



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

EDUCATING FOR A “CHRISTIAN AMERICA”?
BIBLE COURSES, SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS
AND THE TEXAS CONTROVERSY

TRANSCRIPT OF REMARKS

BY

MARK A. CHANCEY, PH.D.

PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES
SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

FEBRUARY 24, 2011

JAMES A. BAKER III HALL, RICE UNIVERSITY
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

© 2011 BY THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY OF RICE UNIVERSITY

THIS MATERIAL MAY BE QUOTED OR REPRODUCED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION,
PROVIDED APPROPRIATE CREDIT IS GIVEN TO THE AUTHOR AND
THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

I would like to thank Dr. William Martin and the Baker Institute for the invitation to deliver this lecture. It is a pleasure to be your guest, and I’m grateful that you have come tonight to consider political, policy and cultural aspects of recent controversies concerning religion and public education in Texas. The controversies I will explore tonight all involve the treatment of religion in the curriculum. There are sound reasons for teaching about religion. People across the political and religious spectrums have rightly argued that religious literacy is a fundamental component of a broader cultural literacy. Many have rightly emphasized the civic benefits of religious literacy. Our nation’s citizenry is growing more diverse, and globalization is bringing us closer to other societies. Religious literacy is essential for the smooth functioning of a pluralistic democracy in a shrinking world.

And yet, the question remains of how to teach about religion and what to teach. As with virtually every aspect of public education, these issues are highly politicized. We have witnessed this politicization in a state law mandating instruction about the Bible; in the creation of social studies standards that emphasize religion while downplaying the separation of church and state; and in the approval of a resolution condemning purported pro-Islamic bias in textbooks. These measures vividly illustrate the maxim that classrooms are often the frontline of the “culture wars.”

What are we to make of this? To what extent are these initiatives driven merely by a commitment to religious literacy, and to what extent are they driven by a desire to promote certain religious views over others? What are their broader implications?

Scholars have long noted that debates over public education reflect larger struggles over how to define American identity, and that is definitely the case here.¹ The Texas controversies are about what it means to be a “real American.” For some of the elected officials driving recent educational policy, “real Americans” are predominantly theologically and socially conservative Protestants. People with this view hold what I call a “Christian America” ideology. In their understanding, the Founding Fathers established America to be a distinctively religious nation, a

¹ For example, Jonathan Zimmerman, “Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

distinctively Christian nation. By Christian, they mean roughly equivalent in their theology and politics to the socially and theologically conservative Protestants that dominate the Christian Right. The Founding Fathers, in this view, were theologically orthodox Christians, and the Bible was the direct inspiration for our nation’s foundational documents. Unfortunately, their logic continues, the nation has drifted from its roots and forsaken its heritage. Christian Americanists are thus a restorationist movement who hope to move America back to an idealized past in which government foregrounded conservative Protestant concerns. “Real Americans” are those who share this ideology.

As former State Board of Education chairman Don McLeroy told a Tea Party conference in St. Louis last month, “For a free society, history is everything.” But, he adds, “The greatest problem facing America today is that we have forgotten what it means to be an American.” “Mainstream America,” McLeroy urged, “wants their children to know about what it means to be an American.” For McLeroy, apparently what it means to be an American is to be a Christian — more specifically, a Christian like him.²

Throughout this lecture, I’ll use the term “Christian America” and “Christian Americanists” to refer to this religious and political ideology. I am not making broader claims about the many conservative Protestants and other Christians who do not hold this view. I’m talking about a specific ideology and its specific adherents.

This is the context within which we should understand the promotion of Bible courses in Texas. There are sensible reasons from a cultural literacy perspective for studying the Bible, but that is not all that is going on here. The emphasis on Bible courses is partly driven by Christian America ideology.

Many people are surprised to learn that Bible courses are legal at all. A 1963 Supreme Court decision prohibited school-sponsored devotional Bible reading in public schools but very

² The Educational Policy Conference was sponsored by the St. Louis Tea Party Coalition. McLeroy uploaded his comments to <http://www.scribd.com>; see Don McLeroy, “Teaching Our Children What it Means to be an American in 2011?!” (speech, Educational Policy Conference, St. Louis, Mo., Jan. 28, 2011). Last modified January 28, 2010. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/47997816/Don-McLeroy-Teaching-Our-Children-What-It-Means-to-Be-an-American-in-2011>.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

explicitly affirmed the educational value of studying the Bible and comparative religions from an “objective” and “secular” perspective.³ Various federal district courts have decided that to be constitutional, a public school Bible course must neither promote nor disparage any particular religious viewpoint. It must neither promote nor disparage religion in general or nonreligion in general. Apparently, it must neither promote nor disparage any particular opinion at all. You can see the difficulty.

Bible courses have been in Texas since the early twentieth century, but in 2007 the state passed a law (HB 1287) requiring public schools to teach something about the Bible somewhere in the curriculum. The law encouraged schools to meet that requirement by offering elective Bible courses. The original form of the bill, in fact, required every school district to offer a Bible course. It also prohibited the state from developing standards or approving curricula for the course. If the original had passed, districts would have been required to teach a challenging course with no guidance.

How did the bill’s sponsor, Rep. Warren Chisum justify it? He appealed to cultural literacy, explaining, “There’s a lot of stuff in the Bible that finds its way into our dictionaries, into our art, into all of our literature and into our laws.”⁴ All true, but if the goal is religious literacy, then why didn’t Chisum introduce a bill promoting the study of the so-called “world religions”? His bill was not a world religions bill; it was a Bible bill. For Chisum and his allies, cultural literacy per se was not the only motivation. Chisum emphasized the importance of the Bible in the worldviews of the Founding Fathers, who, he claimed, regarded it as the ultimate source for morality. He argued that it was important for students to read the Bible so that they, too, could be moral people.⁵ “We need for people to know why we are the sort of country we are,” Chisum said. “We ought to know where we come from and why we do what we do.”⁶

³ *Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963). The majority decision read, “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 program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.”

⁴ Garry Scharrer, “Lawmaker Says Text is Relevant to a Moral Society,” *San Antonio Express-News*, April 4, 2007.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Patrick McGee, “Bill Would Make the Bible a Textbook,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 4, 2007.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

Ultimately, the House Public Education Committee amended Chisum’s bill. The law as passed requires every school district to teach something about the Bible, somewhere in the curriculum, but it does not require them to offer Bible courses per se. It does, however, encourage districts to offer such courses — and a fair number do.

It would be easy for cynics to say, “Only in Texas” — but it wouldn’t be accurate. Texas is not the only state with a Bible law. Georgia, Tennessee and Oklahoma have also passed laws. Bills are pending in Arkansas and Kentucky. Other states such as Alabama and Missouri have seen Bible bills in the past.

If you investigate the rationales offered for such bills, you find that religious literacy is always cited as a rationale, but it is never the only reason. Consider the comments of the sponsor of the Georgia Bible bill, who argued, “This country is built on Judeo-Christian faith, ethics and knowledge of the Scriptures ... Our Founding Fathers were often quoting the Scriptures.” Consider this statement from the author of the Oklahoma law: “This bill allows schools to represent our American heritage from a Christian, biblical perspective without fear of retribution, and I think they should be able to do so. It wasn’t Hinduism or Buddhism that motivated the move to these shores. It was Christianity and the desire to worship freely.”⁷ Another Oklahoma legislator echoes such sentiments: “Our nation was founded on Christian principles and if we don’t teach them to our children now in a few generations America’s values will be lost in history.” He continued, “If we don’t teach our kids the fundamental values of what this nation was founded upon in future generations they will most likely lose it or not care.”⁸ “At the same time,” he emphasized, “we don’t want this to be an ‘in your face’ thing about Christianity.”⁹

State law or not, Bible courses are already taught across the union. What actually happens in them? Texas Freedom Network (www.tfn.org), an Austin-based watchdog group that sees itself as a counterweight to the Religious Right, asked me to study Texas Bible courses taught in 2005-2006, which was before the Texas law. Our findings were very clear. Most Bible courses

⁷ Rep. Todd Russ, quoted in Greg Horton, “Bills on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools Continue to Move through the State House and Senate,” *Oklahoma Gazette*, March 24, 2010.

⁸ Christina Lusby, “Bibles in Oklahoma Public Schools?” *KTEN*, March 11, 2010, <http://www.kten.com/global/story.asp?S=12126857>.

⁹ Randy Krehbiel, “Bible-education Bill Advances,” *Tulsa World*, April 8, 2010.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

promote certain religious beliefs over all others. They promote Christianity, and in particular they promote theological views held primarily or even exclusively among conservative Protestants. In various courses, students are taught that the Bible is the inspired word of God, that it is accurate in every historical and scientific detail, that Judaism is a failed religion that was replaced by Christianity, that the miracles happened just as reported in the Bible, that dinosaurs and humans once roamed the earth together before Noah’s flood, that NASA has found a missing day in time that confirms the biblical story of the sun standing still (Joshua 10). Some districts use an explicitly Christian Americanist Bible curriculum that teaches students that the Bible is the basis for the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.¹⁰

In some Texas courses, the promotion of religious beliefs is clearly intentional, but in many cases, it seems to happen despite the very best intentions of very good teachers, simply because they lack the state and local support they need to teach the course appropriately. In light of this, it is unfortunate that even after the Bible law was passed, the State Board of Education very pointedly declined to develop content-specific standards for Bible courses. They have sent teachers into a minefield without a map.

Texas teachers do have a new road map on how to teach most social studies courses after last year’s bruising fight over course standards, the topic to which I’ll now turn. So much has been said about our new Social Studies TEKS. TEKS is the acronym for Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills.¹¹ The TEKS have been accused of leaning right politically, of whitewashing history by overlooking diverse ethnic groups, of consisting of little more than isolated facts strung together like popcorn on a string. One historian calls them “an overstuffed laundry list that treats seniors like kindergartners.”¹² Another calls them “a culturally irrelevant history of

¹⁰ See Mark Chancey, “The Bible and Public Schools: Report on the National Council on Bible Curriculum” (2005); and Mark Chancey, “Reading, Writing and Religion: Teaching the Bible in Texas Public Schools” (2006), both written for the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund.

¹¹ The TEKS can be seen online at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/index.html>, as can related documents, on the Texas Education Agency’s website, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=3643>. An excellent resource for understanding the social studies debate is available under the TEKSWatch tab on the Center for History Teaching and Learning at The University of Texas at El Paso website, <http://organizations.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=64634>, directed by history professor Keith Erikson.

¹² Keith A. Erikson, “An Overstuffed Laundry List that Treats Seniors Like Kindergartners,” George Mason University’s History News Network, 2010, <http://www.hnn.us/articles/126371.html>.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

‘melodramatic minutiae.’”¹³ The NAACP and LULAC have complained to the federal Department of Education, and the Mexican American Legislative Caucus is pressuring the board for revisions. Even the right-leaning Thomas B. Fordham Foundation faults them as little more than “selective, fragmentary and historically vapid checklists” that avoid “clear historical explanation while offering misrepresentations at every turn.”¹⁴ In contrast, defenders of the new standards depict them as correcting the previous liberal imbalance.

Understanding the TEKS process is important, but because the details are cumbersome, I will here offer only a streamlined summary. When a subject is up for review, state board of education members appoint a small number of expert reviewers who look at the old standards and suggest revisions. Several review committees made up primarily (though not exclusively) of educators consider the recommendations of the expert reviewers and amend the old TEKS, effectively creating new ones. Board members consider changes along the way. There are opportunities for public comment. At the end of the process the Board of Education edits the standards, adding, subtracting and editing content as it sees fit. The real power in this process is thus in the hands of the board: elected officials who generally are neither professional educators nor scholars nor content specialists.

The ideological dimensions of the social studies revisions were evident at the very beginning of the process when board members appointed expert reviewers. They appointed six experts, three of them academics from Texas colleges and universities.¹⁵ Each of the Texas scholars made important contributions, but not so much in the area of religion, and they do not figure prominently in my discussion. The fourth academic appointed by the board, however, was Daniel Dreisbach, a professor in the School of Public Affairs at American University. Dreisbach is well known for his position that the Founding Fathers as a whole did not intend the First Amendment

¹³ Iliana Alanís, “A Culturally Irrelevant History of ‘Melodramatic Minutiae,’” George Mason University’s History News Network, 2010, <http://www.hnn.us/articles/126369.html>.

¹⁴ Sheldon M. Stern and Jeremy A. Stern, “The State of State U.S. History Standards 2011” (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2011), 141,143.

¹⁵ Jesus Francisco de la Teja, history, Texas State; Lybeth Hodges, history and government, Texas Woman’s University; and Jim Kracht, education, Texas A&M.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

to create a “wall of separation between church and state.” In his view, religion has been driven from the public square in ways the Founding Fathers never intended.¹⁶

The other two expert reviewers appointed by the board were neither scholars nor professional educators. One was David Barton, founder of WallBuilders, a company in Aledo that ironically is devoted to tearing down the wall separating church and state.¹⁷ Barton is a political activist who is very visible in state and national Republican circles. Under his influence, the Republican Party of Texas has had a plank in its platform for years repudiating what it calls “myth of separation of church and state.” Barton is also a key figure in the Bible in public schools movement; there are Bible course materials that explicitly promote his Christian America ideology. Some Texas Bible courses watch David Barton’s video “Foundations of American Government” before they even read Genesis.¹⁸ This video 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.¹⁹ Barton also writes books, articles, pamphlets and blogs; he has a radio show; and he leads “spiritual heritage tours” in Washington.²⁰

Expert reviewer number six was Peter Marshall of Peter Marshall Ministries. The ministry’s website says that it is “dedicated to helping to restore America to its Bible-based foundations through preaching, teaching and writing on America’s Christian heritage and on Christian discipleship and revival.”²¹ Marshall, who died last fall, was also a popular writer and speaker. His books on what he regarded as America’s Christian heritage are staples among homeschoolers.²²

¹⁶ For key arguments, see Daniel L. Dreisbach, “Famous Founders and Forgotten Founders: What’s the Difference, and Does the Difference Matter?” in “The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life,” eds. Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall and Jeffrey H. Morrison (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 1-25; Daniel L. Dreisbach, “Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State” (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall, Jeffrey H. Morrison, eds., “The Founders on God and Government” (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

¹⁷ Wallbuilders, www.wallbuilders.com.

¹⁸ David Barton, “Foundations of American Government” (Aledo, TX: Wallbuilders Press, 1993).

¹⁹ *Engel v. Vitale* 370 U.S. 421 (1962).

²⁰ Barton has a bachelor’s degree in religious education from Oral Roberts University.

²¹ Peter Marshall Ministries, www.petermarshallministries.com/.

²² Peter Marshall and David Manuel, “The Light and the Glory” (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1977); Peter Marshall and David Manuel, “Sounding Forth the Trumpet” (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1997); Peter Marshall and David Manuel, “From Sea to Shining Sea” (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1986).

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

These three expert reviewers argued for a heavy injection of religion into the TEKS. They suggested (sometimes explicitly, sometimes by implication) that to be historically accurate, Texas’s schools should emphasize America’s Christian heritage. Their reports gave like-minded State Board of Education members the warrant they needed to make significant changes to the TEKS.

What were those changes? Some were very subtle, while others were anything but subtle. Some appear unremarkable, until you realize the rationales behind them, which you can identify by reading the expert reviewers,²³ following the discussions at the board itself and looking at board members’ public statements.

To understand religion in the TEKS, it’s best to start at the beginning — the beginning of American history, that is.

One can see the Christian Americanist agenda at play in the way the new TEKS treat the colonial period. When students study the reasons for the establishment of the colonies, they will learn that one factor was religious intolerance in Europe.²⁴ It is one of our most cherished national myths that colonists fled the intolerance of Europe to experience religious freedom in the New World. Like all myths, there is some truth in it, but there is also oversimplification. Yes, some groups fled intolerance, and yes, they sought religious freedom in the colonies — but they sought freedom for themselves, not freedom for other groups, toward whom *they* showed intolerance. In many parts of the New World, colonists of one persuasion were happy to persecute those of another. Jews, Catholics, Quakers, Baptists and other groups were the victims of legalized persecution and discrimination. The broad freedom that we think of when we say the words “religious freedom” was slow in coming — not that students will necessarily learn that if their courses closely follow the new Texas TEKS.

Christian Americanists like to point out the religiosity of early colonists, and they accurately note the explicitly Christian content of many colonial governing documents from the 1500s, 1600s

²³ Each of the expert’s reviews of the current social studies TEKS and the first draft of revisions can be found on the Texas Education Agency’s website, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=6184>.

²⁴ On the context for the numerous references in the TEKS to religious freedom, see Daniel L. Dreisbach, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 19-20; cf. Daniel L. Dreisbach, “Review of First Draft Social Studies TEKS,” 5.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

and early 1700s. Where they misstep is when they draw a straight line from these early, explicitly religious documents that emanate from particular communities and colonies all the way to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, placing all of these documents together in a trajectory that points towards an explicitly Christian government. It *is* important to know about early colonial documents and their religious dimensions, but it’s also important to know how those texts differ from those that actually bind us together as a nation, the Declaration and the Constitution.

Noting the differences, however, is not the intention of the TEKS, which make a point of citing earlier documents with Christian highlights. It is not surprising that students will learn about the Mayflower Compact, governing text of the Plymouth Colony, but the reasons for its inclusion go beyond its early date. The Mayflower Compact notes religion as a motivation for founding the colony: It was done “for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country.” Some board members regarded the Mayflower Compact not only as the governing document for Plymouth but also as the foundational document for the entire nation. Thus, former board member Cynthia Dunbar writes: “This is undeniably our past, and it clearly delineates us as a nation intended to be emphatically Christian.”²⁵

Other documents, however, are a little more obscure for most of us. Students will learn about the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut of 1639 and the role Rev. Thomas Hooker in that document’s creation.²⁶ Expert reviewer David Barton explains, “The importance of a written constitution cannot be understood unless one understands why written documents were originally introduced into American government.”²⁷ Barton explains, “In 1638, when the Rev[s]. ... Hooker ... [and others] established Connecticut, [Hooker] delivered a famous sermon” highlighting Deuteronomy 1:13 and Exodus 18:21 and arguing that the governed appoint their officials and determine the limits of their power. For Barton, this demonstrates that the Bible is the direct inspiration for the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut and for that the idea that citizens appoint their leaders, an

²⁵ Russell Shorto, “How Christian were the Founders?” *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 11, 2010.

²⁶ David Barton, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 7-8, 20; David Barton, “Review of First Draft Social Studies TEKS,” 31, 32, 51, 52, 61, 62; Dreisbach, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 4.

²⁷ Barton, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 20.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

idea that is a fundamental premise of our political system. For this reason, the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut and Thomas Hooker are now fundamental knowledge for Texas.

Hooker is not the only colonial figure added to the TEKS. There are many others, from the early periods as well as from the Revolutionary War era and immediately afterwards. Some are the standard names you would expect: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison. Expert reviewers and board members often seem to have made religiosity the primary criterion when determining which other names to add. They seem to have made a point of adding individuals whom they regard as theologically orthodox Christians or who at one point said something about the importance of religion for sound government and healthy society. The TEKS have vague references to understanding the “motivations” of the Founding Fathers, and the motivations the authors of the TEKS frequently had in mind were religious motivations.²⁸

John Adams once said that religion and morality were the only foundations for government, so he is mentioned. Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, Benjamin Rush, Charles Pinckney, Roger Sherman, John Witherspoon, John Peter Muhlenberg — they are all there. George Washington’s Farewell Address emphasized the importance of religion and virtue, so of course it is there.²⁹ There are good reasons to include these figures, but the primary reason some of these were included rather than others is because board members and key expert reviewers regarded their religiosity as evidence of America’s distinctive Christian identity. Colonial leaders who provide less support for this construction of a Christian America are less likely to be included.

²⁸ Barton, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 51; cf. Barton, “Review of First Draft Social Studies TEKS,” 20; Peter Marshall, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 3: “Therefore, it is imperative that the textbooks and the teachers handle the teaching of history by considering the motivations of those who made American history. In our American situation it is indisputable that the motivational role of the Bible and the Christian faith was paramount in the settling of most of the original 13 colonies.”

²⁹ See, for example, Dreisbach, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 9-13; and Barton, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 14, 16, 21. For comparison, see the approach modeled on Peter Marshall Ministry’s “Restoring America” Web page: “How can we restore America? By recovering the original Pilgrim and Puritan vision of America as a shining ‘city upon a hill.’... That means that in order to restore America we have to recover the truth about America’s Christian heritage, and God’s hand in our history.” The paragraph includes quotations such as this one, attributed to Patrick Henry, whom it identifies as “a great Founding Father, and one of the strongest evangelical Christians of his time”: “‘It can not be too often repeated, or too strongly emphasized that America was not founded by religionists nor on any religion, but by Christians on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.’ This is a statement that never shows up in the history books that are read by the vast majority of American schoolchildren.”

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

Consider John Wise, a Congregationalist minister in Massachusetts in the late 1600s and early 1700s who protested British taxation. According to expert reviewer David Barton, Wise penned “two works forcefully asserting that democracy was God’s ordained government in both Church and State, thus causing historians to title him ‘The Founder of American Democracy.’” Wise shows us that democracy is God’s will — and his writings show us that the whole American system of government is divinely ordained.

Other founders are included in the TEKS because they were strongly influenced by the Reformed theological tradition, which emphasizes the total depravity of humanity. For these particular Founding Fathers, humanity’s total depravity was why we need a government with checks and balances, limited terms, separation of powers and boundaries for the government.³⁰ Some of the board members and their expert reviewers regard this Reformed influence as evidence that key constitutional concepts are directly inspired by the Bible. Students will learn these Founders’ names. They are less likely to learn the names of Founders who argued such points on less explicitly theological grounds. It is perhaps not surprising that in a world history course, John Calvin’s name has been added alongside Thomas Jefferson in a standard emphasizing “how contemporary political systems have developed from earlier systems of government.”³¹

This idea that our foundational documents are directly inspired by Christian scripture is argued at length in the writings of David Barton and Peter Marshall and board members like Cynthia Dunbar (who is no longer on the board).³²

³⁰ Dreisbach, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 14-17; Barton, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 20-21; Marshall, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 6.

³¹ 113.42c20C.

³² Current board chair Gail Lowe told the New York Times Magazine that our founding documents “had a basis in scripture.” Russell Shorto, “How Christian were the Founders?” New York Times, Feb. 11, 2010. Former board member Cynthia Noland Dunbar makes the same point in “One Nation Under God” (Cynthia Noland Dunbar, “One Nation Under God” (Oviedo, Fla.: Oneward, 2008), 16, relying on Donald S. Lutz, “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought.” American Political Science Review (1984), 189-197). See also the use of Lutz’s article in Dreisbach, “Review of First Draft Social Studies TEKS,” 9-10 and Marshall, “Review of First Draft Social Studies TEKS,” 4.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

Students will also learn about the influence of the 18th century English jurist William Blackstone (1723-1780) on “the development of self-government in colonial America.”³³ Why Blackstone? Blackstone wrote an extraordinarily influential commentary on English common law, and colonial lawyers studied and quoted his works, which indisputably impacted early American political thought.³⁴ The three conservative expert reviewers all insisted on including Blackstone in the TEKS, but it was not until I looked at board member Dunbar’s books that I understood the likely reason for this desire. It can be summed up very simply. Blackstone regarded the laws of man as subordinate to the “laws of nature and of nature’s God” (Blackstone’s phrase). Thomas Jefferson incorporates this very phrase, the “laws of nature and of nature’s God,” into the opening sentence of the Declaration of Independence.³⁵ Thus, both Blackstone and Jefferson believed that God’s laws were supreme, and that idea is in our Declaration of Independence. For readers like Dunbar, the god in question is the God of the Christian Bible.³⁶ Thus, the phrase connects the Declaration to the biblical God. This is one of the primary reasons students will learn William Blackstone’s name.

Former board chair Don McLeroy argues similarly. Referring to the Declaration’s preamble, he told the Tea Party conference, “On July 4, 1776, Thomas Jefferson charted the course for a new nation: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.’” According to McLeroy, “it is here in the Declaration of Independence that we can clearly establish that our nation was founded on biblical not secular principles.”³⁷

How do people with this view of a biblically inspired America reconcile that view with the religion clauses of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an

³³ “The student is expected to: (A) explain the role of significant individuals such as Thomas Hooker, Charles de Montesquieu, John Locke, William Blackstone and William Penn in the development of self-government in colonial America” (113.20b20A).

³⁴ Dennis R. Nolan, “Sir William Blackstone and the New American Republic: A Study of Intellectual Impact,” *New York University Law Review* 51 (November 1976): 753.

³⁵ “When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

³⁶ Dunbar, “One Nation Under God,” 12-13, 45-47. Dunbar is only one example of a Christian Right figure that makes these connections.

³⁷ McLeroy, “Teaching Our Children”; cf. Barton, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS,” 11-12.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

establishment of religion [the Establishment clause], or prohibiting the free exercise thereof [the free exercise clause].” For key board members, the original intention of the First Amendment was simply and solely to prohibit the establishment of a national state church. The notion that the First Amendment establishes some sort of separation between church and state, in this view, is a drastic misinterpretation.

So what will Texan schools teach? For the high school United States Government course, the board added this standard: “examine the reasons the Founding Fathers protected religious freedom in America and guaranteed its free exercise” in the First Amendment “and compare and contrast this to the phrase, ‘separation of church and state.’”³⁸ Students will not learn about the separation of church and state as a summary of the meaning of the First Amendment’s religion clauses, nor will they study it as a shorthand label for an influential interpretation of the Amendment. Instead, they will compare and contrast the idea of separation of church and state with the amendment.

Board members in favor of this “compare and contrast” standard have explicitly said that they intended it to expose students to the fallacy of church-state separation, and the three expert reviewers provided these board members with plenty of support. According to board member Ken Mercer, “I think their point [the Founding Fathers] was that they did not want a separation from religion, they just wanted to avoid having a national denomination ... one religion everyone would have to follow.”³⁹ McLeroy told the Tea Partiers that the reason the board added the phrase “separation of church and state” was “so that our children will know that it is not in the Constitution.” “What we have in America, in the Constitution,” McLeroy reasoned, “is not the ‘separation of church and state’ ... what we have is the disestablishment of religion.”⁴⁰ David Bradley, another board member, put it even more bluntly: “I reject the notion by the Left of a constitutional separation of church and state ... I have \$1,000 for the charity of your choice if you can find it in the Constitution.”⁴¹ He is correct on this last point, of course: the words “separation of church and state” are not in the Constitution. But neither are terms like

³⁸ 133.44 c7G.

³⁹ “Texas Textbooks: Separate Church and State?” FOX News video, March 11, 2010, <http://liveshots.blogs.foxnews.com/2010/03/11/texas-textbooksseparate-church-and-state/>.

⁴⁰ McLeroy, “Teaching Our Children”

⁴¹ James C. McKinley Jr., “Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change,” New York Times, March 12, 2010.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

“federalism,” “separation of powers” and “checks and balances,” terms the TEKS repeatedly refer to as constitutional. What matters is if the idea is in the Constitution, not the exact terminology.

No one can dispute that preventing the establishment of a national state church was one of the rationales for the First Amendment. One can certainly point to Founding Fathers for whom that was the primary rationale. However, there were certainly other founders who had broader concerns in mind, most notably the Virginians James Madison, the primary author of the Bill of Rights, and Thomas Jefferson, who made the phrase “wall of separation between church and state” famous in a private letter. When it comes to the nature of religious freedom, we have dueling Founding Fathers, who had differences of opinion and who said different things at different times. When Christian Americanists look back at this history, they quote only their friends (and those often out of context). They ignore other voices.

How can we define “original intent” when the reality is that the original intentions of the Founders were quite diverse? Church-state separationists are quick to point out that if Founders had wanted the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause to be narrowly limited only to disestablishment of a national state church, they could have made that point easily and explicitly. If that is what they meant, they could have said it. They did not do so. As they argued and debated how to word the Establishment Clause, they considered prohibiting the establishment of “a” religion” or of “a national religion,” wording that would lend itself to the argument that a national state church was the sole issue. Ultimately, they did not use that wording, nor did they use the wording of “sect” or “society” or other terms that could be construed as meaning simply one particular denomination. They finally opted for broad and vague wording: they prohibited the establishment of religion. Some were presumably ecstatic about this compromise, while others presumably thought the wording was too open-ended, but these are the words they settled for nonetheless: “Congress shall make no law respecting *an* establishment of *religion*.” The problem with the Texas standard — at least as its advocates intended — is not that it requires detailed analysis of the debates surrounding the creation and interpretation of the religion clauses. The problem is that it shuts off debate by excluding the fact that separation of church and state has been an important interpretation from the beginning.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

Dallas board member Mavis Knight proposed an amendment requiring students to “examine the reasons the Founding Fathers ‘protected religious freedom in America by barring government from promoting or disfavoring any particular religion over all others.’” The amendment was rejected on a straight party vote, 10 to 5. Knight’s wording was problematic — in fact, some governments continued to promote religion, because it took time for individual states to disestablish their churches. Nonetheless, one suspects that this was not the only reason Knight’s amendment was rejected.⁴²

Thus the title of my lecture: “Educating for a Christian America.” This is the vision of a significant block of elected officials, including both legislators and board of education members. For Texas, where will non-Christians fit into the discussion of religion in public schools? They will learn very little of non-Christians in American history. As for the world history TEKS, time does not permit us to explore them in detail, but I would like to examine briefly a subject that will surely be a flashpoint of controversy: Islam. The TEKS treat Islam as a monolithic religion, largely undifferentiated by sect, theology or geographical location, much less by such variables as gender and class. Nowhere in the TEKS can you find the words Shi’ite or Sunni. It is notable that 10 years and two wars after Sept. 11, some of our schools will still not be teaching even such basic facts about Islam. Students will learn, however, “how Islam influences law and government in the Muslim world,”⁴³ a clear indication of anxiety about Shariah law, but with no acknowledgement of differences within the Islamic world and no comparable attention to how other religious traditions influence law and government. Students will also learn about Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism and “how Arab rejection of the State of Israel has led to ongoing conflict.”⁴⁴ After all, as McLeroy once said, “The way I evaluate history textbooks is first I see how they cover Christianity and Israel.”⁴⁵

This past fall, the State Board passed a resolution condemning what it called “pro-Islamic/anti-Christian bias” in “past Texas social studies textbooks.” It objected that “pro-Islamic/anti-

⁴² Terrence Stutz, “Texas Education Board Rejects In-depth Study of First Amendment,” Dallas Morning News, March 12, 2010.

⁴³ 113.42c25D.

⁴⁴ 113.42c13F, an addition proposed by McLeroy.

⁴⁵ As quoted by Stephanie Simon, “The Culture Wars’ New Front: U. S. History Classes in Texas,” The Wall Street Journal, July 14, 2009.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

Christian half-truths, selective disinformation and false editorial stereotypes still roil some social studies textbooks nationwide.” In its rhetoric, the terms “pro-Islamic” and “anti-Christian” go hand in hand; whatever is “pro-Islamic” is by definition “anti-Christian.”

The resolution was accompanied by an appendix that attempted to document pro-Islamic/ anti-Christian bias in textbooks. Having examined some of the textbooks in question — 1999 editions that do not even circulate anymore — I can say without reservation that the resolution was startlingly inaccurate.⁴⁶ As authorities, the resolution relied on disturbingly anti-Islamic resources such as a report that makes the sweeping generalization that “Islamic values” are “not conducive” to values such as “the rule of law, constitutional democracy and a market economy.”⁴⁷ In other words, Islam in its very essence is incompatible with American-style freedom. What was the motivation for this resolution? Its author was afraid of Muslim conspiracies to infiltrate the textbook market in an effort to “take over the minds of our young people” — and then our nation.⁴⁸

Apparently, for the board members who supported this resolution, as non-Christians, Muslims are the dangerous “other.” This is the same anxiety evidenced in the numerous anti-Shariah bills currently under consideration in states across the country. The implication is that as non-Christians, American Muslims apparently do not deserve the same respect as other citizens. One certainly did not hear supporters of this resolution expressing concern for the hundreds of thousands of Muslims living in Texas.

⁴⁶ See “State Board of Education Summary of Action Items,” presented on Sept. 24, 2010. The resolution asserted this bias on the basis of a count of the lines in those books referring to Christianity and to Islam, but its lists of pages and line numbers ignore numerous sections in the textbooks that explicitly discuss Christianity. This supposedly empirical analysis was thus very misleading.

⁴⁷ Gilbert T. Sewall, “Islam in the Classroom: What the Textbooks Tell Us,” (New York: American Textbook Council, 2008), <http://historytextbooks.org/islamreport.pdf>.

⁴⁸ It warned that “more such discriminatory treatment of religion may occur as Middle Easterners buy into the U.S. public school textbook oligopoly,” referring to the Dubai royal family’s investment in a major publisher. Its author, Randy Rives, is an Odessa citizen who lost a campaign for a seat on the state board of education. Speaking before the board on July 23, 2010, he warned that Americans should be concerned that dangerous outsiders might try to control the country, using textbooks as their tool. “If you can control or influence our educational system, then you can start taking over the minds of our young people.” He predicted that problems would increase as “more and more Moslems’ [*sic*] money is pumped into buying textbooks.” Video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AFbltfBKHM>.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

Having done my best to demonstrate that in some cases, elected officials are formulating educational policy to promote particular religious views over all others, I would like to conclude with a few reflections.

First of all, as is well known, Texas has a sizable impact on the textbook market. Publishers tweak the content of textbooks to fit the needs of individual states, but Texas and California have an outsized impact on what goes into them. What happens in Texas does not stay in Texas. What publishers put into their textbooks to meet the Texas TEKS will find its way into textbooks of other states.

Second, it might not surprise you to learn that I think our curriculum process in Texas is broken. I am not an educational policy expert and I do not know what the best system would be, but a system that allows people who are neither educators nor content specialists to have this much control over curriculum is a deeply flawed system. Standards-based education is particularly vulnerable to being co-opted. When public education suffers this way, the whole state suffers.

Third, I would like to emphasize that the idea of a “Christian America” already goes far beyond Texas. This argument drives Bible course bills and resolutions celebrating America’s “Christian Heritage” across the nation. Americans are genuinely confused about the role religion played in America’s foundation. A 2007 survey by the First Amendment Center found that 65 percent of those polled agreed (46 percent “strongly”) that the “nation’s founders intended the United States to be a Christian nation.” Some 55 percent thought that “the U.S. Constitution establishes a Christian nation.”⁴⁹

Fourth, as a society, we are confused about what the relationship between church and state should be. This confusion is not new; it goes back to the Founding Fathers themselves, who held different views. The new social studies standards are not going to help us sort through this tangle of issues. Their emphasis on the religious motivations of some Founders is lopsided in that they exclude the voices of other Founding Fathers; in places, the standards are outright inaccurate.

⁴⁹ First Amendment Center, “State of the First Amendment 2007.”
http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?item=state_first_amendment_2007.

Educating for a “Christian America”? (Transcript)

Teaching our students misinformation will make it harder in the future for citizens to engage in the thoughtful deliberation required to find compromises between different views.

These sorts of issues are going to take on more and more urgency as our nation’s population becomes more religiously diverse. To a considerable degree, the push for a Christianization of American society is driven by anxiety over our nation’s increasing pluralism. This pluralism compels us to be mindful of the religious rights of our neighbors, regardless of who we are and who they are.

In conclusion, religious literacy is a laudable goal that serves a legitimate civic purpose. But controversies like these illustrate the extent to which the rhetoric of cultural literacy can mask another agenda, the promotion of one set of religious beliefs above all others. The importance of religion in America’s history is well worth studying, but not in ways that misrepresent that history for the purpose of elevating one contemporary religious voice above all others. The public school stands once again on the frontlines of the struggle to define American identity. The stakes are quite high. As the late Peter Marshall observed: “We’re in an all-out moral and spiritual civil war for the soul of America, and the record of American history is right at the heart of it.”⁵⁰ I couldn’t agree more. Thank you.

⁵⁰ See Simon, “The Culture Wars’ New Front.”