

LA Canada

In Theory: Should holy books be distributed in schools?

May 25, 2011

Q. Schools in White County, Tenn., have agreed to stop allowing the Gideons to distribute Bibles in classrooms after the ACLU threatened a lawsuit. The Gideons entered a classroom at Doyle Elementary School in Doyle, about 100 miles east of Nashville, and invited students to take a Bible if they wanted one. The ACLU became involved after one girl complained that she felt pressured into taking a Bible.

This isn't the first time Tennessee schools have attracted the attention of the ACLU. Several schools in Sumner County have been slapped with lawsuits for First Amendment infringements, including allowing the student Bible club to pray over loudspeakers during morning announcements, schools' websites linking to Christian prayer groups, and a teacher hanging a cross in her classroom.

Reactions to the lawsuits are split, with comments on the stories ranging from, "I wonder if I can go hand out Bhagavad Gita on school property and tell kids about the wonders of Hinduism?" to "[I]f the kids are not allowed to pray and worship God in the very school buildings that our tax dollars paid for, then their civil liberties are being violated." The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty said in a blog posting, "Gideons has (sic) been involved in so many of these complaints, why can't they help school district (sic) avoid such blatant violations of church-state law?"

Is blocking the distribution of Bibles in class protecting or denying students' rights? And if the Bible is allowed to be distributed, does that mean other holy texts, such as the Koran, also should be permitted?

A.

The United States Constitution includes clear guidelines protecting the separation of church and state and giving security to both entities. And Thomas Jefferson, the third president of our country, wrote numerous articles and letters clarifying that concept. As a result, the members of churches, synagogues, mosques or congregations in our country should be protected from the government's control over how they can practice their own religious beliefs within the rules of their organizational structures. Likewise, the government is protected from infringements by religious groups within the boundaries of its organizational structure.

Since public schools are government-mandated institutions, it is clear to me that they should not be encouraging the distribution of religious material or the practice of religious worship, whatever the religion that is being promoted. Our public schools do not have a right to advocate any particular religious tradition for the students enrolled at their campuses.

We are a country whose citizens practice a wide variety of religious beliefs, not just one; and there are many families and individuals who do not follow any religious tradition. Therefore, handing out literature, including the Bible, or promoting specific religious beliefs in our state schools is an infringement of the rights of students to make their own choices.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

I thought kids were in school to learn a particular educational curriculum. I didn't know part of their day included the disruption of class time by a group claiming their need to spread the word of their religion outweighs the rights of teachers to teach and students to learn.

What is the difference between a religious group soliciting kids in class with Bibles and the makers of Jell-O soliciting kids with coupons? It makes no difference about the content of the solicitation, and I would flatly refuse to admit any particular Bible quote as support of that right into this argument. After all, couldn't the makers of Jell-O claim their product has a right to be solicited because, "There's always room for Jell-O?" Just because a group thinks people should know their religion is superior does not give it the right to inflict it upon others.

You like your judgmental, vengeful, prejudiced God? Awesome. Keep it from my kids and I likewise promise not to tell your kids that no matter what they do, there is a more enlightened, all-loving power that does not seek to inflict guilt and cast them into eternal damnation for having a liberal lifestyle.

Can't we just agree to let kids learn in schools without the disruption of solicitors? Isn't there enough distraction in their lives already? It doesn't matter if it's God, Mohammed or Cap'n Crunch — it's a solicitation and there's no room for it in public school so long as our educational system continues to underperform other industrialized nations. Clearly, there are better things to do during class time.

Gary Huerta
Nondenominational
Glendale

Does distributing Bibles in public schools violate someone's rights, and, if so, whose rights?

The first provision in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This provision sets forth both the "Establishment Clause" and the "Free Exercise Clause," which together provide religious rights and restrictions.

The Establishment Cause was intended to separate churches and government and to prevent the establishment of a national church in the United States. The Free Exercise Clause was intended to allow individuals to choose religious beliefs and to exercise, or practice, those beliefs without government restraint.

In a nation with citizens of many different religious beliefs (or no religious beliefs at all), the right to act upon such beliefs must be qualified by the government's responsibility to further compelling government interests (e.g., health and safety). This inherent conflict between religious rights and the legitimate regulatory responsibilities of government creates the battleground over rights.

Turning to the Gideons' actions in Tennessee, and without getting into the nuances of Constitutional law, I think it was appropriate for them to restrict their activities. Given the law as to it stands today, both school authorities and the Gideons pushed the legal envelope.

Having said that, I believe it is a good thing to encourage school-age children to read the Bible and to get Bibles into their hands. The goal may be appropriate, but the process to achieve that goal was flawed in this case.

In light of this, how do we teach our school-age children religious principles without getting entangled in legal issues? For Latter-day Saints, this is done in the home, at church and through the Seminary program. The latter is an early morning class (6:00 am) held most days during the school year at local LDS chapels. The goal for that program is to provide our youth (9th through 12th grades) with scripture and gospel study that adds to their secular education.

In sum, government restrictions on religion should be limited, but religions should be mindful of the restrictions that do exist.

Rick Callister
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
La Cañada II Ward, La Crescenta Stake

Freedom of religion is different from absence of religion. It is, in my mind, the freedom to make one's own informed choices about religion (including the choice not to have one), rather than have any particular religion's agenda forced upon you, or having allegiance to the same be politically, legally or socially required.

Freedom as an informed choice requires information. So yes, all holy texts of all the world's religions should be available to students (though never forced upon them) so that they can have the exposure and information they need to make their choices. Isn't the business of schools putting information in front of people? Those books should be in the library with other books, sold in school bookstores and co-equally taught, compared and contrasted in world religion classes.

However, to present and distribute only one religion's scripture in schools — even if you're only inviting students to take a copy — is wrong. Allowing only one religious group to pray over the loudspeakers, or link to their website through the school's site, is wrong.

I am against the stamping out of religion in America in the supposed name of freedom. I am also against the imposition of Christianity in the supposed name of American values.

I am for the open, public celebration of all religious faiths and a rich multiplicity of spiritual practices. I am for teaching children that there is more to this life than reading, writing and 'rithmetic; more to life than smart phones, grades and soccer; realities far more real than what can be seen, heard, touched or even imagined.

I am against defining freedom with 'fear of the other.' I am for defining freedom as glad interplay among every perspective and practice and fearlessly intelligent dialogue among them, with final choices remaining a matter of personal conscience.

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada

This is a difficult subject. Years ago, I would have said blocking the distribution of Bibles was denying students' rights. This country is founded on Christian principles. And as such, we have allowed Christian values to permeate this nation, set a foundation.

But the times we live in are diverse, ethnicities and other religions have settled and integrated here. So it does seem difficult to ban other religions and embrace Christianity unless laws stating such are in place and practiced.

Personally, I of course do not think we should ban Bibles. Again, other countries allow freedom to their religions but not necessarily Christianity. I would say my preference is to allow our religious foundation to be legal and freely expressed — without burdening those with different beliefs to partake.

However, we have freedom of religion; we do not have not such laws banning other religions. With that said, I think our government needs to access laws across the board on this topic or we will continue to have these situational issues arise.

Kimberlie Zakarian, LMFT
Kimberlie Zakarian Therapy, Inc.
Montrose

I have previously expressed my opinion in this column regarding the separation of church and state. I believe that when America's founding fathers ratified the First Amendment of our Constitution, they intended to prevent the Federal government from establishing a central religion that would effectively favor one religious group over another. However, the founders did not intend to eradicate every semblance of religion from schools and the public domain. On the contrary, the framers of the Constitution were very cognizant of the essential role that spirituality plays in both private and public life; therefore, they strove to be pious in their personal lives and were extremely supportive of religious expression in public.

Of course there are some people and groups whose excessive religious activity or proselytizing are unduly imposing upon others. In these situations, I can see why the ACLU should step in to protect the rights of all American citizens. But the vast majority of religious people are good, wholesome individuals who simply wish to share with others. There is no harm in that — quite the opposite — and so long as their interactions remain respectful and tolerant of diverse opinion, I laud individuals who take of their time to help others find spiritual completion.

Generally speaking, I believe the ACLU is a well-intentioned organization that sincerely wishes to uphold the law and protect individuals from violations of their rights. However, when the ACLU takes on a group like the Gideons, I question the wisdom of its leadership and wonder if the group is allocating its contributions in a thoughtful manner. The unfortunate fact is that every day, there are true travesties of justice taking place across our country, but by diverting their resources toward a silly case such as this one and confronting harmless Bible distributors, the ACLU is then prevented from making a real difference in our legal system and helping those who really need their assistance.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

A while ago I encountered Gideons at the Los Angeles County Fair distributing Bibles. No preaching, just freely offering. I still have the small red New Testament their predecessors gave me back in West Virginia when I was in fifth grade. I credit them with my salvation, and my gratitude propels me to shake hands with every Gideon I meet.

I love the Gideons. They aren't some denomination; they're diverse churchmen that spend their own money buying Bibles and their own time dispensing them. They put truth into the hands of takers and what they distribute isn't merely religious; it's historic — both in content and in contribution to American culture.

Permitting Gideons doesn't make schools biased; neither does it infringe anyone's religious rights. Gideon Bibles are gifts, the content of which should be known by every citizen. Being biblically ignorant is being a stupid American, and one doesn't have to be religious to read or own Bibles, any more than one necessarily supports fascism for possessing “Mein Kampf” in their library. But I believe the Bible is “alive and active” (Hebrews 4:12 NIV) and it'll have a positive effect on the souls of those to whom it is exposed. If others want to distribute their religious books, let them. They won't; but supposing they did, the result would be kids owning more resources with which to have parental discussions.

Why is it that handing out condoms is applauded but handing out literature irks the crud out of the ACLU? What happened to freedom of press and freedom of religion? What's their deal?

Millions are positively affected by the Gideons (like me) and millions of stories can be told of people's lives being transformed by Gideon Bibles found in hotel rooms. Why then should students be forbidden access to transformative learning?

Support what's good in this world. Stand with the Gideons. I do.

The Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
Montrose

Remember reading about the so-called Scopes “Monkey” trial, which occurred in Dayton, Tenn., in the early 1920s? A high school teacher named John Scopes got in trouble with the local religiously conservative folk when he tried to teach evolution. How interesting that Tennessee should be the scene again of religious controversy.

This time it's the Gideons, who want to hand out Bibles, vs. the ACLU, which doesn't want them to, and which threatened to go to court to keep them from doing so.

I suppose an argument can be made that the ACLU is keeping the children from learning about religion, although I would assume that such teaching is the job of parents and churches. The bigger question, it seems to me, is whether other faiths, including the Muslims and the Hindus, should be able to hand out copies of their holy books if Christians (i.e., the Gideons) are allowed to hand out copies of the Bible. For me, the answer is a definite “yes.” And if Christians are allowed, then the witches of Tennessee, or anywhere else, also should be able to hand out copies of what they believe.

Some may believe that the ACLU is a trouble-making organization, but I don't share that view. The ACLU exists to be sure that the Bill of Rights is enforced for all Americans, religious or not, obnoxious or not, and one of those rights involves the First Amendment. Part of that amendment says that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” As I understand that phrase, the Constitution's First Amendment is essentially religion-neutral, so if the Gideons aren't permitted to hand out Bibles, nobody else can hand out their religious books, either. But if the Gideons are permitted to distribute copies of scripture, then every other religion also should be able to hand out what they consider to be holy writ.

This is America, and as my late father used to say, “What's fair is fair.” He also used to say, “What's good for

the goose is good for the gander.” So what's good for the Gideons is good for the rest — and fair, too.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada

The religious expressions we have seen in Tennessee classrooms are a reflection of that state's more Bible-oriented culture. At one point, it's somewhat difficult (maybe even impossible) to ask people not to express what is in their hearts when they meet with others. So if the general culture of teachers, students and their families is Christian, there will inevitably be evidence of it in the schools. Man's laws have never ultimately stopped Jesus' expressions of his love and his truth through his people anyway. Legally banning Christian expression is about as effective as passing a law that the sun can't shine in public.

The Gideons are a dedicated, faithful and generous group of Christian businessmen committed simply to distributing Bibles to whoever wants them. Here in California they exercise their constitutional rights to distribute Bibles on public property and they do so with the greatest respect to everyone around them. With the countless harmful influences daily confronting our students, we should warmly welcome people like the Gideons who bring them good news of hope, comfort and purity.

If Bibles are allowed to be distributed in classrooms, then other faiths' books should be allowed as well. If information about a faith is provided, however, it should be offered in a manner that the child is offered the opportunity to approach and inquire unforced and at his own discretion. Elijah the prophet appealed to the discretion of Israel. He gave the false prophets all day to call on their gods. There was no answer. But when Elijah offered one simple prayer, God answered powerfully and Israel turned back to him. I believe that the Bible, even if it is presented alongside contrary religious texts, will always show itself to be true. And maybe that's exactly what the opponents are really afraid of.

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

When my dad would discover my sisters and me holed up in our room with a stack of “True Confessions”-type magazines, titillation of a more innocent age, my mom would gently talk him down: “Now Kenneth, at least they're reading.”

Wise words. It is tempting to give a pass to anyone providing good reading material at schools.

What I object to is the contrivance, even duplicity, of the Gideons' approach. They seem to be more concerned with making a statement about church and state than about children's access to Bibles.

As the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty points out, there are perfectly legal ways to get Bibles to school children, as the Gideons no doubt are aware.

Upholding both the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution, which along with supporting and amplifying court decisions, assures our religious freedom and church-state separation, does protect these important rights.

Reversing the question to a possible denial of students' rights sets up a false parallel. Students in public schools have no right to religious materials provided with official involvement as part of the required

classroom day.

I do think that quality, age-appropriate, even-handed curriculum covering the cultural, political, and economic aspects of religion in the human experience is a desirable part of a good education.

Can the Gideons not be aware of the magnitude of the challenges currently facing public education? Yet they choose to use their resources illegally, creating a distraction from the educational mission. A more positive approach would be to contribute their funds and energy to literacy programs to help make sure future citizens are able to comprehend all sorts of texts.

Roberta Medford
Atheist
Montrose