

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Examining religious freedom

After reading the report about Bible courses in Texas public schools that I wrote about in the [February Connections](#), I've kept thinking about how the Bible and Christianity are presented in schools, in churches, and elsewhere. Several articles and a disturbing book have raised related issues in my mind.



Among other things, I've kept wondering if there is really any way to present mere information about the Bible or the documents that other religions consider sacred. Can what anyone says about that subject be objective? Maybe not. Some of us try to be objective and factual by calling on science and other scholarly fields as reliable sources of facts, while many religious conservatives instead see their scriptures and their interpretation of their personal religious experiences as facts. But even in saying what is or isn't factual, we're all being subjective.



Bias may be unavoidable but proselytizing isn't

University of Texas at Austin journalism professor Robert Jensen addresses a similar issue in a January 12 article that's [on his website](#). It's about a report that accuses history professors of bias, but what Jensen writes also applies, I think, to teaching about the Bible in public schools. In his view, "political biases are present in any course in the humanities and social sciences, no matter whether a professor acknowledges them or not." I suspect that's also true of courses about the Bible. Jensen points out that decisions about what topics to cover, the list of readings, and the framing of lectures and discussions all reflect a teacher's views to some degree. However, he continues, "to recognize that all research and teaching have a politics is not to claim that the work of professors is nothing but politics, in the sense of proselytizing."

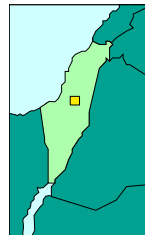
Seeds of discord in each faith

Jim Rigby, pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Austin Texas, risks saying a lot that I think needs saying but I don't see many ordained or lay Christians willing to say openly. I especially appreciate the following statements from his website, [jimrigby.org](#), on which he uses his blog to discuss the relationship between religion and politics.

"Is it possible to affirm our different religious (and nonreligious) worldviews in ways that do not lead to intolerance and oppression," Rigby asks in his bio, "or does religion lead inevitably to superstition and sectarian violence? Can we affirm the core values of our own group, and yet still be good citizens of the world?" Rigby feels that "it is possible, if all religions are willing to go through radical reformations to align themselves to the best science available, to learn to honor artistic expression however different, and to serve universal human rights."



In his February 1 blog entry, Rigby writes that he doesn't believe interfaith efforts will bring lasting unity as long as each faith keeps carrying the seeds of discord within its own self-definition.



"So long as each religion refuses to renounce the idea that its leader is the only true guide," he writes;

"So long as each religion refuses to renounce the idea that they are God's only chosen people;

"So long as each religion believes that God has given them an actual tract of land;

"So long as each religion believes their scriptures are to be taken literally, thus overriding human reason and trumping the needs of the common good;



"So long as these factors remain in place, we can have all the interfaith picnics and worships we want but will still carry daggers in our hearts and will pass them on to our children. The roots of religious intolerance do not lie in hatred, or even in ignorance, but in our claims of special privilege over one another."

Jensen goes on to say that what matters is whether the political nature of teachers' work is understood and acknowledged. The only sense in which a teacher can be neutral or present a depoliticized position, Jensen feels, is by exposing students to a variety of views.



Awareness protects freedom

Achieving the religious freedom that the U.S. claims to provide requires citizens to be aware of what other citizens believe and why they believe it. We all need to know basic information about not only the Bible but also the sacred documents of other religions, and we also need to recognize that there are varied interpretations within the major religions. Then we must use that awareness to help ensure that our governments don't privilege any one of these religions or interpretations over another.



Helping to ensure real religious freedom is dangerously easy to neglect when we're adherents of the one that is in the majority in the U.S. And neglecting it seems to be especially tempting for the Christians whose interpretation of Christianity includes seeing it as the only religion that has the truth and that will keep people from going to hell when they die, therefore as the one to which everyone needs to be converted.

Views that families don't embrace

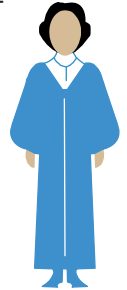
How can public schools help provide the awareness that citizens need? In response to last month's *Connections*, a Presbyterian pastor wrote me that she's uneasy about the variety of views that might be presented to her children if courses about the Bible were taught in their schools. "I would not want to have my children taught something our family and church didn't embrace," she said.



Her statement made me ask myself what the purpose of children's education is. Is it to merely reinforce what they learn from their families and churches? Isn't it to make them aware also of what has been discovered by people outside of their immediate surroundings, and what's being thought in the wider world? And isn't that likely to include exposing students to some views that differ

from some that their families and churches hold? That can be disturbing, but isn't it part of maturing?

Considering varied beliefs is part of spiritual growth, in fact, so churches themselves need to help members consider beliefs other than the churches' own official doctrines. But of course, exposing members to other possibilities can be risky for a church. It risks letting members find other beliefs convincing. Thus most churches seem afraid to take the chance. Isn't this the same fear that makes many Christians unwilling to have Bible courses taught in schools?



Why risk exposure to varied views?

United Methodist pastor and emeritus seminary professor Leroy Howe addresses some of these questions in the January 27 entry of his blog, at www.faithchallenges.com. "Many people are still functionally illiterate about religion, their own included," he points out, "and public schools could help by teaching something about the many religions currently represented in our increasingly pluralistic society."



"Some people," Howe observes, however, "fear that exposing impressionable minds to many religious traditions will undermine the faith already impressed upon them. Others fear that the exposure will only make for more conflict in already conflict-laden classrooms."

"These fears are worthy of acknowledgement and respect," he admits. "Religion itself is highly self-involving, and it is hard to be objective about one's own religious faith or the lack of it. Why explore alternatives, it might be asked, if you already have the Ultimate Truth in your own possession?"

"Here's why," Howe explains. "Studying about the impact of religions on humankind's cultural history, which is what the Supreme Court had in mind those decades ago, can and should make us less willing to take things said about any religion, especially the bad things, at face value. And it can make us more open to the truth and the glory in the world's religions on those religions' own terms rather than on ours."



Studying these religions helps us to see that in each there is an incompleteness about its grasp of Transcendent Reality. But in each, there are also transforming moments of Transcendent disclosures, to those who are diligent and patient enough to seek them out.”



Tax money for private schools?

A question related to teaching about religion in public schools is whether governments should give students vouchers to pay for their attending private schools. Many of these are so-called Christian schools, specifically designed to promote a particular interpretation of Christianity that many other Christians see as misrepresenting the teaching of Jesus and ignoring or even contradicting the consensus not only of scientists but also of historians and biblical scholars. Much home schooling also presents such an interpretation of Christianity.

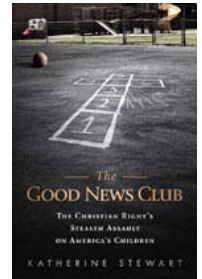
\$ These kinds of schooling keep their students from properly appreciating religious views that differ from their own. And if we use tax money to support Christian schools through vouchers, besides indoctrinating many students with narrow religious views we are also making that money unavailable for providing the public education system that is so important for democracy.

Some voucher advocates claim that vouchers can make possible a variety of school settings and teaching methods in order to reach children with different backgrounds, learning styles, abilities, or interests. That may well be a worthy aim, but shouldn't tax funds be spent toward accomplishing it within the public school system rather than through schools that promote particular religious beliefs?

Teaching that looks official but isn't

What about Bible courses that are taught in school buildings at after-school times, by volunteers? What about churches that are using public-school buildings as their meeting places? Courts have ruled that these uses of school buildings must be allowed because they represent freedom of speech. Yet they give the impression that the school is promoting the teaching that is being presented.

Christian fundamentalist organizations behind such efforts are becoming more powerful, and their efforts more widespread. If this disturbs you, as it does me, I urge you to read *The Good News Club: The Christian Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children*, by journalist Katherine Stewart. It reveals appalling information about Good News Clubs (learn about these at www.cefonline.com), the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, See You at the Pole, and churches that use public-school buildings.



Prayer in public schools

What about prayers spoken to public-school classes or assemblies or other events? Being a captive audience for these clearly violates the religious freedom of students whose religion doesn't support the prayers' claims or aims. Some Christians claim that courts' prevention of prayer in schools has contributed to the moral collapse of our nation. But I find that unconvincing, because no one can prevent silent, personal prayer, in school or anywhere else. And isn't that kind of prayer closest to what the Bible shows Jesus advocating?

Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door ...
—Matthew 6:6

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* 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 20 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.

Prayers in government settings



In the February 24 issue of the *Austin American-Statesman*, columnist Ken Herman, who is Jewish, writes about the invocations offered daily in the Texas Legislature. Most of these, he finds, are offered by Christians in the name of Jesus. Invited clergy, Herman tells us, get a letter saying that “the Texas tradition is for a prayer that is nonsectarian.” But Herman quotes the current House Speaker, who is also Jewish, as saying that he hasn’t given a moment’s thought to whether the prayers are actually nonsectarian.

Herman quotes one recent invocation that included this: “Father, grant each one in this chamber today, and their family members, a lively faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Herman saw this, as I also do, as being definitely improper. But he finds that although invocations mentioning Christ have sometimes been a source of irritation among non-Christian legislators, complaints are rarely aired publicly, presumably because complaining could cause enmity that legislators don’t want to incur.

It’s time for Christians to speak up about the ways in which religious freedom is being violated.

Barbara



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If the church’s purpose is meant to be demonstrating and promoting the ways of treating people that Jesus taught, as I believe it is, I keep wondering why so many churches seem to put so much more emphasis on other things. Some top church leaders say they’re wondering something similar.

In the Feb. 11 newsletter of the UMC’s General Board of Church and Society, Jim Winkler, who is completing 12 years as the top GBCS official, comments on a recent gathering of young clergy that GBCS hosted. “Many of them told me,” Winkler says, “that they have good people in their congregations, but their members for the most part are satisfied that packing boxes and donating to charity constitute ‘missions.’ Social justice, these pastors reported, is largely anathema to their congregations.” Yet promoting social justice is a huge part of what both the Hebrew prophets and Jesus apparently said God wanted human beings to do.

In the Feb. 20 issue of *The Christian Century* magazine, UMC bishop William H. Willimon writes this about the pastors he supervised for 4 years: “I found too many clergy who allowed congregational caregiving and maintenance to trump more important acts of ministry, like truth telling and mission leadership. These pastors dash about offering parishioners undisciplined compassion rather than sharp biblical truth. One pastor led a self-study of her congregation and found that 80% of them thought a minister’s primary job was ‘to care for me and my family.’” As Willimon notes, they “saw no higher purpose for ministry than servitude to the voracious personal needs of the laity.”