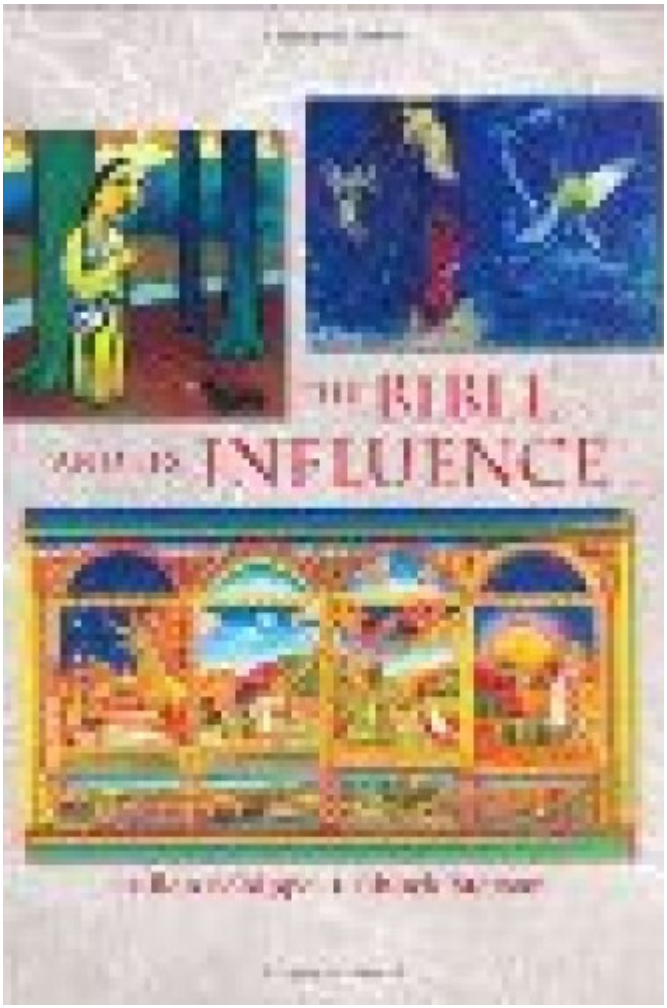
Textbook case

By Luke Timothy Johnson in the February 21, 2006 issue

In Review



The Bible and Its Influence

Cullen Schippe and Chuck Stetson, eds.
BLP

Public schools have been a primary battleground between the despisers and defenders of religion. The forces of secularity have pounded steadily forward on the

prayer front, pushing into a tiny meditative corner those who want schools to reflect and teach spiritual, and even specifically Christian, values. They have succeeded in their aggressive tactics because it is genuinely debatable whether sponsoring prayer in a classroom or at an athletic event constitutes coercive support for (if not an establishment of) religion. The battle becomes considerably subtler, though, when religion is advocated not as a way of life but as something to be studied as an integral part of American culture, and is made part of a high school curriculum.

Last year in these pages Mark A. Chancey reviewed the vigorous—and successful—efforts being made by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, a conservative Christian organization, to place its textbook, *The Bible in History and Literature*, in the curriculum of public schools (see "Lesson plans: The Bible in the classroom," August 23). Given the way the culture wars divide religious folk among themselves on the question of how to respond to modernity, it was only a matter of time before the conservative Christian effort was matched by one from an ecumenical group of Christians and Jews.

The Bible Literacy Project offers serious competition with the publication of *The Bible and Its Influence*, which is to be accompanied by a teaching manual and a university-based, online teacher-training program. This effort, like that of the NCBCPS, relies heavily on the distinction made by Justice Thomas Clark in the 1963 Supreme Court decision forbidding devotional reading of the Bible in public schools: "Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment."

Whereas the NCBCPS has a list of advisers that reads, in Chancey's words, "like a Who's Who of religious, social and political conservatives," the Bible Literacy Project seeks to represent a much broader spectrum of religious views, and the book's reviewers and consultants include Jews as well as Christians of virtually every stripe. Clearly, the desire is to present the project as a consensus effort. The distinguishing feature of those involved seems to be less a uniform religious position than a deep commitment to the proposition that education in the humanities must include the serious study of religion. The corresponding conviction is that ignorance of religion is unacceptable among those a culture regards as educated. The direct corollary is that an American education that systematically ignores the biblical religion so obviously formative of this culture is necessarily a shabby and second-rate education.

The entire Bible Literacy Project, in fact, bases itself squarely on the Bible Literacy Report (2005), which is subtitled, “What do American teens need to know and what do they know?” The Templeton Foundation put up the money, and the Gallup organization polled approximately a thousand teenagers and conducted interviews with 41 high school teachers. The findings are predictably sobering.

We may not be surprised to learn that only 10 percent of teenagers can name all five of the world’s major religions, or that 66 percent cannot name the Qur’an as the sacred book of Islam. It is more disconcerting to learn that 20 percent do not know what Easter commemorates, or that 28 percent cannot identify Moses as the man who led the Israelites out of bondage. And while there is some comfort in knowing that 74 percent of teenagers know that “Do not divorce” is not one of the Ten Commandments, it is diminished by the realization that another 26 percent think “Do not steal” or “Do not kill” or “Keep the Sabbath holy” is not in the Decalogue. That 49 percent of American young people can identify what happened at Cana is good; that 51 percent got the answer wrong is troubling. We are relieved to learn that 81 percent of adolescents can pick out the Golden Rule from among multiple options; we are dismayed to think of the 19 percent who have no idea what it is.

The survey further shows that there is a lack of opportunity for students to gain such knowledge in school. Across the spectrum of private and public schools attended by these teenagers, only half offer any sort of class in religion, and only 16 percent require any study of religion. (The requirement is found in 80 percent of private schools and 74 percent of homeschool situations, compared to 7 percent of public schools.)

The book’s title reveals its strategy: it seeks to demonstrate the relevance of the Bible by showing its cultural influence, above all in literature, but also in music, art, politics and religion. The treatment of each book in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is straightforwardly literary rather than historical. The canonical sequence is followed, with attention given regularly to literary forms, characters and themes. At the head of each section, students are assigned texts from one of several translations of scripture, and are given themes to discover, names to know and a question to consider. At the end of each section, they are assigned a project.

For example, one unit considers kingdom and exile. In a chapter titled “The Kingdom Falls,” students are required to read substantial portions of 1 and 2 Kings and are asked to learn about the reign of Solomon, the division of the kingdom, the role of

Elijah and the kingdom's final fall. They are to consider "Why do governments rise and fall?"

Accompanying the exposition are a picture and paragraph devoted to architecture (Solomon's Temple), a lithograph of the Jerusalem temple, a pictorial representation of Solomon and Queen Sheba from Ethiopia, a painting by Cornelis de Vos of Solomon offering sacrifices to idols, a map of the divided kingdoms, a contemporary Chinese painting of Elijah, another painting of Elijah by Peter Paul Rubens, a 17th-century needlepoint rendition of Jezebel's death, a sidebar devoted to the term "Jezebel," and a picture of a panel showing King Jehu offering tribute to the Assyrians. There is also a short essay on "cultural connections" devoted to music, namely Felix Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*. At the end, students can choose to do one of three projects: research the archaeological remains of Solomon's kingdom, listen to and review Mendelssohn's oratorio, or chart the 14 wonders reported about Elijah and the 28 reported of Elisha by the books of Kings. This is all impressively thoughtful and organized.

Emphasis on the Bible's influence is especially evident in the "unit feature" that accompanies each section. For the introduction to the book, for example, the unit feature is devoted to "biblical allusions." It argues that without a knowledge of the Bible, one misses a great deal of what one reads in literature. The feature concludes with a list of biblical allusions in the English Advanced Placement test. Subsequent unit features take up "Milton and the Bible," "Literary Views of Abraham and Isaac," "Exodus and Emancipation," "Exile and Return," "Thirst for Justice," "The Bible and Shakespeare," and "A Summary of Literary Genres in the Bible"; and (shifting to the New Testament) "Parables of Mercy," "A Death with Meaning," "Augustine," "The Legacy of the Reformation," "Dante's Purgatorio" and "Freedom and Faith in America."

Fair-minded readers can hardly object either to the book's aims or to its way of pursuing them. None of the overt biases detected by Chancey in the NCBCPS materials can be detected here. The tone is mild, informative and balanced. Jewish, Christian and even Muslim perceptions are fairly represented. There is not even, so far as I can tell, any tilt toward a specific version of Christianity. Attention is given to both the Catholic and Orthodox canons. The excursus on "The Legacy of the Reformation" devotes paragraphs to Luther, Calvin, Henry VIII and the radical reformers, and concludes with a recognition of the reform within Roman Catholicism: "The Roman Church worked to get back to its roots in scripture and tradition. The

Catholic Church is known for its worldwide good works, hospitals, and educational institutions."

The entire production is handsome, informative, high-minded, irenic. The focus on the Bible as literature enables the authors to bypass some thorny topics—little is said about science, nothing about evolution—and to deal delicately with others, such as the New Testament polemic against Jews.

The strengths of the book, however, also suggest its limitations. The book is perhaps too pragmatic in its goals: students are told they will understand the world around them better, be better students, be better able to participate in a society that takes religion seriously and be better able to express themselves. They are given little sense of the passions out of which this literature emerged, or the passions it can still engender. They will not get a full sense from this book of the weight of authority invested in the Bible by its passionate readers who are little interested in its literature but sure about its truth.

As with all textbooks, the effectiveness of this one will depend most on the abilities of teachers. It is good that a teaching manual and online training are in production. Whether these will equip teachers to deal with the issues that will inevitably arise in the classroom is not clear. Students will bring their own experience of the Bible into class with them, and the book's avoidance of some disputed questions almost ensures that they will emerge in the classroom—and in a far less orderly and more passionate form than they would have in the book.

The more pressing question may be the degree to which both Bible curriculum projects may be far too little far too late, not only for schools but for the culture itself. The real issue is not the threat such projects pose to the authority of the home and school, but the fact that young people come to high school so dismally uninformed religiously by home and church that responsible educators feel obliged to take up the task. As I read through this excellent textbook with appreciation for all the rich cultural connections it makes, I became increasingly uneasy because of two growing realizations. The first is that students' cultural ignorance goes far beyond the Bible. It is not enough to suggest that Milton, Dante, Shakespeare, Rubens and Caravaggio used the Bible; a far greater challenge is to make Milton and the rest seem as important to young students as many of them already consider the Bible to be.

The second realization is that so many of the cultural connections adduced by the authors came from the (often quite distant) past. The closer that writers and artists are to the present, the more difficult it is to make the case that they are in any sense shaped by the Bible. The question this fine book presses on teachers and students alike—and on the rest of us—is whether the Bible continues to influence the higher expressions of contemporary culture, granted that there are higher expressions.