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# Review of Deckman and Prud'homme's "Curriculum and the Culture Wars: Debating the Bible's Place in Public Schools"

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**Melissa Deckman and Joseph Prud'homme (eds.)**

*Curriculum and the Culture Wars:*

*Debating the Bible's Place in Public Schools*

*New York: Peter Lang, 2014 pb 222pp \$42.95*

*ISBN 978-1-4331-1848-7*

*Curriculum and the Culture Wars* details layers of political, legal, and social complexity present in the cultural conflicts in American public schools concerning the Bible, vouchers, evolution, and sex education. Some may cast doubt on the legitimacy of the culture war construct, but such hesitancy is set aside here as current features of various fronts in the battle are analyzed.

Four chapters focus specifically on conflict over the Bible. The first recounts the earliest debates about the appropriate place of the Bible in schools. These arguments, Daniel Dreisbach suggests, are “as old as the republic and as current as the morning paper” (p. 24). The approach that won out was considered most helpful for building and sustaining the nation by promoting personal virtue. Even Deists saw utility for the common good.

The story of Bible elective courses and their use is told by Melissa Deckman. She sets the stage by pointing to deterioration in the relationship between evangelical Protestants and the public schools after key

court cases in the 1960s. When devotional Bible reading and prayer were declared illegal, attempts to get the Bible back into the schools followed. Deckman asserts there were three responses by conservative Christian families during this time. They either left public schools, homeschooled, or challenged the public schools politically. Those political efforts and the role of national advocacy groups are explored.

The focus on national advocacy groups and policy must explain why one of the most prominent national partisans—Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Church and State—is a contributor. Lynn questions the motives of those promoting Bible instruction in schools, points to a number of problems to be addressed, and proposes integrating religion into other curricular areas when relevant.

The final chapter on the Bible is by Diane Moore, who provides a helpful presentation of the American Academy of Religion's *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K–12 Public Schools in the United States* (2010). This succinct but comprehensive framework promotes a religious studies approach, and Moore suggests how the Bible fits in.

What follows are chapters addressing three of the most persistent issues in the culture war over schools: evolution, sex education, and vouchers. George Bishop, Misook Gwon, and Stephen Mockabee contend that “for the bulk of the creation-evolution combatants, it’s a battle, fundamentally, about worldviews, neither of which is likely to yield an inch anytime soon” (p. 109). They trace the history of anti-evolutionism to the present day and assert that fear is a core driver for Christian opponents.

The conflict over sex education is explained by Carl Mark Rom as a moral battle between those who seek to guarantee sexual expression as a human right and emphasize personal choice and pleasure against those who view sex as a matter of right and wrong choices with serious negative consequences for both individuals and society. He observes, “Each side has its own moral priorities and rejects those of its opponents” (p. 121). He goes on to describe how the two camps engage with research and the media in ways that serve their own goals rather than the common good.

Kenneth Godwin and Richard Ruderman frame their chapter with this query: “Would you enlist in a culture war if you believed that people whose values are antithetical to your own are using the State to teach your children values that contradict your most fundamental beliefs?” They assert that “many conservative Christians view the public schools as the

enemy of their beliefs” (p. 147) and this provides the starting point for a philosophical consideration of parental choice and school funding, questions that drive the voucher debate.

Joseph Prud’homme’s concluding essay reviews the key points from each chapter. He then raises concern about the frequent “depiction of conservative Christians as, in effect, rather troublesome meddlers intruding on the proper functioning of public schools” (p. 147). He also asserts that it is unlikely the Bible can be taught in a way that will appease the most concerned conservative Christians. Finally, he challenges the accuracy of the emotionalism and fearfulness in most portrayals of evangelicals engaged in creationism and sex education controversies. These are helpful correctives.

*Curriculum and the Culture Wars* contains a rich range of resources. The background passages on the issues provide helpful, embedded tutorials, and material addressing the most recent activity will appeal to all.

*Gary Sehorn*