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The Case for Teaching The Bible

By DAVID VAN BIEMA

Miss Kendrick came ready, with props. The day's topic was the Gospel of Matthew. "You can divide all the Beatitudes into two parts," Jennifer Kendrick explained to her teenage audience. "The 'Blessed are the whatevers,' like 'the meek,' and then the reward they will get. So I've made some puzzle pieces here." She passed out construction-paper sheets, each bearing either the name of a virtuous group or its reward, in black marker. "And you've got to find the person who has the other half. What's the first one in the Bible?"

"The poor in spirit," mumbled a crew-cut boy.

"O.K. What goes with the poor in spirit?"

A girl in the front of the room replied, reading from her sheet, "For they will see God."

"Nope," chirped Kendrick. "O.K., find the person that matches yours. I'll take the roll."

By which she meant an official attendance roll. Because 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. 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. The smaller of the two went into operation just last year but is already into its second 10,000-copy printing, has expressions of interest from a thousand new districts this year and expects many more. The larger publisher claims to be roughly doubling the number of districts it adds each year. 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.

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 *McCullum 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?

HERE IS ONE OF PROTHERO'S FAVORITE stories of Bible ignorance. In 1995 a federal appeals court upheld the overturn of a death sentence in a Colorado kidnap-rape-murder case because jurors had inappropriately brought in extraneous material--Bibles--for an unsanctioned discussion of the Exodus verse "an eye for eye, tooth for tooth ... whoever ... kills a man shall be put to death." The Christian group Focus on the Family complained, "It is a sad day when the Bible is banned from the jury room." Who's most at fault here? The jurors, who perhaps hadn't noticed that in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus rejects the eye-for-an-eye rule, word for word, in favor of turning the other cheek? The Focus spokesman, who may well have known of Jesus' repudiation of the old law but chose to ignore it? Or any liberal who didn't know enough to bring it up?

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 covenantal 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. Without the Bible and a few imposing secular sources, we face a numbing horizontality in our culture--blogs, political announcements, ads. The world is flat, sure. But Scripture is among our few means to make it deep.

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. Fundamentalist pastor John Hagee has complained that *The Bible and Its Influence*, a curriculum Kendrick uses in her class, could "greatly damage" youth too callow to "decipher" what he called its misrepresentations of Scripture. He cited its observation that contrary to Christianity, "other origin stories tell of ... gods who themselves are created." Hagee thundered that this could convince a student that polytheism is as valid as monotheism. But 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. It becomes too hard for most folks to draw the line between teaching and preaching." 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. Stetson's religious credentials alarm church-state separationists. He is a graduate of Colson's Wilberforce Centurion project, a study group pledged to "restore our culture by effectively thinking, teaching and advocating the Christian world view as applied to all of life." Yet he claims his commitment to his textbook's constitutionality determined its secularity. 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, which has offered its curriculum since 1993, claims a bigger market (382 schools in 37 states) than the newcomer (85 school districts in 30 states). But its 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.

Some secularists are worried about who will teach the literacy classes. Joe Conn and Rob Boston of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State have expressed a concern about how teachers willing to give the Bible secular treatment would be found, particularly in states where vast majorities are evangelical. They note that Stetson's history sections are almost exclusively positive. "A textbook should offer objective study about both the positive and negative uses of the Bible," Conn writes. "Where is the analysis of the role of the Bible in the Inquisition or the Salem witch trials?" They specifically question the tone of a final section, "Freedom and Faith in America," which omits the high court's school-secularization rulings and ends on a truly odd note: a Chinese social scientist attributing the "pre-eminence of the West" to the fact that the "heart of your culture is ... your Christianity." Unlike most of the book, this seems written by Stetson the true believer who took Colson's Centurion program.

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. She's unconvinced of its impartiality. "It will bring up Catholicism and mention Gandhi, but you can tell it's written as if I am a Protestant Christian teaching Protestant Christians."

Actually, she is a conservative Protestant. But her students don't know that, and nothing in the class I saw suggested it. Kendrick aces the compulsories--notes John Locke's use of the Beatitudes and Frank Zappa's riffs on "the meek shall inherit the earth," and ponders why various politicians have found it more convenient to attribute the "city on a hill" to Winthrop rather than to Matthew. When a student asks how Jesus could say the meek shall inherit the earth, when Christianity inherited it only after attaining tremendous strength, she suggests, "When he was giving the sermon, people took it not just as a physical award but an emotional or spiritual kind of award. Later on, when they became more powerful, say, in the Crusades or something, they weren't trying to inherit the earth. They were trying to take it over." Explaining why Jesus' famous sermon took place on a mount, she reminds the students that Matthew was writing for Jews, and a mount is where Moses received the Ten Commandments. "So, supposedly," she says, "Jesus is the new covenant, the new law, for the Jewish people."

She gives over much of the class to a Socratic symposium on Jesus' simplest yet most difficult sayings, which reveals a lot about the class's earnest attempts to make sense of rather disparate worlds. "'Turn the other cheek'--Does that mean we're supposed to let them hit you on the other cheek too?" she asks. A boy answers, "You should, you know, just take what's coming. It's not like if someone hits you. If someone doesn't give you the right change back, you shouldn't come back looking for a fight." A girl argues that it is more of an ideal than a mandate. "So it's a guideline," asks Kendrick, "and you apply it to the situation and see what fits?" This, in turn, upsets a girl in the third row, who asks, "Does that mean that the Ten Commandments are exceptions?"

Kendrick: "That they're literal?"

Everyone: "Yes!"

Trying to make sense of both this consensus and his possible future, an ROTC cadet notes, "Some people say, 'Thou shalt not kill' is really 'Thou shalt not murder,' and in Ecclesiastes it says, 'There's a time for war and a time for peace.'"

I could find little to object to here and much to admire. Here was a conservative teacher going way beyond *The Bible and Its Influence*, but not in a predictable direction. She name-checked the Crusades, avoided faith declarations and treated the Bible as a living document to be pored over rather than blindly

accepted. She even managed to fit in other faiths. Moving on through the Sermon on the Mount, she pulled out another sheaf of papers. "So I'm gonna give these examples of Golden Rules from different cultures. Read 'em and share 'em with the class." They ran from Buddhism to Baha'i. And most did sound a lot alike. Shouted one girl: "The Golden Rule remix!"

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, sitting in his B.U. office with the inscription Sans Dieu Rien--Without God, Nothing--carved above the fireplace. (True to his nonsectarian position, he calls its presence "a coincidence. This used to be a private house.") "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. But if an elective is offered, it should be twinned mandatorily with a world religions course, even if that would mean just a semester of each. 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. No one should take the course but juniors and seniors. The Bible's harmful as well as helpful uses must be addressed, which could be done by acknowledging that religious conservatives see the problems as stemming from the abuse of the holy text, while others think the text itself may be the culprit. The course should have a strong accompanying textbook on the model of *The Bible and Its Influence* but one that is willing to deal a bit more bluntly with the historical warts. 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.

David Van Biema is TIME's senior religion writer. His first cover story on the topic ran in 1996

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