THE
BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS

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LINDA K. WERTHEIMER is a journalist and author of *Faith Ed.: Teaching About Religion in an Age of Intolerance*. She spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** and undergraduate research assistant **Nathan McGuire** before her presentation on teaching about religion in public schools at an event co-sponsored by the Lynch School of Education and the Boisi Center.

MCGUIRE: We want to start off by asking a question that relates to the topic of your talk today – how young is too young to start teaching about religion in public schools?

WERTHEIMER: You could do some really simple things even in kindergarten. In kindergarten, teachers could read students storybooks about the different holidays at an appropriate time. It doesn't necessarily have to be when the holidays are, but during a unit on different religions in kindergarten. In first grade, you could do a little bit more explaining about the religions.

The key thing is going to be how well you train the teachers on how to handle the topic, and how they handle the questions that kids might ask. You have to train them in content too because an elementary teacher, unlike a middle or high school social studies teacher, may never have taken any kind of world history class in college. They may know nothing about religion except about their own religion, if they are affiliated with one. You should not just throw them a bunch of worksheets and say, here. You need to train them in the content, but then also show them how you handle this topic, which has a lot of potential minefields.

HEVELONE: How do you go about teaching the teachers to teach? How do you make sure what they say is from a more historical perspective, rather than a more faith-based or theological perspective?

WERTHEIMER: I would use Modesto, California, as a great model for this. They teach at a higher level. They teach

a ninth grade world religions course required for all high school students. They intentionally moved instruction about religion from middle to high school. But you could adopt what they do with their high school teachers with any level of teacher. They really divide the training into two parts.

One is about the First Amendment. They brought in people from the First Amendment Center, and they trained the teachers on the separation of church and state and where the lines are drawn, and they also included history lessons on the First Amendment. So the teachers understand that "I'm here to teach about the religion, not preach it," and here's where the lines are drawn. The trainers talk about how you keep your own beliefs out of it, and they also talk about celebrating versus educating students about the holidays – how do you keep it as neutral as you can? As part of the First Amendment training, they talked to the teachers about handling conversations that may come up about religion.

The second part is content. What Modesto did was very creative. They brought in religion scholars from local universities, who taught the teachers about the different religions they were going to teach. Then they also toured the houses of worship in their community. Modesto's more diverse than many areas around the country. It has a Sikh temple, a mosque, a Jewish temple, a Hindu Mandir and houses of worship of many other faiths. If you don't have those examples of several houses of worship for teachers to tour, you can show films, you can have them read Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*. There are so many resources out there, and the teachers don't have to become incredible, deep experts

of the religions they teach. But they have to know the basics.

MCGUIRE: You mentioned how Modesto is a diverse community in terms of religion. But in other parts of the country, where we don't see that much diversity, how can schools and how can the curriculum go about balancing the different religious traditions in the world and split up time for what they're teaching?

WERTHEIMER: Schools may look at this in an academic fashion. At the minimum, most schools would cover Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and then they might add Hinduism and Buddhism. They look at those three religions because they're the three main world religions. They're all monotheistic. They'll look at Buddhism and Hinduism as well, because China and India are such big players in the world. They look at it in history, in terms of where this fits in history. That's not making a decision on who's in our community.

Modesto did both. They looked at which religions play such a big role in the world history class that we're going to teach, but then who else is in our community? So I think you can look at it two ways. But in communities where pretty much everyone is Christian or atheist or agnostic, if they tried to look at their community, then what would they come up with? So they can't do it that way. They have to look at it educationally.

There's another piece of this – what the state standards say. Generally, if they mention specific religions, they mention the first three that I mentioned, and then they will sometimes add Buddhism and Hinduism.

HEVELONE: What inspired Modesto to start doing this in the ninth grade?

WERTHEIMER: It's a complicated story, because there was a controversy that preceded the creation of the course. There's a little bit of a disagreement on whether the controversy actually led to the creation of the course, or if it was just because the superintendent told the social studies teachers to look at new ways to do the curriculum. The former superintendent thinks it's all interrelated.

They had this controversy in the school system where there was a lot of gay-bashing going on in high schools, and the superintendent's solution was to bring in groups to train the teachers in sensitivity about gays. Modesto is also part of California's Bible belt, and so there was a huge outcry. You can't do this. You're imposing different values on our kids than what we're teaching them at home. It became nasty.

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The superintendent then invited Charles Haynes, a senior scholar at the First Amendment Center, to come in and act as a mediator. As part of that mediation, he talked about the First Amendment, and so this conversation got started. At the same time, the superintendent said to the social studies teachers, can you see what you can do to reinvent the curriculum? Religion, of course, was on everyone's mind. So it grew out of that, because they talked about the need to create more respect for everybody in the community. They also established what would be the character traits that everyone would desire for students and connected those traits in a symbolic way to this curriculum.

MCGUIRE: Despite the lack of a national movement to incorporate religion into the national curriculum, do you think that local leaders should try to continue to maintain control over it, or should there be a push towards standardization?

WERTHEIMER: There really is no such thing as a national curriculum in our country. We're local control. There are state standards, which school districts must adopt. There has been a national movement off and on since the '60s, and I'd say we're in a free-for-all movement right now. You have Modesto which created this required course, and then Wellesley, Massachusetts, which I wrote about, which takes the social studies program and turns it on its head and focuses on religion for half the year.

You do have these state standards that came out in the '90s and early 2000s that require teaching about the world's religions as part of social studies. It's more clearly in the standards now than it has ever been before. We're in a good place that school districts should be doing it, and most of them actually are, but it's inconsistent in terms of how much they're doing it, how well they're doing it, and when they're starting the instruction. Most of them are doing it a little bit in middle school, and then again in a world history and/or geography course in high school. So we're in a little bit of a free-for-all, but there's some consistency.

HEVELONE: In your book, you talk about "burkagate," and you talk about the trip to the mosque with Wellesley and the role media played in presenting those. Considering those cases, what role do you think the media should play in the formation of curriculum and reporting on religion in the schools? What would you like to see media do?

WERTHEIMER: I would like to see media, when they're covering these disputes, to really report them more fully. They seem to just go for the hot button, and then you often don't get deeper discussion about education. In Wellesley, they were teaching this course for nearly fifteen years. So what is the issue here? Is it really Islamophobia, or is it about teaching about religion in schools? Things get lost. Also, Fox Media would jump in and do this gotcha kind of story, but then the *The Boston Globe* did an earlier story that was fine. I decided to dig deeper into the Wellesley uproar when I did a magazine piece. In terms of what role the media could play, when they cover these disputes, they should just dig as deep as they can to get to what it's really about. Also, they need to educate themselves about the different religions, so when someone says something about Islam, they can speak with some authority. Or if they don't know, interview several religion scholars and try and get an answer.

Because you'll have people in Wichita, Kansas say, "Oh my God, they put a bulletin board that said five pillars of Islam, and they didn't put the sixth pillar of jihad." Some people just reported that as if it was a straight, real concern, when most of us would agree that there's a basic understanding of these five pillars of being the five obligations of a Muslim, and jihad is something different. It's not an obligation. It's a description of an inner struggle.

The role media can play is both educating itself and educating society about religion.

MCGUIRE: Shifting gears a little bit: the book takes us across the country into a lot of different communities. What's your sense of how students respond to religion in the classroom versus how the parents respond at home?

WERTHEIMER: The students, interestingly, respond with a lot more open-mindedness than some of the parents, but it depends on the region. In

Wellesley, the parents have been supportive and open-minded for the most part. In Tampa, it was fascinating, because the students were annoyed that people had jumped on the speaker who came to their class. They heard him, and he didn't say anything that was wrong, and the students felt like people who weren't there were acting as if the teenagers were a bunch of idiots.

I still remember this one girl who said, "I'm defending the fact that we're not stupid. Teenagers are not stupid. Our teachers are not stupid. You're acting as if we can somehow get brainwashed and indoctrinated in one sitting."

For the most part, students tended to be more open-minded. There were cases, like in Texas, when I interviewed one of the girls who had complained, where she was just as closed-minded about this as some of the parents. She said, "You know, Obama is Muslim. We have a Muslim in the White House." She obviously needed more education on the topic.

For the most part, the kids understood the lessons their teachers were trying to teach them, and they understood the idea that we need to learn about the world around us, and it's good to learn about different religions. Also, they weren't taking the information like someone was brainwashing them. They were able, whether they were sixth graders or ninth graders, to analyze it. The first graders, no. They can't analyze it, but it's such simple stuff the first graders are really learning.

HEVELONE: In your book, you draw a lot on your childhood experiences.

WERTHEIMER: It's part memoir and it's part reporting. It's not an academic book.

HEVELONE: Would you like to speak a little bit about how your childhood influenced your decision to write this book, how you came to this book?

WERTHEIMER: Many people ask, when did you start this book? In a way, I've been writing it since I was age nine. My childhood definitely shapes the book throughout. It really led to me writing this book partly, along with the Wellesley field trip, because it left so many questions in my mind.

The experience that I described in the book is we moved from western New York State, where there were some Jewish temples, to this small town in Ohio where there were none. There were no Jews in our school. And the first week in school, a woman comes in and teaches Christianity classes. It was preaching, not teaching. Then the kids would say,

"Why don't you go to the class?" I'd say, "I'm Jewish." They said, "You're going to hell." Things kind of went downhill from there.

At first I thought it was anti-Semitism. But then as I got older, I wondered was it anti-Semitism or was it ignorance? And then a bigger question as I got older also formed in my mind – what if instead of pastors preaching to us, the teachers had tried to teach us about many religions instead of one? Could it have made a difference? Would it have made us more respectful of each other?

I wasn't disrespectful of my peers' religion, per se, but I was upset about the youth pastor roaming the lunchroom and about people trying to shove their religion in my face. That's how I saw it. As an adult, I can look at it more as that's how they've been taught in their house of worship. I'm not saying I agree with such proselytizing, because I prefer that someone doesn't try to convert me. But at the same time, I'm much more open to it as an adult. Not open to being converted, but open to the fact that when a Jehovah's Witness comes to my door, they've been trained to do that. That's their tradition.

My childhood shapes the whole book, and it was intentional that my own story played a role in the book, just because it's a narrative book.

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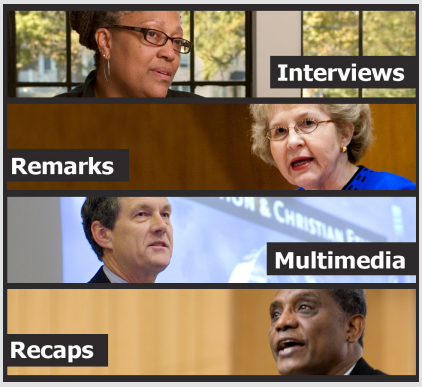

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