

Educating for Autonomy and Respect or Educating for Christianity? The Case of the Georgia Bible Bills

Suzanne Rosenblith
Clemson University

Conscientious citizens should be wary of another approach to reintroducing the Bible in public schools. This approach seeks to implement Bible courses in the context of world religions; subjecting the Bible to inter-faith criticism, judging it by group consensus, and molding it to fit politically correct standards. Such courses tend to promote faiths such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. While these courses are also legal, they teach comparable religions rather than a true Bible curriculum. (National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, 2006)

Many philosophers of education (Feinberg, 2006; Kunzman, 2006; Noddings, 1993; Nord, 1995)¹ have made strong arguments for including more religion in the public sphere. Others, like sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2005) of the Princeton University Center for the Study of Religion, have made more subtle arguments that public schools must be more hospitable to religious studies because our society is grossly ignorant of the religious other. Religious illiteracy is, in short, being recognized more and more as a public problem that public schools ought to address. Ignorance of the religious other can lead not only to everyday misunderstandings, but to more harmful acts such as in the days after September 11, 2001, a Sikh in Texas was murdered, assumed to be a Middle Eastern terrorist because of how he looked and dressed. However, even if we agree that ignorance of the religious other is harmful to a liberal, pluralistic state, it is not at all clear what it means to address this ignorance in public schools. In fact, once we begin to get more specific about teaching religion (about religion, religious studies),

things get much more complicated. After all, to teach religion in the public schools is not necessarily to teach “a true Bible curriculum.”

From a liberal educational standpoint, educational thinkers have argued that schools ought to provide students with opportunities to wrestle with existential concerns (Noddings, 1993), “grapple” with relevant moral issues (Kunzman, 2006), teach about religion from a multicultural frame of reference (Fraser, 1999), educate citizens for a global community (Nash, 2005), expose students to different religious experiences and religious ways of thinking (Nord, 1995, 1999), and deal with the issue of religious truth (Rosenblith, 2006, 2005, 2004). Among these different points of emphasis, there is some agreement that in order to foster autonomy in our students, a cornerstone of liberal educational theory, students must be given opportunities to wrestle with competing ideas and views on given issues. Religion, whichever way it is pursued thus seems ripe to help public schools meet broader liberal educational goals.

However, while public schools across the country are slowly becoming more open to the idea of more religion, the sort of religion and the type of religious education being served up should give those invested in preserving liberal educational ideals pause for concern. Furthermore, for those who value religious pluralism, such programs are also cause for alarm. That is, from a policy perspective many of the programs passing as “religious studies” are neither constitutionally sound nor educationally advisable. This paper examines in detail one policy: the Georgia bible bills.

The first part of this paper provides a somewhat detailed account of the Georgia legislation. The story of how the final bill came to be reveals more about political maneuvering than it does about sound educational policy decision-making. This is important to describe in some detail because as I will demonstrate, the combination of a strong evangelical Christian influence as well as political pandering, meant that discussion of important liberal and pluralistic ideals such as autonomy, critical thinking, understanding, and respect were neglected. The second part of this paper provides a brief constitutional critique of the legislation as well as a more developed educational analysis. The final section of this paper focuses on a vision of religious studies in public schools that can be compatible with liberal educational goals such as developing in students the skills and tools to be autonomous and critical thinkers, as well as the goals of religious pluralism to help foster more understanding and respect of the religious other.

Georgia Bible Bills

In March 2006 the Georgia legislature voted to approve two bible

classes as high school elective courses. While approving “The History and Literature of the Old Testament” and “The History and Literature of the New Testament” is not, by itself, controversial or even terribly noteworthy, what is controversial and of great significance is both the motivation behind the development and subsequent approval of these courses and, the requirement that the main texts of each course be the Old and New Testaments respectively.

In setting the context for this case it is important to note that while the Georgia bill has garnered a lot of recent attention, similar bills are in the works in several states including Alabama, Tennessee, and Missouri. The Georgia case proves instructive, however, particularly for those concerned with fostering autonomy and respect among young citizens, because it paints in bold relief a very different vision for religion in public education. In some ways it also serves as a cautionary tale for how religion is being implemented in public schools and for what reasons. As Charles Haynes (2006) from the First Amendment Center puts it, “If this were only about bible literacy the flurry of bible bills might pass unnoticed.” But this case is about much more than biblical literacy.

In a part of the United States becoming more emboldened with public expressions of religious faith, and in a part of the country where politicians recognize the importance of “religious speak,” it is no surprise that both major parties jumped at the opportunity to attach their names to a bible bill. In the Georgia case it was actually Democrats and social moderates who initially proposed the first bible bill. Their bill authorized the state board of education to “develop and adopt a curriculum for a state funded elective course consisting of a nonsectarian, nonreligious, academic study of the bible and its influence on literature, art, music, culture, and politics;” additionally, “[t]he curriculum and associated textbook shall meet academic rigor and standards of the state board of education in the same manner as required for approval of any other elective course and textbook” (http://www.legis.ga.gov/legis2005_2006/search/sb437.htm). The bill further requires that the course,

1. Be taught in an objective and nondevotional manner with no attempt to indoctrinate students as to either the truth or falsity of the biblical materials or texts from other religious or cultural traditions.
2. Not include teaching of religious or sectarian interpretation of the bible or of texts from other religious or cultural traditions; and
3. Not disparage or encourage a commitment to a set of religious beliefs.

The initial version of the legislation included the use of Schippe and Stetson’s textbook, *The Bible and Its Influence* (2006). It is worth noting that, according to Haynes (2006) this book has been reviewed by

41 scholars and has been successfully field-tested. However, as soon as this first version was proposed, which seemed on the surface both constitutionally permissible and educationally defensible, the Republicans blocked its passage and instead proposed and passed their own version of a bible bill. Their deliberate political actions had everything to do with their vision for religious instruction in public schools. The more moderate legislators, through their proposed bill made it clear that religious (biblical) literacy is important for students because religion has had a profound impact on politics, society, and culture. This is consistent with arguments put forth by many secular thinkers most notably perhaps, Warren Nord. Nord (1995) argues that public schools ought to take religion more seriously and that students cannot have a full appreciation for history, art, politics, and culture if students are not exposed to the impact religion has had in these domains. This position is fully consistent with liberal educational ideals and poses no threat to the cherished separation of religion and government. Additionally, as Nord (1999) argues elsewhere, to exclude religion from such study might be construed as “illiberal” if we think of liberal education as a marketplace of ideas.

Instead of a curriculum that was focused at its core with helping students become biblically literate, the new bible bill was actually motivated by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (National Council), whose interests centered around teaching a particular version of Christianity in the public schools. The National Council (2006) claims that the field-tested textbook *The Bible and Its Influence* is anti-Biblical because it encourages multifaith interpretations of the Old and New Testaments and because it takes a decidedly non-literal point of view of the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, the National Council proudly endorses one specific bible translation for these public school courses—The King James version. Thus it becomes clear that the new bible bill was very far removed from the interests of the liberal and pluralist educator.

Though the Georgia legislation does not mention the National Council by name, lawmakers have cited the group’s successful approach to bible study. The Georgia legislation in its final form abandoned the requirement of a more conventional textbook as the main text for the courses and instead adopted the National Council’s recommendation of the bible as the main text. Though the legislation does not require a specific translation, this decision is left up to local school authorities, as I will argue in the next section, mandating the bible as required text is particularly problematic both constitutionally and educationally.

While liberal educators might disagree on the appropriate focus of

religious studies in public schools, it seems clear that this approved legislation does not come close to approximating the ideals and principles of a liberal, pluralist state. Had that been the concern of legislators, then perhaps they would have taken the first proposed bill more seriously. Contrary to the idea that public schools in the United States must do more to help students become religiously literate, and respectful, the Georgia bible bill seeks to further legitimate evangelical Christianity in the public schools.

Constitutional and Educational Critique

From a legal perspective, any program of religious studies in a public school must meet the constitutional requirements of the establishment clause. While space does not permit a thorough explication of the 1st amendment “religion clauses” it is important to note that there is no clear judicial record on what ‘establishment’ means. Typically justices fall into one of three categories. The most restrictive are the strict separationists, who argue for a “wall of separation.” The least restrictive are the accommodationists who argue that short of the establishment of a state church government may accommodate religion as long as the state does not prefer one religion to another. The third position falls somewhere in between the two and is probably the most invoked position in recent times—neutral separationism. This position argues that it is government’s job to maintain neutrality between religion and nonreligion.² In what follows I examine the Georgia bible bill from the perspective of the most forgiving of the three positions—accommodationism. If the legislation cannot pass muster according to this view, it is unlikely to come even close under either of the other two views.

Though it appears clear that the legislators’ intentions were to inculcate a Christian version of these biblical electives, nowhere in the wording of the legislation does it say anything of the sort. In fact, the legislation goes to great lengths to disavow itself of any particular religious perspective. While they clearly legislate that the Old and New testaments be the only required texts for these courses, they leave the decision as to which translation(s) to the local school board and/or individual teachers. Furthermore, if a student would prefer to use a different translation than the one selected, the law provides that s/he will be allowed to do so. Yet even with such seemingly reasonable safeguards in place, there seems to be something troubling about the requirement of the bible as the primary text for these courses. What reason could the Georgia legislature have to abandon a field-tested textbook on the Old and New testaments in favor of the bible itself? By mandating the

bible, the legislation's goals of "objectivity" and "nondevotional teaching that does not indoctrinate students" are more likely to be compromised. In fact, use of the bible as the main text and only required text for these courses should be construed as a constitutional violation. While the state government does not legislate a particular translation in the actual bill, they have made it so that local authorities or individual teachers, that is, agents of the state, are to require a particular translation.

From a constitutional perspective it seems irrelevant which governmental entity makes this decision. The fact that representatives of the state, in an official capacity, mandate one translation to the exclusion of all others should be understood as a preference for one religion (or religious denomination) over others, which is clearly problematic from the accommodationist position. The state of Georgia could have easily avoided this issue had they simply gone with the original plan, a plan used in many other states in the U.S. and required a textbook as the main text for the course. But because, as Charles Haynes (2006) points out, "National Council advisory board member (and prominent evangelical minister) D. James Kennedy labeled the textbook [*The Bible and Its Influence*] "anti-biblical" and claimed it was supported by the ACLU, and the Council on Islamic Education," the Republican version of the bill reflected this concern.

The legislation is not only constitutionally questionable, but it is also pedagogically dubious, from a liberal educational standpoint. Consider the fact that two central goals of liberal education are helping students to develop the skills and tools to be autonomous thinkers and respectful citizens. Though not impossible, such goals would be significantly compromised with the requirement that the Old and New Testaments—and certain versions of these!—be the only required texts. Imagine when one brave student in a Georgia public school expresses doubt as to the veracity of some claim in the bible. The student raises his hand and says something to the effect of, "It seems highly unlikely that a sea parted at all, yet even more unlikely that it parted long enough for one group of people to pass through, but not long enough for another." Or perhaps a more emboldened student asks the teacher whether there is a chance Moses had ingested some sort of hallucinogenic that caused him to see a burning bush not be consumed, or a stick turn into a snake."

These are not insignificant questions. What evidence can the teacher offer (from the "textbook") that the Red Sea parted, that a bush was burnt but was not consumed, or that a stick turned into a snake short of, "the bible says it's so?" How is such an answer responsible or satisfying? Since the legislation requires that teachers not aid in disparaging (or encouraging) religious belief among students, teachers' hands are

tied. It seems they cannot say much. By making the bible the core text of such courses, students' abilities to grapple with a range of possible answers is hampered. How does it help develop autonomous thinking in students?

Not only might an advocate of liberal educational ideals find the bible requirement problematic, but so too might persons committed to religious pluralism's goals of understanding and respect. To begin, with the exception of Judaism and Christianity, all other religions are rendered invisible, thus contributing to the religious ignorance that concerns Wuthnow (2005) so much. By ignoring a range of religious world views, the Georgia legislation all but assures us that students will have no greater understanding or respect for a whole range of religious perspectives. Further, by mandating the bible as the main text for the course, it is quite likely, I think, that the sort of respect that we might come to expect students will have for Judaism and Christianity will be dependent upon the perspective by which the teacher teaches the class (and the choice of bible translation). Had the state considered such central educational goals, and endorsed the field-tested textbook, perhaps these problems could be avoided.

One could argue however, that in choosing any textbook we necessarily limit the students' ability to challenge what is said in it and we quite possibly limit the perspectives by which students learn about a given issue. After all, what about a student who, say, disagrees with the rendering of the story of the Vietnam War offered by her U.S. History textbook? Though much would depend on the quality and expertise of the teacher, challenging a claim in a textbook, seems somewhat different from challenging a claim in the bible. The stakes are not nearly as high. Challenging a claim in a textbook can be perceived as challenging the authors' claims, while challenging a claim in the bible, to many, might be construed as challenging God. Furthermore, challenging a claim from a textbook does not come as close to running the risk of undermining a student's religious beliefs, but challenging a biblical claim could come much closer. In short, using the bible as the main textbook for these courses, that is as the main source of "truth," impedes liberal educational goals of autonomous and critical thinking. Choosing a specific translation of the bible, which will inevitably reflect a single religious perspective, compromises attempts at fostering religious pluralism's goals of understanding and respect.

An Alternative

Calling into question the constitutional and educational legitimacy

of the Georgia bible legislation appears to be a much simpler task than making a case for an alternative form of religious studies for public schools that has at its core a commitment to liberal educational principles of autonomy and critical thinking as well as pluralistic principles of understanding and respect. As I mentioned earlier, several philosophers of education have been hard at work articulating their ideas for educationally sound studies of religion in public schools. In this section, I'd like to flesh out one of those ideas and make a gesture toward an alternative program of religious studies in public schools.

A simple alternative to the Georgia bible bills would be to implement a set of electives that more closely approximates the original legislation, but such a program would be so limited in scope as to not meet the demands of educational liberalism or religious pluralism. That is, while a set of elective courses in the Old and New Testaments that sought to assist students in becoming more biblically literate would be a great improvement over the current set of courses, it is still insufficient. If we want to make the claim that autonomy, critical thinking, understanding, and respect are important goals for schools to achieve, and if we are willing to stand behind the argument that says that students must be enabled with the skills and tools to be thoughtful, pluralistic, and respectful thinkers, then it seems to me our schools need to do much more than offer two elective courses on the Old and New Testaments.

Even if done well, such a program helps students become literate only in the Old and New Testaments, that is in biblical Judaism and Christianity. This is limited at best since there is, arguably, much more to Judaism and Christianity than their respective bibles. Such a course might not help students become more knowledgeable of modern day Jews and Christians (What do modern day Jews and Christians believe and value?), which it seems would be critical if understanding and respect were two of our goals. And, of course it does not heed the cautions of Robert Wuthnow (2005) who argues that religious minorities feel ignored and/or stereotyped by the Christian majority in the U.S., since it would ignore all religions with the exception of Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, autonomous thought requires, in part, exposure to a range of ideas and views and students who are exposed to only biblical Judaism and Christianity could hardly be said to be exposed to a comprehensive range of religious views.

A different approach, which is more comprehensive, follows the lead of many multiculturalists, and suggests that religious studies must be woven into the curriculum in such a way that students are exposed to issues related to religious diversity in our liberal pluralistic state in a more comprehensive and systematic manner. This view has been ar-

ticated most forcefully by James Fraser (1999), Nel Noddings (1993), and Warren Nord (1995). Though I have argued elsewhere (Rosenblith, 2007, 2005, 2004) that religious studies as multicultural studies is necessary but insufficient for religious literacy, I do think it is a valuable and important place to begin in conceptualizing and understanding the religious other. Of the many lessons we learn from multicultural education, one of the most important is the deleterious effect that ignorance of the other has on all students, but particularly minorities. I would contend that the same holds for religion. Ignorance of the religious other leads to stereotyping, bigotry, religious conflict, and violence, which are harmful to the project of cultivating a pluralistic citizenry.

The exhaustive study by Wuthnow (2005) highlights over and over again the necessity of dialogue and engagement across religious traditions in order for religious pluralism to be realized. He says, "religious pluralism involves more than the mere coexistence of multiple traditions. At the very minimum, it requires engagement across traditions. And such engagement necessarily challenges preconceived ideas about beliefs and values" (2005, 100). I don't take Wuthnow to be arguing that schools must consciously work to develop skepticism in students, but rather that if our goal is to achieve a meaningful and lasting religious pluralism, students need to have good reasons for their beliefs and values that are reasons beyond familiarity. Likewise, through such engagement, students come to realize the reasons for others' values. Thus students come to know and learn about the religious other and in the process become more religiously literate.

In contrast to the Georgia legislation, this alternative can afford students opportunities to engage with and understand the religious other, her beliefs, values, and traditions as well as her reasons for believing and acting in certain ways. Such an education can help students gain a stronger, more meaningful sense of respect for the religious other, what Wuthnow calls reflective religious pluralism. According to Wuthnow (2005), reflective pluralism involves, "Acknowledging how and why people are different (and the same), and it requires having good reasons for engaging with people and groups whose religious practices are fundamentally different from one's own" (289).

Furthermore, for those more concerned with liberal educational ideas such as autonomy and critical thinking, studying religion through a multicultural lens can be a valuable tool to cultivate these skills and dispositions. Learning about a range of beliefs and values, which in many cases are incommensurable, forces students to think deeply, critically, and thoughtfully about these beliefs. What sits well with me? Why does it sit well with me? Why do I have such objections to this belief? These

sorts of questions will, I think, inevitably emerge during discussions. And like so many meaningful educational discussions, the richness is in the questions, rather than in the answers. Noddings (1993) captures this sentiment in *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* when she says that the goal of such an educational program is not belief or unbelief, but rather *intelligent* belief or unbelief. Given this, a student's intellectual development is in part a growth in his ability to gather evidence, assess arguments, discriminate among authorities, construct counter arguments, and challenge claims (7). Noddings contends that an education in religion committed to intelligent belief or unbelief will acquaint students with religious beliefs, tenets, positions and conflicts and will encourage students to ask and explore these issues as their needs demand and in a way that will contribute to their growth. Thus, the goal of such an educational program is not unanimous agreement on such existential questions as "Does God exist?" "Is there life after death?" "Is there a soul?" Rather, it is to provide an organized forum in which students feel free to explore the range of possible answers and to defend any particular view, with attention to evidence; and it is this that contributes to their moral, spiritual and intellectual development. Noddings conception of religious education, though not specifically anchored to multicultural education is, in any case, consistent with its goals.

Like Noddings, Warren Nord (1995) is not specifically concerned with the multicultural project, but he is concerned that multicultural advocates have neglected religion in their struggle for a more equitable and balanced curriculum. He believes that studying religion, like studying race and ethnicity is important because it not only provides students with knowledge and information that present educational curricula fail to provide, but also, and more importantly, it re-centers religion and religious believers; it moves them from the fringes of curricula and textbooks into focus. According to Nord (1999) this re-centering is critical since religious believers have been disenfranchised by the lack of representation in textbooks and inclusion in the curriculum. Furthermore, a policy of inclusion shows respect toward religion, which is critical according to the demands of a liberal, pluralist state.

The shortcomings of the Georgia legislation highlight real opportunities for those concerned with liberal educational ideals to reconceptualize what religious studies (or at least part of religious studies) in public schools might look like. Far from preventing rich discussions of students' beliefs, values, and ideas, teachers could have a formative role in actually fostering such discussions. In keeping with the goals of autonomy and critical thinking, one of the central purposes of religious studies would be to provide students with opportunities to explore a

range of beliefs, ideas, and traditions and determine where, if at all, such beliefs fit into their own thinking. Furthermore, in such courses, multiple texts would be required for the purpose of providing students with different interpretations, emphases, contexts, and views on similar matters. By doing this, students are forced to think seriously and systematically about these important matters. Additionally, given what might be considered a comparative approach, students might come to see fundamental similarities in many of the world's religions.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that religious studies in public schools can be compatible with liberal educational goals such as developing in students the skills and tools to be autonomous and critical thinkers, as well as the goals of religious pluralism to help foster more understanding and respect of the religious other. Yet in crafting such programs, the case of the Georgia bible bills becomes instructive in precisely what not to do. In contrast to this legislation, I have suggested that religious studies as multicultural education is a good start toward achieving the goals of liberalism and religious pluralism. Studying religion through a cultural lens has the potential to help students become better acquainted with the religious other as well as provide students with opportunities to wrestle with competing beliefs and values.

In order for the multicultural approach to be successful, however, we must begin to give serious consideration to the kind of teachers that will facilitate such discussions. The knowledge base, training, and skills of facilitation of these teachers will be paramount to the success of such courses. To that end, I suggest philosophers of education give serious consideration to what the training and education of future public school religious studies teachers might consist of. If we want to create a society in which people know how to relate to others with vastly different religious beliefs, then we will have to begin to start thinking seriously about how to do so; if religious education is to be much more than bible education, then we must get more clear on what it is to be and how it is to be done.

Notes

¹ This list is not meant to be exhaustive.

² I am indebted to Simone Schweber for this concise summary of positions.

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