

Texas Text Book Follies

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Would you believe—and please try not to fall out of your seats when I tell you this—that Baptists were once a minority in this country? I know it’s hard for us, living here in the epicenter of the Baptist movement, to believe that even in Texas Baptists were not always the dominant Protestant religious community. In fact, in 1801 a group of nervous Baptist ministers in Connecticut wrote an urgent letter to the newly elected President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Consider that nine of the original American colonies had not only government established and financed churches of the Anglican persuasion, but in many cases they also made people like Baptists, and Quakers, and Jews feel profoundly unwelcome if not persecuted. Jefferson himself was deeply opposed to government establishment of churches, and he wrote back to the Danbury Baptists that the government has no business establishing state-sponsored religion, but that it must insure the free exercise of religion. He reassured the embattled Baptists that there is an inviolable wall of separation between church and state. True, these phrases “the free exercise of religion,” and the “separation between church and state” are not in the Constitution itself. But let us not forget that it was Jefferson who influenced the writing of the Constitution, so we must assume that these were some of the very outcomes he intended. Most of us revere Jefferson as not only one of America’s greatest presidents—he’s got a terrific monument on a prime piece of Washington D.C. property and his face on the side of Mt. Rushmore as well as the nickels that jingle around in your pocket—but we also think of Jefferson as a philosopher, a scholar, a sage of American democracy. At least, that’s how I was raised and taught to think of him. But in Texas, the State Board of Education has proposed dropping Thomas Jefferson altogether from the social studies world history section focusing on great political thinkers. In his place are two great thinkers to be sure: Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin...though most of us would more appropriately consider them renowned for their religious rather than their political thought. Jefferson’s sin, it seems, was his unequivocal opposition to the merging of church and state.

This, my friends, is the tip of a very ominous iceberg that looms over the Texas educational system. The Texas Board of Education is not made up of educational experts, nor are its members professional historians. They are politicians. There’s a dentist, an insurance salesman, a real estate agent, a few lawyers, a minister and a few other sundry members. Basic credentials, however, are not particularly relevant to these elected posts...one board member, for example, admitted to not recognizing the name Milton Friedman, the celebrated, Nobel Prize winning economist. But several board of education members are overwhelmingly united by one cause: that is evangelical Christianity. This esteemed group, which not long ago amended the state science curriculum to include ‘the strengths and weaknesses of the theory of evolution,’ do not hide the fact that their goal is to change the nature of how religion is taught in public school classrooms--specifically to introduce students to the unassailable fact of America as a Christian nation. Some of the tactics are subtle, like

demoting the third president of the United States. Others are more obvious, like recommended close reading of the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, a 1638 document that is considered by some to be the first written Constitution in the western world. That's why Connecticut's nickname is the Constitution State. But in these orders which 8th graders will be directed to analyze, they will encounter the statement that the document is intended "to maintain and preserve the liberty and purity of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the Mayflower Compact, 8th graders are instructed to understand that the Plymouth Colony document sets up the future of America "for the glory of Christ and the advancement of Christian faith." Now the truth is that America was founded by a group of Christian men. America does have undeniably Christian roots. And I don't say that with any disdain or derision. In fact, I find it nothing less than remarkable that these Christian men were able to build a republic that, perhaps for the first time in history, did not entangle government with religion! That's a tremendous accomplishment! These Christian men did not include the word "God" even once in a Constitution that was meant to be inclusive rather than yet another regime that persecutes religious minorities, even though some of the original colonies did. This, to me, is the definition of American exceptionalism. I am happy that the founders were Christians of this ilk, and I believe their value system closely parallels anything we would label a Jewish or Judeo-Christian world view. But feckless Texas Board of Education members like Cynthia Dunbar want to highlight people and events in American history that allegedly prove that America is "emphatically Christian." That the purpose of America was specifically to promote Christianity in the Western hemisphere, and that Christian heritage is invariably protected by a certain breed of ultra-Conservatives who see the classroom as the most fertile soil in which to plant their ideology. As Ralph Reed, the leader of the Christian Coalition said after the Rev. Pat Robertson failed to secure the Presidential nomination, "I would rather have a thousand school board members, than one president and no school board members." Or take Cynthia Dunbar, who predicts that "The philosophy of the classroom in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next."

At least they are honest...what better place to start than with a captive audience of impressionable children to convince society of an evangelical world view. The truth is that there is so much that is objectionable and ridiculous about these textbook escapades. How many of you read this book to your children (Brown Bear Brown Bear)? I know I do, regularly! It was written by Bill Martin, Jr. in 1967. Bill Martin was the author of some 300 children's books. The State Board of Education banned him from approved 3rd grade reading lists because someone forwarded them an email about a Bill Martin who wrote an essay called "Ethical Marxism." They banned Bill Martin before they realized that the children's author and the DePaul University philosophy professor who wrote the essay are in fact not the same people. This is the kind of unsophisticated, truculent discourse in our State's highest educational commission [Martin's books were later re-admitted]. In a McCarthyite witch hunt for anyone who might undermine their version of America, the board also changed all language referring to America as "democratic" (which sounds too much like the party) to America as "constitutional republic." [Hmmm.] They surprisingly left Helen Keller in the pantheon of American notables. They must not have gotten the message that Keller was a vehement socialist. Same goes for the NAACP founder W.E.B. DuBois who was a member of the Communist Party. Please don't tell them about Keller or DuBois! The board eliminated discussion on the changing roles of gender in America out of fear that it might promote transsexualism. Cesar Chavez is regarded as an inappropriate role model for kids, while Joseph McCarthy is strangely vindicated in the revised curriculum. Thurgood Marshall, however, is deemed not a "strong enough example" of a historically influential figure. Roe v. Wade is considered the most influential Supreme Court decision affecting American life in the 20th Century...And the list goes on and on.

Texas has been the laughingstock of the rest of the country over these curricular measures, but the truth is it's really no laughing matter.

Texas recently became the largest producer of text books in America. Only the state of California comes close. But California textbooks happen to be very California-centric, meaning that the 48 million textbooks Texas publishes annually are much more likely to be found in classrooms in nearly every state in America. Though Texas may be ridiculed in the editorial pages of the New York Times and the LA Times, if the standards are not changed it will be the Texas Board of Education that will get the last laugh.

I want to be clear: religion is an inseparable facet of America's history. It has been the force that animated some of America's most profound struggles, like abolition and civil rights. And the protection America affords to its palate of religious persuasions is legendary and globally significant, particularly in an age when fundamentalist regimes throughout the world trample on religious liberties as a matter of policy. But there is a difference between teaching about religion and its role in American history and culture and teaching religion itself, not to mention preferencing one religion over others to children in public school classrooms. There is a difference between exploring the religious trends of American life, and insisting that one of those trends is dominant and predestined to be synonymous with America.

Texas is home to many fine educators...[like Larry and Laura Schnitzer,] and many great public and private schools. The Texas Educational Fund has \$22 billion in its coffers. Certainly this state can do better than publishing half-baked, chauvinistic, ideologically tainted curricula. I urge you to participate in the official public commentary period between April 16th and May 18th, during which Texas citizens will have the opportunity to voice our opinions to Board of Education members about this curriculum. They are all politicians, and if there is a wave of public opinion opposing this, it will make a difference. I will inform you of the means of reaching these officials right after Passover. Our Jewish Community Relations Council has accomplished heroic efforts by maintaining a presence in Austin and closely monitoring this process. Specifically, JCRC has managed to successfully counter misinformation and misleading jargon about Israel and Jews in the social studies curriculum. The Jewish community should thank JCRC for being on top of this critical issue on all of our behalf. May this season when we celebrate the physical liberation of our ancestors from slavery also herald the intellectual liberation from suspect, dubious, and politically loaded ideas that will harness us to the past rather than catapult us into the future!