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APPROACHING RELIGION: EMBRACING DIVERSE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO ENCOURAGE THE INCORPORATION OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN AMERICA'S CURRICULUM

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Current literature supports the inclusion of the academic study of religion in public education but varies in the purposes and practices it recommends for teaching religious studies. For an educational subject that has historically been misunderstood and devalued, but carries tremendous potential to dismantle religious illiteracy and intolerance, an accessible, compelling, and purposeful pedagogy is necessary. In this thesis I argue that a critical move toward a comprehensively pluralistic society is increasing the presence of meaningful religious studies content in American public schools by presenting it through any or multiple academic approaches. A content analysis of seven U.S. high school social studies textbooks identifies the prevalence, strengths, weaknesses, and functions of seven different approaches to religious studies. Findings and discussion demonstrate that each approach recognizably translates its main theoretical ideals in its presentation of content in textbooks and that content remains meaningful and well-integrated when multiple approaches work side by side. Certain approaches appear incomplete though, whether in their limited prevalence, imperfect clarity, or failure to fulfill every goal of their ideal theoretical description. The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of the current relationship of religion and curricula in its historical narrative and an empirical understanding of how approaches can be used to their fullest potential, either by embracing their strengths or avoiding their limitations. Findings support the increased use of approaches to present religious studies content and continued empirical testing so that educators have clear and confirmed options for including religious studies in schools.