

Religion's role in schools – informing or evangelizing?

Given our Constitution's requirement that church and state remain separate, religion should appear in public schools only in a balanced historical context that informs students about the world's religions. But too often, Christian evangelism is allowed instead. That's the crux of a fierce debate now raging in Texas. The problem may be greater here than in most other states, but it also exists to some degree in many other places.



It is especially prevalent in Texas because Texas is such a large market for textbooks and other study materials. Publishers must meet official Texas standards in order to have their publications bought by Texas school systems. Yet the official Texas standards for history and social-studies courses give disproportionate emphasis not just to Christianity, but to conservative or even fundamentalist interpretations of Christianity with which many Christians strongly disagree and which most scholars recognize as incorrect.



Scholars are finding errors and bias

Textbook debates have been in the news lately thanks to hearings about which textbooks will be adopted by the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) in November. The new materials chosen for use by the more than five million Texas public school students in 2015 will replace books published 12 years ago.

For years, most SBOE members have been Christian conservatives who have chosen textbooks that promote their views. Until recent years, this problem seems to have gone largely unnoticed. But now, fortunately, more Texans are realizing the need for schools to present religion fairly and accurately.



Doubt can deepen, clarify, and explain

In the September 26, 2014, issue of *The New York Times*, opinion writer Julia Baird reports news about a top religious leader. "When the Most Rev. Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury, said recently that at times he questioned if God was really there," Ms. Baird tells us, "much of the reaction was predictably juvenile: Even God's earthly emissary isn't sure if the whole thing is made up!"



I don't consider "juvenile" an appropriate description of the reaction Ms. Baird observed. Surprise at a top church leader's expressing doubt may well be unreasonable, but it's a reaction that's likely to come from a lot of adults.

Such admissions aren't likely to pay the bills

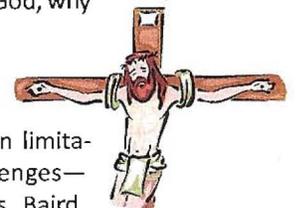
Ms. Baird reports that the *International Business Journal* had said that the archbishop's comment had sparked concerns that the leader of the Church of England might one day renounce Christianity or spirituality as a whole. Ms. Baird, however, found his remarks "rather tame." He told a recent Bristol Cathedral audience, she says, that he had moments of wondering "Is there a God?" and "Where is God?" and saying to God, "Look, isn't it about time you did something, if you're there?"



Julia Baird observes that church leaders don't often openly admit having such questions. She attributes this at least partly to the fact that such admissions aren't likely to pay those leaders' bills, and of course that's a valid point. But she finds that the archbishop's candor only makes him human. "Faith," she points out, "cannot block out darkness or doubt." And she reminds us that even Jesus, when on the cross, did not cry out, "Here I come!" but rather "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

A crucial part of belief

"Doubt acknowledges our own limitations and confirms—or challenges—fundamental beliefs," finds Ms. Baird. It is "not a detractor of belief but a crucial part of it."



The history of religion includes believers' struggles with doubt over the centuries. How well does the curriculum in your church or schools deal with this fact?

A leader in bringing about this change has been the Texas Freedom Network (TFN), a nonpartisan watchdog organization. It has recently enlisted scholars to examine the available textbooks and to point out errors, biases, and omissions that urgently need to be remedied. At www.tfn.org, you can read the reports of the scholars' findings and send needed financial help to TFN if you wish.

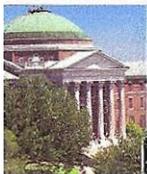
Few scholars on the official panel

An official state review panel with 140 members has existed to review textbooks, but TFN found that only four of those panel members were college or university faculty members. TFN therefore has contracted with an independent group of scholars to analyze the textbooks that are now under consideration.

The TFN group includes four faculty members from the Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University (SMU), plus faculty and researchers from the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Mary Washington in Virginia. Besides these scholars who focused on history and religion, specialists at the National Center for Science Education have examined textbook content on climate science, identifying what they considered serious problems with the treatment of that subject.



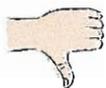
Errors, misconceptions, and worse



Dr. Edward Countryman, an SMU distinguished professor of history and one of the scholars enlisted by TFN, has found that publishers' attempts to align with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) requirements

have led to errors, misconceptions, or worse. The scholars all agreed on two main points, he writes in a September 22 article in *The Daily Beast*: most publishers tried hard to do what TEKS required, but that resulted in distortion or worse.

Countryman reminds us that when the TEKS requirements were adopted, four years ago, the process ignited an international media storm. Even the explicitly conservative Fordham Institute, writes Countryman, gave TEKS a grade of D because it amounted to political and cultural indoctrination.



Misrepresenting the Bible's influence

One of Countryman's objections is that TEKS requirements have forced the publishers of the currently proposed textbooks to assert direct biblical origins for the U.S. Constitution, "despite there being no evidence at all to support that idea." Countryman told *The Dallas Observer*, "This is not a political issue. It is simply whether the books provide good history that makes the best possible sense of what happened."

Countryman also points out that arch-conservative David Barton, who has no historian's credentials but has had a huge impact on TEKS, maintains that verse after verse from the Bible is quoted verbatim in the Constitution. Yet this is just not so.



Making a similar point, SMU history professor Kathleen Wellman reported to the SBOE that several of the U.S. government and history textbooks that she reviewed exaggerated the influence of Moses on America's founders. "These books make Moses the original founding father and credit him for virtually every distinctive feature of American government," Wellman told the SBOE.



Archaic racist commentary

Another important shortcoming was pointed out by SMU anthropology professor Ron Wetherington. He found what he called "archaic, misleading, and unintended racist commentary" that included use of the expression "negro race." In his view, "the term 'negro' is archaic and fraught with ulterior meaning. It should categorically not be used in a modern textbook."

Wetherington, by the way, was featured in the 2011 PBS documentary "The Revisionaries," which dealt with the inner workings of the Texas SBOE and won the 2014 DuPont award, the broadcast equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize. I wrote about this documentary in the [February 2013 Connections](#), which also tells about a report by SMU professor Mark Chancey, sponsored by TFN and available from its website. It showed that many Bible courses taught in Texas public schools were biased, inaccurate, and apparently in violation of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment and a 2007 Texas law. The [March 2013 Con-](#)



nections also deals with the subject of religion in schools. Both of these back issues are on my web-site, www.connectionsonline.org.

A subtle Christian tilt



Dr. David Brockman, an SMU scholar enlisted by TFN whose specialties include world religions, reviewed the religion-focused content of the proposed world history and social studies high-school textbooks. He focused on accuracy and balance in each book's coverage of religion generally, as well as of particular world religions. He found what he calls "a kind of subtle Christian tilt" in many of the books. Their failure to explain what Christian terms and practices mean, yet explaining those of other religions, mistakenly assumes that all students and instructors will be Christians.



The textbooks David Brockman examined, he writes in his report, "are basically oriented toward Western civilization, and they privilege Christianity. They tell a triumphalist and at times historically inaccurate story of the rise of the West, guided by its dominant religion." However, this Western-civilization slant, Brockman notes with regret, is borne out in the content of the TEKS standards themselves, which give Europe and the Americas the sole or main focus.

Omitting indigenous religions

Brockman finds that TEKS lists seven religions whose origins, central ideas, and spread must be covered, but it omits primal or indigenous religions. Yet 6% of the world's population is made up of adherents of these — only slightly smaller than the percentage of Buddhists and far larger than that of



Jews—and many primal religions are among the world's longest-lived religious traditions.

Other aspects that Brockman found to mark the TEKS' Christian slant include its failure to require coverage of the major divisions in Islam or Buddhism, which are so influential in today's world. Also, the Texas standards emphasize Christianity's unifying social and political role in medieval Europe and the Byzantine Empire, but make no mention of Confucianism's similar role in China, or Islam's in the Muslim world, during that same time period.



Brockman also finds that the textbooks downplay Christian disunity and violence within, such as brutal persecution of supposed "heretics." They minimize Christianity's violent past and exaggerate Islamic violence, largely ignoring Christianity's own conversions by conquest but playing up those by other religions.

Brockman also criticizes the TEKS claim that the origins of three key legal concepts — trial by jury, presumption of innocence, and equality before the law — were not only in ancient Greece and Rome but also in "the Judeo-Christian legal tradition." He finds this term ambiguous almost to the point of meaninglessness, and sees little convincing evidence that these three legal concepts are Jewish or Christian in origin.

Neither sugarcoating nor slandering

As a Christian himself, Brockman believes that Christians are expected to speak truthfully, which must include neither sugarcoating our own nor slandering others' religious beliefs and practices. "We all know," he reminds his fellow Christians, "that our religious tradition has not always been a force for good in the West or the world."



Many back issues, a list of back issues, and a list of books I've written about, plus more *Connections*-related information, are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 22 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Missing what is truly exceptional

"The truly sad thing about the TEKS approach," writes history professor Edward Countryman, "is that it misses the real creativity of the men who gathered in Philadelphia and wrote the Constitution.



Some were Christian, some were not." Almost all agreed with James Madison that religion can just as readily become "a motive to oppression as a restraint to injustice."

"The framers were not hostile to religion," Countryman assures us, "but they were embarking on a path that hardly anybody had tried to trace until

then, realizing both that religion needed to be kept safe from the state and that the state had to be kept safe from militant, sectarian religion. To miss that point is to miss just one of the many dimensions in which they truly were breaking new ground. It is to miss how creative and fresh and daring the framers' thinking was." The SBOE supposedly wants Texas students to learn about "American exceptionalism," writes Countryman, but "what they insist be taught denies the students the chance to understand what is truly exceptional about the course of American history."

U.S. students, in Texas and all other states, deserve better than this.

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Religion and the founders

Many conservative Christians claim that the "founding fathers" were Christians of the same stamp as modern evangelicals. No one familiar with history can accept this claim at face value, but in order to rebut it, we need to learn the facts about our nation's origins.



Thomas Jefferson, for example, was a deist who wrote his own revision of the Bible! Madison, Washington, Franklin—none of their views matched those of today's conservative Christians.

A true history of the U.S. can't whitewash the founders' real beliefs. How do your state's textbooks open students' eyes to the wide range of religious views held by our founders? How aware of them are you?

Missing issues / Updated website

Several of you have contacted me wondering whether you had missed the June and September issues. I skipped those months—my first time to miss in 22 years. I apologize for those interruptions, but at this stage of my life, I'm finding that I may not be able to produce *Connections* as regularly as I once did. It may now sometimes appear only every other month.

I have gotten my website, www.connectionsonline.org, updated, however, with the help of *Connections* reader [Paul Kirtley](#). I hope that even if new issues now appear less regularly, you will be able to take advantage of the site's new archive features to review past issues on topics that especially interest you and are still as relevant today as they were when I first wrote about them.

