

Role of religion in society debated in State Board of Education hearing

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AUSTIN—Citizens debated the role of religion in society—and particularly of Christianity in American history—as the Texas State Board of Education held a public hearing Jan. 13 on social studies curriculum for public schools.

More than 130 people signed up in advance to testify before the board, voicing their opinions about proposed language of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, a state-mandated set of learning objective for public-school students.

Those standards not only influence textbooks in Texas, but also have an impact across the nation. Texas is one of the top two buyers of textbooks in the United States, and many publishers craft their books with the Texas market in mind.

In addition to Texans who expressed their views about how—and if—religion should be handled in public school social studies curriculum, many also expressed concerns about whether significant Hispanic and African-American historical figures would be given due attention.

Several people raised concerns that “founding principles” about limited government may be neglected in favor of “a radical socialist agenda.”

Others testifying before the board urged that the curriculum standards give greater emphasis to Judaism and Holocaust studies, as well as include the

Sikh faith in the study of world religions.

A draft of the proposed standards includes references to the Judeo-Christian legal tradition and the expectation that students be able to identify major intellectual, philosophical, political and religious traditions that informed the nation's founding, including the Judeo-Christian tradition—"especially biblical law."

One much-debated standard requires students to be able to "explain the significance of religious holidays and observances such as Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, the annual hajj, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Diwali and Vaisakhi in various contemporary societies." An earlier version of the requirement included Easter but not Christmas—an action that prompted the conservative Plano-based [Free Market Foundation](#) to launch an online petition "to save Christmas."

A point of contention for some advocates of church-state separation was the state board's choice of appointed curriculum reviewers—particularly David Barton and Peter Marshall. Barton has written and lectured about "the myth of separation of church and state." Marshall has promoted the idea of "recovering the original Pilgrim and Puritan vision of America" as a Bible-based commonwealth.

Barton, founder and president of [WallBuilders](#), holds an undergraduate degree in religious education from Oral Roberts University, and Marshall, a Presbyterian minister and author, earned degrees from Yale University and Princeton Seminary. Neither holds advanced degrees in history or the social sciences.

Derek ~~D~~avis David ~~B~~arton Several people who testified at the board hearing expressed support for the standards as drafted, saying they emphasize the importance of teaching about religion

without promoting a particular religion. But they urged the board to reject amendments that would advance a social and political agenda.

Steven K. Green, law professor and director of the Center for Religion, Law and Democracy at Willamette University in Salem, Ore., noted with alarm efforts to “simplify, sanitize and sanctify” history by giving undue emphasis to Christian influence on the nation’s founding and overstating any influence of Moses’ law on civil law in the United States. The nation’s founders “did not create a Christian nation” based on biblical law, he insisted, but developed a republic based on Enlightenment principles.

Several people who testified stressed the idea of American exceptionalism, contrasting it with teaching multiculturalism. Lela Pittenger, a Republican from Austin who is a candidate for the U.S. Senate, emphasized the importance of focusing less on exceptional historical figures and more on the role of the United States as an exceptional nation.

Jack Kamrath of the American Heritage Education Foundation urged the board to give greater emphasis to the Judeo-Christian foundations of the United States and less attention to multiculturalism and pluralism.

In written testimony submitted to the board of education, Derek Davis, director of the [Center for Religious Liberty at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor](#), expressed concern “that well-meaning people, lacking adequate understanding of our constitutional history, are seeking to persuade the Texas State Board of Education to violate the religious liberty of Texas public school students by inclusion of inappropriate material in the Texas social studies curriculum.”

Davis, dean of the UMHB College of Humanities, affirmed the notion of including information about American’s religious history in public school

curriculum, but he took issue with any effort to give favored status to Christianity.

"As education without some understanding of the profound role of religion in our nation's history and its contributions to our nation's success is an incomplete education, and our courts have said as much," he said.

"What violates the Constitution is presenting material that either prefers Christianity over other faiths or depicts the United States as a Christian nation in some legal sense. Some of the proposal suggested by members of the State Board of Education and their appointees to curriculum panels commit both violations, and therefore infringe the religious liberty of public school students across Texas."

Effort to undermine the separation of church and state damage the nation's heritage and its values of fairness and religious equality, Davis added.

"The separation of church and state, which frees religion to be robust and voluntary, is hardly the source of the nation's problems. In fact, it is the primary reason that religion in America, and foremost Christianity, has flourished for all of our history," he insisted.

"Religion is vibrant in America precisely because of the separation of church and state, not in spite of it. It is my hope that we will not in the present hour and in these curriculum standards retreat from the founders' intentions to make religion a key thread in our national tapestry while protecting the diverse faiths of all Americans."

Marcus McFaul, pastor of Highland Park Baptist Church in Austin, also submitted written testimony, challenging board members not to focus on winning points politically or advancing a social agenda, but rather to concentrate on providing truth to students.

"What is at stake with the Board of Education social studies curriculum is

bad history—winning, not learning the truth,” McFaul said. “Hagiography is not the same as history. Agenda-ed history is not the same as history.”

Curriculum should rightly give due attention to the role and influence of religion in American history, he added, but it should not “advance, promote or seek advantage for any particular religion’s point of view.”

McFaul particularly voiced his objection to any attempt to give privilege to “one voice and no others in the name of Christian America.”

“Religious doctrine and sectarian interpretation of Scripture—or social studies—should not pass from the realm of religion to the realm of the state,” he said. “When that happens, learning loses.”