# The Case for Teaching the Bible

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**Should the Holy Book be on the public school menu? Yes. It's the bedrock of Western culture. And, it's constitutional – as long as we teach it but don't preach it.**

By DAVID VAN BIEMA

Miss Kendrick came ready, with props. The day's topic was the Gospel of Matthew. … The day was Thursday, not Sunday. And the location was not Oakwood Baptist Church, a mile down Texas State Highway 46, but New Braunfels High School, a public school that began offering a Bible-literacy class last fall [using a textbook created for public-school Bible courses called *The Bible and Its Influence*]. The class has its share of conservative Christians. Front-row center sat Rachel Williams, 18, whose mother does teach Sunday school at Oakwood. But not 20 ft. away sat a blond atheist who asked that her name not be used because she hasn't outed herself to her parents. Why take a Bible class? I asked her. "Some of my friends are Christian," she said, shrugging, "and they would argue about, like, whether you can be a Christian and believe in evolution, and I'm like, Okaaaay ... clueless." Williams signed up for a similar reason. "If somebody is going to carry on a sophisticated conversation with me, I would rather know what they're talking about than look like a moron or fight my way through it," she says. The class has "gotten a lot of positive feedback," she adds. "It's going to really rise in popularity."

The same might be said about public-school courses on the Bible nationwide. There aren't that many. But they're rising in popularity. Last year Georgia became the first state in memory to offer funds for high school electives on the Old and New Testaments using the Bible as the core text. Similar funding was discussed in several other legislatures, although the initiatives did not become law. Meanwhile, two privately produced curriculums crafted specifically to pass church-state muster are competing for use in individual schools nationwide. Combined, they are employed in 460 districts in at least 37 states. The numbers are modest, but their publishers expect them to soar. …These new curriculums plus polls suggesting that over 60% of Americans favor secular teaching about the Bible suggest that a Miss Kendrick may soon be talking about Matthew in a school near you.

**"[Public school Bible electives] should have a strong accompanying textbook on the model of *The Bible and Its Influence…*"**

To some, this idea seems retrograde. Citing a series of Supreme Court decisions culminating in 1963's Abington Township School District v. Schempp, which removed prayer and devotion from the classroom, the skeptics ask whether it is safe to bring back the source of all that sectarianism. But a new,

post-Schempp coalition insists it is essential to do so. It argues that teaching the Bible in schools—as an object of study, not God's received word—is eminently constitutional. The Bible so pervades Western culture, it says, that it's hard to call anyone educated who hasn't at least given thought to its key passages. Finally, it claims that the current civic climate makes it a "now more than ever" proposition. Says Stephen Prothero, chair of the Boston University religion department, whose new book, *Religious Literacy* (Harper SanFrancisco), presents a compelling argument for Bible-literacy courses: "In the late '70s, [students] knew nothing about religion, and it didn't matter. But then religion rushed into the public square. What purpose could it possibly serve for citizens to be ignorant of all that?" The "new consensus" for secular Bible study argues that knowledge of it is essential to being a full-fledged, well-rounded citizen. Let's examine that argument.

**Is it constitutional?**

TOWARD THE BEGINNING OF THE COURT'S string of school-secularization cases, the most eloquent language preserving the neutral study of religion was probably Justice Robert Jackson's concurring opinion in the 1948 case McCollum v. Board of Education: "One can hardly respect the system of education that would leave the student wholly ignorant of the currents of religious thought that move the world society for ... which he is being prepared," Jackson wrote, and warned that putting all references to God off limits would leave public education "in shreds." In the 1963 Schempp decision, the exemption for secular study of Scripture was explicit and in the majority opinion: "Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment," wrote Justice Tom C. Clark. Justice Arthur Goldberg contributed a helpful distinction between "the teaching of religion" (bad) and "teaching about religion" (good). Citing these and subsequent cases, Marc Stern, general counsel for the American Jewish Congress, says, "It is beyond question that it is possible to teach a course about the Bible that is constitutional." For over a decade, he says, any legal challenges to school Bible courses have focused not on the general principle but on whether the course in question was sufficiently neutral in its approach.

**Why should I care?**

…According to *Religious Literacy*, polls show that nearly two-thirds of Americans believe the Bible holds the answers to "all or most of life's basic questions," but pollster George Gallup has dubbed us "a nation of biblical illiterates." Only half of U.S. adults know the title of even one Gospel. Most can't name the Bible's first book. The trend extends even to Evangelicals, only 44% of whose teens could identify a particular quote as coming from the Sermon on the Mount.

**So what? I'm not a very religious person**

SIMPLY PUT, THE BIBLE IS THE MOST influential book ever written. Not only is the Bible the best-selling book of all time, it is the best-selling book of the year every year. In a 1992 survey of English teachers to determine the top-10 required "book-length works" in high school English classes, plays by Shakespeare occupied three spots and the Bible none. And yet, let's compare the two: Beauty of language: Shakespeare, by a nose. Depth of subject matter: toss-up. Breadth of subject matter: the Bible. Numbers published, translated etc: Bible. Number of people martyred for: Bible. Number of wars attributed to: Bible. Solace and hope provided to billions: you guessed it. And Shakespeare would almost surely have agreed. According to one estimate, he alludes to Scripture some 1,300 times. As for the rest of literature, when your seventh-grader reads *The Old Man and the Sea*, a teacher could tick off the references to Christ's Passion—the bleeding of the old man's palms, his stumbles while carrying his mast over his shoulder, his hat cutting his head—but wouldn't the thrill of recognition have been more satisfying on their/own?

If literature doesn't interest you, you also need the Bible to make sense of the ideas and rhetoric that have helped drive U.S. history. "The shining city on the hill"? That's Puritan leader John Winthrop quoting Matthew to describe his settlement's convenantal standing with God. In his Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln noted sadly that both sides in the Civil War "read the same Bible" to bolster their opposing claims. When Martin Luther King Jr. talked of "Justice rolling down like waters" in his "I Have a Dream" speech, he was consciously enlisting the Old Testament prophet Amos, who first spoke those words. The Bible provided the argot—and theological underpinnings—of women's suffrage and prison-reform movements.

And then there is today's political rhetoric. For a while, secular liberals complained that when George W. Bush went all biblical, he was speaking in code. Recently, the Democratic Party seems to have come around to the realization that a lot of grass-roots Democrats welcome such use. …

**Doesn't secular teaching about the Bible play into the hands of the religious right and the secular left?**

YES. BOTH. WHICH MAY SUGGEST THAT EACH is exaggerating its claim. … Evangelical pundit Chuck Colson favors Bible-literacy courses. "Would I prefer a more explicitly biblical Christian teaching?" he asks. "Of course. But you can't do that in public education. What you can do is introduce the Bible so that people are aware of its impact on people and in history and then let God speak through it as he will."

First Amendment sentinels like Wendy Kaminer, a lawyer and the author of Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and the Perils of Piety, fear that given America's overwhelmingly Christian cast, even neutral Bible instruction would amount to preferencing. "If you teach the Bible outside of close conjunction with other religions," she says, "then it becomes a kind of promotion of the majority faith…." Yet the American Jewish Congress's Stern, who has participated in Supreme Court establishment-clause-violation cases, sees Bible class as a plus for anyone following in his footsteps. "Take creationism," he offers. "Unless you are literate in the first two chapters of Genesis, you have no idea what people are fighting about."

All such discussion, of course, assumes that the two sides of the culture wars are duking it out over impressionable young minds. Prothero rejects the premise. He says he has never seen a Bible-literacy course change anyone's faith one way or another. "I think the academic study of religion provides a kind of middle space between those two ways of talking. It takes the biblical truth claims seriously and yet brackets them for purposes of classroom discussion," he says. "It works in a way that feels safe to both the believer and the unbeliever in the room." And people are "tired of the culture wars," he insists. "There's a broad middle who want to do something productive."

**So who are the leaders of this movement?**

DECADES AFTER THE Schempp DECISION, most school administrators, lawsuit-averse by nature, had eliminated almost any treatment of religion. Then during the evangelical renaissance of the 1990s, a theologically conservative North Carolina group called the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools compiled an outline for Bible courses. The curriculums reached the attention of Charles Haynes, a senior scholar at the First Amendment Center, based in Arlington, Va., who favored teaching about religion in school but didn't think what he was looking at passed constitutional muster. He composed a document, *The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*, that accomplished two crucial things: it provided bright-line standards on what the law allowed and collected endorsements from so broad a base of advocates (the American Jewish Committee, the Council on Islamic Education, the National Association of Evangelicals and the liberal watchdog group People for the American Way, to name a few) that even the most nervous school board could find what he calls "safe harbor" for a course teaching about the Bible.

Haynes also brought in Chuck Stetson, who wanted to take the next step: a secularly acceptable Bible textbook. … In late 2005 he unveiled *The Bible and Its Influence*, which was vetted by 40 religious and legal scholars, including Jews, Protestants and a Roman Catholic bishop. Meant to be read alongside a Bible, the book's 373 oversize pages provide a clearly written—if selective—theme-and-style analysis of key passages in most of the biblical books. Its sidebars—"Cultural Connections," "Historical Connections"—do much of the heavy lifting in transforming a Bible commentary into a textbook.

It seems more legally palatable than its competition. The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools … [whose] 1999 edition reportedly recommended materials from something called the Creation Evidence Museum; a "question for reflection" in the 2005 version suggested that the logistics of Noah's Ark would have been more manageable if some of the animals were babies or hibernating. In 2002 a Florida district court ruled unconstitutional a course that critics claim was loosely based on its New Testament portion (the Council denies a connection). Its spokespeople claim it is refining itself as it goes and its most recent edition, which came out last month, eliminates much literalist bias—but still devotes 18 lines to the blatantly unscientific notion that the earth is only 6,000 years old.…

**A modest proposal**

A BASIC QUESTION: WHY TEACH THE BIBLE and not comparative religion? It may not be necessary to provide Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism with equal time, but it seems misguided to ignore faiths that millions of Americans practice each day; and a glance at the headlines further argues for an omnibus course. Yet could a school demand that its already overloaded kids take one elective if they take the other? Concerns about whether a Bible Belt Christian teacher could in good conscience teach a religiously neutral Bible course also plagued me. Was high school Bible study one of those great ideas that vaporizes when exposed to air?

I visited New Braunfels high in early February. Jennifer Kendrick is committed to *The Bible and Its Influence*, but as a starting point rather than a blueprint. "It gives me ways to approach the topic, and then I put together something else," she says. …

One successful class teaching the Bible as an academic subject hardly guarantees that it will work every time or everywhere. But Kendrick shows that it can work. "Bad courses will be taught," predicts Prothero … "People will teach it as a Sunday-school class. And we'll do what we always do when unconstitutional stuff happens in America. We'll get a court to tell us what to do, and then we'll fix it."

Prothero may be overly sanguine about the workings of the U.S. court system. But even if he's wrong, this shouldn't stop schools from making some effort to teach the Bible. The study doesn't have to be mandatory. In a national school system overscheduled with basic skills, other topics such as history and literature deserve core status more than Scripture—provided that these classes address it themselves, where appropriate. … Within that period students could be expected to read and discuss Genesis, the Gospel of Matthew, a few Moses-on-the-mountain passages and two of Paul's letters. … The course should have a strong accompanying textbook on the model of *The Bible and Its Influence* … And some teacher training is a must: at a bare minimum, about their constitutional obligations.

And, oh yes, there should be one faith test. Faith in our country. Sure, there will be bumps along the way. But in the end, what is required in teaching about the Bible in our public schools is patriotism: a belief that we live in a nation that understands the wisdom of its Constitution clearly enough to allow the most important book in its history to remain vibrantly accessible for everyone.

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