

Bible valid as an academic subject

Proper credentialing, context negates fears of 'religious agenda'

By KENT HAROLD RICHARDS

A 2006 law allowing elective classes on the Bible to be taught in Georgia public schools set off a national debate. Top on the list of concerns were teacher qualifications and First Amendment issues.

Now we read on ajc.com that several Georgia school districts agree these courses may be too prickly to handle ("Schools shying away from Bible classes," Jan. 14). As director of the Society of Biblical Literature, I offer a few words of encouragement to schools and concerned parents.

In the article, a spokeswoman for the Hancock County school system said the course is not offered there because "many of our students have a strong spiritual upbringing that is firmly grounded in Christianity."

This should be a nonissue for public schools. Schools are not in the business of spiritual

upbringing. There are many who think Bible courses in the schools will impart Christian values and have a positive effect on student behavior. That cannot, however, be the stated or implied goal of a public school course on Bible or religion.

What are the goals of Bible courses in the public schools? To educate students about the world that gave rise to these texts, to show the influence of these texts on democracy and introduce us to the values and ideas that have been a force in the formation of our literature and media. The Bible is both an ancient document and one that shapes the world around us.

Teacher qualification is indeed a concern for schools. The risk is that an English teacher or social studies teacher is put in the classroom with no formal education in the Scriptures. They may have gone to Sunday school or have their own faith views on the Bible. But again, those views cannot direct the content of a public school course.

What we need are teachers with at least one course on the Bible at the college level — Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) and Christian Scriptures (New Testament).

If we are serious about teaching Bible courses well, we have to start thinking about teacher qualifications in the same way we would think



Richards

about them for any other subject: English, algebra or American history.

The Society of Biblical Literature hopes to offer summer teacher training workshops on the Bible to assist public school teachers who will teach such courses and offer a set of teacher guidelines and a curriculum.

We need to acknowledge the fear around teaching Bible and religions in the public schools. Fears about a cloaked "religious agenda," the inadvertent imparting of religious values or about the ACLU policing our schools are all out there.

We address these fears by following the law, assigning qualified teachers, teaching with sound resources and by treating the Bible and religion as a subject worthy of study and understanding.

It is a subject that affects people's lives, both locally and globally, and that influences literature, history, art and politics. To not study the Bible because of our fears alone is academic negligence.

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