A study of the religious orientation of public school districts located in the Bible Belt of the United States

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Abstract
This paper examines the religious orientation of public school districts in a geographical region of the United States known as the Bible Belt. The hypothesis for this study was that public schools located in the Bible Belt would have a sacred religious orientation. If that were true, those public schools would allow religion so long as it was the preferred religion in their surrounding community. It was found that while some school districts did appear to be sacred on a number of issues touching religion, the predominant orientation was to honor all religions but prefer none.

Introduction
The struggle to accommodate one person’s right of religious expression while not infringing upon another person’s right to be free from religious coercion has existed since the Founding Fathers of the United States of America first drafted the Bill of Rights for Americans more than 200 years ago. The genesis of the controversy lies in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which provides in pertinent part that, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The First Amendment, including the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause (referred to collectively as the Religious Liberty Clauses), was made applicable to the states by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment provides, inter alia, that, “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States.” Read together the First and Fourteenth Amendments mean that states have no more right to make laws or policies that establish religion, or to prohibit the free exercise thereof, than does Congress, a principle of law recognized by the U.S. Supreme Court in Engel v. Vitale (1962).

Moreover, it is a well-settled precept of law that in America there is a wall of separation between Church and State. The United States Supreme Court recognized in the case of Everson v. Board
of Education (1948) that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment was enacted to erect that wall.

Despite the language of the Religious Liberty clauses and of the subsequent decisions interpreting them by the U.S. Supreme Court, the arena of religious freedom has been fertile ground for litigation over the last half-century. In no arena has that battle raged more intensely than in our nation’s public schools. Issues of daily prayer, scripture readings, moments for silent meditation, and invocations at extracurricular activities, graduation ceremonies, and before school board meetings have been so troubling as to necessitate intervention by the United States Supreme Court.

The U.S. Supreme Court has granted certiorari numerous times over the past 60 years to interpret the meaning of the Establishment Clause, especially with regard to prayer. The Court has declared unconstitutional (a) a program of daily classroom prayer adopted by the agency charged with overseeing the operation of public schools in the state of New York (Engel v. Vitale, 1962); (b) a Pennsylvania statute which required that at least 10 verses from the Holy Bible be read over the intercom by students, without comment, at the beginning of each public school day (Abington v. Schempp, 1963); (c) a Maryland statute which authorized that each school day would begin with a reading, without comment, of a chapter in the Holy Bible and/or a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer (Murray v. Curlett, 1963); (d) an Alabama statute that authorized a period of silence during the school day for meditation or voluntary prayer (Wallace v. Jaffree, 1985); (e) an invitation extended by a school to clergy to give the invocation and benediction at a public school graduation ceremony (Lee v. Weisman, 1992); and (f) a public school policy that permitted, but did not require, prayer to be initiated and led by students at high school football games (Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe, 2000).

The U.S. Supreme Court has not restricted its interpretation of the application of the Establishment Clause in the arena of public education to cases involving prayer. The Court has also struck down as unconstitutional (a) a program that upon parental request allowed students to attend religious classes in a public school during regular school hours (McCollum v. Board of Education, 1948), (b) an Arkansas statute which made it unlawful for a public school teacher to teach or to use a textbook that teaches evolution (Epperson v. Arkansas, 1968), (c) a Kentucky statute that required the posting of the Ten Commandments on the wall of each public school classroom (Stone v. Graham, 1980), (d) a Louisiana statute that required public schools to give balanced treatment to creation science and evolution science (Edwards v. Aguillard, 1987), and (e) the denial by a local school board of a request by students to form a Christian club (Westside Community Schools v. Mergens, 1990). However, the Court upheld as constitutional a New York statute that permitted students to attend religious classes off campus by and at the expense of a religious body (Zorach v. Clauson, 1952).

In addition to deciding numerous cases implicating various religious issues, in Lemon v. Kurtzman (1971) the U.S. Supreme Court went so far as to articulate a three-part test to determine whether a state statute was constitutional under the Establishment Clause. The Court
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held that in order to pass First Amendment muster a statute must (a) have a secular legislative purpose, (b) have a principal or primary effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion, and (c) not foster an excessive governmental entanglement with religion.

Our nation’s highest court has also decided cases implicating the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment in the context of public schools. The U.S. Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a compulsory school attendance law in Wisconsin, on the grounds that it unduly burdened the religious beliefs of Amish parents by requiring their children to attend school to the age of 16 (Wisconsin v. Yoder, 1972). The Court also declared unconstitutional a local school board regulation that compelled students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and salute the American flag at the beginning of each school day (West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette, 1943). In doing so, the Court reversed an earlier decision in which it characterized a similar edict to be a matter of educational policy within the realm of the state legislature (Minersville School District v. Gobitis, 1940).

In the process of deciding the foregoing cases, the Supreme Court has established legal precedents that should logically and rationally guide the policy decisions of every public school board member, administrator, and teacher in the United States with regard to religious liberty in schools. Furthermore, there is a wealth of resources available to school districts wishing to adopt formal policies on religion.

One theory that has been advanced for the incongruence between law and practice is that local practice is influenced by the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of local school boards, school administrators, and the surrounding community with regard to matters of religion in public schools. Charles C. Haynes, a noted expert in the field of First Amendment law and public education, has characterized the ongoing debate over religion in public schools as a cultural war involving three sharply divided viewpoints (Haynes, 2006a).

In “The Bible and Public Schools,” a guide published by the First Amendment Center (1999), Haynes theorized that individuals on one end of the spectrum believe that the separation between Church and State should be absolute and schools should be places where religion is excluded. Haynes used the term “naked” to describe these schools. A somewhat neutral view is held by those people who believe that public schools should neither inculcate nor inhibit religion, and believe that public schools must protect the religious liberty rights of students of all faiths and of no faith. Haynes described these institutions as “civil public schools” (Haynes, 2006). At the opposite end of the spectrum are those people who advocate “sacred” public schools in which their religion is the preferred one in school policies and practices. In his essay, “Religious Liberty in Public Schools,” Haynes identified this latter approach particularly with the rural South (Haynes, 2006a).
Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to determine if public school districts in the Bible Belt have a sacred orientation toward religion. Published policies were analyzed and superintendents of public school districts publishing policies were interviewed to measure the degree to which cultural norms, values, and community beliefs influence the policies and practices of public school districts toward religious liberty. Data were collected in this study on (a) the existence of school district policies addressing religious liberty in public schools, (b) the contents of such policies, (c) the practices that occur in school districts that have policies addressing religious liberty, and (d) the influence of the local community on the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values of superintendents on religion in public schools.

The population was all public school districts located in that geographic region of the United States commonly known as the Bible Belt, which for purposes of this study consisted of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas. The sample was selected using cluster sampling. A list of school districts within each state was generated and each district was assigned a number according to the district’s ordinal position on the list. A table of random numbers was used to select eight school districts from each state in the region for a total of 64 school districts.

The study employed a two-tiered qualitative research design. Internet research was done to determine public schools within the sample that had policies addressing religion published online. Once policies were procured and analyzed from eight school districts within each state of the Bible Belt, a random number generator was used to select four districts from each state. The superintendent of each district so selected was contacted by way of a cover letter. The purpose of the cover letter was to explain the study, establish rapport and trust, and explain the protocol for conducting a semi structured interview by telephone. An interview was subsequently done to gather data on the attitudes, values, and beliefs of those superintendents regarding religious practices in schools, with an emphasis on the impact of community values on those policies and practices.

Discussion of findings

Three objectives were established in order to determine if public school districts in the Bible Belt were predisposed toward a sacred religious orientation. The findings of this study will be presented in the context of those objectives, which were

1. Analyze, compare, and contrast the policies and practices of Bible Belt public school districts in matters of religion;
2. Analyze, compare, and contrast the congruence between policies and practices for those school districts on matters of religion; and
3. Determine the influence of the local community on the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values of superintendents on religion in public schools.
Policies and practices

In terms of school district policies, the religious orientation of school districts was predominantly civil; districts tended to honor all religions but prefer none. This orientation is not surprising, given the logical conclusion that district policies are often crafted by state departments of education or state school board associations. It seems reasonable that those policies would be based on legal mandates such as the Religious Liberty Clauses of the First Amendment, No Child Left Behind, the Equal Access Act, the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment, and well-settled federal antidiscrimination law. In fact, all of those laws formed the basis for various policies in the researched school districts.

There is ample evidence to support the conclusion that, from a policy perspective, school districts have a civil religious orientation. An air of neutrality was pervasive. For example, the typical policy on prayer provided that it had to be student-led, student-initiated, and voluntary, free of coercion, and could not disrupt the educational process. It could be neither school-sponsored nor school-directed. In those districts which provided a daily moment of silence, the policies were usually drafted to state that the activity was not intended to be religious, that school officials were to neither encourage nor discourage use of the time for prayer, and that coercion of students who desired to abstain would not be tolerated.

With regard to other religious activities, the norm was a policy which protected the right of students to voluntarily pray, express their religious viewpoints, and join organizations of like-minded students. The freedom of students to read religious literature and to participate in prayer groups and other religious gatherings before, during, and after school was also routinely acknowledged. At the same time, however, typical policies also provided that students would not be harassed, ridiculed, persecuted, or intimidated due to their beliefs or participation, or lack thereof.

Another common denominator was the equal nature of the orientation; equal access for the use of school facilities, equal educational opportunities, equal employment opportunities, and equal access of student organizations. The prevailing themes were nondiscrimination and creating a working and learning environment free from religious harassment.

The orientation of school districts seemed to shift somewhat from civil to naked in the classroom, where the environment tended to more closely resemble a complete separation of Church and State from an institutional perspective. Instruction was required to be secular, neutral, and objective, and usually confined to the study of religion in an historical or literary context. There was a more civil orientation with regard to students, who typically were given the right to express their religious viewpoints in class.

Contrary to the predominantly civil orientation of school districts in the context of policy, a study of school district practices revealed a greater mixture of civil, naked, and sacred orientations, the latter characterized by a mindset that the local religion was the preferred one. The predominant orientation tended to be civil, with isolated pockets of districts with sacred or naked orientations.

For example, superintendents from 12 districts spread out across eight states said that either a prayer or a moment for silent reflection occurred in conjunction with Friday night football games. The norm was for the prayer to be student-led, but there were isolated districts in which prayer was voiced by a local minister or by an adult from the community. Neither prayer nor a
moment of silent reflection occurred at four districts in Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

There was also student-led prayer before graduation in nine districts located in six states, but no prayer was voiced in two districts in Alabama and Mississippi. A sacred orientation was present in a Kentucky district where the superintendent, who professed to be a devout Christian, admitted to delivering a religious message from the Bible at graduation.

Isolated areas of school districts with sacred practices were found in other areas as well. For example, seven school districts in six states held baccalaureate services in a local church. While attendance was not mandatory, it is reasonable to assume that students in the graduating class, and their parents, could face the dilemma of missing a milestone event or being exposed to religious beliefs that troubled them. Eight school districts in seven states did not have a baccalaureate service, which could be viewed as a naked orientation toward religion.

A mixture of religious orientations was found in the area of teaching and instruction. Superintendents of 17 districts in eight states said that teaching about religion was confined to an historical or literary context, indicating somewhat of a naked orientation. However, six school districts in Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee said that a class on the Bible was being taught or would be shortly as an elective, which would indicate a more civil orientation. That orientation was also on display in the near unanimity among districts in allowing students to express their religious views in a class assignment, and in providing an alternate assignment or favorable consideration if the student had a religious objection to an assignment.

District practices on encouraging or discouraging religious activities revealed a division between civil, sacred, and naked districts. Twelve superintendents in six states said that their districts were neutral, neither encouraging or discouraging religious activities. Two superintendents in Louisiana and Texas avowed that no religious activities occurred in their districts. A Mississippi superintendent urged caution, fearful that allowing religious expression would open the door for devil worshippers, and a Kentucky superintendent admitted to promoting Christianity in a way that would not draw undue attention to it.

Another area where school districts were split between orientations was in the distribution of religious literature. Nine districts in seven states allowed representatives from Gideons International to distribute copies of the Bible on their campuses, which was evidence of a sacred orientation. While the prevailing practice in those districts was to place the Bibles on a table in a common area, it is instructive that texts representing other religious beliefs were not made available. In fact, one Kentucky superintendent said that the practice would stop in his district if administration was required to pass out copies of the Quran as well. An equal number of districts, nine in six states, did not allow the distribution of any religious literature on campus, which would indicate a naked orientation toward religion.

Student dress was an area in which a civil orientation controlled. Seventeen districts in eight states allowed students to wear religious garb, provided that there was no distribution of the educational environment. While that garb tended to be clothing with religious words or symbols, five superintendents in Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee said that they would allow a Muslim girl to wear a Burka. However, there was one isolated instance of a sacred orientation, found in the Kentucky district whose superintendent implied that any study who wished to wear a t-shirt communicating a religious message other than support for the local church was an extremist.
**Congruence between policy and practice**

Two questions are raised and addressed in this section. Firstly, does congruence of policy and practice exist within the sample of school districts whose policies were studied and whose superintendents were interviewed? Secondly, does congruence exist within those individual districts from one religious issue to the next? In other words, is it possible, for example, that a school district be sacred with regard to the distribution of religious literature but civil on prayer?

As a starting point, every superintendent interviewed said that there was congruence between religious policies and practices in their respective districts. It should follow, then, that if policies were almost universally civil or naked, the practices described as occurring by the superintendents would be almost universally civil or naked. For the most part, that hypothesis proved to be true.

However, while there were no written policies identified as sacred, there were instances of sacred practices in those districts where data from superintendent interviews could be compared to policies in place in those districts. For example, one school district in Texas allowed Gideons International to distribute copies of the Bible on school grounds, despite having a policy that prohibited the distribution of religious texts or materials used in an appropriate course of study. It is worth noting that the superintendent, in the context of responding to a question on offering a Bible course, did not want to be drawn into equality for all world religions. The superintendent did not want to be required to teach the Quran because his faculty erred in trying to teach the Bible.

There were other instances as well. Seven school districts in Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas held baccalaureate ceremonies in a local church. However, three of those districts had express policies that prohibited the district from taking an action respecting the establishment of religion, that pledged neutrality on matters of religion, or that prohibited the district from promoting any religious belief. It can be argued that simply holding a school district activity on church grounds communicates school sponsorship of that particular faith to all those in attendance.

In the context of internal district congruence, there were instances where districts had mixed religious orientations depending on the issue. For example, a superintendent of one Kentucky district who described himself as a devout Christian admitted to several personal practices that would constitute a sacred religious orientation. Those practices included (a) the delivery of a religious message based on the Bible at graduation; (b) eating in the cafeteria and saying a prayer over his food to initiate discussion about religion with students; (c) allowing the Bible to be passed out on school grounds, with the caveat that the practice would stop if the Quran had to be distributed as well; and (d) sometimes leading prayer at Baccalaureate. However, the superintendent also said that he would not want a student to be penalized for having a religious objection to an assignment.

Another Kentucky superintendent admitted to encouraging Christianity, but not in an overt way. Yet, baccalaureate ceremonies were not held in his district, instruction was confined to a discussion of religion in a historical context, there was no issue with granting a student’s request to be excused from an assignment on religious grounds, and the distribution of religious literature on campus was not allowed. Although an Arkansas superintendent could not define a “legitimate religion,” that term was used as the district’s standard for those materials allowed to
be left in the office for distribution. However, the superintendent would have no issue with honoring a student’s objection to a class assignment on religious grounds.

**Attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs of superintendents**

Superintendents were asked to express their opinions on two questions regarding religion. The first question concerned their perceptions about the current reality and the desired reality of religion in public schools. In the second question superintendents were asked to describe the influence of the local community on their policies and practices.

Superintendents almost universally described the current role of religion in public schools as nonexistent. The most often cited reason was legal mandates. While approximately one fourth of superintendents expressed agreement with separation of Church and State, others were frustrated at not being able to do what they believed best for students on the local level. One Arkansas superintendent suggested that perhaps those mandates were not as chilling on religious expression as districts interpreted them to be. The fear of litigation from offended parents or watchdog organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union may cause districts to swing too far the other way, and in fact fear of the ACLU was specifically cited by two superintendents. If that were prevalent, however, one would expect to find more districts with naked religious orientations, and that was not the case in this study. The orientation of most districts on most issues was either civil or, to a lesser extent, sacred.

Among those superintendents who argued for an expanse of religious influence in public schools, the vast majority of them argued not for the teaching of religious faiths but rather for what was described by some as character education. The prevailing feeling among those superintendents was that students need greater training in morality, and that such training could appropriately come in the context of Bible-based religious instruction. Unspoken was the implication that only the Christian faith could appropriately be the basis of sound moral instruction - which, in and of itself, is a sacred orientation toward religion.

Regarding the impact of local culture on policies and practices, 17 superintendents in eight states said that because of legal mandates their local communities had minimal if any effect on school district policies. That should not be surprising, given that policies published by school districts on the internet could be quickly and easily verified for compliance with statutory and common law. That is not necessarily the case with school district practices, which are more readily out of the public eye and cloaked by the homogeneity of the surrounding community. As one of the Kentucky superintendents phrased it, laws and statutes are open to interpretation and loopholes for those creative enough to find them.

In the context of religious practices, three superintendents denied that those were affected by the local culture. In each instance, there was an acknowledgement that practices had to follow policies. Two others talked about the erosion of local influence as government intervened more and the population grew more heterogeneous. At the opposite end of the spectrum was the unapologetic Kentucky superintendent who was excited to find a school and community that shared his moral values and beliefs. Most superintendents, however, seemed caught in the struggle between fulfilling their legal obligations regarding religion in public schools and a desire to accommodate local wishes where they could. That struggle perhaps accounted for those situations in which districts had a mixed orientation depending on the nature of the practice.
Conclusion

The original hypothesis for this study, based upon theories of Charles Haynes regarding the religious orientation of public schools, was that public schools located in the Bible Belt of the United States would have a sacred religious orientation. If that were so, those public schools would allow religion so long as it was the preferred religion in their surrounding community. It seems logical that internal consistency of orientation on religious issues within individual schools should be implied within Haynes’ theory.

Neither was found to be the case for the sample of 64 school districts and 22 superintendents researched from Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. While some school districts did appear to be sacred on a number of issues touching religion, the predominant orientation was civil; school policies and practices that honored all religions but preferred none were the norm. Inconsistency of orientation was found within school districts, with different orientations evident depending on the context.

For educators, scholars, and policymakers, these conclusions point to the danger inherent in drawing generalizations about the religious orientation of public school districts based on geographic location or cultural biases. Orientation tended to be much more nuanced than that, even to the degree that it in some cases it varied from issue to issue within the same school district. Further study would be required to determine if this were also the case in other geographic regions of the United States.
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