

Turning Texas Public Schools into Sunday Schools?

A Review of the State's Proposed K-5 Reading Curriculum

A Report from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund

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About the Author

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Introduction

Earlier this year, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), in accordance with recent state legislation,¹ made available for public review and comment a newly state-developed Texas Open Education Resources (OER) curriculum for K-5 Reading and Language Arts (RLA).² If adopted, this curriculum would be made available for use by school districts.³ According to a May 2024 TEA press release, the OER RLA curriculum:

weave[s] together elements of the science of reading with a cross-curricular knowledge building approach consistent with a classical education model that is focused on the fundamentals. OER RLA immerses students in classic literature along with reading lessons about art, history, culture, science, and technology. As a product built for Texas students, the content features strong representation from the diverse people, places and history of Texas.⁴

What is missing from this description is one of the most conspicuous and potentially controversial characteristics of the OER RLA: its heavy coverage of religion and its incorporation of passages from religious texts, most prominently the Bible. Indeed, the incorporation of religious source materials in the curriculum is so extensive that the developers include a special note about it in the OER RLA Program and Implementation Guide. The curriculum, they write, includes “content...from different religious traditions, including various monotheistic and polytheistic faiths around the world.” The guide further notes that the curriculum’s inclusion of “content from or about religious source material...is not for the purpose of advancing any particular religious belief.”⁵

There is nothing wrong with the coverage of religion in public schools per se. Indeed, as I have noted elsewhere, there is a growing consensus among U.S. scholars and educators that as the world becomes more interconnected and American society more religiously diverse, public school students need a basic working knowledge of the world’s religions. Yet in the public school context, coverage of religion must be presented in a balanced and nonconfessional way, not only to protect the venerable and widely cherished constitutional requirement for church-state separation in our country, but also because public school classrooms in a state as diverse as Texas are likely to have students with families that follow a variety of faith traditions or none at all.⁶

However, soon after the OER RLA instructional materials were released for public review, they drew criticism for their use of biblical materials and their apparent Christian bias. The curriculum was widely called “Bible infused” in the news media.⁷ Southern Methodist University scholar Mark Chancey noted a “pronounced Christian emphasis” in the OER RLA materials.⁸ The political context exacerbated these concerns: “The new curriculum was released amid a broader push by Texas Republicans, who control state government, to put more Christianity in public schools,”⁹ while in nearby Oklahoma, state education superintendent Ryan Walters in late June “directed all public schools to teach the Bible.”¹⁰ State officials in Texas, however, defended the OER RLA curriculum’s inclusion of religious materials, including biblical texts, as necessary for student understanding of religious allusions in literature, art, and culture.¹¹

Because of my interest as a religious studies scholar in how educators approach teaching about religion,¹² the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund (TFNEF) commissioned me in June 2024 to conduct an independent examination and assessment of the coverage of religion in the OER RLA instructional materials.¹³

Beginning the review process in mid-June 2024, I conducted a careful examination of all units of the K-5 materials, including those with no religion content. I focused on the teacher guides, which contain student readings and activities as well as instructions and guidance for teachers.¹⁴ I also consulted the family support letters which accompany units throughout the curriculum; the stated intent of these letters is to inform families about the topics covered in the unit and encourage discussion at home.¹⁵

I evaluated the religion coverage in the proposed OER RLA instructional materials in terms of criteria set out in my earlier work on religion coverage in public schools:

- Is the coverage of religion accurate? Does it accord not only with what members of a given religion believe but also what is accurate historically?
- Is it balanced? Does it give students a sense of the diverse religious environment they will encounter in society?
- Is it nonconfessional? Does it avoid favoring or promoting one religion over others?

While I applaud the OER RLA materials for exposing K-5 students to religion and its role in the human story, I find that the coverage of religion in this curriculum is at times inaccurate, generally lacks religious balance, and too often fails to provide students with objective, neutral, nonconfessional coverage of religions necessary for a public school context, with its diverse student and teacher population. In this report, I discuss five key findings from my independent examination:

1. The OER RLA curriculum overemphasizes Christianity, offering very limited coverage or none at all of other major religions and faith traditions.
2. One-sided portrayals of Christianity and its impact whitewash difficult historical truths.
3. Lessons subtly portray Christian faith claims as straightforwardly true, opening the curriculum to the charge that it is meant to proselytize students.
4. The authors appear to go out of their way to work detailed Bible lessons into the curriculum even when they are both unnecessary and unwarranted.
5. Though religious freedom is vital to American democracy, the curriculum distorts its role in the nation's founding while underplaying the importance of other fundamental liberties cherished by Americans.

I also found numerous misleading passages, inaccuracies, and errors in the OER RLA instructional materials. These are discussed in the appendix to this report.

FINDINGS

FINDING 1: The curriculum overemphasizes Christianity, offering very limited coverage or none at all of other major religions and faith traditions.

As noted above, the Program and Implementation Guide claims the curriculum includes “content... from different religious traditions, including various monotheistic and polytheistic faiths around the world.” Moreover, the guide notes that inclusion of “content from or about religious source material...is not for the purpose of advancing any particular religious belief.”¹⁶ Sadly, the curriculum as a whole fails to deliver on these promises.

First, the guide suggests that the curriculum offers more varied and richer religious coverage than is in fact the case. Students learn a great deal about Christianity, much less about Judaism (and that is restricted to biblical Judaism), even less about Islam, and little or nothing about other major world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism. There is some material on traditional Native American religions, but this is mostly restricted to the pre-Columbian era. Grades 2 and 3 cover ancient Greek and Roman religions fairly extensively. Yet these traditions have vanishingly few followers today.¹⁷ They have exercised a cultural influence (e.g., on Western art) but do not prepare students for life in a religiously diverse society, as exposure to, say, Hinduism or Buddhism might.

Moreover, readers expecting the promised coverage of “various monotheistic and polytheistic faiths” will also be disappointed. Of the world’s major monotheistic faiths, only two, Judaism and Christianity, receive any meaningful coverage, and coverage of Judaism is restricted to the biblical periods (Hebrew Bible and New Testament periods), not its contemporary forms.¹⁸ Sikhism receives no coverage at all. As for Islam, students learn about the 14th-century Malian King Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca,¹⁹ as well as the Crusades (though very much from a Christian viewpoint);²⁰ there is also a brief summary of contributions of Islamic civilization to Western civilization.²¹ Otherwise, Islam makes few appearances in this curriculum.

The polytheistic faiths included in grades K-5 are limited to the now largely defunct religions of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as the polytheistic religions of the Native American peoples, but, again, only in their pre-Columbian forms. No contemporary (“living”) polytheisms, such as Hinduism, Buddhism²², or Daoism, are covered.

Given the overall lack of diversity and balance, it comes as something of a surprise in Grade 3 material on the Spanish missions in the Americas, when the teacher is instructed to “Tell students that while they are reading, they should think about how there are many people in our world today that have different religious beliefs.”²³ A welcome bit of advice, to be sure, but the curriculum thus far has given students and teachers precious little information about the diversity of religious belief and practice “in the world today.”

What is puzzling about this lack of diversity and balance is that the authors have plenty of opportunities to include material from other religious traditions—for instance, in the “Sharing Stories” unit in Grade 1, or in the poetry units in Grades 4 and 5. The Grade 5 lesson on Psalm 23 (from the Jewish and Christian traditions) could be followed by a lesson on a devotional work by

the Hindu poet Mirabai (e.g., “Do Not Leave Me Alone”²⁴) or the Muslim poet Hafiz (e.g., “I Have Learned So Much”²⁵), to help students explore how poets from non-biblical traditions express similar feelings of devotion to the Divine.

There’s a final problem with this overall lack of religious diversity and balance. Though the curriculum developers may not intend to “advance[e] any particular religious belief,” by so favoring coverage of Christianity over other religions, the developers open themselves to the charge that they are giving students the impression that Christianity is more important and more worthy of attention than other religions—an impression a *public* school curriculum has no business conveying.

FINDING 2: One-sided portrayals of Christianity and its impact whitewash difficult historical truths.

Besides overemphasizing Christianity to the detriment or exclusion of other religions, the curriculum offers a one-sidedly positive portrayal of Christianity in history. It consistently downplays what is—though it grieves me as a Christian to acknowledge—the well-documented history of Christians’ involvement in injustice and oppression.

One especially egregious example of this problem is the consistent soft-pedaling of European attempts to convert the Native American peoples to Christianity. Through the use of mild terms such as “share,” “introduce,” and “teach,” rather than the more accurate “attempt to convert,” the authors misleadingly suggest that conversion efforts were a friendly dialogue between religions and consistently conceal the religious intolerance and often brutal power dynamics at play in these efforts. For instance, the authors tell kindergarteners that the Spanish conquerors “wanted to share their religion with the Native people.”²⁶ Third graders are told that the conquistadors sought “to spread the message of Christianity,”²⁷ and that Spanish missionaries “worked to introduce the Native people to Christianity” and “made many contributions to American culture by sharing their faith with...Native Americans.”²⁸ A Grade 3 lesson on Spanish missions stresses how the Native peoples learned important practical skills from the missionaries as well as Spanish language and customs, Catholicism, and the Bible; the text glosses over the destruction of native cultures and lifeways.²⁹ It is not until Grade 5 that students get a true picture of these conversion efforts: the authors correctly note that “The Spaniards *imposed* their language *and religion* on the native people”; “Spaniards, led by Cortés and Pizarro, took over [Native American] lands, *imposing* their language and *religious beliefs*” [emphasis mine].³⁰

The curriculum also positions Christianity entirely on the side of the antislavery movement and racial justice. Take for instance the Grade 5 unit “Juneteenth and Beyond.” The text says that Abraham Lincoln and other leading opponents of slavery “*relied on a deep Christian faith* and commitment to America’s founding principles that people should be equal under the law to guide their certainty of the injustice of slavery” [emphasis mine].³¹ Yet the authors fail to mention that Southern defenders of slavery also “relied on a deep Christian faith.”³² Similarly, in a discussion of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” the authors write that “Like so many before him, he [King] *relied on a deep Christian faith* to guide his certainty of the injustice of segregation” [emphasis mine].³³ Though Dr. King’s Christian commitments are unquestionable, the authors fail to mention not only that many non-Christians shared King’s certainty about the injustice of segregation (for instance, the many Jewish Americans who were active in the Civil Rights

movement), but more importantly, that many white Southerners of equally “deep Christian faith” were just as certain that segregation was right and proper.³⁴

Acknowledging uncomfortable historical truths is not a criticism of Christianity or people of faith as a whole. Unfortunately, history is replete with examples of those who misuse faith to justify terrible things. A public school classroom should educate students about the past, in an age-appropriate way, so that they understand the lessons of history. Whitewashing that past fails to educate and raises concerns about the motivations of the authors.

FINDING 3: Lessons subtly portray Christian faith claims as straightforwardly true, opening the curriculum to the charge that it is meant to proselytize students.

In addition to giving far more attention to Christianity than other religions, the curriculum verges on Christian proselytism. This issue contradicts the curriculum authors’ own claim that the inclusion of religious materials “is not for the purpose of advancing any particular religious belief.”³⁵

True, the curriculum does not *explicitly* tell students they should believe the claims of Christianity. Rather, the curriculum’s near-proselytism—as I’ll call it—is more subtle. It works through a combination of omission, stark contrast, and implication, resulting in an account of Christianity that is anything but neutral and nonconfessional.

The clearest instance is in the Grade 3 unit on ancient Rome (Unit 4). Here, the authors present the first detailed account of the life of Jesus and the rise of early Christianity.³⁶ While this is undoubtedly an important part of the story of ancient Rome, it—like all discussions of religion—must be handled with great care, in order to preserve religious neutrality. Sadly, the curriculum authors fall short in this regard.

The first problem is one of omission. In the curriculum up to and including Grade 3, students are exposed in depth to only three religious traditions: in Grade 2, to ancient Greek polytheism; and in Grade 3, to ancient Roman polytheism and the biblical tradition.³⁷ As for the latter, the coverage of Judaism is restricted to the biblical period, and does not discuss why Judaism and Christianity became separate religions or indicate how contemporary Jewish belief and practice differ from Christian. Students are not exposed to contemporary polytheism, such as Hinduism. So, when third graders arrive at this unit, they effectively have only two religious forms to compare: ancient polytheism and Christian monotheism.

Second, the authors set up a stark contrast between those two forms (a stark contrast that is itself problematic, as discussed in the Appendix). They characterize ancient Rome “as two *completely different* cultures, one of polytheism, with multiple *mythical* Roman gods...and another of monotheistic Christianity” [emphasis mine].³⁸ In line with the claim of “complete difference,” the authors then explicitly categorize ancient Roman polytheism as fictional, but strongly imply that Christian accounts are factual.

In Lesson 2 of this unit, which offers a fairly detailed account of ancient Roman polytheism, the

authors repeatedly—even obsessively—refer to the Roman deities as “mythical” (as they do the ancient Greek deities in Grade 2).³⁹ Rather than using the neutral sense of “myth” common among religion scholars like myself,⁴⁰ the authors instead explicitly define “myth” as fictional—indeed, “*completely fictional*” (emphasis mine).⁴¹

Having firmly classified the ancient Roman deities as fictional, the unit then turns to the life of Jesus and the rise of early Christianity.⁴² Drawing almost exclusively on the New Testament accounts, Lesson 10 recounts stories about the annunciation and birth of Jesus (complete with angels), several miracle stories (the great catch of fish, healings, walking on water, calming a storm), Jesus’ foretelling his death and resurrection, and the crucifixion and resurrection narratives.⁴³ Lesson 11 describes the apostle Paul’s miraculous vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus and his subsequent conversion to Christianity.⁴⁴

The authors’ handling of this Christian material could not be more different from that of ancient Roman polytheism. Whereas the deities and stories of ancient Roman polytheism are repeatedly labeled “mythical” and thus “completely fictional,” the New Testament stories are presented without comment regarding their truth status. It’s natural for third graders to conclude that the Christian stories must be factual. This is a broader problem with teaching about the Bible in the public school classroom. As Mark Chancey, who studies public school Bible courses, notes, “One of the biggest stumbling blocks” in classroom presentation of the Bible is treating biblical accounts “as straightforward and unproblematic history, which is in effect making a religious claim.”⁴⁵

In fairness, the authors do not *explicitly* claim the New Testament stories are true; they frequently employ qualifying phrases such as “In the biblical account,” or “The Bible explains.” Yet the authors are not always sufficiently careful. For instance, at one point, the text says, “In the years that followed, *many heard about the resurrection of Jesus*” [emphasis mine],⁴⁶ rather than the more careful (and precise) “many heard *believers’ stories* about the resurrection of Jesus.” Students may well gain the impression that the resurrection was a historical event—a faith claim a public school curriculum has no business conveying.

The authors also mislead students about Jesus and Jewish messianic beliefs. In the section on Jesus’ birth, the text accurately describes the first-century CE Jewish belief in a Messiah, a “Savior sent by God” who would “free the Jewish people from Roman rule.”⁴⁷ However, in the following account of the annunciation and nativity stories, the text mentions that angels “explained” that Jesus was the Messiah predicted by the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴⁸ The text does not mention that this Christian belief was not shared by many Jews at the time and is not shared by Jews today.

The unit’s handling of early Christianity is equally troubling. For instance, it misleadingly implies that Christianity offered a simpler path to salvation than polytheism:

Anyone could receive that forgiveness [accomplished by Jesus’ death and resurrection] and remain connected with God. This idea stood in contrast to the polytheism of Rome before Constantine. Official Roman religious beliefs focused on the idea that individuals must worship many different gods by working with priests at a temple.⁴⁹

This “contrast” is problematic for two reasons. First, it implies that worshiping one god is somehow

easier or simpler than worshipping many gods—a questionable assumption given the long and continuing history of polytheism. Second, it erroneously suggests that priests and ritual practices were found only in Roman polytheism. Quite to the contrary, early Christianity developed its own system of priests and bishops, its own system of ritual practices, and “arduous” requirements for those who wished to be baptized.⁵⁰

Equally troubling, the authors strongly imply that the Roman Empire became more moral and just after the rise of Christianity. The authors claim that “Many Roman laws were changed, informed by Christian values,” and they cite changes to Roman laws partially limiting slavery as the sole example.⁵¹ While Christianity did bring some changes to Roman law and attitudes toward slavery, some Christian clergy did not free their own slaves.⁵² Moreover, changes in the Roman Empire after Christianization were not all positive; non-Christians and homosexuals suffered the often extreme persecutions to which Christians had once been subject.⁵³ In short, the unit’s quasi-triumphalist account of Christianity’s impact is not historically justifiable.

Overall, the treatment of Roman polytheism and Christianity in this unit risks violating two of the core guidelines established by the National Council for the Social Studies on teaching about religion in the classroom. Such teaching should “Expose students to a diversity of religious views, but not impose any particular view,” and such teaching should “Educate about many religions, but not promote or denigrate any religion or nonbelief.”⁵⁴

Moreover, it is highly questionable whether such detailed coverage of the life of Jesus and origins of Christianity is appropriate for eight- or nine-year-olds—who are still developing a sense of personal identity—in a public school context that serves students of many different faith traditions.

Finally, it is very concerning that the Family Support Letter accompanying this unit does not notify parents that their children will be studying New Testament accounts of Jesus in some detail. Here is all the letter says:

The last part of the unit is focused on Rome’s decline into two separate empires and its transition to Christianity. Students will hear how the Roman road system was a catalyst for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. Students will learn about many factors that led to the empire’s decline, and students will study the reigns of Constantine the Great and Justinian.⁵⁵

The letter does not mention that the unit discusses Jesus’ alleged miracles and resurrection, nor the unit’s quasi-triumphalism concerning Christianity’s impact on the Roman Empire.

It is difficult to see how non-Christian parents could be untroubled by the prospect of their students learning about the purported miracles and resurrection of Jesus. It is equally difficult to see how teachers who either are not Christians, or are Christians who do not believe the Bible is historically accurate in all respects, will be comfortable presenting these accounts to their students.

FINDING 4: The authors appear to go out of their way to work detailed Bible lessons into the curriculum even when they are both unnecessary and unwarranted.

The curriculum authors frequently introduce in-depth study of biblical content with little justification. And they often do so without notifying parents that their children will be doing what at minimum verges on Bible study more suited to Christian Sunday School than nonsectarian public schools. Several instances of this problem crop up in the K-5 curriculum. Two in particular stand out.⁵⁶

The first example comes from the instructional materials for kindergarten, an age when students are especially impressionable. In a unit that is ostensibly about art appreciation (“Exploring Art”), the text devotes an entire lesson to the Creation and Flood stories from the biblical book of Genesis.⁵⁷ Though the text mentions that the ancient Maya, Aztec, and Greeks sometimes decorated their pottery to show “their religious beliefs of how the world was created,”⁵⁸ the text does not go into any detail about these beliefs. In sharp contrast, it treats the biblical stories in great detail, devoting four pages to them, with accompanying artworks illustrating specific events from these stories. And in a subsequent application exercise, students are drilled, not on the artwork, but on the details of the biblical creation story:

Use the prompts below and support students to order the events of the story.
Record students’ answers on the graphic organizer.

- Which event happened first? (God created light.)
- What happened next? (God created the seas, dry ground, and vegetation.)
- What happened after that? (God created the fish and birds.)
- Then what happened? (God created the animals.)
- What happened last? (God created the first man and woman and the Garden of Eden.)⁵⁹

It is difficult to avoid concluding that this art appreciation unit is being used as an excuse to smuggle in what is effectively Bible study. Indeed, given the excessive attention to the Genesis accounts and the paucity of attention to similar stories from other religious traditions, kindergarteners are likely to come away from this unit believing that the biblical story is *the* creation account and that it alone is worth their attention.

Equally problematic, the Family Support Letter for this unit gives parents no indication that the students will be studying Bible stories in some detail. All it tells parents is that their children will “explore the many different things that inspire artists,” including “religious faith.”⁶⁰ Considering how impressionable children are at this age, parents deserve to know just how much biblical content their children will be exposed to. That is especially the case because (as stated earlier) a public school classroom in a state as diverse as Texas is likely to have students with families that follow a variety of faith traditions or none at all.

A second example comes from a Grade 5 unit on the Renaissance.⁶¹ In a lesson on Leonardo’s fresco *The Last Supper*, the text correctly describes the painting as “based on the biblical narrative of Jesus Christ’s last Passover meal,” and quite reasonably notes that “[t]o understand the painting, we must understand the Bible story.”⁶² The authors could have then summarized the New Testament account quite concisely—such as, “The *Last Supper* depicts the New Testament story of Jesus’ final meal with his followers, focusing on the moment when he predicts that one of them will betray him to the authorities, leading to his crucifixion.”

Instead, the authors launch into a lengthy account of the Last Supper story and include the following quote from the Gospel of Matthew:

“When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.”

They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?...”

...Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?”

Jesus answered, “You have said so.”⁶³

It is highly doubtful that this level of detail, and particularly the direct quotations from Matthew, are necessary or beneficial to students’ understanding of Leonardo’s painting. They appear gratuitous at best. More troubling, the authors imply that the biblical account—including Jesus’s alleged foreknowledge of his death—is factual: “*The Bible explains that Jesus knew that after this meal, he would be arrested, put on trial, and killed. Let’s read the story in the book of Matthew to see for ourselves what unfolded during the supper*” [emphasis mine].⁶⁴ The italicized passages strongly suggest that the events related in Matthew really happened.⁶⁵ Here again, to make such a suggestion is effectively to make a religious or faith claim and thus to violate the requirement that religion be treated nonconfessionally in the public school setting.

As is the case with the kindergarten materials, the Family Support Letter for this fifth-grade unit gives parents little notice as to the amount and nature of Christian content their children will be exposed to. While the letter does mention generally that students will be considering the Bible as an influence on Renaissance figures, it does not give parents a heads-up that their children will be covering gospel materials in some detail, coverage that verges on Bible study and, arguably in some cases, appears to cross the line into religious instruction.⁶⁶

FINDING 5: Though religious freedom is vital to American democracy, the curriculum distorts its role in the nation’s founding while underplaying the importance of other fundamental liberties cherished by Americans.

Students should learn that religious freedom is one of our most important liberties and is explicitly protected by the Constitution. But an especially troubling aspect of the OER RLA curriculum is

its repeated stress on religious persecution and religious freedom, a stress which borders on the obsessive and at times gives students a misleading and/or inaccurate picture of history. This is particularly true regarding the curriculum's coverage of North America, the Revolutionary War and its causes, and the Founding.⁶⁷ Students may well come away with the mistaken impression that religious freedom is more important than other liberties (such as freedom of speech or press) and that it was the primary motivation for the English colonization of the Atlantic seaboard and a major cause of their revolutionary war against Britain. Moreover, the relentless repetition of the religious freedom narrative raises questions about the motivations of the authors as well as the conservative politicians and political figures on the curriculum's official advisory panel.⁶⁸

Selected examples from three grades are discussed below.

Kindergarten:

A unit entitled “America: Our Great Country”⁶⁹ stresses religious liberty without addressing other vital freedoms. In a lesson on U.S. government, the text correctly notes that the Founders acted to protect people's liberties, yet the instructions to the teacher give only one example of such liberties—religious freedom.⁷⁰ A later exercise about the word “liberties” also lists religious liberty as the sole example of the concept.⁷¹

Grade 1:

In a unit on motivations for American independence,⁷² the authors give students the historically questionable impression that a perceived threat to religious liberty was a main grievance colonists had against the British government. While the text accurately notes that the colonists “were angry over taxes,” it goes on to strongly imply—without evidence—that the colonists were concerned about losing their religious freedom:

Many people who lived in the colonies had other concerns beyond taxes. Many colonists came to America to have religious freedom. Religious freedom means begin [sic] able to freely practice religion without the government telling you how. The pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock, in what would become the colony of Massachusetts, wanted to be able to pray to their God without being told how to pray. Even outside of Massachusetts, in the other original thirteen colonies, colonists worshiped in different ways....Many people from a religious group known as the Quakers left England and went to Pennsylvania, where they had the freedom to worship.⁷³

The clear implication is that the colonists were angry that the British government was threatening their religious freedom. Yet the text does not describe precisely how the British government was doing so. In fact, though the British government certainly endeavored to control the colonies through taxation and punitive laws such as the Coercive Acts, London exerted little control over the religious lives of the colonists.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the lengthy list of grievances in the Declaration of Independence makes no mention of violations of the colonists' religious liberties.⁷⁵

Grade 2:

Throughout a unit entitled “Fighting for a Cause”—which begins with two figures who “fought for religious freedom,” the biblical Esther and the Quaker William Penn⁷⁶—the authors hammer away at the notion of religious freedom, often at the expense of other important freedoms. So, for example,

second graders are reminded how an earlier unit pointed out that many immigrants came to the United States to find religious freedom. The same unit reminds students of this again a few pages later and then returns to religious freedom in various contexts at least a dozen more times in the same unit, far exceeding discussion of other important liberties.⁷⁷ Indeed, the relentless repetition smacks of indoctrination rather than education.

The coverage of religious freedom at times gives rise to historical inaccuracy. In a lesson on William Penn in the same unit, the teacher is given the following guidance:

Explain that one of the reasons people have religious freedom in the United States today is because when our country was founded, *it was founded by people who wanted religious freedom*. Many people left England because, in England, they did not have religious freedom. They could be punished if they didn't practice religion the way the government of England required. *These early founders of our country wanted to make sure that here in America, everyone had the freedom to worship as they believed without the government telling us how* [emphasis mine].⁷⁸

There are two errors here. First, the U.S. was not founded solely by people seeking religious freedom, as the first italicized passage suggests. Colonists had many motives, most prominent among them economic opportunity (as the curriculum notes elsewhere in Grade 2⁷⁹). The second error lies in the claim that “These early founders” sought to ensure that “everyone had the freedom to worship as they believed.” Quite to the contrary, some “early founders,” like the Puritans discussed two pages later, were interested in their own religious freedom but *not* that of those with different beliefs and practices, whom they often brutally persecuted (e.g., Baptists, Quakers, Catholics).⁸⁰

The search for religious freedom was one important motivation for some early colonists and a major concern for the Founders (as shown by the placement of the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses in the First Amendment to the Constitution). Yet religious liberty is but one of a constellation of liberties that make America what it is. The near obsessive focus on religious freedom in this curriculum—sometimes at the price of accuracy—opens the developers to the charge that they are more interested in promoting an agenda than educating students.

Conclusion

We can now address the question posed in the title of this report: Does the OER RLA curriculum turn Texas public schools into Sunday Schools?

As far as the curriculum’s *nonreligious* content is concerned, the answer might be no. But in all too many instances, the treatment of *religious* content in these instructional materials makes them far more appropriate in a Sunday School setting than in Texas public schools, which are called upon to serve students and families from a variety of faith traditions or none at all. As this report has attempted to show, the OER RLA curriculum overemphasizes Christianity, too often portrays Christianity in a one-sided way that whitewashes difficult historical truths, and incorporates detailed Bible lessons in ways that are both unnecessary and unwarranted. Especially worrying are lessons that subtly portray Christian faith claims as straightforwardly true, opening the curriculum to the charge that it is meant to proselytize students. Additionally, the manner in which religious freedom is covered in the curriculum distorts the history of the nation’s founding and downplays other fundamental liberties cherished by Americans. These systemic problems in the curriculum raise valid suspicions that there is an ideological rather than educational purpose behind it: to turn public schools into a tool for promoting a narrowly sectarian agenda. Such an agenda ultimately hurts students, families, and teachers; as Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote, government endorsement of a particular religion “sends a message to nonadherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.”⁸¹

In the move toward open education resources, Texas officials have an opportunity to give students the accurate, balanced, nonconfessional coverage of religion they need to function and prosper in an increasingly diverse state and nation. Although the OER RLA curriculum’s emphasis on the role of religion in the human story makes a welcome start in that direction, its present version is far too Christian-centered and as such, threatens to introduce into Texas elementary schools the very insider-outsider dynamic about which Justice O’Connor warned. Accordingly, I recommend that state officials delay adoption of the OER RLA curriculum until the system-wide problems identified here are remedied.

APPENDIX: Misleading Passages, Inaccuracies and Errors

This appendix notes misleading passages, inaccuracies, and factual errors in the K-5 curriculum not otherwise discussed in the body of this report.

Kindergarten

In a unit on the early English colonies, a lesson on William Penn incorrectly claims that people in England “who were not part of the Church of England were sent to jail.”⁸² While some Catholics and dissenting Protestants in Britain were indeed imprisoned—including Penn himself—many instead faced fines or suffered forms of persecution other than jail.

Grade 1

In Unit 8, alongside an image of the baptism of Virginia Dare, the first English colonist born in the New World, the text instructs the teacher to “Explain that the people are English settlers watching the baptism of Virginia Dare. *A baptism is a Christian religious ceremony, which is an expression of religious freedom*” [emphasis mine].⁸³ This is erroneous. Baptism in itself is not an expression of religious freedom. After all, baptisms can be and have been coerced.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Dare was baptized into the Church of England, the established or official church—hardly an expression of “the ability to practice religion without the government telling you how,” as religious freedom is rather tentatively described in Grade 2.⁸⁵

Another passage from this unit misleadingly suggests that “the English” had two motives for settling in the Americas: first, “They wanted a place for their people to spread out from their small island country”; second, “They were also looking for a place where they could have more religious freedom....the freedom to pray, worship, and practice their religion in any way they chose.”⁸⁶ The general reference to “the English” is misleading: only *some* English, such as the Pilgrims and William Penn, were motivated by a desire for greater religious freedom.

Grade 2

A review exercise in a unit on immigration asks students, “Why did people, such as the Pilgrims, choose to leave England and start a new life in North America?”; the correct answer is given as “They wanted to be free to practice their own religion.”⁸⁷ Phrased in this way, this is misleading and inaccurate. Many English settlers had motives other than religious freedom, as the curriculum itself notes elsewhere.

Grade 3

There are two factual errors in the treatment of Christianity in the unit on Ancient Rome. First, the text claims that due to persecution, Christians often worshiped in secret in catacombs.⁸⁸ This belief, though widespread, appears to be false.⁸⁹ Second, the text wrongly claims that the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the “national religion” or “the official religion” of the Roman Empire.⁹⁰ As a *Britannica* entry notes, Constantine “did not make Christianity the religion of the empire, but he granted important concessions to the church and its bishops, and his conversion encouraged other Roman citizens to become Christian.”⁹¹ Christianity did not become the empire’s

official religion until 380 CE, during the reign of Theodosius.

Another problem in this unit lies in the highly questionable, and arguably erroneous, claim that ancient Rome before and after Christianity—that is, polytheistic Rome and Christian Rome—were “two completely different cultures.”⁹² This claim is amplified later in the unit when the text claims that the “religious beliefs” of ancient Roman polytheism “were completely upended. Rome would never be the same.”⁹³ Quite the contrary: there were in fact substantial continuities between these two periods of ancient Roman history. Some of those continuities are quite obvious, like the imperial structure of government, the road system of which the unit makes so much, and the continuing existence of slavery, to mention only a few. Moreover, what changes there were did not happen overnight or all at once. As one scholar notes, “Christianity brought about significant long-term changes [to the Roman Empire], but its impact was more limited in the couple of centuries after it started receiving imperial support around 312....The growth of Christianity and the Church did contribute to the decline of traditional paganism, especially public rites such as animal sacrifice, but this was a gradual process.”⁹⁴ Indeed, polytheistic beliefs and practices persisted even after (and perhaps long after) Christianity became the empire’s official religion, and likely influenced Christianity itself.⁹⁵

Finally, this unit also inaccurately claims that for “early Christians and Christians today, accounts of miracles performed by Jesus are an important part of their beliefs.”⁹⁶ The miracle stories are not equally important to all Christians today and likely were not decisive for all early Christians, either. Christian faith need not rely even in part on a belief in the literal truth of the miracle accounts. A more accurate wording would be “*many* early Christians and *many* Christians today.”

Grade 4

In a unit on the Middle Ages, students are asked in a review exercise, “What was the pope the head of, that was very powerful in Europe during the Middle Ages?” The answer is given as “the Christian Church.”⁹⁷ This is erroneous. The pope did not, and does not, head the Christian Church as a whole, but only the Roman Catholic Church.⁹⁸ Throughout the Middle Ages, the Eastern Orthodox Church, not under the authority of the papacy, was a vital force, especially in Eastern Europe.

In a lesson on the Catholic Church’s effect on medieval people’s everyday lives, the text says that “Women also joined the Church.”⁹⁹ This is incorrect. Neither women nor men “joined” the Church in the modern sense: membership in the Church was generally mandatory. As historian Nicholas Orme notes, such membership “began at birth, without any kind of consent. As you grew up, you had to obey all the Church’s rules about attending church, fasting in certain periods such as Lent, paying dues to the Church, and observing the Church’s moral code.”¹⁰⁰

Finally, this unit’s discussion of the Crusades is in part erroneous and leaves the inaccurate impression that Muslims were the guilty party and Christians were justified in going to war. Here is the passage in full, with the problematic passage highlighted:

A series of wars that became known as the Crusades helped to define and shape the Middle Ages. The origin of these wars began in 638 AD when Arab armies captured the holy city of Jerusalem. Despite this conquest, Jerusalem remained open to travelers, traders, and pilgrims. *The city was, after all, sacred to Jewish people,*

*Muslims, and Christians. Then, in 1095 AD, Muslim Turks took control of Jerusalem. This time the city was closed to Jewish and Christian pilgrims. The pope commanded that the kings of Europe raise an army to reclaim Jerusalem. Between 1095 and 1291 AD, there were nine crusades, or attempts to recapture Jerusalem. Despite these periods of confrontation, trading relationships developed between Europe and the Middle East. In addition to trading goods, people exchanged knowledge of science and mathematics, as well as views on art and architecture [emphasis mine].*¹⁰¹

This account effectively, and unjustly, blames the “Muslim Turks,” i.e., Seljuk Turks, for the Crusades. Scholars, however, suggest that the Seljuks did not in fact “close” Jerusalem to Jewish and Christian pilgrims. For instance, scholar Peter Frankopan notes that even though Arabic sources note “tensions in Jerusalem” prior to the First Crusade, “recent research has questioned how difficult conditions for non-Muslims became in the 1070s and 1080s.”¹⁰² Another scholar writes:

It has often been said that, as a result [of Seljuk Turkish expansion], the condition of Palestinian Christians and pilgrims to Jerusalem noticeably deteriorated, since the Turks treated Christians with less consideration than the Arab Fatimids had; and that the crusades were thus precipitated. But the original source supporting this view is William of Tyre, an author who must be entirely disregarded because he wrote almost a century later. The only established fact is that the church of the Holy Sepulcher remained standing even under Turkish rule and was visited by Christian pilgrims like Robert of Flanders and Adhémar of Le Puy.¹⁰³

The curriculum passage quoted above is also misleading in that it fails to note that after the Crusaders took Jerusalem, they massacred Muslim and Jewish inhabitants.¹⁰⁴

Grade 5

In the Introduction to a unit on the Renaissance, the authors claim that “[s]cholars, philosophers, and artists” of that period “turned both to the Bible and to the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans for inspiration.”¹⁰⁵ However, artists did not turn just to the Bible but to the post-biblical saints and episodes from their lives—for instance, Giovanni Bellini’s *St. Francis in Ecstasy* or Andrea Mantegna’s depictions of St. Sebastian.

In a discussion of the growth of early civilizations (the move from hunting-gathering to agriculture), the text says, “As people settled down to farm, their lives changed....*Between 4000 and 2000 BC*, towns and villages in various places developed into cities. People constructed buildings and *began practicing religions*....Civilizations were born” [emphasis mine].¹⁰⁶ This dating is inaccurate. Religion does not begin “between 4000 and 2000” BCE. Nor is it exclusively linked to the move from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to farming. Archaeologists have found evidence of humans performing ceremonial burials as far back as 30,000 BCE, and of “the veneration of a mother goddess” after 15,000 BCE¹⁰⁷—in both cases, thousands of years prior to the time period mentioned in this text, and for that matter, prior to the Neolithic Revolution (around 10,000 BCE in the Fertile Crescent).

Endnotes

- 1 The pertinent legislation is House Bill (HB) 1605, which passed in the 88th Legislative Session, was signed into law by Governor Greg Abbott, and took effect on September 1, 2023. <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=88R&Bill=HB1605>.
- 2 Texas Education Agency, “Texas Education Agency Unveils Newly Developed Texas Open Education Resource (OER) Textbooks” (press release), May 29, 2024, <https://tea.texas.gov/node/2041111>. The agency also released OER instructional materials for K-8 Algebra Mathematics; these materials lie beyond the scope of this report.
- 3 “If selected as SBOE-approved High-Quality Instructional Materials, Texas OER will be an optional resource for Texas school systems. School systems in Texas have local control over which instructional materials to use, a principle unchanged by HB 1605.” Texas Education Agency, “Texas Education Agency Unveils Newly Developed Texas Open Education Resource (OER) Textbooks” (press release), May 29, 2024, <https://tea.texas.gov/node/2041111>.
- 4 Texas Education Agency, “Texas Education Agency Unveils Newly Developed Texas Open Education Resource (OER) Textbooks” (press release), May 29, 2024, <https://tea.texas.gov/node/2041111>.
- 5 OER RLA Program and Implementation Guide, 23.
- 6 David R. Brockman, *Religious Imbalance in the Texas Social Studies Curriculum: Analysis and Recommendations* (Houston, TX: Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2016), <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/religious-imbalance-texas-social-studies-curriculum>, 2. On the issue of church-state separation and education in Texas, see David R. Brockman, *The Texas Legislature’s Assault on Church-State Separation in Schools* (Houston, TX: Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2024), <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/texas-legislatures-assault-church-state-separation-schools>.
- 7 For instance, Pooja Salhotra and Robert Downen, “Texas education leaders unveil Bible-infused elementary school curriculum,” *Texas Tribune*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/05/30/texas-public-schools-religion-curriculum/>; Linda Jacobson, “Bible-Infused Curriculum Sparks Texas-Sized Controversy Over Christianity in the Classroom,” *The 74*, June 7, 2024, <https://www.the74million.org/article/bible-infused-curriculum-sparks-texas-sized-controversy-over-christianity-in-the-classroom/>; Jaden Edison, “State Board of Education fields concerns about Christian bias in proposed K-12 curriculum,” *Texas Tribune*, June 27, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/06/27/texas-sboe-bible-k12-school-curriculum/>.
- 8 Ben Brasch, “Texas may pay schools to use curriculum critics call overtly Christian,” *Washington Post*, June 6, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/06/06/texas-religion-school-curriculum/>.
- 9 Pooja Salhotra, “Some Texas school officials are skeptical that a K-12 curriculum with Christian influences is the lifeline state leaders promise,” *Texas Tribune*, June 5, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/06/05/texas-christian-curriculum-k-12/>.
- 10 Sarah Mervosh and Elizabeth Dias, “Oklahoma’s State Superintendent Requires Public Schools to Teach the Bible,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/27/us/oklahoma-public-schools-bible.html>.
- 11 “If you’re reading classic works of American literature, there are often religious allusions in that literature,” state education Commissioner Mike Morath told *The 74*. “Any changes being made are to reinforce the kind of background knowledge on these seminal works of the American cultural experience.” <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-texas-seeks-to-inject-bible-stories-into-elementary-school-reading-program/> “In an interview with a Christian talk show, GOP Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who describes himself as a “Christian first, conservative second,” praised the curriculum changes, saying they will “get us back to teaching, not necessarily the Bible per se, but the stories

from the Bible.” <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-texas-seeks-to-inject-bible-stories-into-elementary-school-reading-program/>

12 See David R. Brockman, *Religious Imbalance in the Texas Social Studies Curriculum: Analysis and Recommendations* (Houston, TX: Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2016).

13 In 2014, I conducted a similar review for TFN of religion coverage in social studies instructional materials submitted for state adoption that year. TFN published my findings online in September 2014; these reports can be found at https://tfn.org/cms/assets/uploads/2015/11/FINAL_Brockman_WH.pdf and https://tfn.org/cms/assets/uploads/2015/11/FINAL_Brockman_WG.pdf. I subsequently wrote a more extensive study of these social studies instructional materials and the state’s social studies curriculum standards for Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy; this was published as David R. Brockman, *Religious Imbalance in the Texas Social Studies Curriculum: Analysis and Recommendations* (Houston, TX: Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2016), <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/religious-imbalance-texas-social-studies-curriculum>.

14 The instructional materials examined in this report are those that were available as of June 8, 2024 on the TEA “English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) K–5 Materials” web page (<https://sboe.texas.gov/state-board-of-education/imra/english-language-arts-and-reading-elar-k-5-materials>).

15 “The OER K–5 Reading Language Arts Program incorporates letters to families explaining the unit overview. These letters encourage families to speak about unit themes and ask students about new learning. Families can bring in background knowledge about the topics and support the learning of content, vocabulary, and language development. While students explore culturally rich topics and texts within the units, they can build connections at home with their families.” OER RLA Program and Implementation Guide, 60.

16 OER RLA Program and Implementation Guide, 23.

17 For instance, there are some contemporary followers of the Olympian deities. <https://www.learnreligions.com/about-hellenic-polytheism-2562548>.

18 Coverage of the Holocaust in Grade 5, Unit 7 is helpful, but does not provide much information on the beliefs and practices of post-biblical Judaism.

19 Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 8.

20 Teacher Guide, Grade 4, Unit 4. Problems with the account of the Crusades are discussed in the Appendix to this report.

21 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 2, 36.

22 Buddhism, especially in its Mahayana manifestations, is polytheistic insofar as it recognizes the existence, and in some cases involves the worship, of many deities; however, it can also be considered nontheistic insofar as its ultimate reality (variously described in terms of Nirvana, emptiness, the Buddha Nature, etc.) transcends those deities.

23 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 8, 180.

24 <https://www.poetseers.org/the-poetseers/mirabai/poems/do-not-leave-me-alone/>.

25 <https://www.poetseers.org/the-poetseers/hafiz/hafiz-poems-the-gift/i-have-learned-so-much/>.

26 Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 6, 26.

27 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 8, 69.

28 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 8, 173.

29 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 8, 174.

30 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 3, 27.

31 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 9, 14.

32 See, for instance, Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).

33 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 9, 17.

34 See, for instance, J. Russell Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So: How Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

35 OER Program and Implementation Guide, 23.

36 Prior to Grade 3, the curriculum discusses Jesus and/or his teachings in Kindergarten, Unit 7 (the Golden Rule and the Good Samaritan) and in Grade 1, Unit 1 (the parable of the Prodigal Son).

37 There is a lesson on the Muslim king Mansa Musa in Kindergarten, Unit 8, but it focuses on Musa himself rather than the beliefs and practices of Islam.

38 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 2.

39 Some examples, all from Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4: “Let’s learn about the *mythical* gods and goddesses of Rome. In the early part of Rome, the empire promoted a belief in many *mythical* gods” (41, emphasis mine); “Apollo was the *mythical* god of the sun. He was also the *mythical* god of music and poetry... Minerva was the *mythical* goddess of wisdom. She was also the *mythical* goddess of crafts and weaving” (47, emphasis mine); “ancient Romans believed that the world was ruled by many *mythical* gods” (53, emphasis mine). Interestingly, the Grade 5 curriculum does not apply the same repetitive description of “mythical” to the pre-Columbian deities of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca peoples. In Grade 5, Unit 3, on “Early American Civilizations,” the authors refer, for instance, to “The Maya’s belief in gods and goddesses” rather than “mythical gods and goddesses”; the Maya “believed that gods”—not “mythical gods”—controlled everything.” Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 3, 45.

40 An example of this neutral sense: “a sacred narrative that seeks to explain the worldview of a group of people and is usually associated with religion....[Myths] are regarded as part of a group’s spiritual beliefs, so they are not considered either true or false.” S.v. “Myth,” *Encyclopedia of Global Religion*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, and Wade Clark Roof, Volume 2, SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 2011, 861.

41 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 55. For the Grade 2 description of ancient Greek deities as “mythical,” see Teacher Guide, Grade 2, Units 2 and 3. Grade 2, Unit 3 defines “myth” as “a *fictional* story from ancient times that tries to explain events or things in nature” (11, emphasis mine). The authors reinforce this understanding of myth as fiction in a later exercise: students are asked, “If myths have characters with supernatural abilities, are they fiction or nonfiction? How do you know?”; the correct answer is given as “fiction, because supernatural characters are not real” (13). Though at one point the teacher is advised to explain that while “we consider these beings as mythical or fictional today...many ancient Romans believed that the mythical gods and goddesses were real, and believed in them as part of their religion” (Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 50), that does little to offset the clear, repeated lesson that the ancient Roman deities were but figments of the imagination.

42 As the Teacher Guide notes, these lessons cover “the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the impact of Christianity on the Roman Empire, and key tenets of Christianity that continue to impact modern culture” (238); see also “how the life of Jesus of Nazareth greatly impacted the Roman Empire and continues to have impacts today” (239). Though the curriculum discusses Jesus’ teachings in Kindergarten (Unit 7 on the Golden Rule and Good Samaritan) and Grade 1 (Unit 1, the parable of the Prodigal Son), this unit presents the first detailed account of Christianity and its origins.

43 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 245-48.

44 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 264.

45 Evie Blad, “Should the Bible Be Taught in Public Schools?,” *EducationWeek*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/should-the-bible-be-taught-in-public-schools/2024/07>.

Among other challenges Chancey mentions in this article (paraphrased by Blad): “teachers must navigate differing views, even among Christian students, about how the text should be interpreted and applied, Chancey said. Even selecting a Bible translation can be tricky because various Christian sects differ on perspectives about accuracy and even which books to include. And teachers may not recognize the personal biases they carry about reading scripture.”

- 46 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 248.
- 47 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 244.
- 48 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 245-46.
- 49 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 263.
- 50 John M. Bryant describes the “arduous demands” facing those who wished to join the early Christian movement: “Entrance into the body of God’s elect was screened and safeguarded by a requirement that converts renounce all attachments to the sinful world outside – styled the ‘pomp of the Devil’ in the baptismal interrogation – and commit themselves fully and exclusively to the New Covenant in Christ. This commonly entailed a breach with kin and former associates, disengagement from civic responsibilities, and a rejection of all employments that were somehow tainted by idolatry. Following their baptismal cleansing and regeneration, Christians were expected to live ‘dead unto sin’ thereafter, ever mindful of the need to remain ‘without spot and blameless’ in anticipation of the imminent Second Coming (2 Peter 3:14). Exacting moral rectitude was thus required of those who had become living ‘temples of Christ,’ a charge made more urgent by repeated warnings that any return to ‘sin’s dominion’ risked the loss of the miraculous immortality that had been promised (1 Corinthians 3:16–17).” *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Bryan S. Turner (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2010), 334.
- 51 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 270-71.
- 52 According to historian Kate Cooper, “[T]he earliest Christians were less interested in abolishing [slavery] than in seeing enslaved people as a model of devoted service that Christians should imitate as ‘slaves of Christ’. In the later Empire, things changed—but only a little. Christian bishops worked to free captives who had been sold into slavery by pirates and barbarians, yet Christian clergy continued to own slaves.” “How Did Christianity Change the Roman Empire?,” *History Today*, December 2023, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/head-head/how-did-christianity-change-roman-empire>.
- 53 According to late antiquity scholar Peter Sarris, “[The emperor] Justinian, in particular, turned the Roman Empire into a much more persecutory state. Whereas previous emperors had attempted to ban pagan sacrificial acts, for example, Justinian made it illegal to even be a pagan and introduced the death penalty for those caught making false conversions. Under him, steady downward pressure was applied on the legal status and civil rights of heretics, Samaritans and Jews, and for the first time men were persecuted by the Roman state for homosexual acts. Anti-Jewish measures would further intensify under [the later emperor] Heraclius, whose court presented the Christian Roman Empire as a ‘New Israel.’” “How Did Christianity Change the Roman Empire?,” *History Today*, December 2023, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/head-head/how-did-christianity-change-roman-empire>.
- 54 National Council for the Social Studies, “The Study of Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum,” 2021, <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/study-of-religion-in-social-studies>.
- 55 Family Support Letter (English), Grade 3, Unit 4.
- 56 Other examples include: coverage of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Kindergarten, Unit 7); a lesson on the parable of the Prodigal Son in Grade 1 (Grade 1, Unit 1); a lengthy digression on Psalm 107 in a lesson on the Pilgrims’ first Thanksgiving (Grade 3, Unit 9); and the discussion of stories from the biblical book of Daniel in a lesson on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (Grade 5, Unit 9, Lesson 11).
- 57 Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 11.
- 58 Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 11, 25.
- 59 Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 11, 44.
- 60 Family Support Letter (English), Kindergarten, Unit 11.
- 61 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 2.
- 62 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 2, 78.

63 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 2, 80.

64 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 2, 78.

65 The online Cambridge Dictionary defines “explain” as “to make something clear or easy to understand by describing or giving information about it.” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/explain>. This suggests a greater degree of factuality than a phrase like “According to the biblical story.” Factuality is further underscored by the phrase “see for ourselves what unfolded.”

66 “Students will explore the art and literature of this time period through the works of people such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael, and learn about how they were inspired both by the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans and by the Bible.” Family Support Letter, Grade 5, Unit 2.

67 However, the theme of religious freedom also colors the selection of biblical stories chosen—especially the stories of Esther (Grade 2, Unit 10) and of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the Book of Daniel (Grade 5, Unit 9).

68 See <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://tea.texas.gov/academics/instructional-materials/house-bill-1605/hb-1605-oer-advisory-board-members.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwiz1-WOnb2HAXWm5skDHWQyDrcQFnoECBUQAQ&usq=AOvVaw-2BG-d69iV1PqxP3m3j8muz>

69 Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 10.

70 “The Founding Fathers made sure that...the president, the Congress, and the Supreme Court...had equally important jobs so that the president didn’t hold all the power like a king, and so that people’s liberties would be protected. Liberties are freedoms. Remember, the Pilgrims left England because they didn’t have an important liberty. Which liberty, or freedom, did the Pilgrims not have? (the liberty to choose which church to attend)” (Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 10, 16).

71 “Say the word liberties with me”; “Liberties are freedoms”; “One of your liberties as an American is the freedom to practice the religion you believe in” (Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 10, 20). The “liberty to vote” is mentioned, but in a follow-up “sharing” exercise (ibid.).

72 Teacher Guide, Grade 1, Unit 8.

73 Teacher Guide, Grade 1, Unit 8, 44-45.

74 Indeed, as one scholar of the period notes, “religious differences in eighteenth-century America resulted in a pluralistic society where differences were accommodated,” and a series of religious revivals in the mid-1700s (the Great Awakening) only increased this religious diversity. Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 19.

75 “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

76 Teacher Guide, Grade 2, Unit 10, 13.

77 Teacher Guide, Grade 2, Unit 10, 13, 26, 41, 55, 57, 59, 60, 70, 104.

78 Teacher Guide, Grade 2, Unit 10, 55.

79 “In the colonies of British North America, most people who came were settlers looking for a better life. Many of those colonists came looking for opportunities to create wealth for themselves and their families.” Teacher Guide, Grade 2, Unit 7, 27.

80 As one history writer notes, “the Puritan fathers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony did not countenance tolerance of opposing religious views. Their ‘city upon a hill’ was a theocracy that brooked no dissent, religious or political.” Kenneth C. Davis, “America’s True History of Religious Tolerance,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2010, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/america-true-history-of-religious-tolerance-61312684/>.

81 *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984). <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/us-supreme-court/465/668.html>.

82 Teacher Guide, Kindergarten, Unit 6, 114.

83 Teacher Guide, Grade 1, Unit 8, 16.

84 Consider, for instance, Charlemagne’s forced conversion of the Saxons in the 8th century CE. As Roman Michałowski writes, “the Saxons did not want Christianity and rejected it with all possible measures....[T]he Christianisation of Saxony was possible only through the direct use of force, including both war and military pacification, and legislation....The brutality with which the king of the Franks imposed Christianity on the Saxons was unprecedented in the history of the church, going far beyond anything the Christian Roman empire ever would have presumed to do.” Michałowski, “The Christianisation of the Saxons,” *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association*, 16 (2020), 90. Another example is the forced conversion of Jews and Muslims in Spain in the 14th through the 16th centuries CE.

85 Teacher Guide, Grade 2, Unit 10, 41. Virginia Dare “was baptized into the Church of England on August 24, 1587 and was the first child and second person in America christened into the Church of England.” <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/virginia-dare-1587/>.

86 Teacher Guide, Grade 1, Unit 8, 15.

87 Teacher Guide, Grade 2, Unit 9, 10.

88 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 249.

89 “There seems no truth in the widespread belief that early Christians used the catacombs as secret meeting places for worship. By the 3rd century ad there were more than 50,000 Christians in Rome, and 50,000 persons could hardly go out to the catacombs every Sunday morning in secret. Furthermore, worship of any kind would seem out of the question in the long, narrow corridors of the catacombs, and even the largest of the tomb chambers, such as the Chapel of the Popes in the catacomb of St. Calixtus, hardly holds 40 persons. Finally, Christians and pagans alike regarded death as unclean, so that, while memorial meals or masses for the dead might be celebrated in the tombs on appropriate occasions, regular public worship in such a place would be unlikely.” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/catacomb>.

90 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 249, 270.

91 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity/The-alliance-between-church-and-empire>.

92 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 2.

93 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 250.

94 Late antiquity scholar Richard Flower, quoted in “How Did Christianity Change the Roman Empire?” <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/head-head/how-did-christianity-change-roman-empire>.

95 “Most of the pagan rites related to the Roman religio-superstitio were forbidden at the end of the 4th century. Some survived and new ones appeared, because the private superstitio was more adaptable to Christianity than the public religio and because the Church did not keep a firm hold of the whole population, or indeed of the whole territory. That said, the rites, and the beliefs which founded them, had not only a religious aspect but also a most important hermeneutical dimension: they were essential to give meaning to all actions in life. The clerics wanted to impose a new religious truth, but people called for a global signification to the world, and Christianity was incapable of providing it at this time.” Hervé Inglebert, “EPILOGUE: Vanishing Identity: The Impossible Definition of Pagans and Paganism in the West from the 4th to the 6th Century,” in *Being Pagan, Being Christian in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*, edited by Katja Ritari, Jan R. Stenger, and William Van Andringa, vol. 4 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2023), 312. See also Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

96 Teacher Guide, Grade 3, Unit 4, 246.

97 Teacher Guide, Grade 4, Unit 4, 290.

98 Interestingly, the text itself notes this fact elsewhere in the unit (Teacher Guide, Grade 4, Unit 4, 155).

99 Teacher Guide, Grade 4, Unit 4, 159.

100 Nicholas Orme, “A Baby’s First Visit to Church in 1500,” Yale University Press website, August

31, 2021, <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2021/08/31/a-babys-first-visit-to-church-in-1500/>.

101 Teacher Guide, Grade 4, Unit 4, 255.

102 Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade : The Call from the East* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 91. “[I]t had become more difficult for western pilgrims to visit the Holy City. Jerusalem had seen a massive increase in pilgrimage across the tenth and eleventh centuries, spurred on by increasing material wealth, intellectual curiosity and the greater openness to travel that brought about a general contraction of the early medieval world. But pilgrim traffic now slowed dramatically as a result of the rise in violence in Asia Minor and the Levant. Shocking stories about the holy places were widely circulated and it was reported that pilgrims were subjected to torture and violence and forced to pay ransoms to the oppressive Turks. Peter the Hermit, a charismatic preacher, told an extensive and horrified audience about the ill-treatment he had supposedly experienced on a harrowing journey to Jerusalem. Not everybody was put off, however. Roger of Foix persisted in making arrangements to go to the Holy City in the spring of 1095 , returning a year later to reclaim his lands in southern France. Another knight from Normandy completed the pilgrimage not long after, celebrating his safe return by endowing the abbey of Jumièges. But they were the minority; as one chronicler put it, such were the circumstances in the 1090s that few dared even to set off on the journey.” Ibid.

103 Carl Erdmann, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 361-62. Erdmann does note that “The pilgrims, to be sure, were not unmolested” by the Turks, for instance, by demanding tribute, but notes that the Byzantines had sometimes demanded tribute as well. Ibid., 362-63.

104 “Hundreds of men, women, and children, both Muslim and Jewish, perished in the general slaughter that followed.” <https://www.britannica.com/event/Crusades/The-siege-of-Jerusalem>.

105 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 2, 1.

106 Teacher Guide, Grade 5, Unit 3, 21.

107 John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *World Religions Today*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 39-40.