PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE

FIRST AMENDMENT CENTER

TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

THE BIBLE CONTROVERSY

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MELISSA ROGERS: This session is about the Bible controversy. As we mentioned earlier, constitutional interpretation indicates that it is permissible to study sacred texts in an objective, academic manner, but, as usual, the devil is in the details, so to speak. There has been a concerted push on the part of some to teach about the Bible in public schools, and that's one of the reasons why we're focusing on this issue particularly.

We're also focusing on this issue because it has raised some of the most difficult and complex questions in this area of study of sacred texts. These issues include: Are we taking what is really more of a Sunday school curriculum and importing it into the public schools, and thus not teaching the Bible in an academic and neutral way? What kind of courses should or must be offered along with the study of the Bible? What interpretation of the Bible would be used in the classroom and how would it be supplemented with other materials? Some are concerned, at least educationally, that it would be inappropriate or inadvisable to offer only one course on sacred texts, if that course is focused solely on the Bible.

We have a great panel to talk about this issue with us. I will quickly introduce them, and then we'll launch into the discussion. In the last session, we were talking about having religious leaders with us, and we do have some at the conference. I'm glad particularly that Barrett Duke is with us today, because he used to be a pastor in his former life, and I imagine he still gets in the pulpit every now and then, even though his principal work now is with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission [http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/ERLC.asp] of the Southern Baptist Convention. He serves as their vice president for research and the director of the research institute of that organization. His work for the institute includes editing a journal, *Perspectives on Worldview Foundations*, which is very appropriate for our discussion here. He is also an adjunct professor of Old Testament for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's extension school in Nashville. We're very glad that he joined us today. He brings a very important perspective to this discussion.

Sitting to his left is Judith Schaeffer, who is deputy legal director of People for the American Way Foundation [http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/]. She specializes in a wealth of church-state issues: First Amendment issues broadly speaking, and also discrimination and civil rights matters. She has been a partner at a law firm, and she has worked very hard on these issues, specifically on the issue of teaching the Bible in public schools. She contributed heavily to this publication that Charles played such a large role in producing, *The Bible in Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide* [http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=3978]. We're grateful for her experience. She also drafted some reports for People for the American Way on the experience in the Florida schools with teaching the Bible, titled *The Good Book Taught Wrong* [http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=1345].

The third member of our panel is David Levenson. He is also an expert on the Florida situation regarding teaching about the Bible in their public schools. He currently serves as University Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Department of Religion at Florida State University. He teaches courses about the New Testament, early Christianity and Judaism, as well as teaching Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. He has written some reports about the Florida experience and served as one of the chief drafters of the Florida Department of Education guidelines for teaching about the Bible. So we're very grateful for his experience as well.

Also with us is Christopher Thacker, associate director of the Bible Literacy Project [http://www.biblecurriculum.org/], that, among other things, is working to develop an elective course on the Bible. We have a really great group to discuss these issues with us, and I'm going to start with Christopher, since he and his organization do so much to advocate teaching about the Bible in public schools. I want to give him the chance right off the bat to make the case for why we should teach about the Bible in public schools.

CHRISTOPHER THACKER: Thank you, Melissa.

I am one of those people who advocates the teaching of the Bible as an elective at the high school level. I do so, first of all, because the current status quo is unacceptable. A Gallup poll from a few years ago indicates that about eight percent of public schools deal with the Bible, but I suspect it actually may be fewer than eight percent that deal with the Bible seriously as the actual text at any point in their curriculum. I think that that null curriculum, that absence of the Bible, is certainly part of the naked public square that was commented on and criticized earlier. It's also an amazing educational and cultural oversight, which in the context of our history and our cultures, is almost unfathomable.

And I don't think it's neutral. I think it's a question of fairness. By not mentioning the Bible, a book that is arguably the single most influential text in the English-speaking world, in the Western world, perhaps the single most influential work of literature, however you define the Bible, in the world, period, that's not a neutral message. It sends at least one of two clear messages to students and to society. The message is either, this work really isn't important – its influence doesn't really matter, at least not enough to be included in the basic education that every American should have – or, it's so dangerous, it's so radioactive, that we just can't touch it. It can't be dealt with in a civil way. It can't be dealt with in a responsible way, so we just have to leave it out and hope you pick it up somewhere else.

I don't think that those messages are true, nor are they messages that our school system should be sending. I think it's clear that, first of all, as a matter of cultural or educational literacy, all English-speakers, regardless of their faith-tradition or lack thereof, to be considered nominally educated, must know something about what the Bible is, what we mean when we say the Bible, and the differences among the different kinds of

Bibles, and how it's impacted culture over the years. I think our goal, and our argument, is that they should be educated about the Bible and literate about the Bible in the same way that we'd advocate Shakespeare literacy or constitutional literacy. That is, every educated person – and by educated I would hope that might mean, though I don't claim that it does now, every person with a high school diploma – should have an idea of what is in these collections of writings, would be familiar with it and its themes and narratives and characters. Again, just like we'd want an educated person to at least have a passing knowledge of who Shakespeare was and what his poetry and his plays are about, and for Americans, to know what the Constitution is. Again, I think the Bible is at least as important in our culture, and perhaps as constitutive of our culture, as either of the other two examples I've mentioned.

In the context of today's conference, I might also mention that I think there is an important element of religious literacy. If you're going to talk about religion in America, we're an increasingly pluralistic society, but we certainly do have a dominant set of traditions that must be part of the dialogue. And they look to what we know as the Bible.

We began this morning with Charles' putting up the quote from *Abington v. Schempp*, and in some sense, we set that as the beginning of the modern history of the debate about religion in public schools. *Abington v. Schempp*, when it did speak about content, the content the Court was asked to talk about was the Bible. There's a long history of the Bible as the centerpiece of the greater controversy. This panel's entitled "The Bible Controversy," which I thought was interesting. Controversy wasn't on the schedule until here. The controversy about religion in public schools and America, really, is, in many ways, a controversy about the Bible and how we have dealt with it and how we can deal with it. I think that's been true from the founding of American public education, which had something to do with the Bible as I recall, up until the present.

I think it's going to be very difficult in this country, and certainly in certain regions of this country, to convince school boards and parents that they should look at religion in the curriculum – a world religions curriculum or a comparative religions curriculum, for instance – if you haven't been able to show that you can deal effectively and openly with the Bible. I would like to suggest that perhaps one of the first steps, or one of the early steps, we need to take would be to find a way that we can deal with the Bible as an elective course that is offered in many schools. It's certainly not the only step; many, many steps, we've seen today, need to be taken before we can see religion in general taken seriously across the curriculum. That's what we're working toward, and I think it should happen.

MS. ROGERS: Thank you very much. I should mention that Matthew Hicks was also supposed to be on this panel, but he got sick and was unable to join us. We're sorry for that, and I know we all hope he feels better.

David Levenson, I wanted to ask you next about your perspective on some of the educational policy decision-points when one is considering teaching about the Bible. What are some of those decision-points and how have you come out on them?

DAVID LEVENSON: I think if we look at the chapter – and I know some of you have had a chance to read it already – on teaching about the Bible, several issues are highlighted. Which Bible do we use? Whose interpretation? Which translations? What is the connection between historical and literary analysis? I want to say a few things about each one of those, and I also hope it will give us some concrete issues to talk about, because I think that's very important. We need to move from the abstract in this discussion to be able to say in any given discussion, in any given class, when this issue comes up, How do we deal with it? What sort of problems emerge? I'm hoping to give us some information that we can discuss and chew on for a while.

The first thing I want to do is to make a distinction between Bible literacy and literacy about the Bible, i.e., what the Bible is. Christopher already mentioned that, and I think that's very important. The other thing that we need to have cultural literacy about is about the academic study of the Bible, because I think many people, including my colleagues in universities and even in religion departments, don't quite understand what is being done when the Bible is studied in an academic way. I think it's important for us to get that out on the table, because I think that does offer us a model that we can work with.

And as far as what seemed to be a lot of controversial issues, my argument would be that they are the least controversial issues. For instance, which Bible? Whose Bible? On this particular question, what you would do is simply list the canons of each community, you make the very important point that there are different collections considered authoritative and sacred by different communities. This is a very important point that can be made in a straightforward, objective way. Simply making the point that Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews have different canons is not a big deal, and it can be, certainly, understood by high school students. One can read some of the literature that's in, for instance, the apocryphal or deutero-canonical books, and I think it's important to read some selections from those as well. I think it's an important thing to point out at the beginning, so people understand what the Bible is and what the different Bibles are.

In terms of issues such as which translation, I think these really depend on the question of what the Bible is, and here I would introduce textual criticism. This might seem controversial, but I also did three summer institutes with high school teachers, and I think I was able to make it interesting, or show them how they could make it interesting in a classroom. By textual criticism, I mean it in a very narrow sense, looking at ancient manuscripts. When we talk about what the Bible is, we're not simply talking about the question of individual communities; we're talking about a whole lot of ancient manuscripts. And there are great Web sites for those. You can have students look at which books are in which manuscripts. You can take particular cases: For instance, there are four different endings to the Gospel of Mark. That's an interesting thing to point out. The Dead Sea Scrolls – there are all kinds of material on the Web for that.

There are also many different textual variants that make a difference culturally. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among human beings," or "Peace among human beings of goodwill." That makes a lot of difference in how you read it, but the difference is a very small sigma; actually it was probably written a little bit above the line. I think that can be made interesting.

Simply talking about the non-controversial facts of what the Bible is, I think, can be done, like with this question of textual criticism.

Then we go to the issue of translation, and everybody seems to be concerned about which translation are you going to use, or maybe we should use a selection and use all of the translations. Again, I think once you've gone through questions of canon and text, you are in a position to understand that the question of translation is not that big a deal if you're looking at it from an academic perspective. The differences among the various translations are not theological differences – we might find two or three places – but mostly it's differences in translation philosophy. Do we do a word for word translation? Try to get every word's equivalent, a Hebrew or Greek word to an English word? Or a more dynamic kind of translation? Those are the real differences, and I don't think, quite frankly, it matters a lot. Nor do I think it matters tremendously, once you've explained canon, to talk about which order or which books you use.

And I have real hesitancy about selections, because I think, first of all, you create your own canon at that point. You also make it very hard to do any real study of the Bible, because there are all sorts of references from one passage to the other throughout the Bible. I'd rather have students just have a Bible. They can bring their own. It might be possible for school districts to supply them as textbooks, but, really, once students learn what the Bible is, I would argue, and once our whole culture understands what the Bible is, the question of translation will not be so crucial.

The next issue, which I think is really the heart of the matter, is the biblical text. I think you can do a lot in high school, maybe even a higher percentage in high school with the facts that I mentioned about text, canon and translation, than in college even. But the focus is going to be on the biblical text. This is important, because studying the Bible gives you an opportunity to read a text, a very important text, closely. And it has a long history of close readings. Therefore, the primary method that should be used, as is recommended in the pamphlet and in the book here, is a literary method. This has the opportunity to be the least divisive and the most neutral in many ways. How do you understand the characters? What about the questions of plot? Themes? Structure? To know all of those things, you need to read the text. Those are not necessarily controversial issues.

Certainly you can talk about the religious themes as they appear in the text. But that also comes out of a literary analysis, I would say. The same thing with poetic language in the text: How do you read the prophets, writing in very specific, prophetic and poetic forms? It's important for people to understand that this is very difficult Hebrew. Anybody who has looked at the prophets in the English translation, and says,

Oh, wow, Isaiah, that makes a certain amount of sense, maybe. But then you look at it in Hebrew, and you see it's even more complex, because the translator had to make decisions. So I think you have to learn about the genres of the different types of literature that are found in the Bible.

And you have to do comparative analysis. I really like the point of comparative analysis, because we're always doing it, whether we're thinking about it or not. The Bible offers a lot of great opportunities. We've got the same scene very often in the Gospels, in all four Gospels sometimes and very often in the first three Gospels. We've got the same scene but with different details, so we can look at point of view. This is one of the things that the high school teachers were excited about; they realized how helpful this would be in their meeting their literary standards in analyzing a text. And these are texts some of the students are familiar with, and certainly they are important texts.

But then what about history? Where does history come in? I'm an historian, so it's important for me to get history in here. The field of biblical studies today is both an historical and a literary field, but when I say history, what we want to avoid is precisely what this book pointed out as the problem with the Bible history classes in Florida. We're not talking about historicity of individual events, we're talking about the historical context in which this literature was produced. If you don't understand something about that, you can't understand the literature. If you don't understand how early Christians were a persecuted minority in the Roman world, there's no way you can understand what the Gospel of Mark is trying to get at. If you don't understand something about the Jewish background of the first century, you can't read the New Testament with any degree of sophistication. You notice, most of my examples are coming from the New Testament here, but we could certainly multiply them in terms of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; and I'll say something about the name if anybody asks me later on.

So historical context is important. One of the things I do with my students in college – and I suggest to the teachers they do this – is focus a lot of their analysis on what would this text have meant to ancient Israelite communities or first-century Christian communities. That provides a space for the students, at a safe distance, to look at the text more academically. Whether you're a Christian or not, you can look at the New Testament and answer the question, "What did this mean to first-century Christians?" It's a leap of historical imagination, but that's an important thing in reading any literature from other times and places. This is an old distinction that, as far as I know, Krister Stendahl was the first to make, that distinction between what the Bible meant and what it means. So I think we can talk together in an academic, non-sectarian way about what the Bible meant in its ancient context.

I would add "what it has meant" as a third in between. This is another historical dimension, what the Bible has meant over history, and it raises the question, How do we approach that? Again, I think that's not necessarily the same as secular versus religious. (I have a little quibble with the distinction between religious and non-religious ways of looking at the Bible, and we can come back to that. I don't really think that's the question for us.) We do have the question of the history of the interpretation in various

historical communities. How do we approach that? I'm very nervous about that, I must say. I think some work needs to be done.

First of all, we don't want generalizations – this is a Catholic way of looking at the Bible; this is a Jewish way of looking at the Bible. People usually aren't well prepared to explain that. Unless you can explain it within the context of a discussion about the community, it doesn't really work very well. You can easily caricature something, especially some of the more interesting, from my perspective, points or ways of looking at the Bible. If we use *midrash*, for instance, one of the modes of interpretation used by Rabbis over the centuries and still used in the Jewish community, we have to be very careful. It is by no means the only Jewish way of looking at the Bible, and it's very complex and can be easily misunderstood. People can say, "Gosh, Jews believe that?" without really understanding the details and the complexity. This should take place in a comparative religion class when one does Judaism. I think that's where it would fit in best.

I'll leave this with one suggestion that Corri Patton from University of St. Thomas, who helped me with one of the institutes, made. Instead of talking about Jewish interpretations or Catholic interpretations or various Protestant interpretations, let's talk about specific figures. How did Augustine interpret this particular passage? I think you are on much safer ground, for instance, than talking about how Catholics interpreted a passage.

There are ways to do this in an academically responsible way. We've been doing it in colleges for a long time, teaching introductions to Hebrew Bible and New Testament. I know college and high school are different, but, on the other hand, I'm teaching a lot of 18 and 19-year-olds, and I can't believe there's that vast a difference from the 16 and 17-year-olds, although they're not going home and saying, "Can you believe what this teacher said in class today?" (Laughter.) It's a different – that's a very specific problem, I know.

I hope that gave us some specific cases to talk about.

MS. ROGERS: That's very helpful. Thank you. I want to go next to Judith and then to Barrett Duke. I know both of you have some concerns about the way the Bible has been taught about in public schools, for different reasons. I think it would be very helpful for each of you to describe your experiences and some of the concerns that have cropped up. You don't necessarily need to critique the way it has been presented by our other panelists, but the way you've seen it taught in practice.

JUDITH SCHAEFFER: I'd have to say that from my perspective and experience as a lawyer concerned with church-state separation and freedom of religion in the public schools, what David has described, as wonderful as it is, is public school utopia. It is, unfortunately, not something that, in our experience, we have seen. And I'm not saying that it can't happen. I'm hoping that, as a result of the kind of training

institutes that David and his colleagues have done in Florida, it's starting to happen a little bit in Florida.

The typical problem, however, is the nature of the impetus for the course, and if you are not starting out with a desire to create a course about the Bible in a public school that talks about the Bible in some of the ways that David is explaining, that's not what you will come out with. The Bible classes that exist, that we have seen in the public schools, principally in the South, in the so-called Bible belt, and I think that's a good name for it, are classes that started for purposes of Christian-faith formation. That really is the bottom line.

I should just preface my comments by saying that the People for the American Way Foundation believes it's very important to teach students in public schools about religion. We were among the first in the '80s to look at American history textbooks and what they were or weren't teaching about religion, and we found that they really weren't teaching about religion at all. The Pilgrims were described as wandering people, without any context about why they were wandering. We were very critical of that. We think it is very important as part of history – world history and American history. Students should not be illiterate about the role of religion and about what religion is.

We don't think schools should be a religion-free zone, or a Bible-free zone, or a scripture-free zone, but there's a right way and a wrong way. Our concern about what I'll call Bible-focused courses is both legal and educational. I'll give you an example of one very small lesson that we've seen in just about every Bible class we've been asked to look at, which is illustrative of both the legal and the educational problem. This is a fact: Bible students are told it is a fact that the Bible has 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. This is presented as a fact. There are two problems with that, of course. The Protestant Bible has 66 books, and so what you're doing there is, first of all, telling students there is one single Bible, which, as a matter of fact, there isn't. And you're telling students that the one single Bible is the Protestant Bible, without even telling them that's what you're saying. So you're presenting that class from a Protestant or sectarian perspective. That is unconstitutional. That is not objective teaching about the Bible.

Our concern there would be a legal concern. But it's also a matter of education. That's bad education, because you are teaching students, incorrectly, that there is just one single Bible, instead of teaching them, as David was talking about, the different canons of the different faith-traditions that consider the Bible to be scripture. Catholics would say the Bible has 73 books. Jews, of course, don't recognize in the "Old" Testament and, in fact, call those books the Hebrew scriptures; there is no New Testament in the Jewish faith. So that's just one small example, but it recurs pretty much through all of the Bible classes in the South that we have seen. It comes about because the impetus for these classes has been Christian-faith formation, and not even a recognition that there is outside of the, you know, the protestant tradition, anything that they want to teach about in these schools.

Another example, for instance, is presenting the story of Adam and Eve as the Fall of Man, capital F, capital M, which is a phrase that nowhere appears in the Bible and is a Christian interpretation of the text. Once again, if you present that to students as, "This is what this story is: This is the Fall of Man," then you are both presenting it in a non-objective way. That is a sectarian presentation, and there's a legal problem. Again, you're not explaining to students, you're not giving them a good education, because you're not talking about the fact that this is religious interpretation. How did people look at this story? What did they perceive it to be? What does it mean for that particular faith-tradition?

Those are just a couple of examples, but they are illustrative of what we have seen in the kind of classes that we've been involved in. In Pontotoc County, Mississippi, for example – this is the *Herdahl* case that some of you may know about; it was much more famous because of Christian prayers being broadcast over the school intercom every morning – what was also going on in the school, both in the elementary grades and in high school, were Bible classes. They were Bible classes that were started 50 years ago by the Protestant churches in town who got together and formed what was called the Bible Committee. When they would hire a teacher, the job interview would be a religious test, basically. The applicant would talk about his or her experiences in his or her walk with the Lord. I'm not making this up. They were wonderful people and kept very detailed minutes about all of these meetings. It was a lawyer's dream to have these documents. (Laughter.) The teachers would meet with the Bible committee periodically throughout the school year, and they literally report on how many students were saved in the course that year. "Miss Jane reported that 29 students were saved in the class this year." Again, I'm not making that up. You rarely get cases as a lawyer that are that wonderful. (Laughter.)

I brought this because this is one of my favorite books, it's called *The Kid's Life Bible Storybook*. It really is a terrific Bible storybook for kids about three, four, five, six years old. It is a Christian Bible storybook. It is definitely meant for Sunday School and home use, but this was being used as the textbook in the elementary grades in Pontotoc as recently as the late 1990s. This is basically a child's level Bible. God made our world. God made people. It's really a wonderful book, and after each story – which the teacher would read to the students who couldn't read, and then in the upper grades they would all read it together – they would go over the fact questions about the story at the end. And some of the questions were, for example, "How do you feel when you think about Jesus dying on the cross?" I suspect for most people in this room I don't have to explain why that's such an inappropriate question in a public school setting. But this was going on in Pontotoc.

In the high school grades, basically, they called the class Bible History, but they were using the King James Bible as a history textbook, and the students were studying it from beginning to end. This happened. That happened. That happened. We actually had to try this case, and when the Bible teachers testified, and the judge asked, "How do you present the resurrection? How do you present miracles?" The teacher said, "I teach it the way it says. This happened. That happened. That happened. We are studying the

history." Some of you may know the court in that case said you can't do that; you can't teach the Bible as true in a public school.

In Florida we were involved in a case in Lee County with a very different scenario than in Pontotoc. Most courses like that, in our experience, have been adopted in very religiously homogeneous communities. You don't get a course like we saw in Pontotoc County, Mississippi, if you have a religiously diverse community, because they're just not going to stand for that in their public schools. When some folks tried to introduce a course like that in Lee County, Florida, which is a much more diverse community, people rose up and said, "No, we're not going to do this." There was a lot of dissension in that community for a couple of years, and it resulted in a lawsuit that we participated in. The upshot was that the court said the school district could not teach the New Testament curriculum as a history course. They had us monitoring the Old Testament curriculum, and, finally, the school district settled.

That led us to looking into what was going on in Florida overall, and David is sort of the end part of the story, but I come in at the beginning. We realized that this was a course called Bible history that the state Department of Education had approved because in Florida, as in many states around the country, you can't teach high school courses unless they're approved at the state level. Florida is one of those states. So we used the state's Freedom of Information Act to find out from the state Department of Education which districts were teaching the Bible history courses, then we went directly to those districts and we literally collected all of the instructional and curricular materials that they were using in those Bible history courses. Twenty percent of the state's school districts were teaching these courses. So I went back to high school; I went through all of these materials. They were pretty much home grown. They were all very different, and yet all very much the same in that they had pretty much the same constitutional and educational problems. And we put out a report after that review called *The Good Book Taught Wrong: Bible History Classes In Public Schools*.

Just to give you an example, there were actual exam questions such as, "Why is it hard for a non-Christian to understand things about God?" That was an actual exam question in two different school districts in Florida. I remember when the report came out, a reporter called me and said, "I don't believe you." I said, "I'll fax you the exams." He said, "I really want you to do that." It is so incredible, but there really were exam questions like that. These were courses in Christian-faith formation. The Bible typically presented the King James Bible as true. The courses assumed that the students taking them were Christian. There would be questions like, an exam question, "If you had a Jewish friend how would you explain da da da?" (Laughter.) And this is as late as 1999.

So we put this report out, and we put a little plea in there to the state Department of Education to please get rid of these courses. And when I wrote that, I did not think that would happen. The state of Florida had a Republican administration. It was the South. To my great surprise, two months later, here's David creating new courses for the state of Florida. That was really quite wonderful. The state took a look at this. The documents were irrefutable. We had made the case. And I have to say that the state did

the right thing. They removed those courses from the state's approved course list and created, with David's help – and this is how I first got to know David – new courses that focused on the Bible, not as history, but from the perspective that David just discussed with you. It takes a responsible government to do something like that.

In Louisiana, where the same thing is going on, the state Board of Education really has abdicated its responsibilities to its school districts. There is a Bible class controversy going on down there. The Louisiana Family Forum, which is a branch of a religious-right organization, is promoting the course from the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools [http://www.bibleinschools.net], which is a Protestant-based Bible-as-history, unconstitutional course. The state Board of Education was asked, Please do what Florida did; don't approve these courses. They said, We really believe in local control. They punted, and that's a shame. I think they abdicated their responsibilities to kids all over the state and to their school districts.

Tennessee, on the other hand, has gone the other way and has given out *The Bible in Public Schools: A First Amendment Guid*e to all of its school district and has disapproved courses, elective courses, that don't meet the criteria that are set out in this book. So these things do matter, and that's why we work on them so hard with Charles and everyone else, and that's why Charles is so valuable.

That's our perspective. If you don't start out with the clean slate that we want to present an objective, academic look at the Bible, for the purposes that Christopher is talking about, and with the approach that David is talking about, what you usually wind up with are courses in Christian-faith formation or a Bible survey course which takes the King James Bible and presents it to students as the only Bible, as true, as history. From our perspective, those are really, really troublesome courses.

MS. ROGERS: Thank you so much, Judith. Now we'll hear from Barrett Duke about his concerns. I'm really glad you're here, because we've been talking today on and off about the concerns that religious people have about the portrayal of sacred texts from their own traditions or ideas from their own traditions that are taught about in an academic way in the schools, and so it's very important to understand this side of the concern about this particular issue.

BARRETT ROGERS: Southern Baptists are really fairly divided on the issue of teaching the Bible in public schools. I have no doubt that there are Southern Baptists involved in much of what you heard Judith describe in Florida and Louisiana. (Laughter.) Something similar was attempted in Georgia just a couple of years ago. There was a strong attempt to bring Bible courses to Georgia. The folks who wanted to do that did have a very clear agenda, or many of them had a very clear agenda. They wanted these children in public schools to be taught the spiritual component of Christianity through a Bible class that would help provide some level of evangelization.

We expressed our concerns immediately, that we certainly appreciate their desire to see everyone in Georgia come to know God through Jesus Christ. We believe that's

appropriate, and we believe everyone needs to accept Christ as savior to find peace with God. So we share that part of their agenda with them, in terms of evangelization. But we had a couple of severe questions that we had to direct to them. In looking at the way we believed the whole thing would develop, we counseled them pretty seriously about it. We didn't believe, first of all, that whatever curricula they came up with would be the curricula they ended up with. By the time people who looked at it, people like Judith – (Laughter.)

MS. SCHAEFFER: And we did.

MR. DUKE: I know. (Laughter.) By the time people like Judith looked at these curricula, they would look a lot different than what these very well-meaning Christians in Georgia wanted. This went on for some time and got quite heated in Georgia, and we said, Just wait and see what it is that you're actually going to end up with and tell us if that's really what you want. By the time they saw what would actually be allowed to be taught, they dropped the whole issue and didn't want to have anything to do with it, because there was no longer going to be this faith component in teaching this material. It was going to be much more along the lines of what you heard described here and these folks saw no need for that. In Georgia there are more churches than there are Wal-Marts almost; well, I guess there probably are. (Laughter.) That was already happening in the churches, which we believe is the appropriate place for that to take place.

That was our other objection: We don't believe that churches should ever look to government to do their work for them, because no matter how well-meaning government is in its task, our position is that government doesn't do anything very well, and the more important it is, the less well they do it. Or so it seems to us. So we saw no way that these Bible classes could actually end up the way the folks who were really promoting them wanted them to be.

Furthermore, once those Bible classes got into the classrooms, even if they started out the way evangelical Christians wanted them, eventually you would end up with a permanent component of that school's curricula being a Bible class with content determined by people whose faith perspective is significantly different than those people who initiated the class. Then if you open the door to this, you may end up teaching about other religions, and then you get students asking if certain beliefs are true, and the teacher has to say, "Well, I don't know." Or students asking, "Where does God fit into all of this?" And the teacher has to say, "I'm sorry. We can't talk about that, because this is just a class that's supposed to teach you about the beauty of this text but not its significance, and not its meaning from a faith perspective, or on a supernatural level."

I think we have to do more than look at the text, the biblical text, as an academic exercise, because it is much more than that. It is the foundational text for faith, not primarily a book for academic study. I think we need to remember that. We should not allow that to get lost by bringing it into a public school classroom and then not being able to talk about the thing that the Bible is most important for in the lives of those who accept it.

MS. ROGERS: Okay, well, that was a big drink of water for everyone, I know. I have a whole list of questions myself, but I don't want to monopolize the time. I want to open it up to your questions, and I think Barrett Duke's comments about how we handle different religions is a very important matter, because if we take religions seriously, then we're going to need to treat all religions with equal respect and dignity and look at their impact on our culture when that is academically meritorious. So I don't know if Meera [Viswanathan] might want to make a comment on that a little bit later, but that's a very important point.

And I do want to note that I'm from the South, too, so I can say that in the Bible belt not only are there more churches than Wal-Marts, but many of the churches are actually bigger than the Wal-marts. (Laughter.)

Let me just turn to everybody for questions and comments. Mary Ellen Sikes, why don't you kick us off on this?

MARY ELLEN SIKES: Hi. Mary Ellen Sikes, Institute for Humanist Studies. I'm not sure to whom I'm directing this question, and part of it is a comment. David and I talked about this a little bit last night. I'm concerned about the implied emphasis given to one particular faith-tradition's sacred text when it's the only one offered as an elective.

My daughter, who is now 23, took a Bible literature class in high school. It was required in her particular tract of college prep freshman English. It was called "Bible As/In Literature." I'm not quite sure what they meant by that. It was supposed to be a class that prepared English students to understand biblical references in the later literary works that they would be reading in high school. I supported that, even though the Bible is not a reference point for us in terms of morality or faith since we're non-religious. I did want her to understand things she read. It was taught using a textbook that was clearly identified in the introduction to the textbook as a textbook used for religious education in a particular Protestant church. I can't remember which church. I found myself wondering how the Jewish and Catholic students and the students from other Protestant denominations felt about that. I knew I was uncomfortable with it as a non-religious person, because if I had wanted my daughter to have this perspective, I would have taken her to that church.

It was the kind of text that included in each chapter some excerpts of passages, and then encouraged students to go read in the Bibles they were provided. I believe it was the King James Version, not the one that I grew up with in Catholic schools. And then there were literary references that related to those particular Bible passages. The way this teacher taught the class, they read all the Bible passages but none of the literary references, even though that was the alleged purpose of the class. They never read the parts of Shakespeare and so on that actually were supposed to refer back to these passages.

The major point I wanted to make was this. This class was a semester long. It was the entire first semester of her freshman year. In contrast, the Constitution, which I consider to be the founding document of our nation, was given four days in her AP government class. I can't imagine what was covered in the regular government class. She never had another single document that was given an entire semester. And I ended up thinking that there might have been some other motivation for doing this. I never really raised it with her teacher, but I would like to hear your comments on the appropriateness of that. To my knowledge, it's still being done that way in some schools in Virginia.

MS. ROGERS: Judith? And, David, did you want a crack at that too?

MS. SCHAEFFER: Just very quickly. We really try to discourage schools from adopting Bible-focused courses for the reason you gave at the beginning of your comments. Even if taught correctly – and that is a huge, huge if – for reasons we've discussed, and the reasons Barrett has discussed, at the high school level you're not even likely to have teachers who are really trained to do the kinds of things David's talking about. It'd be great to have a David in all the high schools, but they're lucky if they can teach algebra.

At any rate, but even if taught correctly, it is a course that, as you pointed out, focuses on the scripture or faith-documents of a small group of religions, major though they are, but just one or two or three, depending on how you are looking at it. And we think that students in the 21st century are better served by a course, for example, on world religions, where they are learning about the beliefs of the major world religions. We live in a diverse world, we live in a diverse country, and the purpose of education, part of it, I hope, is to equip students to grow up and be adults in that diverse world. So when we write to school districts that are grappling with these issues, we try to steer them away from a Bible-focused course by telling them how difficult it's going to be for them legally and educationally, and also then trying to tell them this is going to be better for your students in terms of giving them a broader education. That's our perspective on that.

MS. ROGERS: David, did you want to get in? And I know Christopher wants to get a word in, too.

MR. LEVENSON: At some point I want to have the chance to respond.

MS. ROGERS: Okay, we'll be sure and do that. Let me let Christopher in.

MR. THACKER: Yes, I just want to say a few quick things. First of all, I don't think it's an either/or. I don't think you need to advocate not having world religions courses or elective courses in particular religious traditions or other texts in order to advocate a course on the Bible. My organization is involved in advocating for Bible courses, but we don't think that there shouldn't be all these courses, but it's not our job to advocate for them. The reason we think that the Bible can be somewhat distinguished, at

least in the way we approach it, is because the approach that we're advocating isn't primarily a question of religious criticism or religion comparison or primarily seeing the Bible as religious text, though you can't address the Bible honestly without acknowledging that it is. But I think the Bible is unique insofar as, again, for us as Americans at the beginning of the 21st century, speaking English, having the literature and the history that we do, there is no other religious text that is alluded to as much in our culture. The text that we're working on focuses on the influence that the Bible has had through history, art, and literature. I think there is more than enough there to justify an entire semester or year.

I would hope that as an elective of this sort becomes popular, it might encourage people to feel more comfortable dealing with religion in general. You'd see more electives, not just on the Bible, but perhaps world religions and other particular traditions. But I think there is an argument to be made that the influence of this book – not its subjective value, we're not commenting on that, that's not the role of public schools – is maybe not of a different kind, but certainly of a different quantity because the amount of influence is markedly different for us.

MS. ROGERS: So it's sort of "a rising tide will lift all boats" kind of argument?

MR. THACKER: I think so. Yes. I hope so.

MS. ROGERS: David, you wanted to respond to some of Barrett's comments?

MR. LEVENSON: I'll be brief, but I also want to say something on the issue of the Bible and art, music, literature, and the Bible in literature model that Charles and Warren set out. I think I have some problems with that, I must say, because when you actually get around to reading the text, you're reading the biblical text. And if you don't consciously think about how you're going to analyze the text, if you're just reading it for some sort of information to understand something else, what exactly are you doing with the biblical text itself? I think subconsciously we end up importing a way of interpreting the biblical text if we don't spend some time on how we might read this text in what I think can be a neutral way. That's a concern I've got. It sounds great. Oh, the Bible's so important in Western civilization. True, but in the course itself, you're going to spend a lot of time reading the Bible. You're not simply going to be saying, Which biblical passage does this painting come from? Of course, if you don't read the Bible then you really haven't achieved Bible literacy.

I wanted to respond to Barrett because, in a sense, when I was thinking about this issue, I had Judith's concerns on one side and Barrett's concerns on my other side. I grew up in Oklahoma City. My father happened to be a rabbi there, but I had many, many Baptist friends. I can honestly say some of my best friends were Southern Baptists. (Laughter.) When I was at training meetings for this program, it was a culture I know. Ending up in Tallahassee at FSU, I would say a large percentage of my students, a very large percentage, are evangelical Christians. I've been interested in Jewish-evangelical dialogue, on one level or another, for most of my life. So I had that concern. And it was

almost an intellectual problem. What could actually be taught that would be academic, that would be important, that would be useful, that wouldn't deal with some of the more controversial issues? I don't think textual criticism is really controversial, but when you get to issues of authorship, date, sources, those are the places where you're on tough ground in a sense. It can be very divisive.

The way I thought about it is, Let's look at some of the most conservative Old Testament and New Testament surveys. And I say Old Testament here advisedly, because I looked at InterVarsity, Baker, Eerdmans, Zondervan to see what they were doing, and the more conservative versions of the books that they were doing. What did they do in a New Testament survey? Or in an Old Testament survey? What I found is the kind of stuff I was talking about. They all talked about canon, about the different canons. They all talked about the different manuscripts. They all discussed the question of translation. They usually did a literary approach focusing on, Here's the structure of the book. Here are the main characters. Here are the main themes. So I think it's possible to do this in such a way where the issue of a liberal slant isn't a problem. I think that there is a way of approaching this.

On certain questions, there is a lot of data out there, and you just have to decide that we can't decide some of these issues. On others, it's really not that hard. There might be a lot of different endings to Mark, but there are really only two that are likely to be original, for instance. And one can talk about that. Where does God fit in? Well, I think God does fit in. You can't divorce religion from studying the Bible, but you can study the religion of first-century Christians and ancient Israelites and take their religious experience very, very seriously. I think that's an important thing to do if you want to have the kind of informed empathy that's necessary in the study of religion. That means informed empathy with those people, and they're not necessarily the same as modern Christians. I think there's a way of really making it a course where you don't simply say religious issues are irrelevant to the Bible, but to put it in such a way that there is a distance.

Here's a puzzle I haven't really solved in my own mind, but I'll give you my answer now. When you teach Shakespeare or literature from another culture, very often you're trying to make connections. How does this relate to something in your life? To make it easier, to make that jump, to make it seem familiar. Why couldn't you do that in studying the Bible? Why couldn't you say, What does this passage mean to you personally? Very quickly you get into people wanting to share their faith with other people in the class, wanting to witness to other people in the class, because the Bible means something very, very important to them. It's the center of their concern. I think precisely because of that, such a question might be reframed as, "How does your religious experience about the Bible help us to understand how first-century Christians might have understood this particular passage?" I think there is a way of doing it, taking the religious dimension seriously, but still having some kind of distance on it. I have thought about the issue. I think there are still problems, and I think we'd all agree that if this isn't done well – and that's true for the whole thing, studying religion generally – we're all in trouble. We're going to need guidelines. We're going to need textbooks, and

we're going to have them vetted by people from all different perspectives, eventually. That might be the hope, but only when we get people trained to do this. That's the job.

MS. ROGERS: Really setting up that last training session, aren't we? (Laughter.) Since we are getting near the end, I may collect some questions at this point, so take notes, okay? I'm going to collect these three.

JIM FRASER: Jim Fraser from Northeastern University. It's not just politics that creates strange bedfellows, because I found myself in much more agreement with Barrett than with anybody else in terms of this presentation, though I may come from a quite different theological and more secular perspective on it.

I have three quick comments that relate to this panel but also relate to some of the earlier discussion in the day.

The first is, it does seem to me, David, that higher criticism is a particular approach, and, in fact, if you are a very religiously conservative student, it would be oppressive. It would be a way of imposing an approach that that student may not accept.

I also think, culturally, no matter how thoughtful we are about these issues, if you are the lone Jewish kid or the lone Hindu kid in a class, and they're studying the Bible as literature, there is a way in which somebody else's culture is getting imposed on you. There are ways around that, but they require a great deal of sophistication, which leads to my third comment.

A criticism once made of John Dewey was that there was nothing wrong with progressive education except that it required perfect teachers to do it. I think we have to be very careful about developing approaches that simply can't work in the majority of classrooms with the majority of real-life human beings who are teachers.

MS. ROGERS: Thank you very much. Meera?

MEERA VISWANATHAN: Meera Viswanathan of Brown University. As that lone Hindu kid in the Bible class, I think I can speak. (Laughter.) Last semester, I was teaching a course on women and writing in the Middle Ages in Asia and in Europe. One of the figures we read was Julian of Norwich, the great medieval mystic. I thought this was going to be a fabulous class; these students were very sophisticated. I began to ask about their understanding of her dream-visions of the passion of Christ, and our conversation flagged. I couldn't quite understand why, until finally it dawned on me that they thought the passion of Christ was Christ as a vigorous, robust, you know what should I say, sanguine figure. And I was horrified, because I had assumed I would have to talk about medieval Japanese Buddhism when we talked about the Japanese figures, but I hadn't realized I would have to explain what seemed to be a fairly elemental understanding to sophisticated college juniors and seniors.

So I would like to make a plea that, in fact, there is a need for literacy about religion and literacy about the Bible. But I'm wondering about the place of it. If you look at high school English courses, they really function as humanities courses. For many students, that's where they encounter our history and the study of culture. I think there is a great need to have an awareness of the Bible. If I could have my way, everybody would read *Pilgrim's Progress*, too, because I think it's another terribly important text. But people don't. But I do think there is an issue when you set up an elective in the public system only for the Bible.

Barrett, I want to say that I appreciate the candor all of you have shown in talking about your perspectives and background, because I think it takes great courage. I also want to say that I feel for you, but I think your notion of the invasion is actually after the barn door has already been left open. If we're going to talk about American culture, and we want to talk about Emerson and Thoreau and transcendentalism, we have to know about the Vedas, we have to know about the Upanishads. So there is that Eastern sacred text, as you would put it, that already has to be taught. I think it's critical that it be taught. How else can we understand Gandhi, who bases much of his understanding of nonviolence not directly alone on the Vedas and Upanishads, but upon Emerson's reading of the Vedas and Upanishads? How can we understand Martin Luther King, Jr., who reads Gandhi, who reads Thoreau, who reads – (Laughter.) So it seems to me that to compartmentalize it in the way that we've been talking about it is really a false notion. These are messy, messy matters, but we have an obligation to our children. I think you're quite right, we need to hold these sacred texts as sacred, and that's the trick. It's a kind of juggling act. Maintaining the sacrality of them and, at the same time, allowing those for whom it may not be a sacred text to apprehend the influence they've exerted culturally. But I think that that's a mandate. I don't know that we have a choice there.

MS. ROGERS: Thank you very much. Yes.

MARY BURGAN: I'm Mary Burgan. I'm general secretary of the American Association of University Professors.

John Dewey founded our association on the protection of academic freedom in higher education, but I think there is an issue here about the teachers. Who is going to teach under what kinds of freedom, and what kinds of constraints? And what kinds of liberty do they have to bring their own beliefs into the classroom, especially in the public classroom?

I suspect that I kind of agree with Barrett. It's such a difficult problem, and it can't be controlled. Better in a public school to leave it off and have the religion part, the belief part, taught in the churches.

One of the issues we follow constantly with higher education is the teaching of religious studies, the Bible or otherwise. In K-12 there is the issue of the freedom of the teacher as well as the freedom of the student, as someone said over here, not to receive texts or beliefs that he or she does not want to have to assent to. So we're talking about

curriculum, and it's nice to talk about that, and we can have interesting things to say, but we have a teacher on one end and a student on the other. My association deals with the teacher, and in our secular society, we have said academic freedom is very important when the teacher is speaking about a subject about which he or she has expertise, and that the teacher should not be coerced into a faith system that he or she doesn't believe in. That becomes a very real issue in some cultural settings, where there is a kind of faith-test about who's going to teach a religion course, and is that course being taught the right way. So I think that's something we really need to talk about.

MS. ROGERS: Thank you so much. Let me start on this end, and I'll give each panelist a chance to make very brief remarks. We're running out of time, so please do keep them short, but address what you need to address.

MR. DUKE: I appreciate that so many of you have agreed with me on the concerns that I have about this. I think that we share those same concerns. I think that it is very important for us to come to some kind of way of helping students today understand the role of Christianity and other religious traditions in who we are as people in the United States, as American citizens. I think it is important for us to do that.

I'll share one story very quickly, just to bring out the degree of biblical illiteracy that exists today. In my Ph.D. program, the first seminar that I took was on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, two Old Testament books. We started out – now, this is a Ph.D. class on those books, in religious and theological studies, with an emphasis on biblical interpretation – and the professor in the class, on the first day of class, had to say, "Now this is a class on the Bible books of Ezra and Nehemiah. If you've never read those books before, you better read them before we come back to class next week." These are students in a seminary, and the professor has to tell the students, maybe for the first time, to read those books in the Bible.

There is an incredible degree of biblical illiteracy, and it certainly affects our ability to understand our culture. Somehow I agree that people need to have an understanding of what it is that shaped our culture, and the Bible played such a significant role in that. But I just can't see doing it through a Bible class. I just don't know how you can control all those factors across an entire nation and not have incredible problems legally, spiritually and socially as a result of communities in clash, governments in clash with communities, and so on. I just don't see how you can do it.

MS. SCHAEFFER: Just to pick up on the phrase we've used a lot here: Biblical illiteracy, in some respects, is in the eye of the beholder. I recall Professor T. W. Lewis, who is a Bible scholar in Mississippi and taught at Millsaps for many decades. He was our expert witness in the *Herdahl* case and also in Lee County in Florida. He teaches Bible studies at the college level, as does David. He said that students would come to him, having taken these Bible survey courses in Mississippi, and they would think they were literate in the Bible. He'd have to unlearn them, because what they were learning was just a particular perspective on the Bible. They might have grown up thinking they were Bible literate, and in some sense perhaps they were, but from his perspective as a

Bible scholar, and I suspect David's as well, they had a very skewed, sectarian perspective on the Bible from those courses that they were taking in schools like those in Pontotoc. I don't mostly agree with a lot of things that the Southern Baptist Convention proposes with respect to public schools, but I'm probably a lot closer to Barrett's side here today because of the problems that he has talked about and the fact that most of these courses are not started with the right intent and motive, and if they don't start with the right intent and motive you are going to come out with something that is legally and educationally problematic. That is our particular concern with these kinds of courses.

MR. LEVENSON: Well, first, I wanted to clarify something. We didn't talk about higher criticism yet. That does get bandied about, and the accusation, even in Florida, is that students are going to be taught higher criticism. Higher criticism deals with the issues of authorship and sources and specific dates, and I think there are ways of introducing that as one way of looking at things, but that's not part of the discussion at this point. But that's just a footnote.

I think the issue of compartmentalizing is an interesting one. In our institutes a lot of people were English teachers, and they wanted to talk about the Bible in their classes in a useful way, and I think that certainly makes sense. But it also raises the problem I have with this. At least half of me is sympathetic with what Barrett is saying, but for purposes of this discussion, I think if people are going to teach the Bible at all, to bring it in because of these cultural reasons, all this stuff is going to be imported anyway. It's going to be done without thinking through how it should be done. So whether we're talking about specific classes, we can certainly talk about how to do it.

When we do it, I would still press for this literary approach to help read the text in an historical context. And I'm concerned that if it just becomes one other thing the English teacher does, then we've got this very difficult material, potentially very divisive material, brought in without enough reflection. The advantage of a stand-alone Bible course would be there's a lot of thought about how you would do it. I think that's where the advantage would be. On the other hand, there's no reason why the same methods might not be brought into an English class. That's kind of where I'm thinking there.

And I hope I said – I can't remember if I did – I do not believe these courses should be required regardless of their value for Western civilization or whatever. I personally don't think any religion classes should be required.

I would like to leave you with the idea that we do have a model of how this can be done, I think, in the academy. There is a field of biblical studies. A lot of us have spent an awful lot of time figuring out how we can do this in such a way that it is going to be sensitive to a lot of different students from many different backgrounds. And my experience of 26 years is that, and even in these institutes, students get a lot out of it from a lot of different perspectives and many, most I would say most of them, [audio break] – can take from them that's going to be meaningful to them and as long as nothing's presented dogmatically, I think there is a way of doing it. And that's just my experience, having spoken to an awful lot of communities about this.

MS. ROGERS: Thank you.

MR. THACKER: I, like David, was very interested in and sympathize with Meera's question. Why don't we do this in the English courses and other places? I would like to see us do that eventually, and I think it should be done. Part of the problem is that it's not in the curriculum now, and most teachers, most textbook drafters, most states' education systems, aren't comfortable with and aren't moving with any noticeable rapidity to incorporate it into the curriculum. Thus we see the idea of designing a Bible elective and promoting that in various school districts as a way of moving the conversation forward, or raising the comfort level, and we want to do it in what I think are as close to ideal circumstances as we're going to get. You do have elective courses, so no one has to be in these classes. In fact, no teacher has to teach them in most cases. And you are able to do it very thoughtfully and in a process.

We're in the process of writing a curriculum and a textbook now, and in that process, one of the things we consider probably more important than any particular content question is the question of process. We're committed to doing process where we bring people, to borrow a phrase from earlier, like Judith and like Barrett, to the same table, to try to raise the standard from just what's constitutional and what's legal, to what's fair and what qualifies as educationally excellent. I think we can do that, in a limited scope, in an elective course. If we do succeed in doing that, it will have great ramifications throughout the rest of the curriculum. But I think many of the people in this room would be quite happy with what we've been talking about in terms of incorporating religion more broadly and more fairly throughout the curriculum.

MS. ROGERS: Thank you. We wish you luck in that difficult task. I want to thank everybody for a really excellent exchange among the panelists and with the group that's gathered here. It's been an excellent day, and we appreciate your participation so much. We're so fortunate to have each and every one of you participating in this endeavor, and I want to say thank you for that.

Please join me in congratulating our panelists.

(Applause and end of panel.)