

Testimony of Scott Yenor, Professor of Political Science at
BSU

February 25, 2016

I have been asked to speak about why teaching the Bible in the service of a public school's mission to teach literature and history might be necessary and indeed salutary. My general argument is the following: One cannot understand what many of the great works in Western literature and philosophy mean, and one cannot understand many modern principles of political life, without understanding something about Christianity; and understanding something about Christianity often requires some knowledge of the Bible.

Let me begin with a few examples to illustrate this thesis. A teacher may be interested in teaching about religious tolerance or the separation of Church and State. In the history of the world, this tolerance and separation is very unique and predominantly a Western way of doing things. We find that, when we look at the map, it exists in

countries touched by Christianity. This suggests a relationship between the religious toleration and Christianity. What explains this relationship? There are two concepts in the Bible that are very helpful to read and reflect upon in reaching this conclusion. First, there is the idea of rendering unto Ceasar what is Ceasar's and unto God what is God's, found in the Gospels. Second, there is the idea of fulfilling the law and, in some ways moving beyond the law. This aspect of Christianity is understood very poorly. Here is what I mean.

Judiasm and Islam are religions of the law—they set out how governments are supposed to be set up and what the content of their laws are to be. Those religions emphasize what one is supposed to do. Christianity is a religion of faith, of what one believes—and it leaves individuals free to change governments, to have monarchies or democracies, for instance because belief is separate from government.

(Mohammed, as Tocqueville writes, “had not only religious doctrines from Heaven placed in the Koran, but political maxims, civil and criminal laws, and scientific theories. The Gospels in contrast speak only of the general relations of men to God and among themselves. Outside of that they teach nothing and oblige nothing to be believed. That alone, among a thousand other reasons, is enough to show that the first of these two religions cannot reign for long in enlightened and democratic times. . . .”

This example allows for several points to be made. Understanding the separation of church and state requires that we understand the culture or milieu from which that separation arises and that is a Christian culture. It also calls for us to understand in broad perspective contrasting cultures that are informed by other books. These cultures are part of our world too. My point here is simple: One probably cannot understand a civilization without understanding its ultimate values and these ultimate values are, in one way or another, often traceable to revealed religion.)

I talk fast so I would like to make another point. Many of the greatest works of literature cannot be understood without some knowledge of Christianity. Examples abound—Dante's *Inferno*, Alcott's *Little Women*, Dostoyevsky's *Brother's Karamazov*. I want to mention only Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlett Letter*, wherein an adulteress, Hester Prynne, is banished from a Puritan community in New England for her affair with their preacher. A great book. Question: The Puritans claim that the Bible is the basis of their political community and, more specifically, of this particular law. Is this an accurate reading of the Bible and its politics? An answer to this question can only be gotten from a little study of the Bible, including some of the laws in Deuteronomy about adulteresses, the Sermon on the Mount, and perhaps Jesus' confrontation of the prostitute at the well. Small excerpts from the Bible are necessary for us to understand what Hawthorne is criticizing in the Puritans.

One last comment. I have been teaching at the university level for over 15 years. I teach political philosophy and some constitutional law. The level of understanding of what Christianity is among students has been dropping over time, just as their attention span has dropped. I do not blame the schools for this; it is a cultural thing in Idaho and perhaps everywhere. BUT in order to understand much of the Western tradition of political philosophy teaches and to understand ourselves, it seems that we would not want to deprive schools of the use of this tool to teach how those basics have helped shape our civilization. As I mentioned at the onset, look at a map and find the countries enjoying the principles of political freedom and religious tolerance and, almost without exception, they have a Christian heritage. That seems a not insubstantial thing to understand in a history and literature curriculum.