

POLICY BRIEF | VISITING SCHOLAR SERIES

POLICY, POLITICS, AND THE BIBLE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN A CHANGING AMERICA

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SMU's very own Mark Chancey spoke on March 27, 2019 at the titular event, sponsored by the Tower Center.

The twenty-first century has witnessed renewed efforts to make the Bible an object of study in public education. Since 2000, twenty states have debated bills promoting Bible electives for high schools. Seven states (including Texas) passed those bills, and two others created laws allowing school credit for off-campus Bible classes. State law or not, schools in all but a handful of states offer Bible courses.

In 2016, the Republican Party's national platform urged states to promote Bible electives, citing the indispensability of "a good understanding of the Bible ... for the development of an educated citizenry." Democrats have also advocated the courses, and in 2006 the national Democratic Leadership Council encouraged Bible course bills as a way to "offer Democrats the opportunity to talk to voters about their faith and values."

Proponents of Bible courses stress the civic importance of religious literacy. The particular literacy they envision, however, is usually quite narrow. It focuses primarily on sacred texts rather than other expressions of religion and on Judaism and Christianity rather than the broader spectrum of traditions.

Officials sometimes seem to regard Bible

classes as a tool for fostering particular notions of American identity. Some long nostalgically for a religious diversity consisting primarily of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Others seek to return the nation to what they see as its Christian, Bible-based roots. For them, Bible electives function as a buffer against the perceived threats of multiculturalism and secularism.

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Ever present in such discussions are concerns about legality. The Supreme Court's benchmark for legality is that schools must present the material "objectively as part of a secular program of education." But that goal is easier said than done.

To what extent does biblical literacy serve the civic needs of a society that is simultaneously becoming more religiously diverse and less religiously observant? How can schools cultivate religious literacy while respecting the religious liberty and varying sensibilities of a pluralistic society?

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