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## Introduction

Our nation and its public schools are more religiously diverse than ever before in U.S. history. While Christianity is still the majority religion (62%), its population share has declined. Around one-third of Americans are now either non-Christians (7%) or religiously unaffiliated (29%). Moreover, the Christian population – already quite disparate at the time of the nation’s founding – now consists of myriad denominations and nondenominational communities that differ among themselves over theology, morality, politics, and other issues.<sup>1</sup>

Given that public schools are called to serve this increasingly varied community, education policy should – as I have written elsewhere – “ensure equal educational opportunity for all students regardless of creed by promoting curricula that include balanced and accurate instruction about major religions and do not seek to weaken church-state separation or promote one religion over others.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite America’s diversified religious make-up, beginning this year Texas public school districts will have to decide whether to adopt a new Reading and Language Arts (RLA) curriculum for kindergarten through 5th grade (K-5), a curriculum that is anything but diverse in its religious coverage.<sup>3</sup> Scholars and journalists nationwide have called attention to the Bible-infused character of what the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has named the “Bluebonnet Learning RLA” curriculum.<sup>4</sup> The moniker “Bible-infused” is certainly accurate, given that the curriculum:

- Requires kindergarteners to read from and discuss Genesis creation and flood stories.
- Includes an activity requiring students to identify the order in which God created various beings.
- Devotes extensive coverage to the biblical story of Queen Esther, portraying it as historical, though many scholars interpret it as a fictional or symbolic narrative.
- Teaches third graders that Jesus of Nazareth performed miracles and was literally resurrected from the dead.
- Requires fifth graders to read a lengthy passage from the Christian Gospel of Matthew about the Last Supper.
- Covers Judaism almost exclusively in the context of its biblical period and makes only brief mentions of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.
- Implies, when taken as a whole, that Christianity is more important than any other religious tradition.

## A Sea Change in Educational Policy

The state's adoption of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum marks a sea change not only in educational policy but also in church-state relations in Texas public schools. For decades, religious content in Texas public schools (as well as nationally) has largely been restricted to middle and high school social studies courses, though it sometimes was referenced in English language arts, music, and AP art history courses. More substantial Bible content has traditionally only been found in elective high school level Bible courses offered in some school districts.<sup>5</sup>

What is novel about the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum is that, in those districts that adopt it, one religious community's sacred text – the Bible – becomes a major component in what Texas students as young as 5 years old and as old as 12 are required to study in the public schools. In addition, they would study the Bible largely in the absence of texts and teachings from other religions that make up contemporary society in Texas and nationally.

## A Political Victory for Christian Nationalists

The state's adoption of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum marks a substantial victory for Christian conservatives and Christian nationalists (who seek to give privileged status to conservative Christianity in education, law, and public policy).<sup>6</sup> For decades, these religiopolitical factions have been advocating that the Bible be elevated to a place of primacy in public schools – to “put the Bible back in classrooms,” to quote outspokenly Christian nationalist Oklahoma education secretary Ryan Walters, who in 2024 unilaterally mandated that teachers in his state teach the Bible.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the adoption of this curriculum in Texas comes as part of a broader national challenge to church-state separation in public education – a movement marked by legislative efforts mandating that students read the Bible and the prominent display of the Ten Commandments in classrooms.<sup>8</sup>

Texas state Senator Mayes Middleton (R-Galveston) spoke for many like-minded lawmakers earlier this year, when he introduced a bill mandating that public schools provide a period of prayer and Bible reading, saying, “Our schools are not God-free zones. ... We are a state and nation built on ‘In God We Trust.’ ... There is no such thing as ‘separation of church and state’ in our Constitution.”<sup>9</sup>

## National Implications of Christian Bias

As this paper will show, adopting the Bible-infused Bluebonnet RLA curriculum in Texas raises significant concerns for the nation's long tradition of church-state separation.<sup>10</sup> This development may have far-reaching implications for Texas students, parents, teachers, and taxpayers – and could also affect the vitality of religion across the U.S.

Given these impacts, this paper addresses the following questions:

- What is the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum, how was it developed, and how did it take on its Bible-infused character?
- In what sense does its adoption mark a sea change in education policy in Texas?
- How have supporters and critics responded to the curriculum?
- Was the adoption of this curriculum a mistake?
- What are the broader implications of this curriculum for Texas and nationally?

Before turning to these questions, it is helpful to offer some context – specifically, background on the history of Bible use in U.S. public schools.

## **The Bible and Public Schools: A Brief Overview**

While the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum marks a major shift educationally and in church-state relations in Texas public schools – and, as argued below, a concerning change from both an educational and constitutional perspective – the curriculum’s Bible-infused character is not unprecedented in U.S. history. The Bible did have a presence in U.S. public schools for much of America’s history. Indeed, some Christian nationalists speak of a time when young people learned about the Bible in public schools alongside their ABCs. However, Bible use in public schools was never as uniform, uncomplicated, or uncontroversial as such accounts might suggest.

A full history of Bible use in U.S. public schools is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>11</sup> However, to give a sense of how the Bible-infused character of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum changes the public education environment in Texas – and because some parts of the conservative case for “putting the Bible back in the classroom” rely on misunderstandings and/or misinformation about that history – the next section will briefly sketch its contours. Readers interested in more detail can consult the sources cited.

### **A Complicated History**

The history of religion in U.S. public schools can be categorized into two main periods: a long period from the founding of America to the early 1960s, in which the Bible was often, but not uniformly, put to both devotional and academic uses in public schools; and a separationist period beginning in the early 1960s, a time that included landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions prohibiting devotional use of the Bible and other religious texts in public school classrooms while also setting guidelines for the academic study of such texts.

As discussed in the section that follows, some conservative activists and Christian nationalists characterize the early period of Bible use in the public schools as a golden

era of Christian consensus, followed by a significant decline during the second period. I would instead characterize the first era as one that contradicted the letter and spirit of the First Amendment, followed by a necessary correction by the courts beginning in the 1960s.

## The Bible as Textbook

Up until the 1960s (and in certain cases, for some years after), it was common for the Bible to be used within an educational context, but also devotionally, in public schools. As Kirk W. Elifson and C. Kirk Hadaway note, “Religion in the form of Bible reading, devotional exercises, and prayer remained an integral part of many school systems until 1960.”<sup>12</sup> Mark Chancey, a professor of religious studies at Southern Methodist University, provides more detail:

The Bible’s place in the early American schoolhouse is well known. In the colonial period and early Republic, it often served as a textbook for reading and morals, and widely used primers contained ample biblical material. When the Common Schools movement [i.e., the movement to create taxpayer-funded public schools] emerged, it emphasized religion alongside the other three R’s, and reading from the Bible was daily practice. Because the Common Schools reflected the religious sensibilities of the nation’s Protestant majority, the King James Version was the classroom standard.<sup>13</sup>

Some Christian nationalists speak of this use of the Bible as a primary text as anchoring a kind of golden age for the nation. For instance, Texas-based amateur historian, prominent Christian nationalist, and long-time Republican Party activist David Barton writes, “When we were honoring God with a simple, yet profound prayer in schools, we were elevated among the nations of the world in achievement, morality, productivity, stability, and reputation.”<sup>14</sup> When the Bible was “the primary instrument to teach not only reading, but character and morals as well,” Barton states, “students were well-rounded and well-equipped, educated both in mind and in character.”<sup>15</sup>

## Disagreement Among Early American Leaders

Despite this belief about past use, history shows that America’s early leaders disagreed about the advisability of Bible use in schools. On one side, as scholar Daniel E. Dreisbach notes, Horace Mann, the so-called “Father of American Education,” was a key supporter of the use of the Bible in the classroom, considering it to be “a potential tool for harmony and tolerance.”<sup>16</sup> On the other side, Thomas Jefferson himself was opposed to its use in schools, as was his ally DeWitt Clinton.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, as political scientist Melissa Deckman notes, the use of the King James Version in classrooms also served as a tool used by the Protestant majority to exert social control over minorities; Deckman writes, “For many in the Protestant majority, the use of the King James Bible in public schools was a deliberate attempt to ‘Americanize’ both immigrant and native American children and instill in them a common set of moral values based on Protestant principles that they believed went hand in hand with the idea of America.”<sup>18</sup> This did not escape the notice of the targets of such efforts, as other experts have stated, saying, “Roman Catholics, Jews, agnostics, atheists, and freethinkers often regarded it as the promotion of Protestant beliefs over their own.”<sup>19</sup>

With the growth of a large Roman Catholic community in the U.S. during the 19th century, the use of the Bible in schools — specifically, the use of the Protestant King James Version — began to provoke not just controversy but outright violence. Dreisbach writes that, “For many Roman Catholics ... the most common Bible translation in America — the King James Version — was inherently sectarian, and any school curriculum that made use of the King James Bible (with or without commentary) required revision.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, tensions between Catholics and Protestants sparked “the Philadelphia Bible Riots in 1844, in which whole city blocks were leveled.”<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, “Many Protestants were scandalized that anyone would question the appropriateness of Bible reading or the preeminence of the King James Version.”<sup>22</sup> In short, the period prior to the landmark separationist decisions of the 1960s was anything but the golden age of religious consensus that some Christian nationalists describe.

## Early Opposition to Bible Use in Public Schools

Well before the 1960s, legal pressure was building against mandatory school prayer and devotional Bible use. In 1869, Cincinnati Catholics challenged such practices in the city’s public schools, with the Ohio Supreme Court ultimately ruling that “the local school board was under no obligation to sponsor religious activity every day.” The court’s decision included this passage of particular relevance today: “United with government, religion never rises above the merest superstition; united with religion, government never rises above the merest despotism; and all history shows us that the more widely and completely they are separated, the better it is for both.”<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, as the Reverend Barry Lynn noted in 2014, “State supreme courts in Wisconsin, Nebraska, Illinois, and other states struck down coercive programs of school prayer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”<sup>24</sup> In 1910, the Illinois Supreme Court also rejected the common workaround of excusing dissenting students from official devotional exercises, writing, “The exclusion of a pupil from this part of the school exercise in which the rest of the school joins, separates him from his fellows, puts him in a class by himself, deprives him of his equality with other pupils, subjects

him to a religious stigma and places him at a disadvantage in the school. ... All this is because of religious belief.”<sup>25</sup>

Lynn also cites a 1960 survey conducted by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which found that “only five states had laws on the books mandating daily Bible reading,” while seven states authorized Bible reading but allowed students to opt out. In ten states “school-sponsored Bible reading had been declared unconstitutional.”<sup>26</sup>

## US Supreme Court Rulings in the 1960s

The problems inherent to public school Bible use and state-sponsored prayer came to a head in the 1960s when Jews, Unitarians, and atheists brought cases that resulted in two landmark decisions, *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* (1963). At the time, the Supreme Court was guided by a separationist approach to Establishment Clause cases (i.e., a judicial philosophy holding that church and state should be kept as separate as possible), signaled in the 1947 ruling in *Everson v. Board of Education*. Justice Hugo Black, writing for the majority in *Everson*, appealed to Jefferson’s “wall of separation” metaphor by saying, “The First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state. That wall must be kept high and impregnable.”<sup>27</sup>

That separationist philosophy was at work in the two landmark decisions, with *Engel* prohibiting official prayer in public schools and *Abington* barring both school-sponsored Bible readings and the mandatory recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in public schools.<sup>28</sup> These (and related) decisions, Suzanne Rosenblith and Patrick Womac write, “severed the hold that Christianity, and the Bible, had long exercised in the nation’s public school systems,” and set “a precedent of state neutrality between religion and non-religion.”<sup>29</sup>

In so doing, the Court turned out to be prescient. The nation would grow much more religiously plural in the decades succeeding the 1960s. In addition, as I have noted elsewhere, the strong assertion of church-state separation in these rulings has arguably assisted public education in meeting the formidable challenge of providing a quality education to an increasingly varied student population.<sup>30</sup> However, it would take some decades for that prescience to become apparent.

## Opposition to Supreme Court Rulings

In the meantime, the Court’s decisions were widely pilloried by Christian conservatives repeating such commonly-used phrases as “kicking God out of the schools” and “banning the Bible from classrooms.” Rice University Professor Emeritus of Religion and Public Policy, William C. Martin, wrote in 1996 that, “The 1962 and 1963 decisions that ended officially sponsored prayer and devotional Bible reading in the public schools [were] met by howls of outrage and predictions of every sort of evil consequence.”<sup>31</sup>

Leading fundamentalist Carl McIntire declared that much more was “at stake than simply Bible reading in the schools. ... At stake is whether or not America may continue to honor and recognize God in the life of the nation.”<sup>32</sup> The National Association of Evangelicals warned that Engel and Abington “amounted to ‘practical atheism’ that produces a ‘religious vacuum’ in the land.”<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, some school districts remained in more or less open rebellion for a time, as I can attest from personal experience. In the 1960s, several years after Engel and Abington, I attended a public elementary school in Grand Prairie, Texas. Despite those rulings, my teachers handed out little bound copies of the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs to all students, and I vividly recall my sixth grade teacher having us begin class sessions with Bible reading and prayer. One of my classmates, a Jehovah’s Witness, stood outside in the hall while the class conducted these exercises. We were never told why, and (as the 1910 Illinois Supreme Court ruling predicted) he carried an unspoken stigma for appearing to be different.

Opposition to Abington has often reflected a profound misunderstanding of, and perhaps deliberate misinterpretation of, the high court’s decisions. As Martin writes, critics of those decisions “accused the Court of stifling free exercise of religion” and asserted “that those who want to exercise their religion by praying and reading the Bible are told it is against the law.”<sup>34</sup>

For instance, Barton claims that voluntary prayer is not allowed in public schools, and states that, “To deny students the right to pray and read their Bibles in schools is to deny them the opportunity to participate in a major part of our national heritage.”<sup>35</sup>

However, Abington did not ban the Bible or voluntary prayer from public schools. What it did prohibit was “state-sponsored religious practices, including devotional use of the Bible by public-school officials.”<sup>36</sup>

“In fact,” Martin writes about the ruling, “the Court’s position is that citizens are quite free to read the Bible and pray, but not with state sponsorship. And even in some of its most unpopular decisions, the Court has made clear its general support not only of religious freedom but of religion itself.”<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, American religion scholars Stephen Prothero and Lauren R. Kerby write:

Although the Supreme Court prohibited only state-sponsored devotional religious practices in schools, many Americans have erroneously taken this to mean that discussion of religion in any form has been banned from the classroom. ... While [the Supreme Court] banned promotion of religion by public schools, it did not ban the study of religion. In fact, in a famous passage from [Abington], it explicitly encouraged this sort of academic

study: “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.” In other words, the Court went out of its way to underscore the constitutionality of the academic study of religion.<sup>38</sup>

Taking a cue from these guidelines, many scholars (myself included) have argued that public schools should teach students about religion in an academic manner, that is, in a way that is religiously balanced (does not privilege one religion over others), nonconfessional (does not promote the beliefs and teachings of any religion), and accurate.<sup>39</sup>

For instance, it is perfectly legitimate under *Abington* and subsequent jurisprudence for students to study the Bible (or other religious texts) in order to better understand, say, Western art and literature; yet such study should be conducted in an academic manner which does not promote one religion over others.

## Contemporary Arguments for Bible Use in Public Schools

Generally, Christian conservatives and their GOP allies in Texas have shown little interest in a balanced, nonconfessional, academic study of religion in public schools. Instead, they seem to have quite different – and often differing – priorities in mind when they call for “putting the Bible back in classrooms,” though what exactly that is intended to accomplish appears to vary widely. Some make the reasonable point that knowledge about the Bible, and perhaps Christian teaching as well, is essential to understanding major Western literature, art, and culture. For instance, Texas Education Commissioner (TEA) Mike Morath has noted, “If you’re reading classic works of American literature, there are often religious allusions in that literature.”<sup>40</sup>

There is no doubt that students familiar with the Bible and Christianity are better positioned to understand and appreciate some aspects of Western and U.S. literary classics (Dante’s “*Divine Comedy*,” Milton’s “*Paradise Lost*,” or many of the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville), European art (such as Leonardo da Vinci’s “*The Last Supper*”), and Western history (at least from Late Antiquity to the present).<sup>41</sup> Yet, as noted earlier, such study is already allowed under existing law, provided it is offered in an academic manner which does not promote one religion over others. However, the emphasis by conservatives on putting the Bible in classroom, while disregarding the relevance of other religions, suggests that they have something other than literary or artistic understanding in mind.

Other proponents of Bible use in public schools appear to overtly prioritize the Bible and Christianity in classrooms, and perhaps return to something like the state-sponsored devotional practices of the pre-*Abington* period. For instance, in 2022 and 2024, the Texas Republican Party’s platforms for both years called for “prayer, the Bible, and the

Ten Commandments being returned to our schools.”<sup>42</sup> More sweepingly, the 2024 GOP platform urged both the state legislature and the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) “to require instruction on the Bible, servant leadership, and Christian self-governance.”<sup>43</sup>

Other conservative Christians and Christian nationalists make more questionable claims that Bible use in public schools is required to teach students morality and even to solve society’s ills, sometimes issuing warnings about the negative consequences for the U.S. if Christianity is not actively promoted in public schools – warnings that lack any factual basis. For instance, Barton contends that, “God must be included in our educational system in order for [the United States] to enjoy any form of widespread, continuing success.”<sup>44</sup> Barton writes that, in Abington, “the [U.S. Supreme] Court openly repudiated the Bible and its teachings,” and claims that the ruling has resulted in a rise in birthrates of unwed women 15–19 years of age and in pregnancies of unwed women under 15, in violent crime, in the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases among 15–19 year olds and, in the general population, in a rise in the divorce rate as well as a drop in SAT scores.<sup>45</sup>

### Correlation Does Not Equal Causation

However, as a well-known scientific principle points out, correlation does not equal causation. Journalist Katherine Stewart points out that, instead of blaming Engel and Abington for society’s subsequent ills, “Barton could just as well have blamed the decline ... on the Beach Boys, who also happened to make it big in 1962.”<sup>46</sup>

Southern Baptist pastor and Oklahoma state senator Dusty Deevers makes arguments similar to Barton’s in defending the decree from Oklahoma education secretary Ryan Walters that the Bible be taught in that state’s public schools. After arguing (correctly) that Supreme Court decisions like Abington allow for nonsectarian literary and historical study of the Bible in public schools, Deevers then makes an explicitly Christian nationalist argument:

Education shapes the culture and religion of the future ... [E]ducation is best understood as enculturation – the passing down of culture, values, and worldviews from one generation to the next. A Christian culture has the right and duty to pass that culture down to the next generation, especially when the competing pagan culture is as brazenly wicked as the one we face.<sup>47</sup>

Deevers goes on to say, “The Christian moral framework is necessary for personal liberties, limited government, the protection of God-given and unalienable rights, free markets, defiance of tyrants, and the defense of many other blessings of liberty. Failing to teach our children these truths is seeking our demise.”<sup>48</sup>

The more ideologically driven arguments of Barton, Deever, and others mark the profound and growing influence on the right of “Christian nationalism, the belief that the United States’ founding was ordained by God and, thus, its laws and institutions should favor Christians.”<sup>49</sup>

In short, though the Bible did have a presence in U.S. public schools for much of the nation’s history, its use in public schools was never as uniform, uncomplicated, or uncontroversial as some Christian nationalists suggest. The landmark separationist U.S. Supreme Court decisions of the early 1960s ended the devotional use of the Bible in classrooms but opened the way for a balanced, nonconfessional, academic study of religions. However, conservative Christians and Christian nationalists have shown little interest in such an approach. Instead, some have pushed for prioritizing the Bible and Christianity in public schools, including restoration of devotional use of the Bible in some sense.

## **The Bluebonnet RLA Curriculum**

Having established the historical context, the focus now shifts to the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum itself. As this paper shows, the state’s adoption of this curriculum marks a partial, though substantial, victory for those who advocate, as they say, “putting the Bible back into classrooms.” But this goal comes at a high cost to Texas students, parents, teachers, and taxpayers.

### **Curriculum Scope**

Adopting the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum is only a partial victory for advocates in that it does not return Texas to the state-sponsored devotional practices of the pre-Abington period. That is because the curriculum is not devotional. It does not include prayers; it does not explicitly attempt to convert students to Christianity; nor does it explicitly assert that Christianity is the only true religion or superior to other living religions.

### **Privileging One Religion Over All Others**

The Bluebonnet RLA curriculum, however, can be seen as a substantial victory for such advocates in the sense that it does “put the Bible back in the classrooms.” It requires K-5 students to read passages and stories from the Bible. In some instances, it does so in order to suggest the influence of the Bible (and Christianity) on Western history and culture; in others, the biblical content is pedagogically questionable. Moreover, it clearly promotes Christianity and the Bible over other religions, conveying to students the message that Christianity is the only religion worthy of their attention. In so doing, it sets up an insider/outsider dynamic among students, parents, and teachers — a dynamic detrimental to the basic mission of public education.

In this section, the following questions are examined:

- What is the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum, how does it mark a sea change in Texas education policy, and by what process was it developed and implemented in Texas?
- What is controversial about the curriculum?
- What do supporters and critics say about it?
- In what ways is it flawed from an educational, constitutional, and student perspective?

Readers of this paper should be aware that significant portions of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum contain no religious content, biblical or otherwise. The comments that follow apply only to the curriculum's religious aspects.

## Origins and Development

### A Departure From Past Practices

The Bluebonnet RLA curriculum came about as a result of legislative changes in the way instructional materials are developed and acquired in Texas.<sup>50</sup> In 2023, the legislature passed, and Governor Abbott signed into law, House Bill 1605, an omnibus public education bill. Under HB 1605, Texas continues (as it has for several decades) to solicit instructional materials from third-party curriculum developers (such as Pearson or McGraw-Hill) for state adoption as part of the high quality instructional materials (HQIM) list.<sup>51</sup> The legislation does make changes to the nature and frequency of the textbook review and adoption process, and specifies that adopted textbooks must be available for public review through an electronic parent portal.<sup>52</sup> However, as in past years, third-party publishers whose textbooks are chosen for the HQIM list continue to own the copyright to those materials. It is up to individual school districts to decide whether to adopt (i.e., purchase) third-party materials from the HQIM list.<sup>53</sup>

The most substantive change introduced by HB 1605 is that it directed the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to develop custom, state-owned open-resource curricula, which are to be publicly available for review by parents and for adoption by school districts.<sup>54</sup> Thus school districts may now adopt either third-party instructional materials approved by the state (as they have in the past), or state-owned open-resource materials.<sup>55</sup> However, it is worth noting upfront that other budgetary rules provide public schools with financial incentives to choose state-owned materials.

### Parental Rights — But Only For Some

Like the addition of the parent portal referenced above, the move to create open-resource instructional materials available for review by parents was driven in part by the

recent parental rights campaign by GOP lawmakers, purporting to give parents more access to, and control over, what their children learn in public schools.<sup>56</sup> While this campaign raises important issues regarding parental input into public education, it so far appears to focus largely on the interests of conservative Christian parents and to be uninterested in offering guidance for school districts on what to do should the choices of those parents conflict with the desires of non-Christian and non-religious parents.

## Financial Incentives for Using Bible-Based Materials

While school districts are free to adopt all, part, or none of the open-resource curricula, HB 1605 offers an additional incentive for those that adopt them. Besides the usual \$40 per student per year that comes with adopting state-approved materials, districts choosing the open-resource curricula receive “an additional \$20 per student per year that can be used for printing costs.”<sup>57</sup> As *The Texas Tribune* noted, “The incentives come as districts face lagging state funding, declining enrollment and corresponding budget deficits.”<sup>58</sup>

After HB 1605 became law, what was to become the Bluebonnet K-5 RLA (along with a K-5 math curriculum which lies outside the scope of this paper) became the first open-resource curriculum developed under the new provisions.

## When Did the New Law Become About Christianity?

HB 1605 does not mandate any religious content in the open-resource curriculum.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, state curriculum requirements for K-5 reading do not require any coverage of religion, let alone Jesus, the Bible, or Christianity.<sup>60</sup> True, the Texas Education Code does specify that the state’s public school curriculum as a whole include “religious literature, including the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament, and its impact on history and literature.”<sup>61</sup> However, it does not specify that such content should be included in K-5 reading (or, for that matter, what grades should include it), and it certainly does not require an emphasis on the Bible. Nor does it preclude the inclusion of texts from outside the Jewish and Christian traditions.

So how and why, then, did the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum take on the Bible-infused character that became the focus of so much controversy?

To answer that question, it is necessary to go back a few years before the 2023 enactment of HB 1605, to the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>62</sup> TEA first released what was to become the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum in 2020; it was an online curriculum produced by Amplify, Inc., a New York-based publisher, and was released by TEA “as a contingency option for school districts” during the COVID lockdowns.<sup>63</sup> According to reporting by Linda Jacobson of *The 74*, hundreds of Texas districts made use of these materials.<sup>64</sup> For reasons not yet discovered, TEA subsequently asked Amplify to add biblical content, specifically, “a lesson on the story of Esther and ... a unit

on Exodus.”<sup>65</sup> Amplify had not previously been asked to add biblical content to its curriculum, and in 2021 it declined. TEA then contracted with another vendor for revisions in response to “feedback from parents and educators in classrooms piloting the [Amplify] material during the COVID emergency period.”<sup>66</sup> After HB 1605 became law, TEA used the COVID-era Amplify materials as the basis for the subsequent Bluebonnet RLA curriculum.

## An Atypical Lack of Public Transparency

In 2023, conservative Christians expressed concern to Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath that the proposed curriculum materials gave “minimal attention to Christianity.”<sup>67</sup> One conservative activist noted, “There’s one mention of Jesus, that he was a teacher a couple thousand years ago. ... The only other time we can find God, our God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – is in the American unit.”<sup>68</sup> Morath and TEA then turned to other entities to add the biblical content; these reportedly included what was described as the “conservative Christian Hillsdale College in Michigan” as well as the conservative think tank Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF).<sup>69</sup> There has been a considerable lack of transparency about this process: As Jacobson notes, TEA officials “won’t identify who wrote the biblical material. Because a contract for the work fell under a pandemic disaster declaration, the state waived typical requirements that would have shed light on what those companies did and how much they were paid.”<sup>70</sup> At any rate, it was apparently in this phase of the development that the curriculum took on its controversial Bible-infused character.

While some supporters later sought to downplay the amount of Bible content added, the incorporation of religious source materials in the curriculum is so extensive that the developers include a special note about it in the [curriculum’s] Program and Implementation Guide. The curriculum, they write, includes content “from different religious traditions, including various monotheistic and polytheistic faiths around the world.” The guide further notes that the curriculum’s inclusion of “content from or about religious source material ... is not for the purpose of advancing any particular religious belief.”<sup>71</sup> As will be seen, these claims about the curriculum’s wide-ranging religious coverage turn out to be misleading at best and deceptive at worst.

## Is Texas Truly Represented?

TEA released the initial version of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum materials for public review and comment in May 2024 (the “May version”). In a press release, TEA stated that the materials weave together elements of the science of reading with a cross-curricular knowledge-building approach consistent with a classical education model focused on the fundamentals. The press release also claimed that the Bluebonnet RLA “immerses students in classic literature along with reading lessons about art, history, culture, science, and technology,” adding that, “As a product built for Texas students,

the content features strong representation from the diverse people, places and history of Texas.”<sup>72</sup>

TEA also noted that, “The ‘open’ nature of [the Bluebonnet RLA] textbooks means they are owned by the state, made available free to anyone, and can be modified over time to make them better for students and teachers.”<sup>73</sup>

## Immediate Pushback Sparked Revisions

The curriculum quickly drew widespread criticism that mainly focused on the biblical and other Christian content. The first public comment phase culminated in a contentious August 2024 SBOE meeting in which board members heard 10 hours of testimony for and against the May version.<sup>74</sup> Though the board gave a preliminary go-ahead to the curriculum, it forwarded public comments to the (still-anonymous) developers for consideration and possible revision. The developers made numerous changes to the curriculum to address some, but not all, criticisms.

A revised version of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum was released for public review and comment in November 2024 (the “November version”). On November 22, 2024, after another contentious public meeting, the SBOE narrowly approved the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum for possible adoption by school districts.<sup>75</sup>

## Still Bible-Infused — and Highly Controversial

Given Texas’s influence on national politics, its long history of promoting conservative Christianity in the public-school curriculum, and the well-documented Christian nationalist influence on the state’s policymakers — including education policymakers — it is not surprising that the new curriculum quickly drew public scrutiny and criticism nationally as well as in Texas.<sup>76</sup> In the wake of the release of the May version, scholars, journalists, and other observers called attention to the pervasive religious content in the curriculum, and especially to what quickly became known as the curriculum’s Bible-infused character and apparent Christian bias.

The Texas affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) objected that the curriculum materials contain “an unwelcome and unnecessary quantity of Bible references.”<sup>77</sup> Americans United for Separation of Church and State held that the curriculum “improperly focuses on Christianity over other major religions” and “veers into Bible study.”<sup>78</sup> A policy director with Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Texas noted “a consistent pattern of religious insertion into the curriculum, specifically Christianity, starting as young as kindergarten.”<sup>79</sup> State Rep. James Talarico (D-Austin) said, “This new state curriculum that they’re proposing is preaching. ... It is pushing one religious tradition at the expense of all of the others.”<sup>80</sup>

The issue attracted national attention from the start, with Bible scholar Mark Chancey telling CNN that, “The lessons included in the curriculum ‘strongly privilege’ Christianity over other faiths.”

“There are more lessons about the Christian Bible than about any other religious text,” Chancey added. “There are more lessons about Jesus than about any other religious figure.”<sup>81</sup>

“[T]his curriculum,” Chancey continued, “heavily favors Christianity and presents religious claims in a very literalistic fashion to the youngest of our children, which turns public schools into Sunday schools.”<sup>82</sup>

Concerns were also raised about the presence of Christian Right activists on the panel overseeing the project as well as TEA’s ongoing refusal to release information about the authors of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum.<sup>83</sup>

In an apparent attempt to blunt criticisms of the curriculum’s religion content, a TPPF press release claimed that the curriculum contains “very few religious references.”<sup>84</sup> In addition, Education Commissioner Morath noted that “religious references only make up a small ... fraction of the content pie.”<sup>85</sup> The clear implication of these comments was that critics were exaggerating the curriculum’s religion content – an argument that will be addressed later in this section.

Interestingly, while some officials played down the curriculum’s biblical content, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, an outspoken Christian nationalist, appeared to admit that the curriculum was as Bible-infused as critics suggested.<sup>86</sup> Jacobson notes that, “In an interview with a Christian talk show ... [Patrick] praised the curriculum changes, saying they will ‘get us back to teaching, not necessarily the Bible per se, but the stories from the Bible.’”<sup>87</sup>

When the SBOE in November gave the final green light to the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum, conservatives and Christian nationalists in Texas were delighted. For instance, a Texas Values press release immediately following the vote was headlined, “Breaking! The Bible Wins at Texas Education Board!”<sup>88</sup> The press release went on to quote the organization’s government relations director, who said the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum materials “were attacked for no other reason but to completely erase any mention of religion or the Bible from the classroom” – a gross misrepresentation of the stance of critics like Chancey and this author.<sup>89</sup>

## An Unbalanced Curriculum

Were critics justified in their criticisms of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum? Yes, they were – in fact, more than justified. My own analysis of the curriculum (in both its May and November versions) found that “the coverage of religion in this curriculum ...

generally lacks religious balance, and too often fails to provide students with objective, neutral, nonconfessional coverage of religions necessary for a public-school context, with its diverse student and teacher population.”<sup>90</sup>

After the May version was released for public comment, I was asked by the left-leaning grassroots organization Texas Freedom Network (TFN) to review the proposed curriculum and assess its religion content. In August 2024, TFN released my report on the May curriculum.<sup>91</sup> When the revised November version was released, TFN asked me to assess it as well. TFN then released my report on the revised version in November 2024.<sup>92</sup> Since both reports are available on the TFN website, I will restrict myself here to briefly summarizing my criticisms of the two versions. Readers interested in greater detail can consult the full TFN reports cited.

## Systemic Problems Found

While I applauded the Bluebonnet RLA materials for exposing K-5 students to religion and its role in the human story, I found numerous serious and systemic issues with the treatment of religion in the curriculum. These included the following:

- The Bluebonnet RLA curriculum greatly overemphasizes Christianity at the expense of other religious communities.
- It on occasion implies that Christian faith claims are straightforwardly true, opening it to the charge that it intends to proselytize students.
- It includes detailed Bible lessons, regardless of their relevance or pedagogical necessity.<sup>93</sup>

The following sections discuss these problems in more detail.

## Emphasizing Christianity at the Expense of Other Religions

As noted earlier, many scholars and observers noted the curriculum’s focus on the Bible and Christianity at the expense of other religious traditions. Supporters like TPPF, Texas Values, and Morath sought to counter this criticism by asserting that the curriculum contains richer and more varied religious content than critics charged. For its part, TPPF claimed that the curriculum contains “examples from the Bible and a *variety of other religious texts and traditions* [emphasis added].”<sup>94</sup>

Texas Values claimed that the curriculum offers “religious topics from a *wide range of faiths* [emphasis added].”<sup>95</sup> Morath similarly stated that the curriculum “provides information on *various religious traditions*. ... Students will learn about aspects of *most major world religions* [emphasis added].”<sup>96</sup>

These comments echo the claim in the curriculum’s program guide that the instructional materials contain “content ... *from different religious traditions, including*

*various monotheistic and polytheistic faiths* around the world [emphasis added].”<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, both TPPF and Morath attempted to blunt criticisms of the curriculum’s religion content, such as those I raised above, by claiming that the curriculum contains “very few religious references” (TPPF).<sup>98</sup> Or that “religious references only make up a small ... fraction of the content pie” (Morath).<sup>99</sup> The clear implication is that critics of the curriculum’s religion content were making a mountain out of a molehill.

However, such claims regarding the diversity and relatively scarcity of religious references are at best only technically accurate, and they risk conveying a misleading sense of the curriculum’s content. While the curriculum as a whole does mention “various religious traditions,” the religious content is heavily slanted toward the Bible and Christianity. Apart from Christianity, the curriculum offers no extensive treatment of religions that Texas students are likely to encounter or may be adherents of, such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Coverage of Judaism is restricted to the biblical periods (Hebrew Bible and New Testament periods), not its contemporary forms (Rabbinic Judaism).

As for Islam, the world’s second largest religion, the curriculum offers only a very brief summary of its beliefs, followed by a brief account of contributions of Islamic civilization to Western civilization as well as a lesson on the 14th-century Malian King Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>100</sup> Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism receive only passing mentions.<sup>101</sup> The only polytheistic faiths that receive any substantial coverage are the now largely-defunct religions of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as the religions of the Native American peoples, though only in their pre-Columbian forms.<sup>102</sup>

By contrast, as I noted in my August TFN report, “[S]tudents ... learn a whole lot about Christianity and the Bible — about the biblical Creation and Flood stories, the wisdom of King Solomon, Daniel in the Lion’s Den, the life and miracles of Jesus, the Last Supper, the apostle Paul.”<sup>103</sup> Additionally, the curriculum features a grade 5 lesson on Psalm 23, and kindergarten lessons on Jesus’ teachings about the Good Samaritan and the Golden Rule.<sup>104</sup>

In an op-ed published on the TPPF website, Thomas Lindsay, director of its higher education initiative<sup>105</sup> and a member of the TEA-appointed Open Education Resources Advisory Board, downplays the amount of biblical and Christian content in the curriculum. Lindsay writes that the grade 3 unit on the history of ancient Rome “has eight pages that specifically cover the life of Jesus from his birth to crucifixion ... But the entire unit on Roman history spans over three-hundred pages!”<sup>106</sup>

Though Lindsay is correct in saying that eight pages of the more than 300 curriculum pages are given to the life of Jesus, a further three pages discuss the Christian apostle Paul and his miraculous Damascus experience (as well as other lessons — such as the grade 5 unit on the Last Supper — covering Jesus’ life and teachings, discussed later in this paper).<sup>107</sup> Moreover, taken together, these 11 pages amount to far greater coverage

than is given to any other religious figure other than Queen Esther, another biblical personage, who is the focus of two lessons in grade 2.<sup>108</sup> By contrast, the founder of the world's second largest religion, the Prophet Muhammad, receives but a single mention – two sentences in a grade 5 unit.<sup>109</sup> I was unable to find any mentions of the Buddha or major figures from Hinduism or Sikhism.

In short, the curriculum's religion coverage overemphasizes Christianity and the Bible at the expense of other major religious communities that make up Texas and the U.S. today. The curriculum pays lip service to "a variety" of religious traditions, but is lopsidedly focused on Christianity and the Bible.

Furthermore, while it is technically correct that religious content accounts for a relatively small portion of the overall curriculum, it would be misleading to characterize religious references as "very few" – especially with regard to the Bible and Christian content. For a reading and language arts curriculum (rather than, say, a social studies curriculum) – not to mention one designed for impressionable K-5 students – this is a large amount of religion coverage. And it is certainly no molehill.

### Faith Claims Are Portrayed as Fact

The truth status of religious texts and teachings is a matter of religious faith or belief. Accordingly, an important aspect of a nonconfessional approach to the study of religions in a classroom setting is neutrality regarding the truth status of religious claims. A nonconfessional approach avoids either explicitly pronouncing a particular text or teaching as true (or false), or presenting religious texts and teachings in a manner that implies they are true (or false). Instead, a nonconfessional presentation of religious texts and teachings makes clear that their truth status is a matter of each adherent's belief or faith. For example, instructors and instructional materials should be careful to make clear to students that Christians believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, or that Islam teaches that the Prophet Muhammad journeyed to Jerusalem on a winged creature and thence to heaven.<sup>110</sup> This is not the same as teaching that both events happened in fact.

The Bluebonnet RLA curriculum, however, all too often strays into confessional territory by presenting biblical material in a way that implies it is straightforwardly historical. For instance, in a grade 2 unit on "Fighting for a Cause," the biblical figure Esther is discussed alongside indisputably historical individuals such as William Penn and Rosa Parks as "key figures who fought for various causes" and who had a "significant impact ... on the fight for civil rights and human rights."<sup>111</sup> This framing implies that Esther was a historical figure like Penn or Parks.

Though second graders are told that the Esther account is "a story from the Bible," a note to the instructor says that "For members of the Jewish and Christian religions, key stories of the Hebrew Bible tell *the history* of the Jewish people [emphasis added]."<sup>112</sup>

Without further clarification, this suggests that all Jews and Christians take biblical stories as straightforwardly historical, which is by no means the case.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, the instructor is told to “Explain to students that this story took place around the same time as the Battle of Thermopylae”<sup>114</sup> and a date is fixed for it: “The story of Esther begins ... in the year 483 BC, in the kingdom of Persia.”<sup>115</sup> All of this gives an aura of historical accuracy to the Esther story. Throughout the student readings about Esther, which take up a full nine pages (not counting various comprehension and assessment activities relating thereto), the tale is presented as if it is straightforwardly historical.<sup>116</sup> Not only does this violate the requirement of nonconfessionality, it goes against the scholarly consensus that (as Sara Raup Johnson puts it), “There can be no doubt ... that the story itself is the stuff of fiction and legend.”<sup>117</sup>

A second example comes from a grade 5 unit on Renaissance art, in a lesson on Leonardo’s *The Last Supper*. Here is the passage in question: “The Bible explains that Jesus knew that after this meal, he would be arrested, put on trial, and killed. He predicted his betrayal during the supper.”<sup>118</sup> True, the use of the phrase “The Bible explains” does somewhat qualify the truth status of the event “explained,” but it does not sufficiently caution students that its truth status is a matter of faith and therefore debate. Such distinctions may well be beyond the capacity of fifth graders, most of whom will likely understand “The Bible explains” as a straightforward assertion of fact. This problem could be avoided by clearly framing the episode as a matter of Christian belief rather than historical fact (an example of such framing is provided later in this paper).

## Unwarranted Incorporation of Detailed Bible Lessons

According to the curriculum’s program guide, “content from or about religious source material in these instructional materials is ... included for the literary and historical value of the content and its connection to creating a strong background of knowledge for students.”<sup>119</sup>

Education Commissioner Morath echoed this message, calling the curriculum’s religion content “appropriate,” and claiming that the curriculum offers religion content “where relevant.”<sup>120</sup>

“Content does not include religious lessons as one would find in a religious school,” he said (presumably meaning lessons that promote particular religious beliefs); instead, he maintained that religion content in the curriculum “is designed to provide background knowledge and vocabulary to ensure our students can reach high levels of academic proficiency and comprehend great literature.”<sup>121</sup>

TPPF similarly claimed that, “Where [religion] content does appear, it helps to explain specific topics and themes,” while Texas Values claimed the curriculum offers “contextually relevant religious topics from a wide range of faiths.”<sup>122</sup>

Other observers did not agree with these claims. “[The curriculum contains] a lot of weaving in of Christianity where it doesn’t really belong,” Sharyn Vane – a Jewish parent of two Texas public school graduates – said. “This mixing of faith and fact is likely to confuse the youngest, most impressionable learners,” she continued. “They’re not going to be able to make that distinction.”<sup>123</sup>

My own review likewise found that the curriculum repeatedly includes detailed Bible lessons when they are pedagogically unnecessary and unwarranted. One example can be found in instructional materials for kindergarten. As I wrote in my August TFN report:

In a unit that is ostensibly about art appreciation (“Exploring Art”), the text devotes an entire lesson to the Creation and Flood stories from the biblical book of Genesis. Though the text mentions that the ancient Maya, Aztec, and Greeks sometimes decorated their pottery to show “their religious beliefs of how the world was created,” the text does not go into any detail about these beliefs. In sharp contrast, it treats the biblical stories in great detail, devoting four pages to them, with accompanying artworks illustrating specific events from these stories. And in a subsequent application exercise, students are drilled, not on the artwork, but on the details of the biblical creation story.<sup>124</sup>

Given this example, one can legitimately ask what is the primary intended learning outcome here: an understanding of the artworks or an understanding of the Genesis creation account?

A second example appears in the previously mentioned grade 5 lesson on Leonardo’s fresco “The Last Supper.” The authors of the curriculum begin by noting, quite reasonably, that “[t]o understand the painting, we must understand the Bible story” of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples.<sup>125</sup> The authors could have then summarized the New Testament account quite concisely – for instance, by explaining that “‘The ‘Last Supper’ depicts Christian beliefs about Jesus’ final meal with his followers, as reflected in the New Testament. Leonardo’s focus is on the moment when Jesus is said to predict that one of them will betray him to the authorities, leading to his crucifixion.” Instead, the lesson launches into a three-page account of the Last Supper story and has students read a passage from the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>126</sup> The lesson, I argue, offers “far more detailed discussion about the events of the Last Supper than is pedagogically necessary for student understanding of the artwork.”<sup>127</sup>

In my August 2024 report, I concluded, “It is highly doubtful that this level of detail, and particularly the direct quotations from Matthew, are necessary or beneficial to students’ understanding of Leonardo’s painting. They appear gratuitous at best.”<sup>128</sup> In this, as in the Genesis lesson, I contended, “It is difficult to avoid concluding that this art appreciation unit is being used as an excuse to smuggle in what is effectively Bible

study.”<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, in both cases, I concluded that the treatment of Bible passages “verges on Bible study and, arguably in some cases, appears to cross the line into religious instruction.”<sup>130</sup>

## Verging On Christian Proselytism

In light of the problems discussed above, I found that the curriculum verges on Christian proselytizing – not in the sense of trying to convince students that they should become Christians, but in an equally troubling sense. By one-sidedly focusing on the Bible and Christianity while paying mere lip service to other religions, and by subtly portraying Christian faith claims as straightforwardly true, the curriculum conveys to students the message that Christianity is more important and more worthy of attention than other religions – a message that a public school curriculum has no business conveying.<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, as I wrote in the August TFN report:

In all too many instances, the treatment of religious content in these instructional materials makes them far more appropriate in a Sunday School setting than in Texas public schools, which are called upon to serve students and families from a variety of faith traditions or none at all. ... [The Bluebonnet RLA] curriculum overemphasizes Christianity ... [and] incorporates detailed Bible lessons in ways that are both unnecessary and unwarranted. ... These systemic problems in the curriculum raise valid suspicions that there is an ideological rather than educational purpose behind it: to turn public schools into a tool for promoting a narrowly sectarian agenda.<sup>132</sup>

## Broader Implications

While it seems clear that the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum is inappropriate for Texas public schools, its adoption by Texas education officials also has broader implications for both Texas and the nation:

- It could provoke a court challenge, which might give the Roberts Court an opportunity to overturn *Engel* and/or *Abington*, but might also expose the weaknesses of the Court’s novel “history and tradition” test (which is described in the next section).
- It weakens church-state separation, and thus, ironically, may threaten religion in the U.S.
- It is detrimental to Texas students.
- It raises serious problems, including religious freedom issues, for Texas teachers, parents, and taxpayers.

## Costly Court Challenges Are Likely

Because the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum is state-owned and sanctioned and appears to privilege one religion over others, it represents a substantial departure from legal precedent guiding public education since the 1960s. As such, it seems likely to provoke court challenges and perhaps serve as a test case for overturning judicial precedent on Establishment Clause jurisprudence – especially in light of recent developments at the U.S. Supreme Court. (Moreover, defending against such challenges would, of course, come at the expense of Texas taxpayers, who will ultimately foot the bill.)

It is important to note that the curriculum was developed, and its authorizing legislation, HB 1605, passed, in the wake of what at least one scholar has called the U.S. Supreme Court’s “conservative judicial revolution,” which saw the high court overturning longstanding precedents on church-state separation cases (as well as other areas, such as reproductive rights).<sup>133</sup> Most relevant here is the court’s decision in *Kennedy v. Bremerton* (2022), in which the Roberts Court replaced earlier tests of the constitutionality of church-state entanglements – the so-called Lemon and endorsement tests – with a new test based on history and tradition.<sup>134</sup> This test, Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote, requires that “the Establishment Clause ... be interpreted by ‘reference to historical practices and understandings’” and via “[a]n analysis focused on original meaning and history” as well as whether the matter in question “faithfully reflect[s] the understanding of the Founding Fathers.”<sup>135</sup>

Conservatives and Christian nationalists welcomed the high court’s new test, viewing it as a pathway to increased “religious expression” and “religious liberty” in public education.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, the new test remains vague and perhaps raises more questions than it answers.

For instance, the new test fails to address which historic practices and Founding Fathers’ views should be considered; whose view prevails if Founding Fathers disagree; and exactly what period qualifies as “historical” (the late 1700s? Any time prior to the Civil War? Any time prior to the 1960s?). Such questions become particularly knotty in the case of Bible use in public schools, since such use was historically neither universal, uniform, nor without controversy.

Nonetheless, Texas lawmakers seem eager to take advantage of the court’s approach by supporting measures that arguably weaken church-state separation, especially in public education.<sup>137</sup> In the same 88th legislative session that saw the passage of HB 1605, three bills were introduced that seemed designed to probe the limits of the new judicial landscape: SB 1515, requiring public schools to display the Ten Commandments in all classrooms; SB 763, permitting public school districts to hire unlicensed chaplains to assist with student counseling; and SB 8, a school voucher bill allowing the use of taxpayer funds to pay for education at private schools, including religious schools.<sup>138</sup> Only the chaplains measure made it into law in 2023, but the Ten

Commandments and voucher bills were passed and signed into law this year.<sup>139</sup> The Bluebonnet RLA curriculum's privileging of Christianity fits this overall pattern.

If the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum does trigger a court challenge, it is reasonable to expect the state to find recourse in the high court's new test, arguing (among other things) that the practice of required Bible reading in public schools (and perhaps state-sponsored school prayer) is constitutional because it is part of U.S. history and tradition, and therefore that *Engel* and *Abington* were wrongly decided.<sup>140</sup> Defenders of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum might also appeal to favorable voices from the early nation, such as Horace Mann. Opponents, on the other hand, can appeal to the complex (and sometimes violent) history of public-school Bible use, the series of state court decisions banning such use prior to the 1960s, and the views of Founders such as Thomas Jefferson, who opposed Bible use in the classroom.

Given the Roberts Court's demonstrated willingness to overturn longstanding precedent, the Bluebonnet RLA case could give the conservative supermajority an opportunity to use the new history and tradition test to reduce the protections established by *Engel* and *Abington*. However, it is not clear that even the Roberts Court would find that the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum passes the new test. After all, *Kennedy vs. Bremerton School District* — the case that occasioned the new test — dealt with *voluntary* participation by students in a school official's public prayer in an *after-school* activity (a football game) [emphasis added]. The Bluebonnet RLA curriculum, by contrast, *requires* students to read passages and stories from the Bible as part of *normal instruction* [emphasis added]. Simply put, the circumstances are very different.<sup>141</sup>

Moreover, a history and tradition-based defense of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum might well reveal a fundamental weakness in the test itself: it risks "making judicially normative a period in U.S. history when the nation was far less religiously diverse than it is today — a period when white Protestant Christianity was broadly normative."<sup>142</sup> However, today's Texas students are not growing up in the U.S. of the 1790s or the 1950s. As noted at the outset of this paper, the nation is more religiously pluralistic than ever. Christianity no longer predominates and it is split into myriad denominations and nondenominational communities that differ theologically, morally, politically, and in many other ways. Even if a Bible-focused reading curriculum was acceptable and workable in the predominantly Protestant U.S. of earlier days, it no longer is when a full one-third of the population is non-Christian and when there is no "Christian consensus."

## Undermining A Key Constitutional Principle

Besides its departure from longstanding Establishment Clause jurisprudence, this state-owned and state-sanctioned curriculum that privileges one religion over others also serves to undermine America's fundamental constitutional principle of separation of church and state. It signals that the state government, and the districts that adopt the curriculum, endorse or even promote a particular religion.

Certainly this poses dangers for governance: As Founders like James Madison recognized, government preference for one religious community over others could lead to turmoil and possibly tear the nation apart.<sup>143</sup> But a strong case can also be made that weakening church-state separation is bad for religion — including, ironically, the evangelical Christian groups that are currently seeking governmental favor. Political scientists Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown note that, in the 21st century, religion has remained much more vital in the U.S. than in other economically advanced nations, and (as I write elsewhere) they contend that church-state separation appears to be a major reason why.

For one thing, they argue, separation has promoted religious diversity. For another, the absence of an official state religion creates an open marketplace of sorts in which various religious groups compete for members, encouraging those groups to adapt and innovate as society changes. “This environment,” they argue, “makes American religion more vibrant and open than a system that favors certain religions.”<sup>144</sup>

Support for Wald and Calhoun-Brown’s argument can be found in research conducted by Charles M. North and Carl R. Gwin on religiosity in 59 countries. Establishing an official religion, North and Gwin find, reduces religious attendance by between 15% and 17%. They warn that religious groups who succeed in gaining government favoritism “may be inadvertently sowing the seeds of their own destruction.”<sup>145</sup>

## Students May Be Less Prepared for Success

A major goal of public education is to prepare students to flourish in society once they reach adulthood. Indeed, the Texas Association of School Boards holds that there are three primary reasons for public schools to exist: to develop a productive workforce; to create an informed citizenry; and to provide for social mobility.<sup>146</sup> It stands to reason that a key factor in meeting such goals is to help students learn to understand and navigate a society that continues to grow more and more religiously diverse. If so, public education in Texas as well as nationally should — in an age-appropriate manner — provide students with a basic working knowledge of the major religious communities and traditions that they will encounter in an increasingly pluralistic state, nation, and world. A one-sided focus on the Bible and Christianity is insufficient given this environment and may possibly do more harm than good.

The pluralism of the public-school context (not to mention the constitutional principle of church-state separation) dictates that religions be taught in a balanced and nonconfessional way.<sup>147</sup> It is essential that public schools establish a level playing field for all religious groups by scrupulously avoiding favoritism toward one religion over others, or religion over non-religion. Otherwise, as Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor warned, public schools send “a message to nonadherents that they are

outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.”<sup>148</sup>

The Bible-infused Bluebonnet RLA curriculum raises concerns on two fronts. First, by giving limited attention to religions outside Christianity, it may leave students without some of the basic knowledge needed for success in an increasingly diverse society. Second, by prioritizing the Bible and Christianity, the curriculum could create the insider-outsider dynamic Justice O’Connor cautioned against.

## Creating Problems for Teachers, Parents, and Taxpayers

Finally, the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum creates problems for classroom teachers, parents, and taxpayers. It places classroom teachers in the difficult position of having to present religious teachings and stories which they may not themselves believe, and of having to answer often thorny questions of faith for which they have little or no training. Imagine a third grade teacher having to field a question like, “Teacher, did Jesus really come back from the dead?” Almost any answer the teacher gives will offend someone. And what if the teacher is Jewish, or Muslim, or nonreligious? Are they expected to be experts in Christianity and theology in order to answer such questions?

These problems also extend beyond the classroom. The curriculum’s implicit treatment of biblical accounts as historical may well “embroil public schools and school districts in messy debates over theology and biblical interpretation that divide Christians today.”<sup>149</sup>

## Violating the “Parental Rights” of Many

The curriculum also works against the theme of parental control over student education that was a major justification for the implementation of this open-resource curriculum. The curriculum’s prioritizing of the Bible and Christianity over other religions, in fact, takes control of a student’s religious upbringing away from parents who are not evangelical Christians, and places it in the hands of the state’s (still-anonymous) curriculum developers. Furthermore, as John R. Vile observes, “Even Christian parents might be reluctant to have secular teachers (or those from another denomination) instructing their children on key biblical texts.”<sup>150</sup>

Finally, since the curriculum was developed and implemented with public monies, the adoption of the curriculum compels taxpayers to fund instruction in religious views they may not share. That raises a fundamental problem of religious liberty. My comments about the use of taxpayer funds to pay for religious instruction via vouchers apply here as well: the practice “amounts to requiring taxpayers to fund the teaching of religious beliefs they do not share. ... This is deeply unfair, and a direct violation of any commonsense notion of religious liberty.”<sup>151</sup> It also raises questions about what constitutes “religious freedom” in America — a concept that has been used as

justification by the U.S. Supreme Court in recent years to overturn enforcement of laws designed to ensure that certain groups are not discriminated against as well as to overturn laws involving other issues opposed by conservatives. Does religious liberty only apply to Christians? What happens when the so-called religious freedom of Christians tramples the rights and beliefs of other religions? These are all larger questions raised by the use of the Bluebonnet RLA Curriculum in Texas.

## **Conclusion**

Given recent trends in Texas education politics, the decision by state officials to give preference to the Bible and Christianity in public school instructional materials comes as no surprise. Nearly a decade ago, I documented the strong Christian nationalist influence on the state's social studies curriculum standards, although other scholars and observers had already drawn attention to the problem before that.<sup>152</sup> However, the extent to which the Bible and Christianity are prioritized in the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum raises questions about balance and inclusivity in Texas public schools. Requiring K-5 students to engage with lessons that more closely resemble Sunday School content than public school curriculum raises concerns about church-state separation and may not serve the education needs of Texas students, parents, teachers, and taxpayers. This sets a concerning precedent for future open-resource curricula that the state intends to develop under the provisions of HB 1605.

### **What Happens Next?**

Now that state officials have approved the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum, the focus shifts to individual school districts. As mentioned earlier, each district must now decide whether or not to adopt the new open-resource curriculum. When making this consequential decision, districts should be mindful of the curriculum's shortcomings and pronounced religious imbalance.

As for state education officials, it is this author's hope that they will rethink their approach to future open-resource curricula and move toward the kind of balanced, nonconfessional religion coverage Texas students need to prosper in an increasingly pluralistic state and nation.

## Author's Note

Please note that my criticism of the presentation of Christianity and religion in the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum should not be mistaken for criticism of either Christianity or religion. I am myself a Christian (Episcopalian), and I have devoted much of my life, personal as well as academic, to Christian theological reflection as well as the study of religion and individual denominations. In addition, the views expressed in this research paper are my own views and do not necessarily represent the views of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy or those of Texas Christian University.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gregory A. Smith et al., "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Levelled Off," Pew Research Center, February 26, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-levelled-off/>.

<sup>2</sup> David R. Brockman, "Keep Religious Diversity in Public Education," Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, September 23, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.25613/9qye-rm24>.

<sup>3</sup> Texas Education Agency, "Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts, Edition 1," accessed June 11, 2025, <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/instructional-materials/tea-available-materials/bluebonnet-learning-k-5-english-language-arts-and-reading>.

<sup>4</sup> Pooja Salhotra and Robert Downen, "Texas Education Leaders Unveil Bible-Infused Elementary School Curriculum," *Texas Tribune*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/05/30/texas-public-schools-religion-curriculum/>; Linda Jacobson, "Bible-Infused Curriculum Sparks Texas-Sized Controversy Over Christianity in the Classroom," *The 74*, June 7, 2024, <https://www.the74million.org/article/bible-infused-curriculum-sparks-texas-sized-controversy-over-christianity-in-the-classroom/>; Jaden Edison, "State Board of Education Fields Concerns About Christian Bias in Proposed K–12 Curriculum," *Texas Tribune*, June 27, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/06/27/texas-sboe-bible-k12-school-curriculum/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Chancey, private communication to author, March 26, 2025. For a more detailed study of Bible coverage in the K–12 curriculum nationwide, see Mark A. Chancey, “The Bible and the Curriculum of American Public Schools (K–12) in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Bible in the American Experience*, edited by David Shefferman and Claudia Setzer (SBL Press, 2020). For more information on religion content in the social studies curriculum, see David R. Brockman, “Religious Imbalance in the Texas Social Studies Curriculum: Analysis and Recommendations,” Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, October 21, 2016, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/religious-imbalance-texas-social-studies-curriculum>. For information about Bible electives in Texas, see Mark A. Chancey, “Sectarian Elements in Public School Bible Courses: Lessons from the Lone Star State,” *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 4 (2007): 719–742, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/49.4.719>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back For God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020). According to Whitehead and Perry, Christian nationalism contends that America has been and always should be “Christian,” with “Christian” defined as more than merely religious and including assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. In addition, a recent report on Christian nationalism by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) measures adherence to this ideology according to levels of agreement with five statements: “The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation; U.S. laws should be based on Christian values; If the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore; Being Christian is an important part of being truly American;” and “God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society” (Public Religion Research Institute, “A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture,” February 8, 2023, <https://www.prrri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>).

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Graham, “Bible Teaching in Every Classroom? In Oklahoma, Few Signs It’s Happening,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/22/us/ryan-walters-oklahoma-bible-mandate-disputes.html>.

<sup>8</sup> For a survey of such legislation in Texas and other states, see Erik Ortiz, “Texas Bills Would Allow Ten Commandments and Bible Reading in Public Schools,” *NBC News*, February 11, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/texas-bills-allow-ten-commandments-bible-reading-public-schools-rcna191641>.

<sup>9</sup> Pavan Acharya and Robert Downen, “In Quest to Infuse More Religion Into Texas Schools, Advocates Say Courts Are Now On Their Side,” *Texas Tribune*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.texastribune.org/2025/02/12/texas-ten-commandments-school-prayer/>.

<sup>10</sup> The author of this paper defines separation of church and state as a constitutional principle summarizing the Constitution’s approach to religion and to religion-state relations, especially as embodied in the no religious test clause of Article VI as well as

the establishment and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment. As the late Ron Flowers of Texas Christian University noted in a 2004 article, separation of church and state means that the government has no say in what a religion teaches or how it is practiced, with the proviso that religious practice may not harm the public welfare. It also means that every person in this country is free to practice his or her religion “[but] that one may not use the state as an instrument to practice that religion. And that means that all Americans ... are entitled to not have the government or any agent of government impose religion upon them” (Ron Flowers, “Church-State Separation – It’s Nothing to Sneeze At,” *Church & State* 57, no. 5 (2004)). The author of this paper recognizes, however, that the term is an essentially contested one. In her entry on separation of church and state in *The Oxford Companion to American Politics*, Melissa Rogers writes that the phrase is most commonly used to refer to the religion clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. Thomas Jefferson coined the phrase in 1802, and the U.S. Supreme Court subsequently adopted it. Rogers goes on to note that church-state separation is a well-known phrase with a rich history in American public life. Part of that history, however, has been a vigorous debate about the meaning of the phrase. (Melissa Rogers, “Church and State, Separation of,” in *The Oxford Companion to American Politics* 2, edited by David Coates (Oxford University Press, 2012)).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed look at the history of Bible reading in U.S. public schools, see: Melissa Deckman, “Religious Literacy in Public Schools: Teaching the Bible in America’s Classrooms,” in *Curriculum and the Culture Wars: Debating the Bible’s Place in Public Schools*, edited by Melissa Deckman and Joseph Prud’homme (Peter Lang, Publishing, Inc., 2014), 31–47; Daniel L. Dreisbach, “A Handbook for Republican Citizenship? The American Founders Debate the Bible’s Use in Schools,” in *Curriculum and the Culture Wars*; Mark A. Chancey, “Public School Bible Courses in Historical Perspective: North Carolina as a Case Study,” *The Bible in the Public Square*, edited by Mark A. Chancey, Eric M. Meyers, and Carol Meyers (SBL Press, 2014), 193–214; and Steven K. Green, *The Bible, the School, and the Constitution: The Clash that Shaped Modern Church-State Doctrine* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Kirk W. Elifson and C. Kirk Hadaway, “Prayer in Public Schools: When Church and State Collide,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1985): 317–329, <https://doi.org/10.1086/268930>. Similarly, Melissa Deckman notes that from colonial times until the 1960s, Bible reading was a fairly common practice in the public schools: Melissa Deckman, “Religious Literacy in Public Schools.”

<sup>13</sup> Chancey, “Public School Bible Courses in Historical Perspective.”

<sup>14</sup> David Barton, *America: To Pray or Not to Pray?* (WallBuilder Press, 1988), 155.

<sup>15</sup> Barton, *To Pray or Not to Pray?*

<sup>16</sup> Dreisbach.

<sup>17</sup> Dreisbach.

<sup>18</sup> Deckman, “Religious Literacy in Public Schools.”

<sup>19</sup> Chancey, “Public School Bible Courses in Historical Perspective.”

<sup>20</sup> Dreisbach.

<sup>21</sup> Chancey, “Public School Bible Courses in Historical Perspective.”

- <sup>22</sup> Chancey, “Public School Bible Courses in Historical Perspective.”
- <sup>23</sup> Reverend Barry W. Lynn, “Studying the Bible in Public Schools: Sounds Good in Theory, But ...,” in *Curriculum and the Culture Wars*.
- <sup>24</sup> Lynn.
- <sup>25</sup> Lynn.
- <sup>26</sup> Lynn.
- <sup>27</sup> *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/330/1/>; Thomas Jefferson’s “wall of separation” phrase appears in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists (Library of Congress, “Jefferson’s Letter to the Danbury Baptists: The Final Letter,” January 1, 1802, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>).
- <sup>28</sup> *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/370/421/>; *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/374/203/>.
- <sup>29</sup> Suzanne Rosenblith and Patrick Womac, “The Bible in American Public Schools,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, edited by Paul C. Gutjahr (Oxford Handbooks, 2018), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.tcu.edu/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190258849.013.5>.
- <sup>30</sup> Brockman, “Keep Religious Diversity in Public Education.”
- <sup>31</sup> William C. Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, (Broadway Books, 1996), 192.
- <sup>32</sup> Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, (Simon & Schuster, 2017), 240.
- <sup>33</sup> FitzGerald.
- <sup>34</sup> Martin.
- <sup>35</sup> Barton, *To Pray or Not to Pray?*
- <sup>36</sup> First Amendment Center, “The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide,” 1999, <http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/BibleGuide.pdf>.
- <sup>37</sup> Martin.
- <sup>38</sup> Stephen Prothero and Lauren R. Kerby, “The Irony of Religious Illiteracy in the USA,” in *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, edited by Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (Bristol University Press, 2015), 55–76. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t89c7n.9>.
- <sup>39</sup> For one example, see National Council for the Social Studies, “The Study of Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum: A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies,” 2021, <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/study-of-religion-in-social-studies>. The author’s own criteria for teaching about religion in public schools are discussed in “Religious Imbalance in the Texas Social Studies Curriculum.”
- <sup>40</sup> Linda Jacobson, “Exclusive: Texas Seeks to Inject Bible Stories Into Elementary School Reading Program,” *The 74*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-texas-seeks-to-inject-bible-stories-into-elementary-school-reading-program/>.
- <sup>41</sup> Shira Wolosky, “The Bible in American Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, edited by Paul C. Gutjahr (Oxford Academic, 2018) <https://doi-org.ezproxy.tcu.edu/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190258849.013.34>.

<sup>42</sup> Republican Party of Texas, “Platform and Resolutions as Amended and Adopted by the 2022 State Convention of the Republican Party of Texas,” 2022,

<https://texasgop.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2022-RPT-Platform.pdf>. Identical language was also used in the “TX GOP Platform: Republican Party of Texas, 2024 Platform and Resolutions of the Republican Party of Texas,” 2024,

<https://texasgop.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2024-RPT-Platform.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Republican Party of Texas, “2024 Platform and Resolutions.”

<sup>44</sup> Barton, *To Pray or Not to Pray?*

<sup>45</sup> Barton, *The Myth of Separation* (WallBuilder Press, 1992), 208–216.

<sup>46</sup> Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 130.

<sup>47</sup> Dusty Deevers, “The Bible Belongs in the Classroom,” Center for Baptist Leadership, July 3, 2024, <https://centerforbaptistleadership.org/the-bible-belongs-in-the-classroom/>.

<sup>48</sup> Deevers.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Downen, “Conservative Christians Want More Religion In Public Life. Texas Lawmakers Are Listening,” *Texas Tribune*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/05/04/texas-legislature-church-state-separation/>.

<sup>50</sup> Although the RLA curriculum was not called the Bluebonnet Learning RLA curriculum until late summer 2024, it will be referred to as such for the sake of convenience.

<sup>51</sup> Texas Education Agency (TEA), “House Bill 1605 and IMRA,” 2024, <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/instructional-materials/house-bill-1605/house-bill-1605-and-imra>.

<sup>52</sup> H.B. 1605, 89th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Tex. 2023), <https://legiscan.com/TX/bill/HB1605/2023>.

<sup>53</sup> TEA, House Bill 1605; information about ownership of third-party instructional materials comes from Dan Quinn, private correspondence to the author, February 27, 2025.

<sup>54</sup> H.B. 1605 also mandated creation of an open-resource curriculum for K-5 mathematics. See H.B. 1605, 89th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Tex. 2023), <https://legiscan.com/TX/bill/HB1605/2023>. The TEA defines open education resources (OER) as optional, high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) that are freely available for use. In plain terms, they are textbooks owned by the state that can be modified over time to improve them for students and teachers. Bluebonnet RLA Learning materials are state-developed instructional resources that were built specifically for Texans based on Texas’ state standards, i.e., the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) (TEA, “Bluebonnet Learning: Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed June 12, 2025, <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/instructional-materials/house-bill-1605/oer-imra-faqs.pdf>). A TEA document indicates that the agency has been authorized to acquire OER under Texas law since 2009. See TEA, “Bluebonnet Learning FAQ,” accessed June 12, 2025, <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/instructional-materials/house-bill-1605/oer-imra-faqs.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Districts now have the option to adopt free, state-owned materials or select from a range of newly approved, high-quality materials produced by curriculum companies

("Texas 2036, High Quality Instructional Materials: Everything You Need to Know," accessed June 12, 2025, <https://texas2036.org/hqim/>).

<sup>56</sup> For one example, see Brian Lopez, "Gov. Greg Abbott Taps Into Parent Anger to Fuel Reelection Campaign," *Texas Tribune*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/01/26/greg-abbott-parental-bill-of-rights/>. Parental feedback and awareness are a major part of the bill, consistent with the parental rights movement embraced by Republicans across the U.S. Each textbook unit for the TEA-supplied materials has a letter that can be sent home to parents to make sure they are aware of what the unit will cover (Elizabeth Sander, "Everything You Need To Know About the TEA's Bible-Forward Lesson Plans," *Houston Chronicle*, September 13, 2024, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/education/article/tea-bible-forward-lesson-plans-19761974.php>).

<sup>57</sup> Isaac Windes, "Reading, Writing and Religion? A Texas Curriculum Advisory Board's Link to Faith-Based Advocacy," *Texas Tribune*, October 31, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/10/31/texas-curriculum-board-christian-advocacy/>. Financial incentives are mentioned in H.B. 1605, 60–61.

<sup>58</sup> Windes.

<sup>59</sup> H.B. 1605, 88th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Tx. 2023), <https://legiscan.com/TX/bill/HB1605/2023>. Something of an education omnibus bill, H.B. 1605 also made substantial changes to the State Board of Education's process for soliciting and adopting instructional materials. Interestingly, however, one provision of H.B. 1605 immunizes classroom teachers from charges of violating the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution – that is, teaching in a way that infringes on church-state separation. See H.B. 1605, 6. However, any link with the curriculum's subsequent religious content is unclear.

<sup>60</sup> The TEKS for Elementary Language Arts and Reading make no mention of religion whatsoever. There are general provisions for students to analyze increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse literary texts and folktales, fables, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes, but no reasonable person would take such references to require biblical (or other religious) content ("Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English Language Arts and Reading, Subchapter A. Elementary," <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/ch110a.pdf>. The text quoted is from the TEKS for Kindergarten, §110.2(b)(7) and (8)(A); similar references can be found in the TEKS for grades 1 through 5.).

<sup>61</sup> Texas Education Code, Title 2, Subtitle F, Chapter 28, Subchapter A, Section 28.002. <https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/ED/htm/ED.28.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Thanks to Mark Chancey for his help in sorting out the convoluted history of the Bluebonnet RLA curriculum.

<sup>63</sup> TEA, "COVID-19 Support: Texas Home Learning," accessed June 12, 2025, <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/health-safety-discipline/covid/covid-19-support-texas-home-learning>.

<sup>64</sup> Linda Jacobson, "Exclusive: Texas Seeks to Inject Bible Stories into Elementary School Reading Program," *The 74*, May 29, 2024,

<https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-texas-seeks-to-inject-bible-stories-into-elementary-school-reading-program/>.

<sup>65</sup> Jacobson.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Alexandra Clarke, Amplify, Inc., to the Texas Education Agency, May 28, 2021, <https://www.the74million.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/TX-TEA-Developing-and-Editing-Instructional-Materials-No-Bid-Letter-5-28-21-1.pdf>; Texas Education Agency, TEA Instructional Materials, Accessed June 12, 2015, <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/instructional-materials/tea-available-materials/tea-instructional-materials.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Jacobson.

<sup>68</sup> Jacobson.

<sup>69</sup> Jacobson.

<sup>70</sup> Linda Jacobson, "Mike Huckabee's 'Faith-Based' Media Company Contributed to New Texas Curriculum," *The 74*, November 18, 2024, <https://www.the74million.org/article/mike-huckabees-faith-based-media-company-contributed-to-new-texas-curriculum/>.

<sup>71</sup> David R. Brockman, "Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools? A Review of the State's Proposed K-5 Reading Curriculum: A Report from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund," Texas Freedom Network, August 2024, <https://tfn.org/cms/assets/uploads/2024/08/OER-Report-2024.pdf>.

<sup>72</sup> TEA, "Texas Education Agency Unveils Newly Developed Texas Open Education Resource (OER) Textbooks," press release, May 29, 2024, <https://tea.texas.gov/node/2041111>.

<sup>73</sup> TEA, "Texas Education Agency Unveils ..."

<sup>74</sup> Becky Fogel, "Do Bible Stories Belong In K-5 Curriculum? Texas Board to Vote in November," KUT, September 18, 2024, <https://www.kut.org/education/2024-09-18/texas-state-board-of-education-k-12-instructional-materials-bible-stories>.

<sup>75</sup> Jaden Edison, "State Board of Education Approves Bible-infused Curriculum," *Texas Tribune*, November 22, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/11/19/texas-sboe-bible-christianity-curriculum/>.

<sup>76</sup> Brockman, "Religious Imbalance in the Texas Social Studies Curriculum;" David Brockman, "Christian Americanism and Texas Politics Since 2008," Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, March 5, 2020, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/christian-americanism-and-texas-politics-2008>.

<sup>77</sup> Zoe Sottile, "Texas Officials Signal Support for Adding Bible Lessons for K–5 Classes as Some States Push Christianity in Public Schools," *CNN*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/19/us/texas-bluebonnet-curriculum-bible-lessons/index.html>.

<sup>78</sup> Americans United, "Americans United Urges Texas School Districts Not To Implement Christian Nationalist Bluebonnet Elementary Curriculum," press release, November 22, 2024, <https://www.au.org/the-latest/press/texas-bluebonnet-elementary-curriculum/>.

<sup>79</sup> Jeff Brumley, "Texas Board of Education Gets Huge Pushback on Religion-Infused Curriculum," *Baptist News Global*, September 3, 2024,

<https://baptistnews.com/article/texas-board-of-education-gets-huge-pushback-on-religion-infused-curriculum/>.

<sup>80</sup> Fogel.

<sup>81</sup> Amanda Musa and Zoe Sottile, “Texas Education Officials Approve Optional School Curriculum That Incorporates Bible Lessons. Some Say It’s Unconstitutional,” CNN, November 24, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/22/us/texas-school-bible-curriculum-vote/index.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, “Saying ‘No’ to Bible-Based Curriculum in Texas,” September 24, 2024, <https://bjconline.org/saying-no-to-bible-based-curriculum-in-texas/>.

<sup>83</sup> The 10 members of the Open Education Resources Advisory Board, who are tasked with ensuring “the materials are accurate, age-appropriate and free from bias” were picked by Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath. As the *Texas Tribune* reported, “While some panelists are experienced educators, others are not and at least half of them ... have a history of faith based advocacy.” The advisory panel’s composition raises questions about the TEA selection process and whether members may have held views supportive of a Bible-infused curriculum. This is a recent instance of ongoing debates surrounding the education board’s approach to church-state issues in its curriculum and textbook decisions (Windes, “Reading, Writing and Religion?”).

“I did not get a lot of my questions answered when it came to who wrote the curriculum,” said Evelyn Brooks, a Republican board member whose district includes the Fort Worth suburbs. ... Interviewed in early May, the [TEA] commissioner would only say that ‘hundreds of people’ worked on the project. But that doesn’t satisfy board members who say the curriculum borders on proselytizing and promotes a distinctly evangelical view of American history” (Linda Jacobson, “Who Wrote Texas’s Million Dollar, Bible-Infused Curriculum? The State Won’t Say,” *The 74*, August 15, 2024, <https://www.the74million.org/article/who-wrote-texas-million-dollar-bible-infused-curriculum-the-state-wont-say/>).

<sup>84</sup> Texas Public Policy Foundation, “New Study Shows Texans Support High Quality Instructional Materials Including Religious References,” press release, August 15, 2024, <https://www.texaspolicy.com/press/new-study-shows-texans-support-high-quality-instructional-materials-including-religious-references>.

<sup>85</sup> Jaden Edison, “Texas’ Christian-Influenced Curriculum Spurs Worries About Bullying, Church-State Separation,” *Texas Tribune*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/07/19/texas-christianity-school-curriculum-worries/>.

<sup>86</sup> Brockman, “Christian Americanism and Texas Politics Since 2008.” For instance, in a May 2024 press release, Governor Abbott referred only obliquely to Christian biblical content, saying, “The materials will also allow our students to better understand the connection of history, art, community, literature, and religion on pivotal events like the signing of the U.S. Constitution, the Civil Rights Movement, and the American Revolution” (Office of the Texas Governor, “Governor Abbott Statement On TEA’s New Open Education Resource Instructional Materials,” press release), May 29, 2024,

<https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-statement-on-teas-new-open-education-resource-instructional-materials>).

<sup>87</sup> Jacobson.

<sup>88</sup> Texas Values, “Breaking! The Bible Wins at Texas Education Board!” press release, November 22, 2024, <https://txvalues.org/breaking-the-bible-wins-at-texas-education-board/>.

<sup>89</sup> Texas Values, “Breaking!”

<sup>90</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools? A Review of the State’s Proposed K-5 Reading Curriculum: A Report from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund,” Texas Freedom Network, August 2024, <https://tfn.org/cms/assets/uploads/2024/08/OER-Report-2024.pdf>.

<sup>91</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”

<sup>92</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools? An Update,” Texas Freedom Network, November 2024, <https://tfn.org/cms/assets/uploads/2024/11/11.24-OER-Analysis-Update.pdf>.

<sup>93</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”

<sup>94</sup> Texas Public Policy Foundation, “New Study Shows Texans Support.”

<sup>95</sup> Sottile, “Texas Officials Signal Support.”

<sup>96</sup> Ben Brasch, “Texas May Pay Schools To Use Curriculum Critics Call Overtly Christian,” *Washington Post*, June 6, 2024,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/06/06/texas-religion-school-curriculum/>.

<sup>97</sup> Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts, Edition 1, *Program and Implementation Guide*, November 2024, 23.

<sup>98</sup> Texas Public Policy Foundation, “New Study Shows Texans Support.”

<sup>99</sup> Edison, “Texas’ Christian-Influenced Curriculum Spurs Worries.”

<sup>100</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 5, *Teacher Guide*, Unit 2, 36 (summary of beliefs and Islamic contributions); Kindergarten, *Teacher Guide*, Unit 8, 126-37 (Musa).

<sup>101</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 5, Unit 7, *Teacher Guide*, 326 (Hinduism); Grade 1, Unit 10, *Teacher Guide*, 107 (Buddhism); Kindergarten, Unit 7, *Teacher Guide*, 13 (Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism).

<sup>102</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?” and Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools? An Update.”

<sup>103</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools? An Update.”

<sup>104</sup> The discussion of the Golden Rule also includes parallel teachings in Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism (*Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Kindergarten, Unit 7, *Teacher Guide*, 13).

<sup>105</sup> Unlock Higher Ed, “Experts,” accessed Jun 12, 2015,

<https://unlockhighered.com/about/experts/>).

<sup>106</sup> Thomas K. Lindsay, “Do Opponents of HB 1605 Really Want to Ban MLK from Texas’ K–12 Curriculum?,” Texas Public Policy Foundation, September 19, 2024,

<https://www.texaspolicy.com/do-opponents-of-hb-1605-really-want-to-ban-mlk-from-texas-k-12-curriculum/>.

<sup>107</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 3, Unit 4, *Teacher Guide*, 261-63.

<sup>108</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 2, Unit 10, *Teacher Guide*, 22-50.

<sup>109</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 5, Unit 2, *Teacher Guide*, 36.

<sup>110</sup> For more information on the Prophet’s night journey, see “Mi‘rāj” entry in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* edited by John Bowker (Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>111</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 2, Unit 10, *Teacher Guide*, 2.

<sup>112</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 2, Unit 10, *Teacher Guide*, 13, 27.

<sup>113</sup> For a brief discussion of the wide range of Christian approaches to the historicity of the Bible, see “Will Lamb, biblical criticism, modern,” entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>114</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 2, Unit 10, *Teacher Guide*, 27.

<sup>115</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 2, Unit 10, *Teacher Guide*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 2, Unit 10, *Teacher Guide*, 29–33, 44–47.

<sup>117</sup> Sara Raup Johnson goes on to say, “Many elements of the story are easily recognizable as legendary motifs: the loyal Jewish courtier who saves the king from his gentile enemies, for instance, or the king who is persuaded to persecute the Jews by evil advisors, only to discover his mistake at the eleventh hour, so that the Jews are restored to favor and their enemies are utterly confounded. The accumulation of romantic details and fantastic coincidences leading to a melodramatic dénouement would not have been out of place in any fictional tale, from the *Odyssey* to the ancient novels. The historical narrative, although superficially realistic and convincing, is rife with inconsistencies, anachronisms, and errors” (Sara Raup Johnson, *Historical Fictions and Hellenistic Jewish Identity: Third Maccabees in Its Cultural Context* (University of California Press, 2005), 18–19). Similarly, Isaac Kalimi notes that the Book of Esther includes several overstatements, exaggerated numbers, and fantastic descriptions ... and overall, the vast majority of its details are ahistorical. However, the author also presents historical familiarity of the Persian court and administration, and the central theme of the book – the annihilation of the Jews of the Empire – seemingly is based on an historical event, though perhaps not to the extent or adherence to the details described (Isaac Kalimi, “Esther” entry in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics* [Oxford University Press, 2015], <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref:obso/9780199829910.001.0001>). For a Jewish biblical scholar’s take on the Bluebonnet treatment of Esther, see Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, “As a Jewish Biblical Scholar in Houston, I’m Enraged That Texas Is Adopting This Biblically Illiterate New Curriculum,” *Forward*, November 25, 2024,

<https://forward.com/opinion/677608/bluebonnet-curriculum-jewish-houston-texas-bible/>.

<sup>118</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 5, Unit 2, *Teacher Guide*, 102.

<sup>119</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, *Program and Implementation Guide*, November 2024, 23.

<sup>120</sup> Edison, “Texas’ Christian-Influenced Curriculum Spurs Worries;” Ben Brasch, “Texas May Pay Schools To Use Curriculum Critics Call Overtly Christian,” *Washington Post*, June 6, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/06/06/texas-religion-school-curriculum/>.

<sup>121</sup> Brasch, “Texas May Pay Schools.”

<sup>122</sup> Texas Public Policy Foundation, “New Study Shows Texans Support”; Sottile, “Texas Officials Signal Support.”

<sup>123</sup> Benjamin Cohen, “Texas Schools Want To Add Queen Esther to the Curriculum. Here’s Why Jews (and Many Christians) Are Opposed,” *Forward*, November 20, 2024, <https://forward.com/news/676477/texas-bluebonnet-bible-esther-board-of-education/>.

<sup>124</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?” The lesson in question can be found in the *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Kindergarten, Unit 11, *Teacher Guide*, 38–44.

<sup>125</sup> *Bluebonnet Learning K-5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 5, Unit 2, *Teacher Guide*, 102.

<sup>126</sup> Matthew 20:26–30; *Bluebonnet Learning K–5 Reading Language Arts*, Edition 1, Grade 5, Unit 2, *Teacher Guide*, 104.

<sup>127</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools? An Update.”

<sup>128</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”

<sup>129</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”

<sup>130</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”

<sup>131</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”

<sup>132</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”

<sup>133</sup> Noah Feldman, “Can Texas Really Put the Ten Commandments in Public Schools?” *Twin Cities Pioneer Press*, May 19, 2023,

<https://www.twincities.com/2023/04/30/noahfeldman-can-texas-really-put-the-ten-commandments-in-public-schools/>.

<sup>134</sup> The Lemon and endorsement tests are legal standards used to determine the constitutionality of government actions under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits the government from establishing a religion. The Lemon Test evaluates whether a government action has a secular purpose and whether or not it advances or inhibits religion; the endorsement test focuses on whether or not a reasonable observer would perceive a government action as an endorsement of or disapproval of a specific religion or religions. For more on these earlier tests, see Brockman, “The Texas Legislature’s Assault on Church-State Separation in Schools,” Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, April 12, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.25613/DT19-SX85>.

<sup>135</sup> Kennedy v. Bremerton School District (2022), <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/us-supreme-court/21-418.html>.

<sup>136</sup> The conservative First Liberty Institute depicted the decision in Kennedy as an act of God, saying, “after our landmark Supreme Court victories in recent years, a seismic shift is happening in America regarding religious expression. ... God is at work. There’s no denying it. The Supreme Court victories He orchestrated are opening new doors to bring back our nation’s heritage of religious expression and restore the freedoms that were stripped away” (First Liberty Institute, “Texas Bills Would Put History and Religious Freedom Where They Rightfully Belong,” April 28, 2023, <https://firstliberty.org/news/texas-bills-put-religious-freedom-back-where-it-belongs/>). Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, vowing to pass a bill requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms, noted that such legislation only became legally feasible with the Supreme Court’s overturning of the Lemon test. See Dan Patrick, “Could’ve, Would’ve, Should’ve,” June 21, 2024, <https://www.danpatrick.org/couldve-wouldve-shouldve/>; State Senator Mayes Middleton (R-Galveston) — in a post on X publicizing his school prayer bill — cites the Kennedy decision, saying, “Our schools are not God-free zones. This bill restores prayer in our public schools, which is also a top priority of President Trump. This legislation builds on the victory of the Coach Kennedy case in the US Supreme Court by protecting religious freedom in our schools” (Mayes Middleton (@mayes\_middleton), X, February 10, 2025, [https://x.com/mayes\\_middleton/status/1889016413077053693](https://x.com/mayes_middleton/status/1889016413077053693)).

<sup>137</sup> Brockman, “The Texas Legislature’s Assault.”

<sup>138</sup> Brockman, “The Texas Legislature’s Assault.”

<sup>139</sup> The new Ten Commandments bill can be found in SB 10, 89th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Tex. 2025), <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/89R/billtext/html/SB00010F.htm>; the new voucher bill can be found in SB 2, 89th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Tex. 2025), <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/89R/billtext/html/SB00002F.htm>.

<sup>140</sup> For more on this possibility, see John R. Vile, “Texas Law On Bible-Based Curricula for Public Elementary Schools,” Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee University, January 7, 2025, <https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/texas-law-on-bible-based-curricula-for-public-elementary-schools/>.

<sup>141</sup> Vile raises a similar point, noting that, “The most problematic aspects of the Texas law [i.e., H.B. 1605] center on the fact that the curriculum that it is adopting appears to favor Christian teachings over those of other religions and was actually written by a state agency. ... [Previous Supreme Court] school prayer and Bible reading decisions have expressed particular concerns about the pressures that children might face to conform, and these are magnified when, as in the Texas case, the curriculum is designed for K-5 classes” (Vile, “Texas Law On Bible-Based Curricula”).

<sup>142</sup> Brockman, “The Texas Legislature’s Assault.”

<sup>143</sup> Joseph Loconte, “Faith and the Founding: The Influence of Religion on the Politics of James Madison,” *Journal of Church and State* 45, No. 4 (2003), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23920935>.

<sup>144</sup> Brockman, “The Texas Legislature’s Assault.”

- <sup>145</sup> Charles M. North and Carl R. Gwin, “Religious Freedom and the Unintended Consequences of State Religion,” *Southern Economic Journal* 71 (2004): 103–17.
- <sup>146</sup> Texas Association of School Boards (TASB), “School Boards: What Is the Purpose of a Public Education?,” October 25, 2021, <https://www.tasb.org/news-insights/purpose-public-education>.
- <sup>147</sup> Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”
- <sup>148</sup> Quoted in Brockman, “Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?”
- <sup>149</sup> Brockman, “Keep Religious Diversity in Public Education.”
- <sup>150</sup> Vile, “Texas Law on Bible-Based Curricula.”
- <sup>151</sup> Brockman, “The Texas Legislature’s Assault.”
- <sup>152</sup> Brockman, “Religious Imbalance in the Texas Social Studies Curriculum.” For earlier work on this issue, see, as example, Mark A. Chancey, “Teaching about Religion in Red-state America,” in *Religion and Politics in Twenty-First Century America*, edited by Matthew Sutton and Darren Dochuk (Oxford University Press, 2015), 163–179; Gene B. Preuss, “‘As Texas Goes, So Goes the Nation’: Conservatism and Culture Wars in the Lone Star State,” in *Politics and the History Curriculum: The Struggle over Standards in Texas and the Nation*, edited by Keith A. Erikson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 18–38; for a journalist’s take, see Russell Shorto, “How Christian Were the Founders?,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/magazine/14texbooks-t.html>.

