

THE CASE FOR CHRISTIANITY

in Public Schools



BY ERIC BUEHRER



Being Inclusive
WITHOUT MIXING
Church and State

SHARON WORKS IN A PUBLIC elementary school in Minnesota. Each year, the halls of her school are decorated with voodoo masks or images of Aztec gods that the students make in art class. In January, Chinese New Year symbols are posted on the walls of the cafeteria and the children are encouraged to figure out which symbol their birthday is attached to.

“Yet,” she laments, “at Christmas, nobody can talk about Christmas or have any Christmas decorations up - especially a tree.” The children aren’t allowed to sing Christmas carols. And on the last day of school before Christmas break, instead of acknowledging the holiday, the school celebrates “Back to the Fifties” with decorations and clothing and “Fifties” music blaring in the cafeteria.

Sharon asks, “Whatever happened to our American culture and national holidays?”

What happened is that fear, intimidation, and outright misinformation about what is permitted in schools have created a public education system that too often fails to teach students about the American culture of which they are a part.

As president of Gateways to Better Education—a ministry helping Christians at every level in the public schools to appropriately articulate a Christian worldview without fear or embarrassment—I’ve seen countless examples of

bias against Christianity; some are blatant, most are more subtle.

For years, a secular mindset among educators and school officials has pushed legitimate education about Christianity off to an ever-shrinking portion of a public school student’s life. Think about how many children go through twelve years of education and never learn anything of significance about Christianity.

The bias can be so blatant as to actually reinvent history and culture for students. For instance, a district in Wisconsin published a memo on the holidays that stated: “Thanksgiving is a national custom. Please try to avoid religious connotations.” Yet, Thanksgiving, by definition and Presidential proclamation, is inherently religious. Liberal and conservative Presidents alike proclaim Thanksgiving a national holiday and ask Americans to thank God for His blessings. Yet, this Wisconsin school district, in essence, was asking its teachers to mislead their students about the nature of the holiday.

This fear of even touching on a subject that references God or Christianity has led some elementary music educators to avoid teaching students patriotic songs that refer to God. An elementary music teacher in Florida, who is also a Christian, recently told me that her eleven colleagues who

teach elementary music in the district will not teach students songs such as “America the Beautiful” because of the phrase “God shed his grace on thee.”

This illustrates the more common form of bias: teachers or students aren’t actually prohibited from referencing Christianity; they merely ignore it. Students don’t even know what they are missing.

The bias against appropriately teaching about the contributions of Christianity to society comes largely from educators who either think it is not legally allowed or that, even if allowed, it is not proper or culturally sensitive to do so.

There are millions of Christians within the public school system. Christian parents, students, teachers, school board members, and administrators abound in our nation’s schools. It is vitally important that they help those within their sphere of influence realize that helping students understand and appreciate the value and contributions of Christianity to our society, the world, and even their academic subject, is culturally relevant, academically legitimate, legally permitted, and morally imperative.

Parents, educators, school officials, and students can calm their fears about the presence of Christianity in classrooms just by remembering the acronym C.A.L.M. because it is Culturally relevant, Academically legitimate, Legally permitted, and Morally imperative.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT

There are those who argue that, while we once could have been called a “Christian nation” long ago, we now live in a “post-Christian” era. It is true that secularism has become an influential force in society. However, consider the following cultural facts and ask yourself what other culture on earth has such Christian influence.

1. From its founding, America was heavily influenced by Christianity. As A. James Reichley, a senior fellow of The Brookings Institution – a left-leaning think tank – points out, “Almost all of the principal founders of the United States, including Thomas Jefferson, were convinced that the health of republican government depends on moral values derived from religion.”¹

For instance, Jefferson wrote, “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that they are of the gift of God?”² In his second inaugural address, Jefferson said, “I shall need the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life.”³

2. Even before the founding of America, the Puritans saw themselves as uniquely directed by the hand of God. Warren Nord of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center, in their book, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, comment that it is important for students to understand this unique influence of Christianity that is deeply rooted in the American experience. “Modeling themselves on ancient Israel,” write Nord and Haynes, “the founders of the

Massachusetts Bay Colony saw themselves as called by God to change the course of history. Without exposure to this conception of history, much in the rest of the American story is difficult to comprehend.”⁴

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3. Today’s students are the beneficiaries of a long heritage of Christian influence. “Western Christianity,” writes Harvard professor Samuel Huntington, “is historically the single most important characteristic of Western Civilization.”⁵ It has been the basis for, or has strongly influenced, such concepts as individualism, entrepreneurship, capitalism, the rule of law, constitutionalism, representative government, social pluralism, and equality before the law. In addition to this, the influence of Christianity led to the founding of hospitals and schools, the abolition of slavery, the elevation of the status of women and much more. This astounding impact on the world has led sociologist Alvin Schmidt to conclude:

“On the basis of historical evidence, I am fully persuaded that had Jesus Christ never walked the dusty paths of ancient Palestine, suffered, died, and risen from the dead, and never assembled around him a small group of disciples who spread out into the pagan world, the West would not have attained its high level of civilization, giving it the many human benefits it enjoys today. One only needs to look to sectors of the world where Christianity has had little or no presence to see the remarkable differences.”⁶

4. Besides the historical influence on American culture, Christianity continues to have a significant influence on American society. Christianity is the religion with the largest number of adherents in America. In America, 85 percent of the population claim Christianity as their religious affiliation, compared to 2 percent who identify themselves as Jewish. Six percent consider themselves atheists or agnostics and one percent fall into the category of other religions.

5. During a typical week, 40-44 percent of Americans, or between 80 and 90 million people, attend church.⁸ This is high when compared to other major Western countries. For instance, West Germany’s church attendance is 14 percent of the population; Sweden’s is 4 percent. Even England ranks far behind the United States. Figures for weekly church attendance there range from 27 percent to only 8 percent.⁹

6. Pollster George Barna reports that 39 percent of Americans as a whole describe themselves as “committed born-again Christians,” (around 80 million people!) and 61 percent of African Americans identify themselves that way.¹⁰

7. In light of our heritage and current demographic figures, it is little wonder



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that Christian holidays dominate the American calendar; that there are over 1,500 radio stations in America airing Christian programs or music; that our hospitals have names like St. Joseph's and Baptist General; that our language regularly uses Biblical expressions such as “good Samaritan,” and “go the extra mile;” or that our national motto, “In God We Trust,” was adopted in 1956, not 1856. ¹¹

8. The millions of Americans who are Christians bring their faith into the market place. The July 16, 2001 issue of Newsweek magazine ran a cover story on “The Glorious Rise of Christian Pop.” In it, the author reports, “Contemporary Christian music is now the hottest genre in the entire music industry.” She continues, “To put it into perspective: for every 10 country-music albums sold, seven Christian CDs fly off the shelf. CCM (contemporary Christian music) sales were double those of U.S. Latin music last year and topped the combined numbers of jazz, classical, and New Age.” The author also cites the sales of the *Left Behind* book series and the *Veggie Tales* children's videos, together selling over 50 million units, and concludes, “This gospel-fueled fun is now a booming business and a cornerstone of American culture.”

What other culture has such Christian influence? None of this proves that Christianity is right. However, it does show that it is relevant to *contemporary* American culture. It is a valid topic for public school students to learn, precisely because it is such a significant part of the culture.

When I speak around the country on “Integrating Faith and the Public Schools Without Mixing Church and State,” I sometimes show the audience maps of various countries around the world. As I show them a picture of India and have them decide the dominant religion (Hinduism), I ask them if it would be reasonable to teach students something of the Hindu faith in order for them to have a better understanding of the Indian culture. They nod in agreement. I then show them a map of Laos and ask them the same question about Buddhism. They agree that students should learn about it. I continue on with a map of Syria and Israel, and, again, they agree that students should learn about Islam and Judaism in order to truly understand those cultures. Finally, I show them a map of the United States and they chuckle at the “gotcha” of my illustration. Too often, due to our multicultural orientation in schools, we agree with the idea that it is acceptable – even necessary – to teach students about the non-Christian religions of other countries, but we fail to make the

logical conclusion that this needs to be done with Christianity when teaching students about America.

It is reasonable to assume that American schools should teach American students about American culture, and that includes teaching them about the significant role of Christianity, both historically and currently.

Because society has become more diverse over the years, many educators assume it is inappropriate to give Christianity greater attention than other religions. This may come from a sense of “fairness.” However, it is false to believe that to be fair means to give equal time in the curriculum to other religions. “Fair” doesn't necessarily mean “equal.” For example, a first-year teacher may teach the same number of students as does the veteran teacher. They may teach the same subject and grade the same number of papers, but they will not get equal pay for equal work. They will get paid a salary proportional to their years of service. In another illustration, while states receive equal representation by having two U.S. Senators, they receive proportional representation through the House of Representatives. Thus, larger states have greater representation than smaller ones – unequal but fair.

When teachers teach about the contributions of Christianity to society, they are not giving Christianity unfair atten-



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tion; they are merely teaching a cultural fact. Unfortunately, in the name of neutrality, many educators teach an imbalanced view of American culture. For instance, as Christmas approaches, we often hear from parents seeking advice on how to handle their schools' bias against Christmas. For example, a mom from Cupertino, California, wrote to us, "Our experience is just the very common 'Winter Holidays' emphasis: a week of Kwanza, a week of Hanukkah, a week of traditions from around the world, but no Christian history at all."

Do the teachers in that school truly want to convey to students that Kwanza and Hanukkah are more representative of American culture than is Christmas, or that holiday traditions with a religious tone happen outside the United States but not within it? That is the not-so-subtle implication of these cultural lessons.

The sad irony is that while many teachers starve their students of learning about the cultural significance of Christianity, educational leaders from across the political spectrum recognize the academic legitimacy of teaching students about Christianity. This leads me to my second major point: that helping students appreciate the values and contributions of Christianity is academically legitimate.

ACADEMICALLY LEGITIMATE

The mother of a Tyler, Texas public school student wrote to me: "My son is a sixth-grader in middle school. When he stood up to give a book report on Psalms, his teacher stopped him from reading Psalm 23. She said he's not allowed to read the Bible out loud in school. When I talked to the teacher (who is a Christian), she said it is not allowed."

Reading the Psalm in this context is not only legal; it is academically legitimate. The Twenty-third Psalm is one of the most recognized passages of Scripture. Aside from its theological meaning, its poetic style makes it a thing of literary beauty. When doing a book report on the Psalms, it is certainly a legitimate academic exercise to actually read a psalm as an example. Unfortunately, for many teachers (even Christians), Christianity is not considered a legitimate academic subject for public school students. This view of neutrality leads them to censorship rather than education.

For such educators, it may be hard to believe that state school officials and various education leaders actually encourage teaching students about Christianity. For example, in 1995, the

California Department of Education published a handbook on teaching about religion and morality. It states:

"The California public schools need have no hesitancy in teaching about religion. To the contrary, understanding the historical contributions of religion and key elements of world religions is essential to a complete knowledge of our civilization and to being a well-educated person. To provide students with a full and appropriate education, the public schools are obligated to teach about religion, though they must not sponsor or advocate the practice of religion...."

"No single system of religion or morality may be prescribed by government. However, school personnel should help students to (1) recognize the sources of morality in history, law, and experience; and (2) appreciate the significant contributions of religion, including respect for the sacredness of human life and belief in the freedom of worship. Prominent in the shaping of fundamental moral values in our society has been the influence of the Judeo-Christian heritage."¹²

It is worth noting the strong language the California school officials use when describing an educator's responsibility—words such as, "no hesitancy," "essential,"

“obligated,” and “should.” The handbook goes on to state: “School personnel are obliged to help students develop an informal understanding and appreciation of the role of religion in the lives of Americans and the people of other nations.”¹³

In justifying such strong language, state education officials remark:

“Study of religion in America is fundamental to understanding and appreciating the American heritage. America is a land of many races, cultures, languages, and religions. Students should learn about the contributions of religion to America.”¹⁴

Is there any doubt that this means teaching students about the significant contributions Christianity has made to America? The state officials continue:

“They should study about the principal religious figures, groups, issues, and trends; fundamental beliefs contributing to the growth of democracy and the democratic process; the background of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; the problem of religious persecution; and the value of religious freedom.”¹⁵

My point is not merely to focus on California’s official openness to teaching about Christianity. *It is that California’s educational leaders have made the academic case for the rest of the nation that teaching about Christianity is legitimate for the public school classroom. Such legitimacy doesn’t end at the California border.*

Many people will be surprised to discover that California educators also have the freedom to teach students about intelligent design and even divine creation. As one might expect, the State Board of Education’s official policy on the teaching of natural sciences prohibits teaching theories of divine creation in the science classroom. However, they add this statement:

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“Discussions of divine creation, ultimate purposes, or ultimate causes (the why) are appropriate to the history-social science and English-language arts curricula.”¹⁶

While this sort of bias is frustrating, educators should not think that students are prohibited from learning about the exciting discussions now circulating regarding intelligent design. In fact, because such discussions are relegated to the social science and language arts classrooms, teachers are freer to introduce students to the biblical story of creation. They can discuss with students the impact that belief in a Creator has had on American concepts of liberty, equality, and morality.

For instance, a history teacher could introduce a unit on the Judeo-Christian story of creation. He could read from Genesis and then introduce a few key ideas from scientists regarding intelligent design—not a heavy-handed lesson, just a few important ideas that will help students think more critically about what they hear in biology class.

A quick look at the current California Social Studies standards reveals a number of ways that state officials not only

encourage educators to teach about Christian thought, they expect it. It is doubtful that many teachers (if any) actually teach to the following standards. Among these standards, students are expected to learn:

5th Grade – “This course focuses on one of the most remarkable stories in history: the creation of a new nation, peopled by immigrants from all parts of the globe and governed by institutions founded on the Judeo-Christian heritage, the ideals of the Enlightenment, and English traditions of self-government.”

6th Grade – “...students should read and discuss Biblical literature that is part of the literary heritage and ethical teachings of Western civilization; for example, stories about the Creation, Noah, the Tower of Babel, Abraham, the Exodus, the Ten Commandments, Ruth and Naomi, David, and Daniel and the Lion’s Den; selections from the Psalms and Proverbs; and the Hebrew people’s concept of wisdom, righteousness, law, and justice.”

6th Grade – “Note the origins of Christianity in the Jewish Messianic prophecies, the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as described in the New Testament, and the contribution of St. Paul the Apostle to the definition and spread of Christian beliefs (e.g., belief in the Trinity, resurrection, salvation).”

7th Grade – “Students should closely examine the Protestant Reformation and become familiar with the religious beliefs of Martin Luther and John Calvin as well as the history of the English Bible.”

8th Grade – “This year’s study of American history begins with a selective review of significant developments of the colonial era with emphasis on the development of democratic institutions founded in Judeo-Christian religious thinking, in Enlightenment philosophy, and in English parliamentary traditions.”

11th Grade – “Analyze the similarities and differences between the ideolo-

gies of Social Darwinism and Social Gospel (e.g., using biographies of William Graham Sumner, Billy Sunday, Dwight L. Moody).¹⁷

It would be refreshing if children in church Sunday schools were taught this thoroughly about their faith. Again, it does not matter that other states may not have the same standards. My point is that a state as liberal as California has made the academic case that it is legitimate for public schools to teach students very thorough details about the contributions and value of Christianity.

Even the National Education Association agrees. The union's 2000-2001 resolution E-7 states:

"The National Education Association believes that educational materials should accurately portray the influence of religion in our nation and throughout the world."¹⁸

Is California the only state making the case that teaching students about Christianity is academically legitimate? Not at all. Massachusetts is a notoriously liberal state, yet its Social Studies standards expect students to "explain the meaning of 'all men are created equal,'" to "learn and compare basic tenets of world religions and their influence on individual and public life as well as the course of history;" to "examine the influences of religions in law, education, the arts, and social norms;" to trace how the Reformation helped shape western democracy; and to "discuss how the ideas of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed could motivate entire peoples to action."¹⁹ The ideas of Jesus? What a tremendous opportunity to show how biblical truth changed the world!

In Colorado, fifth grade students are to "describe religious developments in United States history." In Florida, students are to know "the significant ideas and texts of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, their

spheres of influence in the age of expansion, and their reforms in the 19th century." In Texas, school officials want to be sure that the "student understands the relationships among religion, philosophy, and culture. The student is expected to: (a) explain the relationship among religious ideas, philosophical ideas, and cultures; and (b) explain the significance of religious holidays and observances such as Christmas and Easter, Ramadan, and Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah in selected contemporary societies."

However, simply because standards include teaching about Christianity does not mean that teachers are including it in their lessons, or if they are, that they are giving it proper attention. It is very likely that many teachers are unaware of the degree to which state officials expect them to teach about Christianity. For instance, a California teacher showed me the results of a survey she had conducted of 100 colleagues for a Master's Degree project. She found that 91 percent were not aware that the state's department of education had published a handbook on teaching about religion. Eighty-three percent indicated that they did not know *any* public school educator who included topics about religion in their curriculum, and 63 percent thought that teaching about religion is not even permissible in California classrooms!

It is findings like this that led one instructor of student teachers to write in *Teacher Education Quarterly*:

"Several studies suggest that as teacher educators we certainly do a thorough job of warning our prospective teachers against establishing [religion]... However, the same studies indicate that we do a rather poor job of letting our intending teachers know: (a) what they can do regarding teaching about religion in the classroom, and (b) what their students can say, given their limited but nevertheless free exercise of religious expression in the classroom."²⁰

ACADEMIC VIEWPOINT BIAS

The exclusion of Christianity from the curriculum is not just limited to lessons on the history of Christianity. There is the often-unnoticed problem of excluding a Christian worldview from an academic topic. A worldview is the way in which you look at the world, not merely the bits of information you learn about the world. Regarding history textbooks for example, in his book, *Religion and American Education*, Warren Nord points out:

"More important than the particular religious topics discussed or not discussed, and the relative amount of space they receive, is the worldview within which the historian works."²¹

He illustrates this by quoting a textbook account of the Hebrews from their Egyptian enslavement to the divided kingdom. All the names and dates are correct, as is the order of events. The problem Nord draws attention to is that the textbook left out "what is most important to the scriptural version: the role of God in shaping history. The meaning of the story is completely lost in the textbook; it becomes, in effect, a different story."²²

Nord shows that this is a problem across the curriculum. For instance, economics is taught with the assumption that there is only a secular way to think about money. The topic of economics involves our beliefs about human nature, materialism, consumerism, social values, and charity. Yet, typically, students are taught that economic decisions only involve cost-benefit analysis, supply and demand, and fulfillment of personal gratification.

Home economics is another academic subject which Nord points out is most often taught as though secularism is the only perspective worth learning. After reviewing eight home economics textbooks, he writes:

"Each follows the same pattern, beginning with one or several chapters

defining human nature, values, and decision making before moving on to discussions of dating, marriage, abortion, child rearing, the family, and what I take to be more traditional home economics fare. Needless to say, religion has had a great deal to say about such things, though one would never guess it from reading these books....None of the books even hints that there are religious conceptions of human nature, values, or decision making that may differ in significant ways from the views presented."²³

In most science classes, of course, evolution reigns as the only view worth studying. But there are other worldview issues at stake. Nord points out that science classes approach life from a particular perspective and lead students to assume that the scientific perspective explains all that is real. He states, "In spite of the reservations of some scientists, science is typically taught as fully adequate to explain nature."²⁴ He points out, however, that science looks only at causes, not purposes; and that its version of reality has no place for God's intervention. Science has affected the way history and social studies are taught in that life is seen as merely the result of cause and effect. Moral demands are not made from an eternal God. There is no Storyteller behind the story of history. Religion may be fine for some, but it is only the manifestation of mankind's need for fulfillment. Everything, including the yearning of our souls, can be explained naturally.

However, because there are other explanations of reality, because Christianity has impacted the way our society looks at nature, life, human relationships, history, economics, decision making, the family, and other topics

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addressed across the curriculum, it is academically legitimate to teach about the Christian perspective.

As we have seen, state education officials from two very liberal states agree that students should know a significant amount about the contributions of Christianity. You would think that this would be enough to give educators the confidence to teach about it. Still, the question will be raised, "Yes, but is it legal?"

LEGALLY PERMITTED

A mother from La Canada, California, wrote me: "My fourth-grader was told in art class (while designing art depicting the California history of the Spanish missions) that, 'You may not draw a cross...because this is a public school and we are directed by our country's separation-of-church-and-state policy.'"

Does such a policy exist? No. In fact, courts have stated just the opposite. In the Supreme Court case of *Abington School District v. Schempp*, Justice Clark, writing the majority opinion stated:

"...the state may not establish a 'religion of secularism' in the sense of affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion, thus 'preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe'....it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment."²⁵

In his concurring opinion, Justice Brennan wrote:

“Indeed, whether or not the Bible is involved, it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion. To what extent, and at what points in the curriculum, religious materials should be cited are matters which the courts ought to entrust very largely to the experienced officials who superintend our Nation’s public schools....Any attempt to impose rigid limits upon the mention of God or references to the Bible in the classroom would be fraught with dangers.”²⁶

Also concurring with the majority opinion, Justice Goldberg wrote:

“...untutored devotion to the concept of neutrality can lead to the invocation or approval of results which partake not simply of that noninterference and non-involvement with the religious which the Constitution commands, but of a brooding and pervasive devotion to the secular, and a passive or even active hostility to the religious. Such results are not only not compelled by the Constitution, but, it seems to me, are prohibited by it.”²⁷

It is common for public schools to forbid or discourage the singing of religious Christmas carols. However, this may come as a surprise to the Supreme Court. In the case of *Lynch v. Donnelly*, involving the public display of a nativity scene, the justices commented that during Christmas, “people are taking

note of the season with Christmas hymns and carols in public schools.”²⁸ The Court assumed school children were singing religious Christmas carols!

In the Federal court case of *Florey v. Sioux Falls School District*, the ACLU was twice defeated in its attempt to have the school district’s policy on recognizing holidays declared unconstitutional. The court upheld the district’s policy:

“Music, art, literature and drama having religious themes or basis are permitted as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday.”²⁹

The Court further agreed that it is permissible for teachers to use “religious symbols” such as a cross or nativity scene “as a teaching aid or resource provided such symbols are displayed as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature.”

While this may irritate some students or parents who think schools should be religion-free zones, the Court concluded, “It would be literally impossible to develop a public school curriculum that did not in some way affect the religious or nonreligious sensibilities of some of the students or their parents.”³⁰

The National PTA acknowledges the legality of teaching about Christianity in public school classrooms. They write:

“The Supreme Court has indicated many times that teaching about religion, as distinguished from religious indoctrination, is an important part of a complete education. The public school’s approach to religion in the curriculum must be academic, not devotional.”

“Study about religion belongs in the curriculum where it naturally arises. On the secondary level, the social studies, literature, and the arts offer many opportunities for the inclusion of information about religions—their ideas and practices. On the elementary level, natural opportunities arise in discussions about family and community life and in instruction about festivals and different cultures.

“Religion may also be studied in special courses. Some secondary schools, for example, offer electives in ‘World Religions,’ ‘Bible as/in History or Literature,’ and ‘Religion in America.’”³¹



Even the Anti-Defamation League acknowledges the legal permissibility of teaching about Christianity in public schools. They ask: “May school officials teach about religion in public schools?” and they answer:

“Yes. Teaching about religion is permissible when it is presented as a part of the secular educational program. Such programs should teach the role of religion in the historical, cultural, economic and social development of the United States and other nations and should instill tolerance and respect for a pluralistic society.”³²

What is the distinction between teaching about religion and instruction in, or the teaching of, religion? The California Department of Education offers this distinction:

“To teach about religion is not to instruct in religion. Teaching about religion embraces the study of various religions; appreciation of the nature and variety of religious experience historically and currently; information on past and present sources, views, and

behavior of religious persons or groups; and the influence of religion on cultures and civilizations. Instruction in religion, by contrast, is to seek acceptance of and commitment to a particular religion, including a non-religion, such as secularism.”³³

Lest someone think that teaching about religion requires neutrality bordering on indifference, the state officials also write that to learn about religion is “to recognize the immense importance of religion to the American heritage.”³⁴

Lessons about Christianity can—and should—be taught with enthusiasm, but it is important for Christian public school educators to refrain from evangelizing in the classroom. Appeals for students to make faith commitments are not permitted.

I once had a teacher tell me, “If I can’t tell my students that they need to make a decision for Christ, well, then I should get out of teaching and become a missionary.” He’s right. If he can’t control himself, he should leave the profession. However, I urged him to channel his enthusiasm into giving students an academic appreciation for the values and contributions

of Christianity. He could do a lot during the course of his career by touching the lives of thousands of students, rather than go down in a blaze of glory and be fired for stepping over legal boundaries. This would not only mute his voice, it would be a poor witness to the school administrators, and create a chilling effect for other Christian teachers in his district.

We must have the integrity to honor the trust that parents give us when we teach their children. If Christian public school teachers try to use their classrooms for witnessing opportunities, they prove to the world that Christians cannot be trusted.

Here’s a general rule of thumb: When there is a legitimate academic reason for teaching students about some aspect of Christianity (and there are ample opportunities to do so), and it can be done without an admonition to devotion or acceptance, it is permissible.

So far, I have argued that helping students understand and appreciate the value and contributions of Christianity is culturally relevant, academically legitimate, and legally permitted. However, there is a fourth reason why we must do this: it is morally imperative.

“A large meta-analysis of U.S. adolescent data that controlled for sociodemographic variables indicates that religiousness decreases risk of suicide ideation and attempts in youths.”

Source: “Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative,” Institute of Medicine’s Committee on Pathophysiology & Prevention of Adolescent & Adult Suicide; Board of Neuroscience and Behavioral Health; National Academy Press (2002; Washington, D.C.).

MORALLY IMPERATIVE

Today’s young people are hurting. Moral aimlessness and spiritual disconnection have left many of today’s youth emotionally, morally, and spiritually lost.

Unfortunately, we also see forces hostile to Christian values gaining a stronger voice and putting pressure on schools to promote the very things that perpetuate this crisis among today’s children and youth.

Some, such as Harvard’s Samuel Huntington, are now asserting that a new Dark Ages of barbarism is descending on the world.³⁵

While school officials and educators cannot promote religious devotion, they need not make their schools “religion-free zones.” They can invite students to live by the moral dictates of their faith at school; and they can inspire students to respect the many benefits religion has brought to the world.

Besides this, new research indicates that involvement in religion is the single best antidote for unhealthy, risky, and anti-social behavior among students.

RELIGION AND BEHAVIOR

The National Study of Youth and Religion, a research project conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, found that students involved in religion are less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or try marijuana. They are less likely to fight, steal, or vandalize property. Religious

students are less likely to skip school, be sent to detention or be suspended.³⁶

The researchers report, “In sum, regular service attendance, high subjective importance of faith and many years spent participating in religious youth groups are clearly associated with safer, healthier, more constructive lifestyles for U.S. teenagers—even after holding constant the effects of nine other control variables.”

The researchers acknowledge that determining cause and effect is difficult. For example, did religion cause the reduction in unhealthy behavior, or are the families of students who are more wholesome drawn to religion? They conclude, “What is clear in this report’s findings, however, is that, for whatever reasons, religiously involved U.S. teenagers engage in fewer risk behaviors, get into less trouble and participate in more socially constructive activities than do less religiously involved youth.”

The researchers examined data related to twelfth-grade students and various risky behaviors. Here is a summary of their findings:

1. Twenty percent of high school seniors smoke regularly. However, this number drops dramatically to 12% for those who attend services weekly or more often.
2. Regarding teenage drinking, 35% of students indicated they never drank to the point of getting drunk, but among students who attended church weekly or more often, or among

students who said religion was “very important,” 50% indicated they had never been drunk.

3. Fifty-four percent of students said they had never tried marijuana. However, among students who attended church weekly or more, or for whom religion was “very important,” 70 percent had never tried marijuana.
 4. When asked if they had vandalized property within the last 12 months, 22% of students for whom religion was “not important” said that they had engaged in vandalism. Among students who said religion was “very important,” the number dropped by half to 11 percent.
 5. Most seniors are never sent to the principal’s office for misbehavior (71%), and students who attend religious services weekly or for whom religion is “very important” are less likely to get into trouble (77%). Likewise, on average, 75% of students have never been suspended or expelled. This number rises to 82% for those who attend religious services frequently.
- In other positive areas, such as community service, daily exercise and sports, and participation in student government, students who attend religious services weekly or for whom religion is “very important” indicate involvement above the average involvement of their classmates.

STEPS TOWARD INCLUSION

Based on their own experience, educators and administrators may agree with these findings, but lament that as public school educators they can do nothing about the religious involvement of their students.

However, it is not necessarily the case that public schools can do nothing on this topic. Can a school encourage religious attendance and promote the importance of religion without getting unconstitutionally entangled in religion? I believe they can. Here are four suggestions for how educators and schools can do this:

1. Give greater prominence in the curriculum to the contributions of religion in society. In many schools over the past 30 years, religion has been ignored or even banished. This view is reflected in that memo on holidays to which I referred previously, “Thanksgiving is a national custom. Please try to avoid religious connotations.” At best, in many schools it gets a slight nod of recognition as some quaint folkway of a few people.
A school can recognize the value of religion in society without promoting religious devotion. To argue that recognizing the contributions of religion is automatically promoting religious devotion, you have to also argue that recognizing the contributions of any past President is automatically promoting his political party.
2. Inform students of their religious liberties on campus and create a welcome and inclusive campus environment. In 1998, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidelines on religious expression in public schools. Education Secretary Richard Riley gave this admoni-

tion to school officials:

“I encourage schools to actively take steps to inform parents and students about religious expression in school using these guidelines.”

With such resounding support, a school principal can confidently have teachers explain to students their religious rights at the beginning of the school year. This may, at first, sound like a radical idea. After all, that would involve actually explaining to students things like their right to pray, to talk about their faith with classmates, to express their faith in class assignments, to wear clothing with religious symbols, and to read their religious scriptures at school. Just the thought of having every teacher in a school do this is enough to cause some administrators to reach for the antacid.

But just imagine the impact this could have on the moral climate of the school. As we have already seen, the majority of students at every grade level say their faith is important. If the school makes a point of saying, in essence, “We welcome you to live your faith on campus,” the climate will be more inclusive for students of faith. To download a copy of the USDOE’s guidelines go to www.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html

3. Form appropriate ties of cooperation to faith-based organizations in the community. Schools need not be sanctuaries of secularism. They can work effectively with faith-based organizations to meet the needs of students. Schools can do this with after-school student clubs, religious released-time programs, after-school sports activities in a local church gymnasium, as well as tutoring and mentoring

programs. Faith-based organizations can address the moral and spiritual needs of students in ways that schools cannot.

4. Include references to religion in lessons and school communications. Educators should include “church or temple” when asking students about weekend activities. School materials and classroom discussions should include “youth pastor, priest, or rabbi” when referring to seeking guidance and advice. Campus “Career Days” should include representatives of various religious denominations. In other words, religious activity and people of faith should be considered an obvious and common part of the local community. The schools should not exclude these aspects of people’s lives.

Currently, many schools are sending the wrong signal to students. Because public schools are too often viewed as “religion-free zones,” they subtly imply to students that religion (and the conduct it motivates) is not all that important to one’s development. On the other hand, by openly affirming students’ religious rights, including references to religion more frequently, and integrating it appropriately in the curriculum, schools will affirm the value of religion already felt by many students.

Social critic Morris Berman in his book, *The Twilight of American Culture*, quotes Alexis de Tocqueville: “When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness.”

Who will keep the flame of civilization alive as our culture sinks deeper into a new Dark Age? Who will pass along to this generation of students the value and contributions of the Christian faith, Christian people, and Christian ideals?

Christianity has had a profoundly positive impact on our society, on world history, in every field of academics, and in people’s lives. Paul L. Maier, professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University, writes:



“Not only countless individual lives but civilization itself was transformed by Jesus Christ. In the ancient world, his teachings elevated brutish standards of morality, halted infanticide, enhanced human life, emancipated women, abolished slavery, inspired charities and relief organizations, created hospitals, established orphanages, and founded schools.

“In medieval times, Christianity almost single-handedly kept classical culture alive through copying manuscripts, building libraries, moderating warfare through truce days, and providing dispute arbitration. It was Christians who invented colleges and universities, dignified labor as a divine vocation, and extended the light of civilization to barbarians on the frontiers.”

“In the modern era, Christian teaching, properly expressed, advanced science, instilled concepts of political and social and economic freedom, fostered justice, and provided the greatest single source of inspiration for the magnificent achievements in art, architecture, music, and literature that we treasure to the present day.”³⁸

Students need to hear this. However, under current conditions, few of them do. Most students won’t hear about it from the music they hear, the books they read, the movies and television shows they watch.

The only way this generation of young people will hear of the value and contributions of Christianity—the only way they will know of it—is if those who hold it dear tell them about it, recount the stories, recall the heroes, recite the principles, and reveal its beauty by living it right in front of them.

Our mission must be to awaken people to the problem and inspire them with the opportunity—the opportunity to be the keepers of civilization; to pass along as a precious gem, the beauty that Christianity brings to the world; to preserve our past, offer tools for life’s challenges today, and provide hope in an uncertain future.

There are millions of Christians within the public schools. They can confidently exercise their constitutional freedoms to tell people of Christian values and Christianity’s contribution to society, the world, and academic subjects.

A VISION FOR MANY GATEWAYS

Teachers act as gateways when they educate students about the contributions of Christians to the academic subject matter; how Christian values shaped America; why Christianity is so important to Western Civilization; and that there are other ways to look at the world than only from a secular perspective.

School administrators and board members act as gateways when they inform students, parents, and educators about students’ religious liberties on campus. They stand as guardians of the gate of free speech and academic freedom when they close the gates on those who would attack and undermine Christian expression and values in schools.

When parents act as gateways, they help their children appreciate the heritage of Christianity and advocate its teaching in their schools. They work to ensure their children learn within a wholesome environment where their faith and values are honored. They



89%
Percentage of alcoholics who reported they had “lost interest in religion during their teenaged years.”

Source: "Religious Commitment and Health Status," American Medical Association, 1998.

protect their children’s religious freedoms at school, and they watch for opportunities to share the love of Christ with educators in their children’s lives.

For too long, we have allowed the “politically correct” crowd to set the agenda – their agenda – and dominate the conversation. There is no reason they should have this exclusive right! Millions of Christians are already involved in public schools every day! Our philosophy of life is legitimate, attractive, and defensible. We must articulate it well.

Our mission must be to unshackle people from their fear of violating the law and from the embarrassment they have been made to feel for voicing a Christian perspective in public. We must do this by not only educating them on the law, but also by equipping them with

creative tools and methods to express themselves in their areas of influence regarding academic, moral, and spiritual issues.

We must take this message of freedom to every educator, every school official, every parent, every youth worker, and every student in the country. I envision public schools as learning communities enriched by the lawful and appropriate expression of Christian values and ideals, where—while acknowledging shortcomings in Christian history—students learn that Christianity has done tremendous good for them in this world.

In too many schools, Christianity is censored out of the curriculum and off the campus due to hostility, indifference, or fear.

Every day in America’s public schools,

teachers are afraid to merely teach the truth. They fear being seen as “imposing” their religion on others. They fear being frowned upon by teachers or parents or administrators. They fear getting in trouble or even losing their jobs. But helping students gain an academic appreciation for the value of Christianity, and helping them see that there are other ways to view the world than merely through secular glasses, is culturally relevant, academically legitimate, legally permitted and morally imperative.

For these reasons, it is time for the fear to stop and the work to begin.

Eric Buehrer is the president of Gateways to Better Education—an organization fostering an academic appreciation for the contributions Christianity has brought to the world and to America.

¹ A. James Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985) p. 340.
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³ Reichley, p. 95.
⁴ Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) 1998, p. 84.
⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996) p. 70.
⁶ Alvine J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001); p. 14.
⁷ George Barna, “Beliefs: General Religious,” Barna Research Online, www.barna.org, (9-5-01).
⁸ The Barna Research Group puts the figure at 40% while a 1997 study from the University of Michigan places the figure at 44%. George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), p. 213-14; and “Study of Worldwide Rates of Religiosity, Church Attendance,” News Release (12/10/1997).
⁹ The 1997 University of Michigan study (see above) puts the figure at 27% while Peter Brierley, a British pollster, puts the figure at 8%. Peter Goodenough, “British Churches Face Worst Attendance Decline Ever,” CNSNews.com (December 7, 1999). See also www.christian-research.org.uk.
¹⁰ George Barna, “African Americans,” Barna Research Online, www.barna.org (9-5-01).

¹¹ Radio station figures are from the 2001 National Religious Broadcasting Directory of Religious Media (Manassas, VA: National Religious Broadcasters, 2001), p. 579.
¹² *Handbook on the Rights and Responsibilities of School Personnel and Students in the Areas of Providing Moral, Civic, and Ethical Education, Teaching About Religion, Promoting Responsible Attitudes and Behaviors, and Preventing and Responding to Hate Violence* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 1995) p.16.
¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
¹⁴ *Ibid.*
¹⁵ *Ibid.*
¹⁶ “State Board of Education Policy on the Teaching of Natural Sciences,” (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education) www.cde.ca.gov/cilbranch/cfir/drsctfw.pdf.
¹⁷ *History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*, 1998 (Sacramento, CA: California Dept. of Education) Found at www.cde.ca.gov/board/pdf/history.pdf.
¹⁸ www.nea.org/resolutions/00/00e-7.html.
¹⁹ *Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework, IX: Learning Standards and Examples PreK-12*. This can be found at www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/history/archive/hist97/hissociX.html.
²⁰ “Cultivating Spiritual Reflectivity in Teachers,” Clifford Mayes, *Teacher Education Quarterly* (Spring 2001) p. 15
²¹ Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995) p.142.
²² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.
²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 285.
²⁵ *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. at 225 (1963).
²⁶ *Abington*, 374 U.S. at 300-01.
²⁷ *Abington*, 374 U.S. 203, 306.
²⁸ *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 686 (1984)
²⁹ *Florey v. Souix Falls School District* 49-5, 464 F. Supp. 911 (D. S.D. 1979), aff’d, 619 F.2d 1311 (8th Cir., cert.denied, 449 U.S. 987 (1980).
³⁰ *Ibid.*
³¹ “A Parent’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools, The National Congress of Parents and Teachers.” For free copies of this pamphlet go to www.fac.org.
³² “ABCs of Religion in the Public Schools: Religion in the Curriculum,” from the Anti-Defamation League web site at www.adl.org.
³³ *Handbook on the Rights...* (see footnote 12); p.19
³⁴ *Ibid.*
³⁵ Huntington, p. 321.
³⁶ The research in this section comes from Religion and American Adolescent Delinquency, Risk Behaviors and Constructive Social Activities, by Christian Smith and Robert Faris; A Research Project of the National Study of Youth and Religion; 2002. For more information: www.youthandreligion.org.
³⁷ Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000) p. 52.
³⁸ Schmidt, p. 8.