. Qualben, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1942), 364, 395.
16. These early Christian churches were anything but monolithic, for there were substantial differences in doctrine and recognized scripture among them. These churches substantially predated the rise of organized denominations.
17. Aurelius Augustinus (b. November 13, 354, Tagaste [Suk-Ahras, Algeria]), converted to Christianity in 387 in Milan, Italy, entered the Catholic priesthood at Hippo (Annaba, Algeria) in 391, and became Bishop of Hippo in 396. He retained this post until his death on August 28, 430. St. Augustine quickly became the western Church's dominant intellectual influence and is generally credited as being the greatest theologian of Christian antiquity. His books include *Confessions*, *De Vera Religione* (Of True Religion), *De Trinitate* (On The Trinity), and *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God). He was canonized posthumously, and his feast day is August 28. Burnaby J: Augustine, ed. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* CD 98.
18. John Chrysostom (b. c347, Antioch, Syria), who began his education in law but later on became interested in theology, was ordained circa 386. In 398, he became Archbishop of Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey). He was later deposed and exiled, and died on September 14, 407, at Comana, Helenopontus. He was subsequently canonized by the Roman Catholic (feast day: September 13) and the Orthodox Catholic (feast day: November 13) churches. Atwater D. et al., "Saint John Chrysostom," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* CD 98.
19. Cyril (b. c315, Jerusalem) became Bishop of Jerusalem circa 350. He was deposed from his episcopacy and exiled on three different occasions, sec-

ondary to conflict with the Arian branch of Adoptionist Christianity. He died circa 386 in Jerusalem. He is mainly remembered for his *Catecheses* (composed of 23 lectures), his promotion of Jerusalem as a pilgrimage site, and his contributions to the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. The Eucharist (Holy Communion) ritualistically commemorates the Biblical account of the Last Supper of Jesus Christ (Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:14-23). The theory of transubstantiation, which is not universally held within Christianity, is that the bread and wine become the substance (but do not assume the appearance) of Christ's flesh and blood. Cyril was later canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, and his feast day is commemorated on March 18. "Saint Cyril of Jerusalem," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* CD 98.

20. The Apostles' Creed derives directly from the oral catechesis used in Rome by at least the second century, and evolved through several forms until reaching its present form in southwestern France during the late sixth or seventh century. Later Christian mythologizing maintained that it was developed by Jesus' 12 disciples, each of whom supposedly contributed one of the 12 articles of faith comprising the creed. It reads as follows, each article of faith being demarcated by a semi-colon. "I believe in God the Father almighty; maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell, the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father almighty; from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead; I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church; the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen."
21. The Lord's Prayer, presented in the Bible as a prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples, is recorded in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4.
22. The Old Testament narrates that the Ten Commandments (Decalogue) given to Moses by God were inscribed on tablets. They are recorded in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21. The Islamic account can be found in Qur'an 7:145-154, in which the Ten Commandments are referred to as tablets (*alwah*).
23. The doctrine of Original Sin states that humanity is born into a state of sin that has been "inherited" from the original sin of Adam's eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. As the Genesis 3:7-11 account emphasizes that Adam and Eve became aware of their own nakedness after eating the forbidden fruit, traditional Christian interpretation equates this fall from grace with sexual awareness, thereby intricately linking sexuality and Original sin. Ironically, the inevitable Christian backlash against human sexuality resulted in the very type of society in which Freud's psychosexual theories have some basis in reality. This does not mean, however, that such theories are applicable to other soci-

eties and cultures in which the equation between sex (including marital sex if done for any reason other than procreation) and sin has not been made.

24. John Calvin (b. July 10, 1509, Noyon, Picardy, France) began his education by studying for the Roman Catholic priesthood. Later on, however, he switched to the study of law. By 1532, he was entrenched in the Protestant Reformation and quickly became its dominant French contributor. Some argue that he was the most important figure in the second generation of Protestant reformers, although his theology has been criticized within Christian circles for its overreliance on the theory of predestination. His work eventually inspired the formation of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches. He died on May 27, 1564.
25. At the risk of oversimplifying, Piagetian developmental psychology posits and empirically substantiates the following major stages of cognitive development: (1) the sensorimotor stage, with onset at birth; (2) the preoperational stage, with onset between 1 and 2 years of life; (3) the concrete operational stage, with onset between 6 and 7 years of life; and (4) the formal operational stage, with onset between 11 and 13 years of life. Within each stage, certain concepts can be grasped without undue distortion, while other concepts can be understood only in a highly distorted manner, if at all. See H. G. Furth, *Piaget for Teachers* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970) and J. Piaget and B. Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).
26. See F. W. Eastman, "Teaching the Bible to Children" and F. E. Kearns, "Teaching the Bible to Youth and Adults," both of which appear in Laymon, *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*.
27. See J. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), and J. Fowler and S. Keen, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1978).