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# A Textbook Example of the Christian Right: The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools

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According to the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, a Christian Right organization, “the Bible was the foundation and blueprint for our Constitution, Declaration of Independence, our educational system, and our entire history until the last 20 to 30 years.” The group claims that over 1,000 American public high schools use its Bible curriculum, which it characterizes as nonsectarian and scholarly. In fact, the various editions of this curriculum have been filled with factual errors, fringe scholarship, and plagiarism. With its promotion of a fundamentalist Protestant understanding of the Bible and a revisionist history of the United States as a distinctively (Protestant) Christian nation, the curriculum appears not to pass legal muster. Its growing use reflects the increasing influence of Christian Americanist ideology as well as the need for greater involvement of religious studies scholars in the issue of religion and public education.

“THE BIBLE WAS THE FOUNDATION and blueprint for our Constitution, Declaration of Independence, our educational system, and

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our entire history until the last 20 to 30 years.”<sup>1</sup> So claims the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS), a North Carolina-based Christian Right organization founded by paralegal Elizabeth Ridenour in 1993 to promote Bible electives in American public high schools (Detwiler 1999: 193–195; Lugg 2001; DelFattore 2004: 249–254). Co-sponsored by the influential American Family Association and the Center for Reclaiming America, its endorsers and board of directors include numerous figures affiliated with the Christian Right as well as national- and state-level politicians (Chancey 2005a). Among them is Georgia Senator Tommie Williams, the primary sponsor of that state’s 2006 law providing public funding for Bible courses.<sup>2</sup> According to the NCBCPS, over 185,000 students in more than 1,000 schools in thirty-seven states have already taken courses based on its curriculum. Although these numbers appear to be greatly exaggerated,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that many schools across the nation have indeed taught the group’s curriculum. The NCBCPS insists that its curriculum is scholarly, nonsectarian, and legally acceptable. In fact, as this article will discuss, its various editions are filled with factual errors, tabloid scholarship, and plagiarism, as well as religious claims and presuppositions that cause them to run afoul of pertinent court rulings.<sup>4</sup>

Though the NCBCPS is over a decade old and its course is taught in numerous school districts, neither the organization nor its curriculum has received much scholarly attention, especially in the field of religious studies.<sup>5</sup> How did this group largely escape our notice while thousands of students took its course? This predicament is partly explained by factors such as difficulty in obtaining the NCBCPS curriculum, its high cost (\$150), and the geographical distance between the mostly rural school districts that teach it and the colleges, universities, and seminaries in which scholars work. I cannot help but wonder, however, about the extent to which another factor explains this lacuna

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<sup>1</sup> [www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=found\\_father](http://www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=found_father).

<sup>2</sup> [www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=bod](http://www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=bod) and [www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=endorsements](http://www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=endorsements). See also Chancey (2007b).

<sup>3</sup> The group has never released a list of these schools. Though its website claims that “our curriculum is now in 52 districts in Texas,” the actual number of Texas districts using it in the 2005–2006 school year was only eleven (Chancey 2006).

<sup>4</sup> On religion courses and public education, see Webb (2002a, 2002b), Styers (2002), The Bible Literacy Project and the First Amendment Center (1999), and Bracher and Barr (1982).

<sup>5</sup> The lengthiest treatments are found in the literature of education, not religious studies: Lugg (2001) and Paterson (2003). See also the important discussions of Detwiler (1999: 193–195), DelFattore (2004:249–254), and Levenson (2002).

in the religious studies literature: our guild's avoidance of involvement in the efforts of public schools to teach about religion. Such involvement is warranted by several considerations, such as the need for public educators to have academically informed perspectives on religion; the possibility that providing such perspectives might help schools to treat various traditions and their adherents with fairness, accuracy, and respect; the hope that greater public familiarity with the world's various religions might contribute to the healthy functioning of our pluralistic democracy; and, at the most basic level of scholarly self-interest, the possibility that increased attention to religion in high schools might result in better prepared students at higher levels of study. Avoidance of involvement in this area is by no means universal—witness, for example, the important work of the AAR Religion and the Schools Task Force and the Society of Biblical Literature's recent creation of a working group dedicated to the issue (Chancey 2007a). The state of affairs in many districts, however, vividly demonstrates that even greater participation on our part is needed. The fact that such a low-quality, highly problematic curriculum as that of the NCBCPS has achieved any degree of success poses important practical questions for the scholarly community: What role can we, as individuals and collectively, play in helping public schools treat religion in ways that are academically, ethically, and legally appropriate? How might we become more active collaborators with curriculum developers and with public educators at both the local and state levels?

As for the NCBCPS, its efforts reflect significant trends in contemporary American culture regarding religion, politics, and education: namely, the agenda of using public schools to promote fundamentalist Protestant beliefs and the increasing influence of the religious and political ideology of "Christian Americanism." As Smith (2000) has demonstrated, evangelicals who describe the United States as a Christian nation often mean different things—for example, that its laws and form of government were influenced by Christian principles; that the Founding Fathers were mostly Christians; or that historically the majority of citizens have been Christians. The NCBCPS's understanding of a "Christian America," however, reflects the clustering together of several such views to form a particular narrative. In this narrative, the Founding Fathers were predominantly theologically conservative Protestants whose views roughly correspond to those of the contemporary Christian Right; they intended the United States to be a distinctively Christian nation; the Bible was the most significant and direct inspiration for the Declaration of Independence and Constitution; until recently, Protestant Christianity dominated the nation's educational

system; the country has departed from the Founding Fathers' intentions and has entered a period of chaos and decline; the cessation of Bible reading in public schools is both a symptom and a cause of this decline; the nation should reclaim its Christian heritage and administer its government according to Christian biblical principles.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, this reconstruction of American history differs sharply from the views held by mainstream historians.<sup>7</sup>

Through its idealization of Protestant dominance and its revisionist history, the council is attempting to propagate particular constructions of American-ness and Christian-ness in public schools. That is to say, its curriculum attempts to re-shape the collective memory of American origins and encourage the notion that the American character is quintessentially conservative Protestant.<sup>8</sup> The council's agenda thus constitutes a supporting illustration for the arguments of Joan Delfattore and Fritz Detwiler that controversies over the treatment of religion in public education often boil down to debates about the understanding of American identity. It also verifies the accuracy of Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr.'s observation that "cultural recognition, power and status are at the root of the conflict between the ultra-fundamentalists and the public education system in the United States" (89). Such values apparently lie at the heart of the NCBCPS efforts; the adoption of the course is one step toward restoring its conservative Protestant advocates to what they see as their rightful place in the center not only of American education but of society as a whole. As Lugg (2000) has argued, such efforts should be interpreted as an example of the Christian Right strategy of

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<sup>6</sup> See the council's Web site ([www.bibleinschools.net](http://www.bibleinschools.net)). Many of the group's supporters also hold such views (e.g., the American Family Association, the Alliance Defense Fund, the Center for Reclaiming America, WallBuilders, the Conservative Caucus, and the Mayflower Institute) (Chancey 2005a). In Chancey (2005a), I referred to such beliefs as "Dominion Theology," in keeping with common scholarly usage. Here, however, I refrain from that terminology because some conservative Protestant circles apply it solely to Christian Reconstructionism, which advocates full implementation of Mosaic laws. See Goldberg (2006), Diamond (1996), Capps (1990), Detwiler (1999), and Berlet and Lyons (2000: 252-264).

<sup>7</sup> For example, scholarship has repeatedly demonstrated the religious diversity of the Founding Fathers. Although some were evangelical Protestants, as suggested by the NCBCPS, others were strongly influenced by Deism and other views (Noll et al., 1989; Davis 2000; Lambert 2003; Davis and McMearty 2005; Kramnick and Moore 2005; Holmes 2006). The aspect of the NCBCPS's narrative with the strongest basis in fact is its claim that a Protestant majority once controlled American education, especially in the nation's early decades (Kaestle 1983; DelFattore 2004: 12-61). In its nostalgia for that system, however, the council disregards the plight of religious minorities in that period; shows little awareness of the changes necessitated throughout the nineteenth century by the arrival of immigrants (most notably Roman Catholics, but also those of other traditions); and ignores altogether the presence of adherents of non-Christian traditions from the precolonial period to the present.

<sup>8</sup> On collective memory formation, see Zerubavel (1995).

re-Christianization, the aggressive introduction of Christian elements into public school life.<sup>9</sup>

This paper argues that the theological, ideological, and political agendas exhibited by the NCBCPS curriculum make it legally and academically unsuitable for public school usage. It makes this case in the following steps. First, it briefly explains the parameters that federal courts have created for Bible courses in public schools. Second, it provides a general overview of the contents and organization of various editions of the curriculum produced between 1996 and 2005. Third, it outlines the ways in which the curriculum presents the Protestant Bible and fundamentalist Protestant notions about that Bible as standard and normative, thus promoting some religious views over all others. Fourth, it describes the curriculum's Christian Americanist interpretation of both American history and the relationship of church and state in contemporary society, an interpretation that fosters the empowerment of certain strands of Protestant Christianity at the expense of other groups. It concludes with reflections on the significance of the acceptance of this highly problematic curriculum in public schools across the United States, a fact that reflects the growing influence of Christian Americanism, the struggle in public schools over the nature of American identity, and the need for greater involvement in these issues on the part of the scholarly community.

### BIBLICAL LAW

In order to understand why the NCBCPS course is so troubling, it is necessary first to review the legal situation regarding Bible courses and public education. The problem is not with Bible courses *per se*. The U.S. Supreme Court case *Abington Township v. Schempp* 374 U.S. 203 (1963), (in)famous for barring state-sponsored devotional reading of the Bible in public schools, explicitly allowed for the scholarly study of the Bible:

It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular

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<sup>9</sup> See also Rose (1993), Provenzo (1990), Gaddy et al. (1996), and Detwiler (1999).

program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment (225).<sup>10</sup>

As summarized in a subsequent case involving elementary school Bible courses in Chattanooga [*Wiley v. Franklin*, 468 F. Supp. 133 at 150 (E. D. Tenn. 1979)], “the Constitutional issue presented in teaching the Bible study courses in the public schools is not the Bible itself, but rather the selectivity, emphasis, objectivity, and interpretive manner, or lack thereof, with which the Bible is taught.”<sup>11</sup>

Various district courts have been left with the responsibility of defining what constitutes “objective presentation as part of a secular program of education,” a task for which the so-called “Lemon test” has proven especially influential (The Bible Literacy Project and the First Amendment Center). In *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971), a case involving public reimbursement of parochial school expenses, the Supreme Court ruled that to be Constitutional, a government action (1) must “have a secular purpose;” (2) that “its principal or primary effect must be one that neither advances nor inhibits religion;” (3) and that it “must not foster ‘an excessive government entanglement with religion.’”<sup>12</sup> The importance of the Lemon test is seen, for example, in the directive of *Wiley v. Franklin*: “if that which is taught seeks either to disparage or to encourage a commitment to a set of religious beliefs, it is constitutionally impermissible in a public school setting.”<sup>13</sup> Courts have repeatedly ruled that the presentation of the Bible as literally and historically accurate constitutes *de facto* endorsement of particular versions of Christianity. In *Wiley v. Franklin*, the Court ruled against the Bible course because “the evidence does preponderate in favor of a finding that the course tends to advance the Christian religious faith and, to the extent that it does so advance the Christian faith, it tends to inhibit other religious faiths.”<sup>14</sup> Using similar logic, *Herdahl v. Pontotoc County*, 933 F. Supp. 582 at 595 (N.D. Miss. 1996), prohibited a elementary school Bible course in Mississippi because it “advance[d] religion in general and, specifically, fundamentalist Christianity.” That ruling noted further that the school “district’s argument that the course can be saved (no pun intended) by prefacing each discussion of a

<sup>10</sup> See DelFattore (2004: 86–107).

<sup>11</sup> See DelFattore (2004: 249).

<sup>12</sup> *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 612–613. For a recent discussion of the “Lemon test,” see Hicks and Barnett (2005).

<sup>13</sup> *Wiley v. Franklin* 474 F. Supp. 525 at 531 (E. D. Tenn. 1979).

<sup>14</sup> *Wiley v. Franklin* 468 F. Supp. at 150.

biblical event with “The Bible says ...” or noting that not everyone believes the Bible, is without persuasion” (596; cf. DelFattore 2004: 236–254).

Until recently, the NCBCPS course had been considered in only one lawsuit, *Gibson v. Lee County School Board*, 1 F. Supp. 2d 1426 (M.D. Fla. 1998) (Detwiler 1999: 193–195; Lugg 2001; Levenson 2002; DelFattore 2004: 249–254). There the Court ruled that Bible courses in the Fort Myers school district “should be taught in an objective manner with no attempt made to indoctrinate the children as to either the truth or falsity of the biblical materials” [quoting *Vaughn v. Reed* 313 F. Supp. 431 (W.D. Va. 1970)]. It reasoned that it “finds it difficult to conceive how the account of the resurrection or of miracles could be taught as secular history” (1434). The Court then determined that although the New Testament portion of the course was impermissible because of its presentation of miracles as historical events, the rest of the course was acceptable because the contents of the Hebrew Bible raised no such issues—an obviously illogical argument. The NCBCPS denies that *Gibson v. Lee County* was directed at their curriculum at all, despite the clarity of the court record, media reports (Fullerton 1998), and statements from the Lee County School District.<sup>15</sup> It assures school districts that its course meets all legal requirements. Because it maintains tight control over access to the curriculum, however, there have been few opportunities to test its claim. In May, 2007, however, the American Civil Liberties Union and People for the American Way filed a lawsuit against the Ector County Independent School District in Odessa, Texas, charging that its use of the NCBCPS was an unconstitutional promotion of religion. The suit remains unresolved (Associated Press 2007).

## THE NCBCPS CURRICULUM

Until late 2005, the NCBCPS curriculum was available for purchase only at the organization’s Web site for \$150. After that date, the NCBCPS ceased selling it online; one must now contact it by telephone to purchase the book. My efforts to obtain it through interlibrary loan searches or from online booksellers were unsuccessful. Because of this difficulty in obtaining the curriculum, its contents have largely been a mystery outside the circles of the schools that teach it.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> E-mail communication with Lee County School District, 1 May 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Though Amazon.com sometimes lists it as available, the company was unable to fill my order. In late 2005 or 2006, however, the NCBCPS posted a sample unit at [www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=curriculum](http://www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=curriculum).

Despite the curriculum's limited availability, education professor Frances R. A. Paterson (2003) was able to examine an early version. Her important study concluded that the "primary effect of this curriculum is the promotion of conservative, evangelical Protestantism."<sup>17</sup> Apparently, however, no scholar in religious studies was able to review the curriculum until 2005.

In that year, in the midst of a controversy in Odessa, Texas, over whether to offer the NCBCPS course (it ultimately decided to do so) (Chancey 2007b: 31), Texas Freedom Network (TFN), an Austin-based civil and religious liberties advocacy group, sent me a copy of the 2005a edition for my evaluation as a biblical scholar. The TFN Education Fund released my report describing the curriculum's problems on 1 August 2005 (Chancey 2005a).<sup>18</sup> Though the NCBCPS strongly denounced my observations as inaccurate, on 9 September 2005 it published a revised curriculum with numerous changes that corresponded closely to my critiques (Chancey 2005b). Through Open Records Requests to Texas schools, TFN obtained this revised edition and significant portions of earlier ones, which they also made available to me. In addition, People for the American Way provided me with access to earlier versions of the curriculum.

Through 1999, the curriculum was titled simply *Bible I Bible II*. By 2003, it was titled *The Bible in History and Literature*. I will here refer to its various permutations simply by publication date. I examined complete or nearly complete copies of the following editions: 1996; 1990X (published some time between 1996 and 1999); 1999a; 1999b; 2005a (the edition reviewed in Chancey 2005); 2005b (the September revision); and portions of editions from 2000X (issued some time between 1999 and 2005); 2003; and 2004. The edition reviewed by Paterson appears to have been published in the 1990s; it exhibits the same types of problems as those discussed here.<sup>19</sup> When discussing the editions collectively, I refer to them simply as "the curriculum."

The curriculum is purportedly based on a course previously taught in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) school district. It was originally designed for a two-year course; editions since 1999 are intended for only two semesters. Although early versions focused primarily on

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<sup>17</sup> Gerard V. Bradley's unpersuasive response caricatures Paterson's arguments ([www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=legality](http://www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=legality)).

<sup>18</sup> Over 185 scholars endorsed the report ([www.tfn.org/religiousfreedom/biblecurriculum/endorsements/](http://www.tfn.org/religiousfreedom/biblecurriculum/endorsements/)).

<sup>19</sup> In addition, the Web site of the Georgia Office of the Attorney General includes the table of contents from yet another version. The Attorney General ruled in 1999 that the course would probably not survive court challenge ([www.ganet.org/ago/read.cgi?searchval=Bible&openval=99-16](http://www.ganet.org/ago/read.cgi?searchval=Bible&openval=99-16)).

summarizing the contents of the (Protestant) Bible, the 1999b and subsequent versions include lengthier treatments of biblical manuscripts, translation history, and the “Intertestamental” (also rendered in the curriculum as “Inter-testamental” and “Intertestamentary”) period. Since the 1999a edition, the curriculum has included content arguing for the Bible’s influence on America’s Founding Fathers. In 2004 or 2005, a unit was added on artistic depictions of biblical stories. The curriculum is a teacher’s guide, not a student textbook, and contains lesson plans; material for lectures; suggested readings, videos, resources, and activities; and quizzes and worksheets. The 2005 editions include a CD-ROM of the book of Walter M. Abbott et al. (1969), *The Bible Reader: An Interfaith Interpretation*, which provides recommended readings. They also frequently advise teachers to utilize *The Bible As/In Literature*, by James S. Ackerman and Thayer S. Warshaw (1995).<sup>20</sup>

The curriculum does not identify its author or editor. Presumably, Ridenour, the group’s founder, bears primary responsibility for its content. The 2005 editions note that Texas educator Tracey Kiesling helped develop the curriculum’s structure. Neither Ridenour nor Kiesling is known to have any academic background in biblical or religious studies (Chancey 2006: 62).

Despite occasional helpful (or at least unobjectionable) components, the overall level of quality is strikingly low. Early editions include hand-drawn charts and graphics. Most editions—with some improvement in the 2005b version—are replete with capitalization, punctuation, and sentence construction errors; factual errors;<sup>21</sup> unsubstantiated claims;<sup>22</sup> faulty logic;<sup>23</sup> and unclear wording.<sup>24</sup> Exercises are based almost entirely on memorization of biblical stories. Content is often reproduced directly from other sources, sometimes cited, often not. The 2005a curriculum, for example, included nearly a hundred pages drawn

<sup>20</sup> Bracher and Barr (1982) discuss these books.

<sup>21</sup> For example, “After a new manuscript was completed, the original one was destroyed. This is the reason that today, we do not have any original manuscripts or even any really old manuscripts. The oldest one in existence today is the Isaiah Scrolls, better known as the Dead Sea Scrolls” [*sic*] (2000X: 14). The curriculum also reflects considerable confusion about the Jewish calendar; “Hannukkah” [*sic*], for example, is dated to 25 December (2005a: 188).

<sup>22</sup> For example, “Even parts of the Bible which involve ‘the miraculous’ in their interpretation of history sometimes have their own archaeological attestation” (2005a: 165).

<sup>23</sup> For example, An assignment on the “Magnificat” (Luke 1: 46–55) and Hannah’s Song (1 Sam. 2: 1–10) asks students to compare “the simple monosyllabic words used by Mary to those of Old Testament poetry. How is this typical of the Hebrews?” (2005a: 138). The curriculum does not explain how English syllabification might provide insight into ancient Hebrew thought.

<sup>24</sup> “Among all the ancient works preserved extant the Bible exists with a greater number, antiquity, and quality of manuscripts and is corroborated by a greater number of material evidences (artifactual and epigraphical) than any other literary document” [*sic*] (2005a: 163).

from elsewhere, with dozens seemingly taken from uncited online publications (Chancey 2005a: 24–31). The 2005b book deleted some plagiarized content and added occasional citations.

## THE BIBLE AS A PROTESTANT BOOK

The NCBCPS curriculum reveals occasional efforts to be nonsectarian. It urges teachers not to impose religious beliefs upon students. The 2005b edition added numerous reminders (including an eight-page preface) that all material must be presented in an objective manner. Occasionally, specific assignments reflect sensitivity to the differences between Judaism and Christianity. Both 2005 editions, for example, recommend studying the Psalms from a Jewish point of view (134) and suggest that students consult a Jewish person about Jewish beliefs and practices (108 and 115).<sup>25</sup>

The overall emphasis of the curriculum, however, is squarely upon Christianity, and the Protestant Bible is treated as *the* Bible. Thus, excerpts from a chart labeled “Introduction to the Bible” (2000X: 13; 2005a: 16) read:

There are 66 books in the entire Bible  
 39 in the Old Testament  
 27 in the New Testament  
 There are two major divisions in the Bible  
 Old Testament  
 New Testament  
 The divisions within the Old Testament are  
 History  
 Law  
 Poetry  
 Prophets (Major and Minor)

Similar presentations are found in earlier editions (1996: 3, 1990X: 3, 1999b: 21). Pre-2005b editions apparently do not explain that the Jewish Bible has not thirty-nine books but twenty-four, arranged differently into three divisions (Torah, Nebi'im, and Ketubim). Likewise, pre-2005b versions use the Christian name “Old Testament” rather than the Jewish term “Tanakh” or the less partisan language of “Hebrew Bible” and nowhere note that Judaism’s Bible contains no New Testament.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ironically, such instructions underscore the presumed Christian nature of the class.

<sup>26</sup> The sole exceptions among the hundreds of pages I examined are on the table of contents pages of the 1999b and 2003 editions, which refer to a “Structure of the Old Testament (TaNaK)

Their descriptions of a thirty-nine-book Old Testament also ignore the presence of additional books in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Old Testaments. Discussions of the Apocrypha in some editions fail to make clear the importance of those books for the Roman Catholic tradition and, like the curriculum as a whole, ignore Eastern Orthodox churches. The curriculum nowhere explains the canonization processes that gave rise to different Bibles.

The 2005b edition addresses these issues, with mixed success. It describes the tripartite organization of the Tanakh and supplements the term “Old Testament” with “Hebrew Bible.” Its revised discussion of the Apocrypha is still confusing, noting that those books are considered deuterocanonical by Roman Catholics but also stating that they “are not included as a part of the Hebrew, and most of the Christian, scriptures” (174). Because Eastern Orthodox Christians and Anglicans also (with variations) accept these books as deuterocanonical, they *are* in most Christian Bibles.

The curriculum identifies a specific translation as its standard: the King James Version, a favorite among conservative Protestants. A statement on the opening page of the 2003, 2004, and 2005a versions justifies this choice because of that translation’s “historic use as *the* [emphasis mine] legal and educational foundation of America.” Recent editions (2003, 2005a, 2005b) recommend use of a parallel Bible of the King James Version and New International Version; the latter is also an evangelical favorite with translation choices sometimes motivated as much by Christian theological concerns as grammar and syntax (Lewis 1991: 324; Thuesen 1999: 147–152; Orlinsky and Bratcher 1991: 217–227). Certain examples of the King James Version’s impact on American culture—Roman Catholic discomfort with it in the 1800s, the Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844, and the creation of parochial schools partly to spare Roman Catholic students from its reading (DeFattore 2004: 12–51)—seem unfamiliar to the council.

Though the curriculum notes that other translations are acceptable for classroom use, the editions it cites are typically those associated with conservative Protestant circles. In the two 2005 editions, for example, a translation exercise directs students to “*The Message Bible, The Amplified Bible, the Moffatt translation, and the Living Bible*” (11). Elsewhere, those editions encourage teachers to use the historical, chronological, and background information provided in the *Ryrie Study*

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Chart.” In the 1999b edition (22), the chart itself is based on the Protestant Bible, with no explanation of what the Tanakh is. The pertinent 2003 page was not available for review.

*Bible* (a dispensational premillennialist standard) and the *Thompson Chain Reference Bible* (4, 11, 62, 147, 184, 200, 201).<sup>27</sup>

The curriculum reflects little familiarity with the scholarly books listed in its bibliographies, which appear to reflect an attempt to provide it with an academic veneer. The sources it actually utilizes are typically popular-level works, online, dated, of dubious quality, and/or written from a conservative Protestant perspective. On several occasions (e.g., 2005b: 3, 147, 184, 200, 201), for example, it relies on the fundamentalist classic *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Halley 2000).

Most editions reflect a particular view of biblical inspiration, inerrancy—the idea that because the Bible is inspired, it is wholly without error and thus completely accurate in all matters, including history, science, and theology. This view is held by many (though not all) conservative Protestants and is often reflected in literalistic reading strategies (Detwiler 1999: 78–100; Fackre 2001). It lies behind the curriculum's creative defenses of literalistic interpretations, such as this one, regarding Noah's Ark: "But let's be liberal and say 40,000 animals, whose average size is that of a rhesus monkey, were on the Ark. How much room in the Ark would be needed for all these animals? About 40% of the Ark's 1.5 million cubic feet would suffice!!!" (1996 and 1990X: R). The following questions from the 1999 editions seem to reflect similar concerns (1999a, 1999b: 30–32):

- Some have suggested that if the account of God's creation of Eve by taking a rib from Adam were literally true, men today would have one fewer rib on one side than on the other. Is this a valid criticism? If your right finger were amputated, would your children be born without right index fingers?
- Genesis 4:17 speaks of Cain's wife. Where did she come from? Did God create other people besides Adam and Eve? Could she have been a Neanderthal or Cro-Magnon? Or could Genesis 5:4 supply the answer?<sup>28</sup>

The 2005a edition explicitly refers to the Bible as divinely inspired (45, 49–51, 212) and presupposes the historical accuracy of biblical stories, even accounts of miracles and divine intervention, such as Noah's flood (60), the Exodus experience (13), the giving of the Ten Commandments (99), and Jesus' resurrection (201–202, 228–235). Furthermore, it claims that archaeology and the hard sciences have

<sup>27</sup> These Bibles come in various editions (e.g., Ryrie 1994; Thompson 1997).

<sup>28</sup> According to Genesis 5:4, Adam had children other than Cain and Abel.

confirmed the Bible's accuracy and that the Bible's words have been transmitted from the original authors to the present without error or change (163, 165, 168–169, 179). On one occasion (179), it supports such claims with appeals to *The Bible and Modern Science*, by the late inerrantist and creation scientist Henry M. Morris (1968). Elsewhere (170), it cites J. O. Kinnaman (1941):

Of the hundreds of thousands of artifacts found by the archeologists, not one has ever been discovered that contradicts or denies one word, phrase, clause, or sentence of the Bible, but always confirms and verifies the facts of the Biblical record.

The curriculum characterizes Kinnaman as a “respected scholar,” a description that reflects its lack of familiarity with the scholarly world. Kinnaman is known mostly for his eccentricities, such as his argument that Jesus and Paul visited Great Britain and his claims that he had seen Jesus’ school records in India and discovered anti-gravitation devices from the lost continent of Atlantis in the Great Pyramid of Giza (Kinnaman 1941, Mehler 1997).

An inerrantist perspective is also evident in the 2005a edition’s discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>29</sup> This section is drawn from board member Grant R. Jeffrey’s book *The Signature of God* (2002), the cover of which reads “Documented Evidence That Proves Beyond Doubt the Bible is the Inspired Word of God.” The curriculum claims that the Scrolls “attest as an archaeological record revealing persons and events described in the Bible, that the Bible is a reliable source, if not of greater reliability, as any of the other ancient documents regarded by historians as historical sources, for ancient history” [*sic*] (164). According to it, the Scrolls “contain definite references to the New Testament and ... Jesus;” one scroll (4Q285) mentions Jesus’ crucifixion (173); several scrolls are fragments of the New Testament (176–178); and some Jews at Qumran were Christians (174–175). In a particularly convoluted argument, it argues that the Scrolls suggest that Jesus is the only Jew in history who could prove that he was King David’s descendent and, thus, the messiah (174).<sup>30</sup> In addition, it claims that the Scrolls prove that the Masoretic Text used by the translators of the King James Version “was identical with the original text as given to the

<sup>29</sup> The 2000X edition likely included this section as well.

<sup>30</sup> For mainstream perspectives, see Kuhn (2000), Evans (2000), and Fitzmyer (2000).

writers by God and inspired by Him” (172)—an explicitly theological claim that also ignores the complexity of the Qumran data.<sup>31</sup>

Discussions of scientific issues cite no scientific literature but buttress further the view of inerrancy. The “Science and the Bible” section in recent editions (2003: 232–233; 2000X: 235ff; 2005a: 259–263), also drawn from Jeffrey’s book, argues that biblical writers understood the Earth’s hydrological cycles and weather patterns. Editions prior to 2005b recommend charts and/or videos from the Creation Evidence Museum in Glen Rose, Tx (e.g., 1996: 6; 2005a: 3–4, 61, 262). This museum argues for a six-day creation, a 6,000-year-old earth, and the coexistence of humans and dinosaurs. When I visited it in 2003, it was accepting donations to fund the construction of a biosphere intended to replicate atmospheric conditions prevalent before Noah’s flood.<sup>32</sup>

To further support its argument that science confirms the Bible’s accuracy, the 2005a curriculum claims that scientists have discovered missing days in time that correspond to biblical stories (116–117). It suggests that the class “note in particular the interesting story of the sun standing still in [Joshua] chapter 10. There is documented research through NASA that two days were indeed unaccounted for in time (the other being in 2 Kings 20:8–11).” It provides the address for a webpage entitled “The Sun Stood Still” that presents this story of NASA’s alleged discovery as fact.<sup>33</sup> The claim that NASA has discovered missing days in time is, of course, an urban legend, one that has been extensively studied by folklorist Brunvand (2000: 137–148) and that is explicitly repudiated on a NASA Web site.<sup>34</sup> This curriculum, however, presents it as mainstream science.

The 2005b edition, issued in response to the TFN report (Chancey 2005a), omits many of these problematic passages, such as the explicit references to biblical inspiration; some of the idiosyncratic claims about archaeological finds and the Dead Sea Scrolls; creation science arguments and recommendations to use creation science resources; and the NASA urban legend. This version also rewords discussions of biblical miracles so that they no longer assume those stories’ historical accuracy.

Despite such improvements, the overall approach of the 2005b edition is still historicizing and harmonizing and thus seems to reflect

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<sup>31</sup> The curriculum goes against the arguments of Randall Price, which it cites as its source. On the Hebrew Bible’s textual history, see Cross (1992). The curriculum cites the volume in which Cross’s essay appears but demonstrates no familiarity with it (161).

<sup>32</sup> [www.creationevidence.org](http://www.creationevidence.org). On museum founder Carl Baugh, see Kuban (1989–2005).

<sup>33</sup> [www.geocities.com/Vienna/6595/sunstill.html](http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/6595/sunstill.html)

<sup>34</sup> [http://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/ask\\_astro/answers/970325g.html](http://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/ask_astro/answers/970325g.html)

conservative Protestant preoccupations with the Bible's accuracy and internal consistency. It generally maintains traditional authorship claims, arguing, for example, that because inscriptions demonstrate that "writing was widespread for many centuries before the time of Moses," it is likely that he wrote the Pentateuch (59).<sup>35</sup> Like earlier editions, it assumes the historicity of biblical characters and stories; Abraham is dated to 2000 BC and Joseph to 1526–1406 BC (52). The only historical questions raised are those of chronology, such as the dating of the Exodus experience, which is placed in both 1225 BC (86) and 1446 BC (88).<sup>36</sup> Students are nowhere exposed, for example, to the questions that archaeological evidence raises regarding the Israelite conquest of Canaan or to debates over the historical accuracy of Acts.

The treatment of Jesus' last week (215–221), preserved from earlier editions (e.g., 1999a: 135–138), illustrates the sectarian presuppositions, factual errors, and inattention to detail that permeate the text as a whole. In describing Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, it notes, "During this prayer, Jesus sweated great drops of blood," a claim based on Luke 22:43–44. Most modern translations indicate somehow that these verses were probably not a part of the original Lukan text but are likely a later scribal addition. The curriculum's allusion to them probably reflects its preference for the King James Version, which treats them as original. The curriculum specifies that "Jesus walked about 1/3 mile to a hill called Calvary," despite the lack of any reference to a specific distance in the gospels. An exercise erroneously notes, "A sword pierces Jesus' side," an apparent reference to John 19:34, in which a spear, not a sword, pierces Jesus' side. The answer key to a chronological exercise specifies that "Veil of Temple tears" happened before "Jesus dies," a point true of Luke (23:45) but not of Matthew (27:51) or Mark (15:38). The whole section assumes an artificial blending together of details from all four gospels, an interpretive approach often utilized among inerrantists but generally rejected in other circles.

The overall impression the various editions convey is of an inability to differentiate between pseudoscience, urban legends, fringe theories, and mainstream scholarship as well as between faith claims and nonsectarian descriptions. Even if a course follows the recent 2005b edition, it will promote the idea that the Protestant Bible is the cultural standard, that conservative Protestant beliefs about the Bible are the scholarly norm, and that the Old and New Testaments consist primarily of easily

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<sup>35</sup> See the somewhat more nuanced treatment of the authorship of Job (126) and Song of Solomon (136).

<sup>36</sup> I employ BC, rather than BCE, in deference to the curriculum's usage.

harmonized historical accounts. In short, students will leave this course with the understanding of the Bible apparently held by most members of the NCBCPS and with little awareness of views held by other religious groups or within the academic community.

### THE BIBLE AS “AMERICA’S BOOK”

The visibility of a Christian Americanist agenda in the curriculum has increased over time. In the 1996 edition, it is limited to the identification of a course objective as “to give insight into the world views of America’s founding fathers and to understand Biblical influences on their views on human rights” (1996: 1), an objective retained in subsequent versions. By 1999 (1999a, 1999b: 6–7), however, the curriculum was recommending resources produced by WallBuilders, a company founded by advisory committee member and political activist David Barton. WallBuilders identifies its mission as combating the separation between church and state.<sup>37</sup> Both 1999 editions included the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, Amendments 11–27, and Washington’s “Farewell Address” in a section titled “Documents of Freedom.”

The 1999b edition, however, included additional material reflecting a Christian Americanist agenda, sometimes subtly, other times blatantly. Mingled with a consideration of the Ten Commandments are quotations from Founding Fathers about the divine (79–81). Also included is the question of whether the slogans “In God we trust” and “One nation under God” are “compatible with ‘separation of church and state.’” An unnumbered seven-page section inserted at the end of the curriculum—one retained in subsequent editions such as 2000X and 2005a, 2005b—relies heavily upon the thought (and sometimes exact words) of Barton, especially his argument that the Founding Fathers were predominantly orthodox Christians (i.e., conservative Protestants, in Barton’s understanding) who sought to found the country in their image. It places considerable weight on Donald S. Lutz’s (1984) study of quotations in early American political literature from the Bible and from Enlightenment, Whig, Common Law, classical, and other sources. The curriculum makes much of the fact that the texts Lutz examined (some 15,000 public political documents from 1760–1805) cited the Bible more often than any other single source. Neither the curriculum nor its own source, Barton, presents other

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<sup>37</sup> [www.wallbuilders.com](http://www.wallbuilders.com)

important information from Lutz's study, such as the fact that 80% of surviving political pamphlets from the period are reprinted sermons. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that biblical quotations are so extraordinarily well represented. Although Lutz's article notes the importance of biblical influences on colonial political thought, its main goal is to document the influence of European thinkers such as John Locke and Charles Montesquieu—a point the curriculum seems to have missed entirely.

Nonetheless, after presenting Lutz's data, the curriculum suggests that scholars are "discovering that the Bible, perhaps even more than the Constitution, is our Founding Document."<sup>38</sup> Noting the presence of Leviticus 25:10 on the Liberty Bell, this section comments, "the symbol most closely associated with the Revolution proclaims that the Bible and civil government were bound together." It states as fact: "The transcendent values of Biblical natural law were *the* [emphasis mine] foundation of the American republic."

Biblical laws (particularly the Ten Commandments) are portrayed as an especially important source for the American legal system. One section in the 2003 and subsequent editions is entitled "THE TEN COMMANDMENTS ARE CONTAINED IN KENTUCKY'S CIVIL AND CRIMINAL LAWS AND SIMILARLY IN THE LEGAL CODES OF EVERY OTHER STATE IN AMERICA" (2003: 83–85, 2005a: 103–105, 2005b: 103–104). Comparing the Ten Commandments with the Kentucky Revised Statutes, it rightly relates "Thou shalt keep the Sabbath holy" to Sunday work laws, though it makes no mention of the fact that in its original context, the commandment refers to the Jewish (not Christian) Sabbath. Other comparisons reflect social concerns often associated with the Christian Right. "Thou shalt not kill" is presented as the foundation for prohibitions of the "performance of abortion on minors" and "Honor thy father and thy mother" is related to parental consent laws for such abortions. "Thou shalt have no graven images before thee" is cited without additional explanation as the foundation for laws about obscenity, pornography, and sexual exploitation of minors. Some editions imply that biblical laws should be more fully implemented in American society.<sup>39</sup>

The ideological emphasis is most pronounced in the 2005 editions. The covers of both are decorated not with biblical or archaeological imagery but with a photograph of the Declaration of Independence and

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<sup>38</sup> This statement comes from Barton (1992c: 201, 2000: 226), which quotes not scholars but *Newsweek* (Woodward and Gates 1982).

<sup>39</sup> For example, "Explain what effect there would be on our American way of life if legislators adopted the Mosaic Civil and Moral laws" (2005a: 97).

an American flag. Title pages of most units depict the flag, the Declaration, and/or the Constitution. In this context, such photographs serve to Americanize the Bible and to Christianize American symbols.

Those editions recommend that students watch the WallBuilders video *Foundations of American Government* (Barton 1992b) even before they read Genesis.<sup>40</sup> This video thus serves as the lens through which to interpret the remainder of the course. It argues that the Founding Fathers intended to establish a Christian nation and that increases in sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancies, divorces, and violent crimes can be attributed to the Supreme Court's prohibition of state-sponsored prayer in public schools in *Engel v. Vitale* 370 U.S. 421 (1962).<sup>41</sup> Aside from its shorter length, it is strikingly similar to another WallBuilders video, *America's Godly Heritage* (Barton 1992a), which was banned from classroom usage in *Herdahl v. Pontotoc County School District* (582).

The 2005b edition revises somewhat the discussion of biblical quotations in colonial documents, the Liberty Bell quotation, and the importance of biblical law. It now notes that the Founding Fathers were also shaped by other influences and mentions the deist and "unorthodox" views of some (231–232). Despite such changes, the section's objective still appears to be convincing students that the [Protestant] Bible was *the* formative political influence on the Founding Fathers.

That message is seen most clearly in a ten-page section in the 2005b edition retained from the 2005a (and possibly earlier) versions, a pastiche of decontextualized quotations about the importance of the Bible and Christianity from famous American and world figures set against the backdrop of blurry images of soldiers carrying an American flag. The quotations include:

- (1) It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded, not by religionists, but by Christians...not on religions, but on the Gospels of Jesus Christ. (Patrick Henry)
- (2) It is impossible rightly to govern the world without God and the Bible. (George Washington)
- (3) To be the distinguished character of patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of Christian. (George Washington)

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<sup>40</sup> Chancey (2005a: 62, 2005b: 11).

<sup>41</sup> Given the video's strong ideological slant, the curriculum's disclaimer that it is just "one perspective" and "one historian's viewpoint" (2005b: 11) that should be balanced with other perspectives does not alleviate the problem, especially since it discusses no other perspectives.

None of the quotations mentions any negative cultural influences of the Bible, of course. Many of the quotations are featured in Barton's books,<sup>42</sup> though he has questioned the authenticity of some, including the Henry and first Washington quotations above.<sup>43</sup> Accurate or not, however, these pages contain a powerful combination of sentiments and symbols: unqualified affirmations of the Bible's importance by great American and western personalities; the depictions of patriots who have fought and died for their country, visible now only through the haze of time; and the unfurled emblem of American nationalism that prompts an emotional response among many. Familiar names and imagery are woven together so that the inseparable association of the Bible and American freedom resonates in the minds of readers, appealing to their most heartfelt devotion to both.<sup>44</sup>

A new section in the 2005b edition, "Observations of the Supreme Court" (237–240), goes well beyond a discussion of the Bible's cultural influence to make a broader argument for an increased role of religion in public and civic life, quoting at length from Chief Justice Warren Burger's opinion in *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984) about the legality of civic nativity scenes, Congressional prayers, Thanksgiving holiday, the motto "In God we trust," and the phrase "One nation under God." Given the negative comments about world religions courses in a NCBCPS brochure (n.d.),<sup>45</sup> one may reasonably doubt that the organization's desire to increase the public role of religion extends far beyond certain forms of Christianity. I am here reminded of Randall G. Styers's (2002) comments on the efforts of some groups to increase public religion:

I am especially concerned that "more religion" most often means simply more "majority religion" in the public square. It strikes me that many religious speakers seek a greater role for "religion" largely because they are confident that their particular perspective will have the influence and resources to figure prominently in public debate (163).

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Barton (1992c: 245–251).

<sup>43</sup> [www.wallbuilders.com/resources/search/detail.php?ResourceID=20](http://www.wallbuilders.com/resources/search/detail.php?ResourceID=20). See Derek and McMearty (2005) on the misuse of such quotations.

<sup>44</sup> On the importance of resonance, familiarity, and affect in Christian Right materials, see Kintz (1997).

<sup>45</sup> The brochure includes statements like: "DON'T BE MISLED BY POLITICALLY CORRECT WORLD RELIGIONS COURSES" and "Such courses tend to promote faiths such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. While these courses are also legal, they teach comparable [*sic*] religions rather than a true Bible curriculum."

Another passage in the 2005b curriculum (100–101, re-inserted from 1999b: 80) is typical of its rhetorical method, lack of balance, selective use of evidence, and appeal to decontextualized quotations:

Thomas Jefferson is said to have been a leading advocate of the separation of church and state. And yet, Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that America is entitled to be an independent nation under the “Laws of Nature and of nature’s God.” He also wrote that “all men are created equal” and that “they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights.” Among his most famous statements is the quote, “God who gave us life gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the Gift of God?”

The logic for these quotes’ inclusion seems to be the assumption that Jefferson was referring to biblical laws and to traditional notions of the Christian God rather than employing language typical of Enlightenment deism. Note in particular how the phrase “and yet” contrasts these quotations with the idea that Jefferson was a proponent of the separation of church and state. Jefferson’s other statements on this issue, such as his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, are not cited, though a later page does acknowledge his distaste for “organized Christianity” (2005b: 233). We find no mention of *The Jefferson Bible*, from which Jefferson excised the Gospels’ miracle stories and Christological claims.

In short, the curriculum provides little evidence of the robust discussions among the nation’s founders about the relationship of church and state. The voice of James Madison, who had much to say about religious liberty, is missing entirely. Instead, the curriculum offers students a tendentious and at times misleading history implying that the separation of church and state is a modern aberration. It rightly notes, “While the full scope of its influence may be the subject of ongoing debate, there is no doubt that the Bible has played a key role in our nation’s history” (2005b: 229). Despite occasional attempts to create the appearance of balance, however, its own position in that debate is clear. It is the same position as that held by many of the National Council’s members and endorsers: because America was founded as a distinctively Christian nation, it should return to its Christian roots.

## CONCLUSION

The various editions of the curriculum of the NCBCPS appear to fall far short of the courts’ guidelines. In terms of “the selectivity,

emphasis, objectivity, and interpretive manner ... with which the Bible is taught," they appear to encourage views associated primarily with certain conservative Protestant circles. Some have rather explicitly attempted to persuade students of the "truth ... of the biblical materials."<sup>46</sup> The 2005b edition, though an improvement, still maintains a historicizing perspective that strongly reflects conservative Protestant views. It likewise retains a distorted presentation of American history seemingly designed to encourage Christian Americanist beliefs. Insofar as all editions of this curriculum have reflected a religious, not secular, purpose and have had the likely effect of advancing the interests of a religious group, they do not meet the "Lemon test."

And yet this curriculum has found acceptance in numerous school districts, even if not the hundreds claimed by the council. That acceptance demonstrates that a considerable gap exists between legal guidelines for the treatment of religion in public classrooms and the actual practices of many districts. It also reflects a lack of suitable resources to help school districts navigate the complicated issues raised by the academic study of religion, particularly in a nonsectarian setting, and a lack of communication between religious studies scholars and public school educators.

The NCBCPS's efforts illustrate a troubling reality: when the mainstream scholarly community is not sufficiently involved in the processes of curriculum and course development for public education, other organizations stand ready to fill that gap. If we religious studies scholars do not make our voices heard in conversations about religion and public education, other groups will claim to speak for us, groups like the NCBCPS whose religious and ideological agendas go well beyond the encouragement of cultural literacy, cross-cultural understanding, and critical thinking. If we do not develop resources, other groups will offer theirs, sometimes to deleterious effect. If we do not familiarize ourselves with their efforts and offer scholarly assessments of their resources' strengths and weaknesses, many districts will not have the tools they need to discern between appropriate and inappropriate materials.

The acceptance of this curriculum also reflects the growing influence of Christian Americanist ideology and a successful effort to utilize public schools to disseminate that ideology. "Since the schools are the primary transmitters of our nation's cultural heritage," Detwiler has observed, "the Christian Right views the battle over the content in

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<sup>46</sup> These quotations come, respectively, from *Wiley v. Franklin* and *Gibson v. Lee County* (the latter quoting *Vaughn v. Reed*).

history, literature, and social science classes as one of mythic proportions for our children” (195). The efforts of the NCBCPS, however, reflect a new approach to win the mythic battle for America’s youth. Rather than continuing old debates over the contents of traditional high school courses, it hopes to add a new course altogether, its Bible course. Only when students everywhere are taking its course can it be assured that those students will receive appropriate exposure to (its version of) the Bible’s message and learn about (its version of) America’s Christian heritage. Only then can it know that students rightly understand what it regards as the essential Christian-ness of the American identity and the essentially conservative Protestant nature of that Christian-ness. Perhaps when enough students have taken its course, they will help return the nation and its government to the faith, as understood by the NCBCPS, of its Founding Fathers.

In the meantime, the NCBCPS continues to promote its curriculum heavily through conservative Christian media outlets. It also updates its Web site regularly. The number of school districts purportedly using its curriculum changes every few weeks, rising steadily upward.

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