

Bible Bills, Bible Curricula, and Controversies of Biblical Proportions: Legislative Efforts to Promote Bible Courses in Public Schools¹

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“This is about more than about God. This is about politics.” So commented state Representative Scott Beason on the floor of the Alabama House in January 2006. He was discussing a bill promoting elective Bible courses in public high schools,² one of eleven introduced that year in Alabama, Georgia, Missouri, and Tennessee.³ Each purportedly aimed to create elective courses that would present the biblical material “objectively as part of a secular program of education,” as required by the famous 1963 Supreme Court decision *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (374 U.S. 203 [1963]).⁴ In Alabama and Georgia, legislative efforts took on a partisan dimension as Democrats and Republicans introduced rival bills, with Democrats favoring a textbook produced by the Bible Literacy Project and Republican leaders expressing support for the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools. Much of the public discussion revolved around the Bible Literacy Project textbook, which some legislators hailed as a model of academic responsibility while others attacked it as undermining Christianity.

Beason’s comment was correct: the Bible bills were about both God and politics. This article serves as a guide to the Bible bill battles of 2006—battles that seem likely to be repeated in future legislative sessions. It provides an overview of the two primary curricular options, examines notable aspects of key bills, and sorts through claims made by legislators, religious leaders, and interest groups. The bills reflect the efforts of both major political parties to appear “religion-friendly.” The details of those bills, however, often reflected a lack of understanding of the complex pedagogical and legal issues raised by public school religion courses. The range of reactions to the Bible Literacy Project provides a vivid example of the difficulties of creating courses that meet the multiple standards of Constitutionality, academic soundness, and acceptability to a diverse public.

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Competing Curricula

The Bible Literacy Project (BLP) was founded by investor Chuck Stetson to promote the study of the Bible in public schools. When it released its textbook in September 2005, it promoted it as a compromise product acceptable to a wide cross section of society.⁵ The book was written in accordance with the guidelines found in the 1999 publication, *The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*,⁶ which was endorsed by a variety of religious, legal, and educational groups.⁷ The organization's Web site claimed the textbook's creation involved forty reviewers and consultants from diverse professional backgrounds (high school teachers, academics of various fields, lawyers, and religious leaders) and confessional backgrounds (Jewish, Roman Catholic, Mainline and evangelical Protestant).⁸

The lavishly illustrated textbook is divided into forty chapters, with approximately half devoted to the Hebrew Bible and half to the New Testament. Each chapter focuses on biblical books or assemblages of passages, providing a summary of content and themes as well as historical and cultural background. Numerous subsections highlight biblical influences on art, literature, music, and political thought.⁹

Some religious figures and publications have responded to the book favorably. Well known conservative Protestants such as Charles Colson, founder of the Prison Fellowship ministry, and Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, endorsed it. Positive reviews appeared in conservative Christian magazines such as *Christianity Today*, *World Magazine*, *Christian Examiner*, and Focus on the Family's *Citizen Magazine*.¹⁰ *Christian Century*, associated primarily with Mainline Protestants, ran a laudatory article by Emory University New Testament professor Luke Timothy Johnson.¹¹ Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Congress and the Anti-Defamation League expressed cautious support.¹² As discussed below, however, other religious voices responded hostilely.

Of the civil and religious rights groups often associated with the political left, only Americans United for the Separation of Church and State spoke out against the BLP.¹³ Joseph L. Conn expressed suspicion about its motives, noting the apparently substantial involvement of Stetson with Christian Right groups and Republican politics. He also argued that the book was imbalanced in its treatment of the Bible's cultural impact, highlighting examples of positive influence (i.e., its use by abolitionist, civil rights, and workers' rights movements) while largely ignoring those of negative influence (i.e., slavery, segregation, oppression of women, genocide, the Span-

ish Inquisition, the Salem witch trials). Conn regarded the book's consideration of biblical influences on America's Founding Fathers as especially misleading.

The book's reception in the scholarly community is difficult to gauge. Thus far, few scholars have commented on it in print. Johnson praised its balanced tone towards Judaism, Islam, and different versions of Christianity. Johnson did comment, however, that the "book's avoidance of some disputed questions [e.g., evolution, religion and science, and anti-Judaism] almost ensures that they will emerge in the classroom."¹⁴ Steven L. McKenzie of Rhodes College offered a thoughtful critique on the Society for Biblical Literature Web site, affirming its treatment of the Bible's cultural impact while lamenting its underutilization of biblical scholarship.¹⁵ Discussion of it at the August 2005 meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association was apparently enthusiastic.¹⁶

While I share some of the concerns mentioned above, to my mind, they do not disqualify the textbook from usage. There is indeed considerable room for improvement, but on the whole the BLP succeeds in avoiding the sectarian assumptions often exhibited in public school Bible courses.¹⁷ Regardless of the motivations of BLP members, the textbook displays what appears to be a good faith effort to be nonsectarian. Unless members of the religious studies guild are willing to create an alternative public school curriculum—with the possible outcome that their time and energy is not be rewarded by its widespread adoption—the BLP textbook is likely to remain one of the most sensible choices available for public school Bible courses.¹⁸

The contrasts between the BLP and the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS) are striking. The NCBCPS was established in 1993 in Greensboro, North Carolina by Elizabeth Ridenour, a paralegal.¹⁹ A Christian Right organization, it is co-sponsored by the American Family Association and the Center for Reclaiming America. Its advisory board consists primarily of individuals from politically and theologically conservative groups, many of them also associated with the Christian Right; it includes no professional scholars in biblical or religious studies with full-time positions at accredited institutions.²⁰ Its most visible spokesperson in 2006 was board member and actor Chuck Norris.

The NCBCPS's eighteen-unit curriculum, *The Bible in History and Literature*, is a teacher's guide; the Bible (preferably the King James Version) is the students' sole textbook. The NCBCPS curriculum is difficult to obtain: at present, one can purchase it (for \$150) only by phoning the NCBCPS. The organization does not send out review copies.

The curriculum is legally and academically problematic. In 2003, education professor Frances R. Paterson concluded that its "primary effect ...

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is the promotion of conservative, evangelical Protestantism.”²¹ Apparently, no professional biblical scholar had ever read it until 2005, when Texas Freedom Network, a church-state watchdog group, sent me a copy for evaluation.²² Though some components were unobjectionable, much of it was riddled with factual errors, idiosyncratic claims, and explicitly sectarian statements.²³ In addition, it suggested that the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were inspired by the Bible and that the Bible should be the center of American civic life.

The NCBCPS denied the validity of my critiques but nonetheless produced a revised edition in September 2005 with many changes that corresponded exactly to my observations.²⁴ Unfortunately, the revised curriculum, though an improvement, still relies primarily on popular-level sources written from a conservative Protestant perspective, harmonizes biblical history, and argues against the separation between church and state. Its agenda goes well beyond cultural literacy.

As of November 3, 2006, the NCBCPS Web site claims that its Bible course is taught in 373 school districts in 37 states,²⁵ including 52 school districts in Texas alone.²⁶ Such numbers are seriously inflated; the reality is that only 11 Texas school districts taught the course in the 2005-2006 school year.²⁷ If the numbers in Texas are representative, then the course is likely taught in only a few dozen districts nationwide. The NCBCPS also argues that it has never lost a lawsuit—a curious claim, since in 1998 a federal district judge prohibited the teaching of its New Testament component in Lee County, Florida schools.²⁸

The NCBCPS won its first showdown with its new competitor. In December 2005, the Ector County Independent School Board in Odessa, Texas selected the NCBCPS curriculum over the new BLP textbook.²⁹ Odessa’s decision came shortly before the first of the Bible bills were officially filed.

The Bible Bills³⁰

On January 4, Republican Sen. Jason Crowell of Missouri introduced the first of the Bible bills (SB 736). In its entirety, the legislation read simply: “Any public school district may offer a class or classes in which the Bible is incorporated. The Bible may be incorporated in multiple circumstances, including but not limited to history, literature, or comparative religion courses.” Perhaps the most notable aspect of this bill is that it was filed at all, since it added nothing to the existing legal situation.

The Missouri legislation attracted relatively little attention, but the next round of bills ignited controversy. Democrats in Alabama and Georgia soon

introduced legislation authorizing state funding for Bible courses. The Alabama House bill proposed a course called “The Bible and Its Influence,” with the BLP book as its textbook (HB 58, introduced January 10). Georgia Senators offered a bill authorizing the board of education to “develop and adopt a curriculum for a state funded elective course consisting of a non-sectarian, nonreligious academic study of the Bible and its influence on literature, art, music, culture, and politics” (SB 437, introduced January 23). The bill stressed that such courses must be taught in an “objective and nondevotional manner” and that their teachers could not be selected “on the basis of profession of faith or lack of faith.” It did not specify a textbook, but its sponsors favored the BLP book.³¹

Republican legislators in both Georgia chambers quickly fired back with their own proposals (HB 1133 and SB 79, introduced on January 26 and 28, respectively). The primary sponsor of the Senate version, Majority Leader Tommie Williams, argued, “This country is built on Judeo-Christian faith, ethics and knowledge of the Scriptures ... Our Founding Fathers were often quoting the Scriptures. Our first Congress paid for the purchase of Bibles to be used in public schools.”³² His bill offered funding for courses titled “History and Literature of the Old Testament Era” and “History and Literature of the New Testament Era”:

The purpose of such courses shall be to ... familiarize students with the contents of the Old and New Testaments, the history recorded by the Old and New Testaments, the literary style and structure of the Old and New Testaments, the customs and cultures of the peoples and societies recorded in the Old and New Testaments, and the influence of the Old and New Testaments upon law, history, government, literature, art, music, customs, morals, values, and culture.

Like the Democratic bill, this one specified that religious beliefs (or lack thereof) could not be a criterion for teacher selection. It also specified a textbook: the Christian Bible (“the book or collection of books commonly known as the Old Testament and New Testament”). The identification of the Bible as the textbook should be interpreted as an implicit criticism of the BLP and a nod to the NCBCPS curriculum, in which the Bible is the only textbook. Another paragraph also appeared to reflect a preference for the NCBCPS curriculum:

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The courses shall familiarize the students with the methods and tools of writing at the times the Old and New Testament books were written, the means by which they were preserved, the languages in which they were written and into which they were translated, and the historical and cultural events which led to the translation of the Old and New Testaments into the English language.

The NCBCPS curriculum treats each of these topics in detail; the BLP textbook does not.³³ Sen. Williams later noted that he had consulted Ridenour, the founder of the NCBCPS, when crafting the bill.³⁴

On January 31, Alabama Republican Representatives also countered the Democratic bill with their own. Over fifty legislators sponsored HB 545, which proposed the creation of a course called “The Bible.” This bill, too, identified a required textbook: the King James Version of the Bible, a translation favored by many conservative Protestants.

The weeks that followed saw a full-scale assault on the BLP. In Georgia, Sen. Williams denounced the group as “an extremely left-wing, one-world government, one-world religion organization.”³⁵ According to *AgapePress*, which ran a steady stream of articles about the controversy, Georgia Sen. Eric Johnson was “warning believers against the BLP curriculum and its textbook. He says the course materials contain ‘politically correct, humanistic interpretations of some scripture passages.’”³⁶

Discussion in Alabama was even more heated. Some critics of the Democratic bill implied that students would not even read the Bible itself in the BLP course. Republican Senator Hank Erwin of Alabama argued, “Let the kids see the Bible, let them interact with the actual book, and let them come to their own conclusions. But I don’t think that we need to have any textbook to replace the actual Bible itself to teach the scriptures.”³⁷ Two members of the state education board issued a press release stating that the course “does not allow the students to use their own Bibles as their textbook.”³⁸ Rep. Beason, attacked the BLP textbook as liberal. Beason was disturbed by the possibility that students’ faiths would be undermined by questions such as “If God is good, why does he allow bad things to happen?”³⁹ and “Did Adam and Eve receive a fair deal from God?” Those passages were among the many, he argued, that “question the sovereignty of God, and question whether or not God’s Word is inerrant, and many, many things that I don’t think K-12 students ought to be subjected to.” Beason also argued that the textbook’s use of BCE and CE instead of BC and AD reflected a preference of political correctness over Christianity.⁴⁰

Similar charges cropped up elsewhere. The press release by the education board members included a link to a “fact sheet” with similar claims created by state branches of the Christian Coalition, the Eagle Forum, the American Family Association, and Concerned Women for America.⁴¹ The Eagle Forum’s *Education Reporter* argued that the BLP undermined “Biblical truth and authority.”⁴² An editorial in the *Shelby County Reporter* alleged (inaccurately) that the BLP “textbook . . . was partially written and approved by ultra-liberal groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, the Council for Islamic Education, and the People for the American Way, which was founded by liberal Hollywood producer Norman Lear.”⁴³

Evangelical leaders elsewhere in the nation also weighed in. D. James Kennedy wrote a brief letter to Alabama Republican Rep. Nick Williams characterizing the BLP approach as “extremely radical” and cautioning that “it would be a tremendous mistake to impose such very anti-biblical material upon our children in public schools.”⁴⁴ John Haggee, pastor of the 17000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, wrote to Rep. Beason that the textbook was “a masterful work of deception, distortion and outright falsehoods.”⁴⁵

On February 7, a vote in Alabama to allow debate about the Democratic bill to continue failed. Though 49 legislators voted to continue discussion, 42 opposed. All 39 Republicans voting opposed the measure, along with 3 Democratic colleagues. Because a 60% majority was required for discussion to proceed, the bill died.⁴⁶

The extent to which opposing votes were motivated by worries about the BLP’s purported theological problems cannot be determined. Some negative votes may have been prompted by the concern that the bill’s specification of a textbook impinged upon local sovereignty over education.⁴⁷ One Republican, however, explained his vote as a defense of Christianity. Rep. Williams issued a press release titled “Bible Distortion Bill Defeated.”⁴⁸ “Normally,” he wrote, “I would be all for this type of legislation, but this bill promoted a certain liberal textbook instead of promoting the Bible. As conservative legislators, we could not allow this terrible bill to pass. It would have had a very negative impact on our teenagers.” Williams expressed the hope that the NCBCPS curriculum would be more widely used.

The Alabama Republican House bill remained alive. On February 23, it was joined by a Republican bill in the Senate (SB 472). The latter noted that school boards would have the authority to choose the course textbook from those approved by the state board of education.

Alabama Democrats did not give up. A Senator filed a revised version of the dead House bill (SB 499) on February 28. Like its predecessor, it specifically mentioned the use of the BLP’s textbook, but it also explicitly allowed the possible use of other textbooks, as well. It stated further that

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textbooks and curriculum shall have endorsements and contributions from widely recognized scholars, educators, and theologians. The publishers of proposed textbooks and curriculum shall demonstrate clearly that they have used a broad array of sources, and have engaged an extensive list of educational and religious groups, to ensure a fair and balanced curriculum that does not promote one particular viewpoint or church teaching.

This provision should probably be interpreted as buttressing the chances of the approval of the BLP and the rejection of the NCBCPS.

Tennessee Republicans joined the fray on February 16, introducing bills in the House (HB 3063) and Senate (SB 3220). Both were loosely modeled on the Georgia Republican Senate bill, stating that the basic course text would be “the book or collection of books commonly known as the Old Testament ... and New Testament.” Also like the Georgia bill, they specified that courses should include discussion of the “methods and tools of writing” in biblical times as well as the history of the Bible’s translation into English.

The bill that broke the partisan pattern was HB 1663, introduced by Georgia Democratic Rep. Randal Mangham on March 24. It not only repeated much of the language of the Republican version but seemed to quietly embrace the NCBCPS curriculum by reproducing lengthy passages verbatim from NCBCPS promotional materials. Nowhere, however, did it mention that curriculum by name.⁴⁹

Ultimately, most of the Bible bills never came up for a vote. The bills in Alabama died with the end of the legislative session, as did those in Missouri and Tennessee. Only in Georgia did bills make it all the way through the legislative process. The Senate overwhelmingly approved the Republican bill on February 3 with a 50-1 vote. The single “Nay” was issued by a Democrat, and a few other Democrats either abstained or were officially excused from voting.⁵⁰ Most Democratic senators, however, joined their Republican colleagues in supporting the bill. On March 20, the House approved its Republican bill 151-7. Though all of the nay-sayers and most of the non-voting legislators were Democrats, the majority of that party (57/79) voted “Yea.”⁵¹ Exactly a week later, the Senate accepted the House version of the bill with a lopsided vote: 45-2, with Democrats making up the two negative votes and most of the non-voters.⁵² Not a single Republican voted against the bills on any of these three occasions. On April 20, the governor signed the bill, along with legislation allowing the erection of Ten Commandments monuments at courthouses.⁵³ Under the law, the State Board of Education must approve curricular options by February 1, 2007.

The Origins of the Campaign Against the Bible Literacy Project

How did the Bible Literacy Project become so controversial? Considerable credit belongs to the allies of the National Council. Kennedy, who wrote against the BLP, sits on the NCBCPS advisory board and his Center for Reclaiming America is its co-sponsor. *AgapePress*, which ran so many negative articles about the BLP, is the media outlet of the American Family Association (AFA), the NCBCPS's other co-sponsor.

An *AgapePress* column by Steve Crampton, AFA chief counsel and NCBCPS board member, appears to be the source of the erroneous charge that the BLP course does not use the Bible.⁵⁴ The column appeared shortly after the textbook's release and in the midst of the Odessa controversy. In it, Crampton argued, "Of the various Bible curricula offered for use in the public schools, only one uses the Bible as its primary textbook, the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools" As Crampton's article continued, his rhetoric escalated with claims that "any Bible curriculum that does not allow students to read it [the Bible] for themselves and draw their own conclusions insults the intelligence of the students [R]efusal to allow students to use their own Bibles in a Bible class is the ultimate in arrogance and arbitrary censorship." Though Crampton at no point referred directly to the BLP, the timing of his column's appearance made his target clear.

AgapePress also frequently drew attention to the critiques of two online writers, Berit Kjos⁵⁵ and Dennis L. Cuddy.⁵⁶ Kjos is a registered nurse;⁵⁷ Cuddy holds a Ph. D. in History from the University of North Carolina and claims to have been a "Senior Associate" with the Reagan Department of Education. Both writers assemble a lengthy list of passages from the BLP textbook that they argue belittle the Christian faith. In a very few cases, the passages they highlight might reflect unfortunate choices in wording or content on the part of the BLP.⁵⁸ Many of their criticisms, however, boil down to the complaint that the BLP does not espouse their theological views. Consider these representative examples of Kjos's complaints (page numbers refer to the BLP textbook):

- **Page 357:** "The Western understanding of the movement from suffering to redemption and the *notion* of an end time have been influenced by the Book of Revelation." Kjos is offended by the reference to the "end times" as only a "notion" rather than an imminent reality.
- **Page 276:** "Jesus was also seen as an example of self sacrifice that can be imitated ... On your own, try to find examples of such

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Christ figures in literature, film or even music.” According to Kjos, this “undermines the heart of Christianity” and is one of the textbook’s most offensive passages.

- **Page 35:** “Look up some examples of other ancient literature and mythology of the origins of the world (such as *Enuma Elish*, *Gilgamesh*, or *Praise of the Pickax*). Compare what you read there with the first two chapters of Genesis. Share your comparisons.” For Kjos, this exercise “blends pagan images with Biblical references” and is another clear example of the BLP’s anti-Christian bias.

Most troubling to Kjos, however, are passages that suggest the possibility of multiple interpretations of scripture, especially those that suggest two interpretive options, such as:

- **Page 19:** “Jewish reading of Scripture is not overly concerned with establishing one ‘correct’ reading, and many of the greatest scholars of the tradition have been content to entertain several seemingly opposed interpretations of a single passage.”
- **Page 31:** “How might Genesis 1:28 be used to justify either or both sides of environmental debates or animal rights legislation?”

One might predict Kjos’s primary complaint here to be the encouragement of relativism, but the issue goes deeper. By presenting two options, Kjos argues, the BLP is modeling “dialectical thinking,” the thought process utilized by Hegel, adopted by Marx and Lenin, and employed in the Soviet Union’s brainwashing techniques.

Most damning for both writers is the association of certain individuals involved with the BLP with the political philosophy Communitarianism.⁵⁹ In Kjos’s words, Communitarianism “places the importance of society ahead of the unfettered rights of the individual” and is comparable to Communism. As Cuddy commented to *AgapePress*, “If you had a bunch of religious people and just put your finger down at random, you probably wouldn’t wind up with half the people you picked as communitarians; so maybe there’s some larger agenda at work here.”⁶⁰ Both note numerous passages that in their views advocate this purportedly sinister movement. Kjos, for example, cites the questions on page 255, “Of what communities are you a member? How were these communities formed?” and the caption for a photograph on page 369, “These two teenagers have volunteered their time for Habitat for Humanity....”

The complaints of Cuddy and Kjos about the BLP's supposed Communitarian leanings lie at the very heart of their concerns. Both argue vigorously that the Communitarian movement is laying the groundwork for America to be subsumed within a New World Order run by a One World Government arising out of the United Nations. Cuddy, for example, has argued that the United States government allowed September 11 to happen so that it could curtail individual liberties and hasten the implementation of the Antichrist's New World Order.⁶¹ Its establishment, he argues, is the goal of a long list of conspirators including the Rhodes Scholars, the National Education Association, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Illuminati, the Masons, the Knights Templar, the Priory of Sion, and perhaps the Girl Scouts.⁶² For Kjos, even evangelical superstar Rick Warren, author of the national best-seller *The Purpose Driven Life*,⁶³ supports this socialistic, globalizing, anti-American, anti-Christian agenda.⁶⁴ Within this logic, the BLP is a part of a demonic movement that must be stopped at all costs.⁶⁵

The allegations of Kjos and Cuddy circulated widely. The NCBCPS Web site collected links to their articles and to related *AgapePress* stories. Cuddy issued dire warnings about the BLP in newspaper editorials and on nationally aired radio shows.⁶⁶ These critics are the source for the warnings offered by the two members of the Alabama Board of Education, the Alabama Eagle Forum letter, the *Shelby County Reporter* editorial, and a column on the Website of former presidential candidate Alan Keyes.⁶⁷ The fact that Georgia Sen. Williams and Alabama Reps. Beason and Williams echoed their criticisms suggests they were the ultimate source for them, as well.⁶⁸

Aside from clarifying that it was not behind any of the various bills,⁶⁹ the BLP initially kept silent about such charges. On March 2, however, it issued a strongly worded press release clarifying that it had not been endorsed by the ACLU, emphasizing that its course did utilize the Bible, and arguing that critics had misrepresented the textbook.⁷⁰ It also updated its Web site with a section titled "Correcting Misconceptions and Inaccurate Reports about Our Textbook," which specified that it had not been endorsed by People for the American Way, the National Education Association, or the Council on Islamic Education; did not promote Communism, Communitarianism, or Wicca; and did not prevent students from reading the Bible itself.⁷¹ Eventually, the BLP announced it would issue a revised textbook removing or editing some of the controversial passages.⁷²

The Significance of the Bible Bill Battles

What was behind these legislative efforts to promote Bible courses? No doubt, some lawmakers were motivated largely by legitimate convictions that biblical literacy is important to cultural literacy. Yet, this explanation by itself hardly seems sufficient. More study of world religions would also promote cultural literacy, but legislators made no comparable push to increase world religions courses.

Some commentators argued that the Democratic bills were an effort to close the “God gap” between Democrats and Republicans.⁷³ According to this argument, Democrats were trying to dispel notions that the G.O.P. was more amenable to Christianity than their own party. Certainly, Democrats were aware that introducing Bible bills had political benefits. Georgia Sen. Kasim Reed, a sponsor of the Democratic bill, argued, “We are not going to give away the South anymore because we are unwilling to talk about our faith.”⁷⁴ Sen. Doug Stone, another sponsor, told the Jewish magazine *Forward*, “I can tell you that us proposing this has had a major impact in the state on peoples’ perspectives on Democrats.” The fact that it was ultimately the Republican bill that had advanced through the legislative process, not his own, was irrelevant, Stone argued. “The leading papers everywhere in the state were saying, ‘Senate Democrats Introduce Academic Study of the Bible,’ and that has stuck,” he noted. “To be very honest with you, most folks are very busy with their lives and don’t get into the finer details of which bill is which.”⁷⁵ In Alabama, Democrats followed up in August with a “Covenant with Alabama” that included a pledge to “require public schools to offer Bible Literacy as part of their curriculum.”⁷⁶

National Democrats praised the bills. In July 2006, the Democratic Leadership Council issued a statement identifying Bible course bills as a “New Dem Play,” arguing that “legislation authorizing academic study of the Bible in the public high school curriculum is both good policy and good politics. Such legislation will not only provide students with a distinct educational advantage, but will offer Democrats the opportunity to talk to voters about their faith and values.”⁷⁷

As for the Republicans, their stance had its own political benefits. Republicans were unwilling to cede their advantage as the party most amenable to Christians (particularly conservative Protestants). Introducing their own bills allowed them to undercut any potential Democratic claim to be the most Bible-friendly party. Vociferous attacks on the BLP allowed certain legislators to position themselves as the true defenders of the Faith.⁷⁸

The two occasions when matters actually came to a vote offer an interesting contrast. The vote in Alabama over whether to keep the Democratic

bill alive was largely split along party lines. Republicans did not hesitate to vote negatively. In Georgia, however, the vote on the Republican bill brought different results: most Democrats joined Republicans in supporting it. To what extent was such support motivated by legitimate enthusiasm for the bill, and to what extent by the political necessity not to be seen as voting against the Bible?

The bills themselves often included elements that were problematic on a variety of levels. That the specification of a particular textbook, as in the Alabama Democratic bills, would be seen as an affront to local control over education should have been predictable. As for the NCBCPS, its troubling track record did not prevent key legislators from supporting it, and by late May 2006, Alabama Reps. Williams and Beason and Georgia Sen. Williams had joined its advisory board. At least on a formal level, none of the bills gave any indication of familiarity with Jewish discomfort with the Christian terminology of “Old Testament,” or of the differences between Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox Bibles. Had the Alabama Republican House bill passed, its selection of the King James Version as the primary textbook would have proven particularly controversial. Several bills referred to teaching the Bible as straightforward history, though courts have ruled that such an approach (particularly in regard to miracle stories) is a *de facto* endorsement of particular religious views.⁷⁹

The amount of attention the bills devoted to teachers’ professional development varied considerably. Most bills seemed to reflect the assumption that finding appropriate instructors would not be difficult. The unfortunate likelihood, however, is that few teachers have received the training necessary to offer an academically and legally appropriate Bible course.⁸⁰ One suspects that training of a considerable number of teachers could prove costly, a neglected issue in the public discussions of these bills.

There seems little reason to doubt that allies and members of the NCBCPS genuinely regard the BLP as theologically suspect, but it is important to remember another aspect of the council’s worries: for the first time ever, it has a national competitor. Should the use of the BLP textbook become widespread, the council’s very existence is threatened, and with it, the hope of utilizing its Bible course to advance its larger Christian Americanist agenda. Thus, the NCBCPS’s allies “pulled the alarm” on the BLP,⁸¹ spreading the word about its supposedly anti-Christian elements through online essays, news stories, newsletters and Christian radio stations.⁸² Eventually these claims—even the inaccurate and extreme ones—made their way into the mouths of state legislators. Even legislators who did not accept these claims had to reckon with the fact that well-organized groups within their constituencies did.

The criticisms hurled at the BLP illustrate the perils of producing religion curricula for public education. Court rulings require neutrality between various religious perspectives and between religion and non-religion, but some organizations and individuals will not be comfortable with textbooks that do not adequately reflect their own religious views. One can imagine that the more extensive the academic content of a textbook, the greater the resistance it will encounter. Consider the more legitimate critiques of the BLP textbook mentioned earlier in this article, its lack of examples of the negative cultural influence of the Bible and its underutilization of biblical scholarship. Addressing these concerns would indeed strengthen the book but would also make it less acceptable to many school districts. One result would be that some schools would adopt other curricula that were even less academically grounded and more overtly sectarian. In the face of such challenges, groups that want to increase the study of religion in public schools have their work cut out for them. As for the BLP itself, it went to considerable effort to produce a curriculum that would be acceptable to a wide variety of religious perspectives. In a polarized society, however, perhaps the most unpardonable of sins is attempting to build a bridge.

Even though only one state actually passed a Bible course law in 2006, the proliferation of Bible bills may prove to be highly significant. Since 1962, conservative Christians have worked to re-introduce school-sponsored prayer into the classroom. Despite occasional gains, that movement has yet to reach its goal.⁸³ Now, however, Bible courses have the support of legislators in both parties, at least for the moment. Christian Right organizations may see Bible courses as a cause with greater prospects for success than school prayer and thus may devote correspondingly greater energy to it, with the hope of using those courses to advance their own theological and ideological agendas. Once again, then, the public school classroom is on the frontlines of struggles to define American identity and to determine the balance between church and state.

Notes

¹ This article is based on "Politics, Culture Wars, and the Good Book: Recent Controversies over the Bible and Public Education," which I delivered as the Maguire Public Scholar Lecture at Southern Methodist University on April 26, 2006. I would like to thank SMU's Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility for its support of my research.

² B. Johnson, "Committee Narrowly Approves Bill to Teach Bible Course," *Anniston Star*, January 26 (2006); A. Sullivan, "When Would Jesus Bolt?" *Washington Monthly*, April (2006): 39-45.

³ In addition, South Carolina passed the “Released Time Credit Act” allowing public high school students to take off-campus courses in religious instruction for elective credit.

⁴ See J. DelFattore, *The Fourth R: Conflicts over Religion in America’s Public Schools* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 86-97. On related district court cases, see The Bible Literacy Project and the First Amendment Center, *The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide* (New York: Bible Literacy Project, Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1999) (<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?id=6261>).

⁵ C. Schippe and C. Stetson, eds., *The Bible and its Influence* (New York and Fairfax, Va.: BLP Publishing, 2005).

⁶ BLP and First Amendment Center, *Bible and Public Schools*.

⁷ See different reactions in W.A. Nord, “Teaching about the Bible in Public Schools,” *Religion & Education* 27:1 (2000): 20-27 and B. Lynn, “Bible Curriculum and Public Schools: Oil and Water,” 28-31 in the same issue. Nord and Lynn respond to each other on 32-33.

⁸ www.bibleliteracy.org/Site/PressRoom/Press20050922/Press050922Reviewers.htm.

⁹ A teacher’s guide appeared in August, 2006: M.H. Schafer, C. Schippe, and C. Stetson, eds., *The Bible and its Influence: Teachers Edition* (New York and Front Royal, VA: BLP Publishing, 2006).

¹⁰ M. Galli, “The Beginning of Education,” *Christianity Today*, October (2005): 78-81; D. M. Carpenter, II, “High School Textbook Targets Biblical Illiteracy,” *Citizen Magazine*, December (2005): 8 (<http://www.family.org/cforum/citizenmag/departments/a0038720.cfm>); G. E. Veith and L. Vincent, “A Good Look at the Good Book,” *World*, October 1 (2005): 26; L. Arnold, “Bible 101—New Textbook Offers Students Chance to Study Document in Public Schools,” *Christian Examiner*, May (2006) (http://www.christianexaminer.com/Articles/Articles%20May06/Art_May06_07.html).

¹¹ L.T. Johnson, “Textbook Case: A Bible Curriculum for Public Schools,” *Christian Century*, Feb. 21 (2006): 34-37.

¹² J. Siegel, “Bible Guide For Public Schools Gets Jewish Okay,” *Forward*, December 30 (2005).

¹³ J.L. Conn, “The Bible Literacy Project: Chuck Stetson’s Trojan Horse?” *Church & State*, January (2006): 19-21 (http://www.au.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=7762&abbr=cs_).

¹⁴ Johnson, “Textbook.”

¹⁵ S.L. McKenzie, “Review of *The Bible and its Influence*” (<http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=465>).

¹⁶ “Report of the Sixty-eighth International Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 662-670.

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¹⁷ I.e., advocacy of biblical inerrancy, the presentation of biblical accounts as straightforward history, and the assumption of a Christian perspective (M. A. Chancey, *Reading, Writing & Religion: Teaching the Bible in Texas Public Schools* [Austin: Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, 2006] [www.tfn.org/religiousfreedom/biblecurriculum/texascourses/]); and People for the American Way, *The Good Book Taught Wrong: Bible History Classes in Florida Public Schools* [2nd printing, 2000] [<http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=1345>]).

¹⁸ Another option would be a college-level textbook. Most, however, are not written with the legal and pedagogical issues of public education in mind.

¹⁹ C.A. Lugg, "The Christian Right: A Cultivated Collection of Interest Groups," *Educational Policy* 15:1 (2001): 41-57; F. Detwiler, *Standing on the Premises of God: The Christian Right's Fight to Redefine America's Public Schools* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 193-95; and DeFattore, *Fourth R*, 249-54.

²⁰ M.A. Chancey, *The Bible and Public Schools: Report on the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools* (Austin: Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, 2005) (<http://www.tfn.org/religiousfreedom/biblecurriculum/>).

²¹ F. R. A. Paterson, "Anatomy of a Bible Course Curriculum," *Journal of Law and Education* 32:1 (2003): 41-65.

²² Chancey, *Bible and Reading*.

²³ E.g., the portrayal of the Bible as inspired and inerrant, the claim that archaeology consistently confirms the Bible's historical accuracy, and the use of creation science resources.

²⁴ "The Revised Curriculum of the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools" (http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Chancey_Bible_Curr_Revised.htm).

²⁵ www.bibleinschools.net.

²⁶ www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=nud.

²⁷ Chancey, *Reading*.

²⁸ *Gibson v. Lee County School Board*, 1 F. Supp. 2d 1426 (M.D. Fla. 1998).

²⁹ D.J. Lee, "National Spotlight on ECISD in '05," *Odessa American*, December 31 (2005).

³⁰ Information about the bills was accessed through government Web sites: for Alabama, <http://alisdb.legislature.state.al.us/acas/ACASLogin.asp>; Georgia, www.legis.state.ga.us/; Tennessee, www.legislature.state.tn.us/bills/currentga/billLookup.asp; Missouri, www.senate.mo.gov/.

³¹ "Sen. Stoner Proposes Academic Study of the Bible in Georgia Public Schools," posted January 18, 2006 (www.dougstoner.com); J. Jewell, "Georgia to Teach Bible: Democrats and Republicans Disagreed About What to Use as a Textbook," *Christianity Today*, June (2006): 19-20.

³² J. Blake, "Teaching the Bible: If the Book is Offered as Elective, Here's What High Schoolers may Find," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 18 (2006). Williams is

apparently mistaken; see D.H. Davis, *Religion and the Continental Congress, 1774-1789: Contributions to Original Intent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137-150.

³³ On the bill as an attempt to introduce the NCBCPS course, see J. Brown, "Dueling Bible Literacy Bills have Georgia Senator Crying Wolf," *AgapePress*, January 31 (2006) (<http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/1/afa/3120006b.asp>).

³⁴ Jewell, "Georgia."

³⁵ D. Gross, "Senate Democrats Propose Bible Class for Public Schools," *Macon Telegraph*, January 18 (2006).

³⁶ Brown, "Dueling."

³⁷ J. Brown and J. Parker, "Alabama House Rejects Bible Literacy Bill, Generating Mixed Reactions," *AgapePress*, February 9 (2006), (<http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/2/afa/q2006a.asp>)

³⁸ <http://www.bettypeters.com/legislation.htm>.

³⁹ B. Johnson, "House Turns Down Bill to Teach Bible Course," *Ledger-Enquirer*, Feb. 7 (2006).

⁴⁰ J. Brown, "Alabama Legislator Hails Defeat of Bill Authorizing State's Use of Controversial Textbook," *AgapePress*, February 15 (2006) (<http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/2/152006d.asp>).

⁴¹ Christian Coalition of Alabama, "Christian Groups Support Bible Literacy Resolution and Reject HB 58," January 11 (2006) (www.ccbama.org/presrelease/pr011106.asp)

⁴² "Alabama's Controversial Bible Literacy Bill," *Education Reporter*, January (2006) (<http://www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=nud>).

⁴³ T.A. Cavanaugh, "Expect Conservative Shifts in Democratic Candidates," *Shelby County Reporter*, February 7, (2006).

⁴⁴ The February 17, 2006 letter is available at www.bibleinschools.net/pdf/Kennedy-literacy.pdf; cf. J. Brown, "Coral Ridge Leader Labels Bible Text for Schools 'Relativistic,'" *AgapePress*, March 2 (2006) (<http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/3/22006e.asp>).

⁴⁵ See Haggee's March 12, 2006 letter at <http://www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=nud>; cf. D.L. Cuddy, "The Bible Literacy Project Under Fire for 'Deception, Distortion, and Outright Falsehoods,'" Christian Wire Service, April 3 (2006) (<http://www.earnedmedia.org/cuddy04031.htm>).

⁴⁶ D. White, "Bible Education Bill Rejected by House," *Birmingham News*, February 8 (2006).

⁴⁷ White, "Bible Education;" cf. J. Davis, "Vote Prevents Debate on Bible Bill," *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 8 (2006).

⁴⁸ <http://www.southalabamian.com/news/2006/0216/News/016.html>.

⁴⁹ The course objectives and definitions of terms such as "non-sectarian" and "objective" are taken from National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools,

Public Schools—Bible Curriculum: The Bible: A Foundation Document of Society—It's Our Constitutional Right.

⁵⁰ One Democratic senator abstained; four were excused from voting, three Democrats and one Republican.

⁵¹ Thirteen legislators abstained from voting, eight of them Democrats; nine were excused, seven of them Democrats.

⁵² The sole legislator excused from voting was a Democrat, as were seven of the eight abstaining legislators.

⁵³ S. Jacobs, "Making Law," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 21 (2006); B. Gutierrez, "Bill for School Bible Classes Sent to Perdue," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 28 (2006).

⁵⁴ S. Crampton, "Why the Bible is the Best Textbook for a Bible Curriculum." This column is available at <http://www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp?pg=curriculum>.

⁵⁵ "Could this be part of the 'end time' deception?" posted in 2005 (<http://crossroad.to/articles2/05/bible-literacy.htm>) and "A More Adaptable Bible? A Critique of *The Bible and Its Influence*" (<http://crossroad.to/articles2/05/bible-textbook.htm>); cf. the 2001 "Twisting Truth through Classroom Consensus" (<http://crossroad.to/articles2/TwistingTruth.html>).

⁵⁶ "The Holy Bible in Public Schools," posted November 14 (2005) (<http://www.newswithviews.com/Cuddy/dennis49.htm>); "The Bible Literacy Project Under Fire for 'Deception, Distortion, and Outright Falsehoods,'" Christian Wire Service, April 3 (2006) (<http://www.earnedmedia.org/cuddy04031.htm>); see the Cuddy archive at <http://www.newswithviews.com/Cuddy/dennisA.htm>.

⁵⁷ <http://www.crossroad.to/index.html>.

⁵⁸ For example, though I consider the question "Did Adam and Eve receive a fair deal from God?" a fairly innocuous discussion starter, I will grant that an unsophisticated teenage reader could misinterpret it as a criticism of God's fairness.

⁵⁹ E.g., C. Haynes, D. Blankenhorn, M.A. Glendon, J. Bethke Elshtain, and O. Guinness.

⁶⁰ Brown and Parker, "Alabama."

⁶¹ D.L. Cuddy, *September 11 Prior Knowledge: Waiting for the Next Shoe to Drop* (Oklahoma City: Hearthstone, 2002) and *Cover-Up: Government Spin or Truth* (Oklahoma City: Hearthstone, 2003).

⁶² D.L. Cuddy, *NEA: Grab for Power: A Chronology of the National Education Association* (Oklahoma City: Hearthstone Publishing, 2000); *Secret Records Revealed: The Men, the Money & the Methods Behind the New World Order* (Oklahoma City: Hearthstone, 1999); and *Now is the Dawning of the New Age New World Order* (Oklahoma City: Hearthstone, 1991).

⁶³ R. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

⁶⁴ B. Kjos, "The Emerging Global 'Church'" (<http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/05/peace-un.htm#purpose>); "Equipping Leaders to 'Lead like Jesus'?" (<http://>

www.crossroad.to/articles2/05/peace-un-2.htm); “Whom do We Serve?” (<http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/05/peace-un-3.htm>).

⁶⁵ Cf. M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-78; B.B. Gaddy, T. W. Hall, R.J. Marzano, *School Wars: Resolving Our Conflicts over Religion and Values* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1996), 33-54; E.F. Provenzo, Jr., *Religious Fundamentalism and American Education: The Battle for the Public Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

⁶⁶ D.L. Cuddy, “Bibles in the Classroom,” *Mobile Register*, January 22, 2006. Cuddy’s radio appearances about the subject include the March 13, 2006 *Prime Time America* on the Moody Broadcasting Network, which has more than 300 affiliates and the June 29, 2006 *Crosstalk*, which airs on approximately ninety stations.

⁶⁷ B. Alba, “The ‘Bible Literacy Project’ — not attacked by the ACLU yet!” posted on March 23, 2006 at <http://www.renewamerica.us/columns/alba/060323> and reposted on several other sites.

⁶⁸ See also “2nd Vice President, Southern Baptist Convention, Says No to The Bible Literacy Project,” *Christian Newswire*, September 26, 2006 (<http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/374131062.html>).

⁶⁹ “Bible Literacy Project’s Official Policy on Legislative Initiatives” (http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Site/News/bibl_news060123Policy.htm).

⁷⁰ “Bible Literacy Project Responds to Misrepresentations of Our Work” (http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Site/News/bibl_news060302.htm).

⁷¹ <http://www.bibleliteracy.org/site/Case/index.htm#Misconceptions>.

⁷² “Bible Literacy Project Announces Changes in Forthcoming Updated Edition of its Widely-Acclaimed Public School Textbook ‘The Bible and Its Influence,’” *Christian Newswire*, September 27 (2006) (<http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/980421074.html>).

⁷³ On the “God gap,” see G.A. Smith and P.M. Craighill, “Do the Democrats have a ‘God Problem’?” at the Web site of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (<http://pewforum.org/docs/index.php?DocID=148>) and the literature cited in K.M. Kaufmann, “Culture Wars, Secular Realignment, and the Gender Gap in Party Identification,” *Political Behavior* 24:3 (2002): 283-307.

⁷⁴ D.D. Kirkpatrick, “Democrats in 2 Southern States Push Bills on Bible Study,” *New York Times*, January 27 (2006).

⁷⁵ J. Siegel, “GOP Bible Bill Upsets Liberals, But Ga. Dems See Political Gains,” *Forward*, April 14 (2006).

⁷⁶ “Democratic Legislative Leaders Announce Covenant with Alabama,” posted August 16, 2006 (<http://aladems.net/index.php?itemid=912>).

⁷⁷ The DLC posted this statement on July 24, 2006 (http://www.dlc.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=253952&kaid=139&subid=273).

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⁷⁸ On this point, see especially Sullivan, "When Would Jesus Bolt?"

⁷⁹ BLP and First Amendment Center, *Bible and Public Schools*.

⁸⁰ Chancey, *Reading*; G.A. Zam and G.E. Stone, "Social Studies Teacher Educators: A Survey of Attitudes Toward Religion in the Curriculum," *Religion & Education* 33:1 (2006): 90-105; S.B. Oldendorf and C.R. Green, "Listening to Teacher Voices: Religion in Schools in the Rural South," *Religion & Education* 32:2 (2005): 65-84.

⁸¹ On "pulling the alarm," see Gaddy, Hall, and Marzano, *School Wars*, 55-56.

⁸² See C. Berlet, "Who is Mediating the Storm? Right-Wing Alternative Information Networks," in L. Kintz and J. Lesage, eds., *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 249-273.

⁸³ J. Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge and Harvard: Harvard University Press, 160-185).