

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

February 2000

Contents

- [February Meeting](#)
- [January Speaker](#)
- [Football Prayers on Texas Republican Primary Ballot](#)
- [Quotes](#)
- [Web site of the month](#)
- [Darwin Day website](#)
- [Florida "Bible History" Courses Violate Constitution, New Investigation Reveals](#)
- [Highway Cleanup](#)
- [To the editor:](#)
- [Calendar of Events](#)

February Meeting

The regular February meeting will not be held. In its place, we have the Darwin Day Celebration on Sunday, February 6, from 1:00-3:30. It will be at a different location this year, the Coloma Community Center, 4623 T Street, Sacramento. The cost is \$10.00 (\$7.50 for students) and includes a catered meal from Celestin's Caribbean Restaurant. Everyone on the AOF mailing list should get an invitation in the mail. For more information, call Anna Andrews at 448-9373.

January Speaker

The speaker at the January meeting was Paul Storey, substituting for Lori Thompson of Planned Parenthood. Paul also has a long association with Planned Parenthood.

Paul noted that Planned Parenthood offered a wide range of reproductive services, including prenatal care. The organization has been targeted by the religious right for one of its activities, providing abortions.

Paul noted that Romania had a requirement for government approval of abortions (which were then uniformly denied). With these records, it was able to track individuals whose mothers had requested but not received abortions. These individuals were more likely to demonstrate social deviance on a wide variety of measures. One interesting possibility is that the widely publicized reduction in crime rates in the United States in recent years are at least in part due to the availability of legal abortions in the 1970s and 1980s.

Under a new California law, HMOs must now cover contraceptives, with some religious exceptions.

There is a feeling in Planned Parenthood that it is losing the battle for legal abortions. One example is the announcement by Wal-Mart that it would not carry RU-486, the "abortion pill". Another example is the reduced number of doctors performing abortions and the reduced number of medical schools providing training in the procedure.

Paradoxically, most Catholics simply ignore the Pope on birth control, and most Americans polled support a right to abortions under most circumstances.

Football Prayers on Texas Republican Primary Ballot

The Texas Republican Party is putting the issue of prayers at public school football games on their March 14th primary election ballot. The Texas GOP hopes that the football prayer issue will attract fundamentalists who are still in the Democratic Party. What did you expect when the Christian Coalition and other evangelicals have absolute control of the Texas GOP?

(From The Texas Atheist #37)

Quotes

Ministers say that they teach charity. That is natural. They live on handouts. All beggars teach that others should give.

Robert G. Ingersoll

Web site of the month

<http://fp.bio.utk.edu/darwin/>

Darwin Day website

With the AOF/HAGSA Darwin Day coming up, here is a Darwin Day website, sponsored by the Tennessee Darwin Coalition, with student essays and other information about Darwin.

Florida "Bible History" Courses Violate Constitution, New Investigation Reveals

State Urged to Drop Courses from Approved List, Schools Asked to Revamp Instruction

All fourteen Florida school districts that have taught high school courses in "Bible History" since 1997 - 20% of the state's school districts - have been violating the U.S. Constitution by teaching the Bible from a religious perspective, using the Bible as if it were a history textbook or otherwise failing to provide objective and secular instruction.

This is the major finding of a new investigation of "Bible History" courses in Florida public schools conducted by People For the American Way Foundation based on an analysis of written course materials. The results of that investigation are described in a report entitled, "The Good Book Taught Wrong: 'Bible History' Classes in Florida's Public Schools," which was released at a news conference in Tallahassee today.

"There is a right way - a constitutional way - to teach about the Bible in the public schools and there is a wrong way," said PFAWF President Ralph G. Neas. "Unfortunately, 14 Florida school districts are doing it the wrong way."

As the U.S. Supreme Court made clear in 1963, the Bible can only be taught about in public schools if the teaching is presented "objectively as part of a secular program of education."

Despite the Supreme Court's ruling, groups such as the private, right-wing affiliated National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS) have been urging local school boards around the country to adopt curricula that present the Bible from a Christian perspective and teaches Bible content as history. People For the American Way Foundation's investigation of "Bible History" instruction in Florida grew out of the successful lawsuit brought in 1998 by PFAWF, the Florida ACLU and the law firm of Steel, Hector & Davis on behalf of parents and taxpayers in Lee County, Florida, who objected to their school board's adoption of unconstitutional curricula for "Bible History: Old Testament" and "Bible History: New Testament" courses based on NCBCPS materials. Through study of publicly available records and public information requests, PFAWF learned that during the two school years starting in the fall of 1997 through last spring, fourteen other school districts have taught one or both of these "Bible History" courses at least once in one or more schools.

PFAWF's report is presented in two parts. The first consists of a general overview of the most common constitutional problems found in the courses in the fourteen school districts. The second gives a more detailed district-by-district description of how the courses have been taught, based on PFAWF's review of the instructional materials provided by the school districts themselves.

"This investigation shows us in no uncertain terms that the 'Bible History' approach is hopelessly flawed and should be abandoned," said Neas. "Even the schools that appear to have made an effort to do it right still got it wrong."

The report calls on the state's education department to withdraw approval of the courses in their present form, noting that the nature of the courses and their inclusion on a state-approved list "have proven to be an open invitation to local school districts to violate the Constitution under the guise of teaching state-sanctioned courses." That recommendation was reinforced today in a letter from Neas and Lisa Versaci, PFAWF Florida Director, to the Florida Department of Education urging the removal of "Bible History: Old Testament" and "Bible History: New Testament" in their present form from the state-approved course list.

To assist the state Department of Education and the individual school districts in revising their course offerings to conform to the U.S. Constitution, PFAWF has also provided them with copies of a new publication, "The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide," recently published by the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center and the National Bible Association. This guide has been endorsed by a wide range of religious, education and First Amendment organizations spanning the political spectrum from progressive groups such as PFAWF to conservative groups such as the Christian Legal Society and the National Association of Evangelicals.

The report also calls on each of the 14 school districts that are the subject of the report not to wait to be sued but to cease their unconstitutional instruction and revise their courses to comply with the Constitution. This recommendation was reinforced in letters sent today to the superintendents of each of the 14 school districts, along with copies of the report.

"The Good Book Taught Wrong" details five common ways in which Florida school districts are violating the Constitution in their teaching of the "Bible History" courses based on their written instructional materials:

1. THE COURSES ARE FRAMED AND TAUGHT FROM CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES (usually Protestant).

FOR EXAMPLE:

Most school districts use the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" in the course titles, establishing their Christian focus at the outset. The term scholars prefer for what Christians call the Old Testament is "Hebrew Scriptures" or "Hebrew Bible."

Some districts ask students to identify parts of the Old Testament that are predictive of "events" in the New Testament, such as the birth of Christ - a purely Christian reading of the Bible.

Instructional materials commonly refer to the story of Adam and Eve as "the Fall of Man" and identify the serpent in that story as "Satan." Those are purely Christian theological interpretations not shared by Jews, who also view Genesis as scripture.

Most courses include study (and sometimes memorization) of the Ten Commandments. The students are generally not made aware that the Commandments are arranged differently by Christians and Jews, and that even among Christians, there are different versions.

Students are most often taught that "the Bible" has 66 books, even though the Bible accepted by Catholics has 73. The seven books of scripture included in the Catholic New American Bible but not in the Protestant King James Bible are typically described in these courses as Apochryphal books, not scripture.

2. THE BIBLE IS USED AS A HISTORY TEXTBOOK.

The courts' rulings have recognized that while public schools may include instruction about the Bible, the Bible must not be taught as if it were "actual literal history." Yet most of the Florida school districts appear to be teaching the Bible as if it were a factual account of history.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Often the Bible is the only textbook used in these "history" courses. Where there are secondary materials used, they are likely to be Bible workbooks or other materials produced by religious publishing houses that often describe their mission as evangelical rather than educational.

Course materials in Escambia County refer to as "historical events" such stories as "Creation" and "Flood" and describe Genesis 1-11 as "Early history of man."

Materials from a Hillsborough County high school go even farther, calling the Bible "the most reliable source for history we have."

3. STUDENTS ARE ASSUMED TO BE CHRISTIAN.

Two high schools, in Marion and Levy Counties, in an exam on I Corinthians, ask: "Why is it hard for a non-Christian to understand things about God?"

An exam question asks students at a high school in Columbia County, "If you had a Jewish friend who wanted to know if Jesus might be the expectant [sic] Messiah, which book [of the Gospels] would you give him?"

In Okaloosa County, a workbook question asks: "What is Jesus Christ's relationship to God, to creation, and to you?"

A lesson on John 8 used in Levy County asks, "Who, according to Jesus, is the father of the Jews? The devil."

Often the instructional materials show their Christian orientation through use of the first person plural pronouns "we" and "us." For example, lesson plans include a discussion of

"[h]ow we got our Bible" (Gulf); an exam asks the location of "Five great sermons of our Lord" (Clay); students are asked, "How do we believe Peter died?" (Polk).

4. THE BIBLE IS USED TO PROMOTE CHRISTIAN FAITH FORMATION AND RELIGIOUS VALUES AND LESSONS.

The courts have drawn a clear line, ruling consistently that public schools may teach about religion but may not proselytize or encourage the adoption of the beliefs of any faith. This line is often crossed in the Florida school districts where the "Bible History" courses are taught.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Students in Indian River County were asked to "figure out what the parables [of Jesus] are telling us today."

In Levy County, a study guide reminds students that "[God] wants us to do what is right all the time."

An exam on Genesis asks Columbia County students, "What stages in the Temptation and Fall of Man do we still find ourselves [in] today?"

5. SUNDAY SCHOOL AND OTHER RELIGIOUS TRAINING EXERCISES ARE USED TO INDOCTRINATE STUDENTS IN BIBLE CONTENT.

Many courses rely on seemingly juvenile activities and rote memorization - more appropriate to Sunday School where the tenets of faith are being learned and internalized - instead of on higher skills such as critical thinking. For example:

Some school districts require students to memorize the names of the books of the "Old" or "New" Testament in order.

Some exams in Marion County require students to find specified Bible verses and "copy them in full" from their Bibles.

In games like "Play Bingo w/Gospels," used in Gulf County, students are required to memorize and regurgitate Bible content.

(From a press release by People for the American Way Foundation. Edited for space.)

Highway Cleanup

Saturday, January 8 saw four AOF members attempt to cleanup AOF's two mile stretch of 99 N of Elkhorn Blvd. in CalTrans' Adopt-A-Highway program. Don Knutson, Tony Kochenash, Hank Kocol and

Betty Simonsma corralled some 14 bags of refuse among the snowy egrets and cormorants but we couldn't provide our usual thorough cleaning. Saturday, March 4 will see us return to the scene at 9:00.

To the editor:

At the last meeting Betty Simonsma raised questions concerning donations to non-profit organizations. As we all know (or should know) almost anyone can start a nonprofit organization and then pay the administration of the organization (yes these are often the same people who start the organization) almost any salary they want. Thus, administration and fundraising can chew up 90% or more of all donations.

There is a reputable organization which is bird-dogging national charities. It is the National Charities Information Bureau. You can find them online at <http://www.give.org>. At this site you can read who they are, see a brief summary of their evaluations for various organizations, and sign up for one free copy of their Wise Giving Guide. Their address is NCIB, 19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003.

Paul Geisert