Textbook case: Bible class in public school

by Mark Chancey in the November 14, 2006 issue

When asked about the Bible course at the local public high school, a West Texas minister told the *Abilene Reporter News*, “My hope is the end result is they read their Bible and start asking questions elsewhere and they become Christians. That’s the hope of the community, too.”

Sentiments like that would normally not raise an eyebrow. In this case, however, the minister was also the teacher of the course. His comments raise questions about how successful he is in presenting the material “objectively as part of a secular program of education,” as required in the 1963 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the treatment of the Bible in public schools. To what extent is this teacher’s presentation of material affected by his hopes that students will adopt his beliefs?

As it turns out, quite a bit. Like almost all of the other public school Bible courses in Texas, this particular course is portrayed by its school district as nonsectarian. The reality is that it is taught primarily from a conservative Protestant perspective. And like most such courses around the country, little has been known about its contents.

To learn what public schools were teaching about the Good Book, Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, affiliated with the Austin-based religious liberties advocacy group Texas Freedom Network, surveyed all 1,031 Texas school districts. Districts were asked if they had offered a Bible course in the past five years, and if so to provide information about the course, including the syllabus, tests, handouts, a list of textbooks and videos used and a description of the teacher’s qualifications.

Twenty-five districts acknowledged teaching such a course in 2005-2006. TFN sent their materials to me to assess if the courses are being taught in the neutral, nonsectarian manner that, in the words of one court, seeks neither “to disparage or to encourage a commitment to a set of religious beliefs.”

Only three of the 25 school districts—Leander, Whiteface and North East (San Antonio)—succeeded in offering nonsectarian courses.

Materials from the other 22 classes revealed serious problems. Many used overtly sectarian curricular materials, such as *Halley's Bible Handbook*, workbooks, or online readings like one titled "Ten Reasons to Believe the Bible," which was assigned in one district. Tests show that the theological claims of such resources were typically presented to students as matters as fact. In some districts the only textbook was the Bible, with the King James and New International versions the most often recommended.

Eleven school districts used the curriculum of the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools. A previous examination of this group's course revealed it to be heavily slanted toward fundamentalist Protestant views (see my Century article "Lesson plans: The Bible in the classroom," August 23, 2005).

The NCBCPS claims that its course is taught in over 370 school districts across the nation, including 52 in Texas. If that figure for Texas is true, then 41 Texas school officials provided false information to TFN's legally binding open-records request—a very unlikely possibility. The NCBCPS appears to have greatly exaggerated its numbers.

In most courses, the Protestant Bible is assumed to be the standard. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Jewish versions of the canon received little if any attention. The Protestant Bible is usually understood from a conservative theological perspective, often that of inerrancy. Two schools, for example, show a video that argues that copyists have made no changes to the biblical text since it was originally inspired by God. Most depict the Bible as straightforward, unproblematic, wholly accurate history. For example, the early version of the NCBCPS curriculum used by one district attempts to persuade students of the plausibility of the story of Noah's ark by asking questions such as "Approximately how many animals were on the ark the size of a rhesus monkey?" Several of the courses are named simply "Bible History."

Dispensationalist premillennialism makes an appearance in a few districts, whether in lectures or Left Behind videos. So does Christian Americanism, the belief that America was founded as a Christian (i.e., conservative Protestant) nation and that its government should return to those roots. Some courses advocate creation science

(one lesson plan, for example, focused on the biblical evidence for dinosaurs) and other forms of pseudoscience, such as the claim that the modern races are descended from Noah's sons. At least one school has apparently presented an urban legend as accurate, teaching its students that NASA had discovered a missing day in time that corresponds to the story of the sun standing still in Joshua 10.

Judaism fares particularly poorly in most Bible courses. The Hebrew Bible is almost always read through a Christian lens. The Christian faith claim that the prophets supernaturally predicted the coming of Jesus is presented as fact; Jewish and other interpretations are rarely mentioned. In one district, an essay question instructs students to write about "how God's purpose and plan of the Old Testament has fulfillment in the New Testament." When a test on Genesis includes the question "Write John 3:16," the perspective of the course as a whole is quite clear.

In several cases, area ministers (almost always Protestants) served as the courses' teachers. More often, the classes were offered by social studies or literature teachers. Only a few had ever had any academic course work in biblical studies.

In some courses, the sectarian elements seem intentional, such as the invitation of a creation scientist to be a guest lecturer at one high school and the presentation at another of a lecture titled "God's Road to Life," with the starting point "Jesus Christ is the one and only way." Often, though, problematic elements appear to be the result of a lack of training. The materials sent to TFN suggest that when teachers have no specific academic preparation, they rely primarily upon their personal experiences in shaping and presenting the material. The result is that even when they have the best of intentions, their courses often end up promoting whatever religious views they are the most familiar with.

The religious nature of these courses is not their only problem. Many do not reflect high academic standards. Memorization of Bible verses is usually a major component. Examinations often test retention of details both significant and obscure from Bible stories without encouraging analysis or critical thought. Some courses make questionable use of videos. In a recent school year, students at one school watched videos on one-fifth of the class days. Students at another saw Hanna-Barbera Bible cartoons; those at another viewed Veggie Tales videos, which feature computer-animated talking Christian vegetables.

Texas is not the only state in which Bible courses are taught. A study published by People for the American Way in 2000 discovered 14 Bible courses taught from religious perspectives in Florida. The fact that two studies involving several states and made several years apart had such similar findings suggests that these problems may be widespread elsewhere.

In the meantime, public school Bible courses are gaining support from state legislators. In April, Georgia passed a law providing state funding for such courses. Similar bills died in Alabama, Tennessee and Missouri, but are likely to be reintroduced. The Democratic Party of Alabama has already announced a covenant with Alabamans that includes a pledge to increase the number of Bible courses.

Neither the Georgia law nor the other bills explicitly mention funding for teacher training in biblical studies and church-state issues. The assumption seems to be that a teacher’s good intentions are sufficient to guarantee that Bible courses will be taught in a nonsectarian and academically sound manner. The lessons from Texas suggest otherwise.

The author's full report, Reading, Writing, and Religion: Teaching About the Bible in Texas Public Schools, *may be read at the Texas Freedom Network Web site: www.tfn.org.*