

The Bible in the Library

A Fact Sheet for Librarians

The Bible is an important book that all students, regardless of their faith, should read to better understand the allusions used in many of the other books stocked in libraries. For its literary and historic importance, school libraries should not censor the Bible from their shelves.

What do today's students need to know about the Bible to participate fully and equally in the courses taught in America's elite universities? The Bible Project surveyed thirty-nine English professors at thirty-four top universities to assess how important Bible literacy is to college-level study of English and American literature.

What do incoming freshmen need to know? Almost without exception, the English professors see knowledge of the Bible as a deeply important part of a good education. For example, all agreed with the statement "Regardless of a person's faith, an educated person needs to know about the Bible." Consider these statements from university professors:

"I think the Bible is one of the foundational texts of Western and American literature, and so I think if you didn't read it in some religious context, you should read it in some educational setting." *Professor Linda H. Peterson Director of Graduate Studies Yale University*

"[I]t is disabling not to know the Bible in trying to come to terms with the discourse of the culture. The person who is educated is being educated to a purpose. The purpose is to allow them to be optimally free and enabled participants in cultural discussions. One cannot do that in the fullest sense, and even in a very full sense, without a knowledge of the Bible." *English Professor Ralph Williams, University of Michigan*

"The idea of Genesis to the New Jerusalem, these are really key ideas for how writers of my period think about history. So there's a lot that students benefit from if they have some access to this material coming into the class." *Associate Professor of English Steven Goldsmith, University of California at Berkeley*

"The Bible has continued to be philosophically, ethically, religiously, politically influential in Western, Eastern, now African cultures, and so not to know it—whether one is a Jew or a Christian—seems to me not to understand world culture. It's not just Western culture. And in terms of my own field, English and American literature is simply steeped in Biblical legends, morality, Biblical figures, Biblical metaphors, Biblical symbols, and so it would be like not learning a certain kind of grammar or vocabulary and trying to speak the language or read the language; can't do without it." *Professor Robert Kiely, Harvard University*

Can the Bible be included in a public school classroom or library?

In the Supreme Court case of *Abington School District v. Schempp*, Justice Clark, writing the majority opinion stated: "...the state may not establish a 'religion of secularism' in the sense of affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion, thus 'preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe....it might well be said that one's education is not complete

without a study of comparative religion or history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities.”

California actually has a law protecting the use of the Bible or other religious literature in schools. Education Code 51511 states: “Nothing in this code shall be construed to prevent, or exclude from the public schools, references to religion or references to or the use of religious literature, dance, music, theatre, and visual arts or other things having a religious significance when such references or uses do not constitute instruction in religious principles or aid to any religious sect, church, creed, or sectarian purpose and when such references or uses are incidental to or illustrative of matters properly included in the course of study.”
(www.leginfo.ca.gov)

Many schools across the country use a popular reading service called Accelerated Reader Program (ARP). Students read library books and test their comprehension using a computer program in the library or classroom. ARP has recently added the Bible to its catalog of books for which it has created comprehension tests. School libraries are now including the Bible in their options for student reading. For more information about ARP, visit www.renlearn.com/ar/default.htm.

In an interview on the importance of the Bible in a liberal education, Professor Kevin Dunn, Dean of academic affairs for arts and Sciences College at Tufts university reminds us:

“If you are living here in this culture—no matter what culture you are from—you have a relationship to the book, whether you’ve read it or not, because it’s so central to a lot of our presuppositions. That literature aside, you know, it’s central, so just in terms of education, I don’t know if there’s any way around that. That’s part of a liberal education.”

* The quotations of university professors are from research cited in *Bible Literacy Report II: What university professors say students need to know*, published by the Bible Literacy Project, June 2006. Visit www.BibleLiteracy.org.