

KENTUCKY WEIGHS RELIGION IN SCHOOL

Bill Donohue comments on two bills before the Kentucky legislature:

In 1965, an animated Christmas special was aired, "Charlie Brown's Christmas." Peanuts character Linus quoted from Luke in the New Testament, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior which is Christ the Lord. That's what Christmas is all about." It was widely hailed as a thoughtful and joyous statement.

Back then, virtually no one thought about registering a complaint against "Charlie Brown's Christmas" being performed in a public school. But a half century later, activist Christmas haters now threaten lawsuits, and nervous school administrators cave in to the intimidation. That is why Kentucky lawmakers have said enough is enough.

At Christmastime 2015, a Kentucky school in Johnson County, W.R. Castle Elementary, was ordered by Superintendent Tom Salyer to excise the scene featuring Linus' statement about the true meaning of Christmas from the school's presentation of "Charlie Brown's Christmas." One person complained. That was enough to muzzle free speech.

Parents and public officials were not pleased with this act of censorship, and began to reexamine the role of religion in the schools. Two bills are now pending to rectify conditions.

The Senate bill, SB 17, is the more comprehensive of the two: it seeks to ensure the religious rights of teachers and students; it passed 31-3 and is now pending before the House. The other, HB 128, passed the House 80-14, and awaits Senate approval.

The Senate bill is in direct response to the censoring of "Charlie Brown's Christmas." The sponsor, Sen. Albert Robinson, would like to expand the religious and political rights of students, whether expressed in homework assignments, artwork or other modes of speech.

In addition, his bill would respect speeches given by students at a school forum: the text of their remarks could not be altered before delivering them. Religious messages on student clothing would also be covered, as would the right of students to meet outside the classroom for religious purposes. Teachers could use the Bible to teach history and the study of religion; they could also use it to discuss biblical influences on art and music.

The House bill would allow an elective social studies course on "the Hebrew Scripture, Old Testament of the Bible, the New Testament, or a combination" of the two. The bill's sponsor, Rep. D.J. Johnson, reminds us that "The Bible is the single most impactful literary work that we have in Western civilization. It affects our culture, our values, our laws."

That these measures are needed in 2017 is a sign of how militant the nation's secular activists have become. All these bills would do is lock in what should be considered the uncontroversial rights of students and teachers.

A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life report of 2007 accurately summarized these rights. The following four principles can be found in two documents: the 1995 "Religious Expression in Public School" report by the U.S. Department of Education, and its revised guidelines in 2003:

- "Students, acting on their own, have the same right to engage in religious activity and discussion as they do to engage in comparable secular activities.
- "Students may offer a prayer or blessing before meals in school or assemble on school grounds for religious

purposes to the same extent as other students who wish to express their personal views or assemble with others.

- “Students may not engage in religious harassment of others or compel other students to participate in religious expression, and schools may control aggressive and unwanted proselytizing.
- “Schools may neither favor nor disfavor students or groups on the basis of their religious identities.”

Regarding the rights of teachers, while they cannot teach religion, they have every right to teach about religion. There is a difference between mandating that students believe that Jesus is the Son of God and teaching that this is what Christians believe.

The American people want to guarantee religious rights in the public schools. A Pew survey from 2006 found that 69 percent agreed that “liberals have gone too far in trying to keep religion out of the schools and the government.” In 2002, a Rasmussen poll found that 82 percent favor celebrating at least some religious holidays in school, Christmas being first among them. In 2013, a Rasmussen survey reported that a majority of Americans believe that “public schools need more religion.”

This past Christmas, a school district in Texas banned a “Charlie Brown Christmas” display because the dreaded word “Christ” was mentioned. The school board agreed. Fortunately, the censors were overruled by Bell County State District Judge Jack Jones. “Religious discrimination toward Christians has become a holiday tradition of sorts among certain groups,” he noted.

Kentucky lawmakers need to insist that the religious rights of students and teachers are respected, and the governor needs to be supportive of them. They would then be providing a great model for all states. Not to do so would be to award the censors with constitutional rights they should never have.