

February 14, 2010**How Christian Were the Founders?****By RUSSELL SHORTO**

LAST MONTH, A WEEK before the Senate seat of the liberal icon [Edward M. Kennedy](#) fell into Republican hands, his legacy suffered another blow that was perhaps just as damaging, if less noticed. It happened during what has become an annual spectacle in the culture wars.

Over two days, more than a hundred people — Christians, Jews, housewives, naval officers, professors; people outfitted in everything from business suits to military fatigues to turbans to baseball caps — streamed through the halls of the William B. Travis Building in Austin, Tex., waiting for a chance to stand before the semicircle of 15 high-backed chairs whose occupants made up the Texas State Board of Education. Each petitioner had three minutes to say his or her piece.

“Please keep César Chávez” was the message of an elderly Hispanic man with a floppy gray mustache.

“Sikhism is the fifth-largest religion in the world and should be included in the curriculum,” a woman declared.

Following the appeals from the public, the members of what is the most influential state board of education in the country, and one of the most politically conservative, submitted their own proposed changes to the new social-studies curriculum guidelines, whose adoption was the subject of all the attention — guidelines that will affect students around the country, from [kindergarten](#) to 12th grade, for the next 10 years. Gail Lowe — who publishes a twice-a-week newspaper when she is not grappling with divisive education issues — is the official chairwoman, but the meeting was dominated by another member. Don McLeroy, a small, vigorous man with a shiny pate and bristling mustache, proposed amendment after amendment on social issues to the document that teams of professional educators had drawn up over 12 months, in what would have to be described as a single-handed display of archconservative political strong-arming.

McLeroy moved that Margaret Sanger, the birth-control pioneer, be included because she “and her followers promoted eugenics,” that language be inserted about [Ronald Reagan](#)’s “leadership in restoring national confidence” following [Jimmy Carter](#)’s presidency and that students be instructed to “describe the causes and key organizations and individuals of the conservative resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s, including Phyllis Schlafly, the Contract With America, the [Heritage Foundation](#), the Moral Majority and the [National Rifle Association](#).” The injection of partisan politics into education went so far that at one point another Republican board member burst out in seemingly embarrassed exasperation, “Guys, you’re rewriting history now!” Nevertheless, most of McLeroy’s proposed amendments passed by a show of hands.

Finally, the board considered an amendment to require students to evaluate the contributions of significant Americans. The names proposed included [Thurgood Marshall](#), [Billy Graham](#), [Newt Gingrich](#), [William F. Buckley Jr.](#), [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) and Edward Kennedy. All passed muster except Kennedy, who was voted down.

This is how history is made — or rather, how the hue and cry of the present and near past gets lodged into the long-term cultural memory or else is allowed to quietly fade into an inaudible whisper. Public education has always been a battleground between cultural forces; one reason that Texas’ school-board members find themselves at the very center of the battlefield is, not surprisingly, money. The state’s \$22 billion education fund is among the largest educational endowments in the country. Texas uses some of that money to buy or distribute a staggering 48 million textbooks annually — which rather strongly inclines educational publishers to tailor their products to fit the standards dictated by the Lone Star State. California is the largest textbook market, but besides being bankrupt, it tends to be so specific about what kinds of information its students should learn that few other states follow its lead. Texas, on the other hand, was one of the first states to adopt statewide curriculum guidelines, back in 1998, and the guidelines it came up with (which are referred to as TEKS — pronounced “teaks” — for Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) were clear, broad and inclusive enough that many other states used them as a model in devising their own. And while

technology is changing things, textbooks — printed or online — are still the backbone of education.

The cultural roots of the Texas showdown may be said to date to the late 1980s, when, in the wake of his failed presidential effort, the Rev. [Pat Robertson](#) founded the [Christian Coalition](#) partly on the logic that conservative Christians should focus their energies at the grass-roots level. One strategy was to put candidates forward for state and local school-board elections — Robertson's protégé, [Ralph Reed](#), once said, "I would rather have a thousand school-board members than one president and no school-board members" — and Texas was a beachhead. Since the election of two Christian conservatives in 2006, there are now seven on the Texas state board who are quite open about the fact that they vote in concert to advance a Christian agenda. "They do vote as a bloc," Pat Hardy, a board member who considers herself a conservative Republican but who stands apart from the Christian faction, told me. "They work consciously to pull one more vote in with them on an issue so they'll have a majority."

This year's social-studies review has drawn the most attention for the battles over what names should be included in the roll call of history. But while ignoring Kennedy and upgrading Gingrich are significant moves, something more fundamental is on the agenda. The one thing that underlies the entire program of the nation's Christian conservative activists is, naturally, religion. But it isn't merely the case that their Christian orientation shapes their opinions on gay marriage, abortion and government spending. More elementally, they hold that the United States was founded by devout Christians and according to biblical precepts. This belief provides what they consider not only a theological but also, ultimately, a judicial grounding to their positions on social questions. When they proclaim that the United States is a "Christian nation," they are not referring to the percentage of the population that ticks a certain box in a survey or census but to the country's roots and the intent of the founders.

The Christian "truth" about America's founding has long been taught in Christian schools, but not beyond. Recently, however — perhaps out of ire at what they see as an aggressive, secular, liberal agenda in Washington and perhaps also because they sense an opening in the battle, a sudden weakness in the lines of the secularists — some activists decided that the time was right to try to reshape the history that children in public schools study. Succeeding at this would help them toward their ultimate goal of reshaping American society. As Cynthia Dunbar, another Christian activist on the Texas board, put it, "The philosophy of the classroom in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next."

Imet Don McLeroy last November in a dental office — that is to say, his dental office — in a professional complex in the Brazos Valley city of Bryan, not far from the sprawling campus of Texas A&M University. The buzz of his hygienist at work sounded through the thin wall separating his office from the rest of the suite. McLeroy makes no bones about the fact that his professional qualifications have nothing to do with education. "I'm a dentist, not a historian," he said. "But I'm fascinated by history, so I've read a lot."

Indeed, dentistry is only a job for McLeroy; his real passions are his faith and the state board of education. He has been a member of the board since 1999 and served as its chairman from 2007 until he was demoted from that role by the State Senate last May because of concerns over his religious views. Until now those views have stood McLeroy in good stead with the constituents of his district, which meanders from Houston to Dallas and beyond, but he is currently in a heated re-election battle in the Republican primary, which takes place March 2.

McLeroy is a robust, cheerful and inexorable man, whose personality is perhaps typified by the framed letter T on the wall of his office, which he earned as a "yell leader" (Texas A&M nomenclature for cheerleader) in his undergraduate days in the late 1960s. "I consider myself a Christian fundamentalist," he announced almost as soon as we sat down. He also identifies himself as a young-earth creationist who believes that the earth was created in six days, as the book of Genesis has it, less than 10,000 years ago. He went on to explain how his Christian perspective both governs his work on the state board and guides him in the current effort to adjust American-history textbooks to highlight the role of Christianity. "Textbooks are mostly the product of the liberal establishment, and they're written with the idea that our religion and our liberty are in conflict," he said. "But Christianity has had a deep impact on our system. The men who wrote the Constitution were Christians who knew the Bible. Our idea of individual rights comes from the Bible. The Western development of the free-market system owes a lot to biblical principles."

For McLeroy, separation of church and state is a myth perpetrated by secular liberals. “There are two basic facts about man,” he said. “He was created in the image of God, and he is fallen. You can’t appreciate the founding of our country without realizing that the founders understood that. For our kids to not know our history, that could kill a society. That’s why to me this is a huge thing.”

“This” — the Texas board’s moves to bring Jesus into American history — has drawn anger in places far removed from the board members’ constituencies. (Samples of recent blog headlines on the topic: “Don McLeroy Wants Your Children to Be Stupid” and “Can We Please Mess With Texas?”) The issue of Texas’ influence is a touchy one in education circles. With some parents and educators elsewhere leery of a right-wing fifth column invading their schools, people in the multibillion textbook industry try to play down the state’s sway. “It’s not a given that Texas’ curriculum translates into other states,” says Jay Diskey, executive director of the school division for the Association of American Publishers, which represents most of the major companies. But Tom Barber, who worked as the head of social studies at the three biggest textbook publishers before running his own editorial company, says, “Texas was and still is the most important and most influential state in the country.” And James Kracht, a professor at Texas A&M’s college of education and a longtime player in the state’s textbook process, told me flatly, “Texas governs 46 or 47 states.”

Every year for the last few years, Texas has put one subject area in its TEKS up for revision. Each year has brought a different controversy, and Don McLeroy has been at the center of most of them. Last year, in its science re-evaluation, the board lunged into the evolution/creationism /intelligent-design debate. The conservative Christian bloc wanted to require science teachers to cover the “strengths and weaknesses” of the theory of evolution, language they used in the past as a tool to weaken the rationale for teaching evolution. The battle made headlines across the country; ultimately, the seven Christian conservatives were unable to pull another vote their way on that specific point, but the finished document nonetheless allows inroads to creationism.

The fallout from that fight cost McLeroy his position as chairman. “It’s the 21st century, and the rest of the known world accepts the teaching of evolution as science and creationism as religion, yet we continue to have this debate here,” Kathy Miller, president of the Texas Freedom Network, a watchdog group, says. “So the eyes of the nation were on this body, and people saw how ridiculous they appeared.” The State Legislature felt the ridicule. “You have a point of view, and you’re using this bully pulpit to take the rest of the state there,” Eliot Shapleigh, a Democratic state senator, admonished McLeroy during the hearing that led to his ouster. McLeroy remains unbowed and talked cheerfully to me about how, confronted with a statement supporting the validity of evolution that was signed by 800 scientists, he had proudly been able to “stand up to the experts.”

The idea behind standing up to experts is that the scientific establishment has been withholding information from the public that would show flaws in the theory of evolution and that it is guilty of what McLeroy called an “intentional neglect of other scientific possibilities.” Similarly, the Christian bloc’s notion this year to bring Christianity into the coverage of American history is not, from their perspective, revisionism but rather an uncovering of truths that have been suppressed. “I don’t know that what we’re doing is redefining the role of religion in America,” says Gail Lowe, who became chairwoman of the board after McLeroy was ousted and who is one of the seven conservative Christians. “Many of us recognize that Judeo-Christian principles were the basis of our country and that many of our founding documents had a basis in Scripture. As we try to promote a better understanding of the Constitution, federalism, the separation of the branches of government, the basic rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, I think it will become evident to students that the founders had a religious motivation.”

Plenty of people disagree with this characterization of the founders, including some who are close to the process in Texas. “I think the evidence indicates that the founding fathers did not intend this to be a Christian nation,” says James Kracht, who served as an expert adviser to the board in the textbook-review process. “They definitely believed in some form of separation of church and state.”

There is, however, one slightly awkward issue for hard-core secularists who would combat what they see as a Christian whitewashing of American history: the Christian activists have a certain amount of history on their side.

IN 1801, A GROUP of Baptist ministers in Danbury, Conn., wrote a letter to the new president, [Thomas Jefferson](#), congratulating him on his

victory. They also had a favor to ask. Baptists were a minority group, and they felt insecure. In the colonial period, there were two major Christian factions, both of which derived from England. The Congregationalists, in New England, had evolved from the Puritan settlers, and in the South and middle colonies, the Anglicans came from the Church of England. Nine colonies developed state churches, which were supported financially by the colonial governments and whose power was woven in with that of the governments. Other Christians — Lutherans, Baptists, Quakers — and, of course, those of other faiths were made unwelcome, if not persecuted outright.

There was a religious element to the American Revolution, which was so pronounced that you could just as well view the event in religious as in political terms. Many of the founders, especially the Southerners, were rebelling simultaneously against state-church oppression and English rule. The Connecticut Baptists saw Jefferson — an anti-Federalist who was bitterly opposed to the idea of establishment churches — as a friend. “Our constitution of government,” they wrote, “is not specific” with regard to a guarantee of religious freedoms that would protect them. Might the president offer some thoughts that, “like the radiant beams of the sun,” would shed light on the intent of the framers? In his reply, Jefferson said it was not the place of the president to involve himself in religion, and he expressed his belief that the First Amendment’s clauses — that the government must not establish a state religion (the so-called establishment clause) but also that it must ensure the free exercise of religion (what became known as the free-exercise clause) — meant, as far as he was concerned, that there was “a wall of separation between Church & State.”

This little episode, culminating in the famous “wall of separation” metaphor, highlights a number of points about teaching religion in American history. For one, it suggests — as the Christian activists maintain — how thoroughly the colonies were shot through with religion and how basic religion was to the cause of the revolutionaries. The period in the early- to mid-1700s, called the Great Awakening, in which populist evangelical preachers challenged the major denominations, is considered a spark for the Revolution. And if religion influenced democracy then, in the Second Great Awakening, decades later, the democratic fervor of the Revolution spread through the two mainline denominations and resulted in a massive growth of the sort of populist churches that typify American Christianity to this day.

Christian activists argue that American-history textbooks basically ignore religion — to the point that they distort history outright — and mainline religious historians tend to agree with them on this. “In American history, religion is all over the place, and wherever it appears, you should tell the story and do it appropriately,” says Martin Marty, emeritus professor at the [University of Chicago](#), past president of the American Academy of Religion and the American Society of Church History and perhaps the unofficial dean of American religious historians. “The goal should be natural inclusion. You couldn’t tell the story of the Pilgrims or the Puritans or the Dutch in New York without religion.” Though conservatives would argue otherwise, James Kracht said the absence of religion is not part of a secularist agenda: “I don’t think religion has been purposely taken out of U.S. history, but I do think textbook companies have been cautious in discussing religious beliefs and possibly getting in trouble with some groups.”

Some conservatives claim that earlier generations of textbooks were frank in promoting America as a Christian nation. It might be more accurate to say that textbooks of previous eras portrayed leaders as generally noble, with strong personal narratives, undergirded by faith and patriotism. As Frances FitzGerald showed in her groundbreaking 1979 book “America Revised,” if there is one thing to be said about American-history textbooks through the ages it is that the narrative of the past is consistently reshaped by present-day forces. Maybe the most striking thing about current history textbooks is that they have lost a controlling narrative. America is no longer portrayed as one thing, one people, but rather a hodgepodge of issues and minorities, forces and struggles. If it were possible to cast the concerns of the Christian conservatives into secular terms, it might be said that they find this lack of a through line and purpose to be disturbing and dangerous. Many others do as well, of course. But the Christians have an answer.

Their answer is rather specific. Merely weaving important religious trends and events into the narrative of American history is not what the Christian bloc on the Texas board has pushed for in revising its guidelines. Many of the points that have been incorporated into the guidelines or that have been advanced by board members and their expert advisers slant toward portraying America as having a divinely preordained mission. In the guidelines — which will be subjected to further amendments in March and then in May — eighth-grade history students are asked to

“analyze the importance of the Mayflower Compact, the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut and the Virginia House of Burgesses to the growth of representative government.” Such early colonial texts have long been included in survey courses, but why focus on these in particular? The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut declare that the state was founded “to maintain and preserve the liberty and purity of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.” The language in the Mayflower Compact — a document that McLeroy and several others involved in the Texas process are especially fond of — describes the Pilgrims’ journey as being “for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith” and thus instills the idea that America was founded as a project for the spread of Christianity. In a book she wrote two years ago, Cynthia Dunbar, a board member, could not have been more explicit about this being the reason for the Mayflower Compact’s inclusion in textbooks; she quoted the document and then said, “This is undeniably our past, and it clearly delineates us as a nation intended to be emphatically Christian.”

In the new guidelines, students taking classes in U.S. government are asked to identify traditions that informed America’s founding, “including Judeo-Christian (especially biblical law),” and to “identify the individuals whose principles of law and government institutions informed the American founding documents,” among whom they include Moses. The idea that the Bible and Mosaic law provided foundations for American law has taken root in Christian teaching about American history. So when Steven K. Green, director of the Center for Religion, Law and Democracy at Willamette University in Salem, Ore., testified at the board meeting last month in opposition to the board’s approach to bringing religion into history, warning that the [Supreme Court](#) has forbidden public schools from “seeking to impress upon students the importance of particular religious values through the curriculum,” and in the process said that the founders “did not draw on Mosaic law, as is mentioned in the standards,” several of the board members seemed dumbstruck. Don McLeroy insisted it was a legitimate claim, since the Enlightenment took place in Europe, in a Christian context. Green countered that the Enlightenment had in fact developed in opposition to reliance on biblical law and said he had done a lengthy study in search of American court cases that referenced Mosaic law. “The record is basically bereft,” he said. Nevertheless, biblical law and Moses remain in the TEKS.

The process in Texas required that writing teams, made up mostly of teachers, do the actual work of revising the curriculum, with the aid of experts who were appointed by the board. Two of the six experts the board chose are well-known advocates for conservative Christian causes. One of them, the Rev. Peter Marshall, says on the Web site of his organization, Peter Marshall Ministries, that his work is “dedicated to helping to restore America to its Bible-based foundations through preaching, teaching and writing on America’s Christian heritage and on Christian discipleship and revival.”

“The guidelines in Texas were seriously deficient in bringing out the role of the Christian faith in the founding of America,” Marshall told me. In a document he prepared for the team that was writing the new guidelines, he urged that new textbooks mold children’s impressions of the founders in particular ways: “The Founding Fathers’ biblical worldview taught them that human beings were by nature self-centered, so they believed that the supernatural influence of the Spirit of God was needed to free us from ourselves so that we can care for our neighbors.”

Marshall also proposed that children be taught that the separation-of-powers notion is “rooted in the Founding Fathers’ clear understanding of the sinfulness of man,” so that it was not safe for one person to exercise unlimited power, and that “the discovery, settling and founding of the colonies happened because of the biblical worldviews of those involved.” Marshall recommended that textbooks present America’s founding and history in terms of motivational stories on themes like the Pilgrims’ zeal to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the natives.

One recurring theme during the process of revising the social-studies guidelines was the desire of the board to stress the concept of American exceptionalism, and the Christian bloc has repeatedly emphasized that Christianity should be portrayed as the driving force behind what makes America great. Peter Marshall is himself the author of a series of books that recount American history with a strong Christian focus and that have been staples in Christian schools since the first one was published in 1977. (He told me that they have sold more than a million copies.) In these history books, he employs a decidedly unhistorical tone in which the guiding hand of Providence shapes America’s story, starting with the voyage of [Christopher Columbus](#). “Columbus’s heart belonged to God,” he assures his readers, and he notes that a particular event in the explorer’s life “marked the turning point of God’s plan to use Columbus to raise the curtain on His new Promised Land.”

The other nonacademic expert, David Barton, is the nationally known leader of WallBuilders, which describes itself as dedicated to “presenting

America's forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on our moral, religious and constitutional heritage." Barton has written and lectured on the First Amendment and against separation of church and state. He is a controversial figure who has argued that the U.S. income tax and the capital-gains tax should be abolished because they violate Scripture (for the Bible says, in Barton's reading, "the more profit you make the more you are rewarded") and who pushes a Christianity-first rhetoric. When the [U.S. Senate](#) invited a Hindu leader to open a 2007 session with a prayer, he objected, saying: "In Hindu [sic], you have not one God, but many, many, many, many, many gods. And certainly that was never in the minds of those who did the Constitution, did the Declaration when they talked about Creator."

In his recommendations to the Texas school board, Barton wrote that students should be taught the following principles which, in his reading, derive directly from the Declaration of Independence: "1. There is a fixed moral law derived from God and nature. 2. There is a Creator. 3. The Creator gives to man certain unalienable rights. 4. Government exists primarily to protect God-given rights to every individual. 5. Below God-given rights and moral laws, government is directed by the consent of the governed."

A third expert, Daniel L. Dreisbach, a professor of justice, law and society at American University who has written extensively on First Amendment issues, stressed, in his recommendations to the guideline writers about how to frame the revolutionary period for students, that the founders were overwhelmingly Christian; that the deistic tendencies of a few — like Jefferson — were an anomaly; and that most Americans in the era were not just Christians but that "98 percent or more of Americans of European descent identified with Protestantism."

If the fight between the "Christian nation" advocates and mainstream thinkers could be focused onto a single element, it would be the "wall of separation" phrase. Christian thinkers like to point out that it does not appear in the Constitution, nor in any other legal document — letters that presidents write to their supporters are not legal decrees. Besides which, after the phrase left Jefferson's pen it more or less disappeared for a century and a half — until Justice Hugo Black of the Supreme Court dug it out of history's dustbin in 1947. It then slowly worked its way into the American lexicon and American life, helping to subtly mold the way we think about religion in society. To conservative Christians, there is no separation of church and state, and there never was. The concept, they say, is a modern secular fiction. There is no legal justification, therefore, for disallowing crucifixes in government buildings or school prayer.

David Barton reads the "church and state" letter to mean that Jefferson "believed, along with the other founders, that the First Amendment had been enacted only to prevent the federal establishment of a national denomination." Barton goes on to claim, " 'Separation of church and state' currently means almost exactly the opposite of what it originally meant." That is to say, the founders were all Christians who conceived of a nation of Christians, and the purpose of the First Amendment was merely to ensure that no single Christian denomination be elevated to the role of state church.

Mainstream scholars disagree, sometimes vehemently. Randall Balmer, a professor of American religious history at [Barnard College](#) and writer of the documentary "Crusade: The Life of Billy Graham," told me: "David Barton has been out there spreading this lie, frankly, that the founders intended America to be a Christian nation. He's been very effective. But the logic is utterly screwy. He says the phrase 'separation of church and state' is not in the Constitution. He's right about that. But to make that argument work you would have to argue that the phrase is not an accurate summation of the First Amendment. And Thomas Jefferson, who penned it, thought it was." (David Barton declined to be interviewed for this article.) In his testimony in Austin, Steven Green was challenged by a board member with the fact that the phrase does not appear in the Constitution. In response, Green pointed out that many constitutional concepts — like judicial review and separation of powers — are not found verbatim in the Constitution.

In what amounts to an in-between perspective, Daniel Dreisbach — who wrote a book called "Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State" — argues that the phrase "wall of separation" has been misapplied in recent decades to unfairly restrict religion from entering the public sphere. Martin Marty, the University of Chicago emeritus professor, agrees. "I think 'wall' is too heavy a metaphor," Marty says. "There's a trend now away from it, and I go along with that. In textbooks, we're moving away from an unthinking secularity." The public seems to agree. Polls on some specific church-state issues — government financing for faith-based organizations and voluntary prayer in public schools — consistently show majorities in favor of those positions.

Then too, the “Christian nation” position tries to trump the whole debate about separation of church and state by portraying the era of the nation’s founding as awash in Christianity. David Barton and others pepper their arguments with quotations, like one in which [John Adams](#), in a letter to Jefferson, refers to American independence as having been achieved on “the general Principles of Christianity.” But others find just as many instances in which one or another of the founders seems clearly wary of religion.

In fact, the founders were rooted in Christianity — they were inheritors of the entire European Christian tradition — and at the same time they were steeped in an Enlightenment rationalism that was, if not opposed to religion, determined to establish separate spheres for faith and reason. “I don’t think the founders would have said they were applying Christian principles to government,” says [Richard Brookhiser](#), the conservative columnist and author of books on [Alexander Hamilton](#), Gouverneur Morris and George Washington. “What they said was ‘the laws of nature and nature’s God.’ They didn’t say, ‘We put our faith in Jesus Christ.’” Martin Marty says: “They had to invent a new, broad way. Washington, in his writings, makes scores of different references to God, but not one is biblical. He talks instead about a ‘Grand Architect,’ deliberately avoiding the Christian terms, because it had to be a religious language that was accessible to all people.”

Or, as Brookhiser rather succinctly summarizes the point: “The founders were not as Christian as those people would like them to be, though they weren’t as secularist as [Christopher Hitchens](#) would like them to be.”

THE TOWN OF Lynchburg, Va., was founded in 1786 at the site of a ferry crossing on what would later be called the James River. During the Civil War, it was a Confederate supply post, and in 1864 it was the site of one of the last Confederate victories. In 1933, [Jerry Falwell](#) was born in Lynchburg, the son of a sometime bootlegger. In 1971 — in an era of pot smoking and war protests — the Rev. Jerry Falwell inaugurated Liberty University on one of the city’s seven hills. It was to be a training ground for Christians and a bulwark against moral relativism. In 2004, three years before his death, Falwell completed another dream by founding the Liberty University School of Law, whose objective, in the words of the university’s current chancellor, Jerry Falwell Jr., is “to transform legislatures, courts, commerce and civil government at all levels.”

I visited the law-school building in late fall, with the remnants of Hurricane Ida turning the Blue Ridge Mountains skyline into a series of smudges. The building’s crisp, almost militaristic atmosphere bespeaks a seriousness of purpose; and the fact that it houses, as one of its training facilities, the only full-scale replica of the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) chamber points to the school’s ambitions.

I had come to sit in on a guest lecture by Cynthia Dunbar, an assistant law professor who commutes to Lynchburg once a week from her home in Richmond, Tex., where she is a practicing lawyer as well as a member of the Texas board of education. Her presence in both worlds — public schools and the courts — suggests the connection between them that Christian activists would like to deepen. The First Amendment class for third-year law students that I watched Dunbar lead neatly merged the two components of the school’s program: “lawyering skills” and “the integration of a Christian worldview.”

Dunbar began the lecture by discussing a national day of thanksgiving that Gen. George Washington called for after the defeat of the British at Saratoga in 1777 — showing, in her reckoning, a religious base in the thinking of the country’s founders. In developing a line of legal reasoning that the future lawyers in her class might use, she wove her way to two Supreme Court cases in the 1960s, in both of which the court ruled that prayer in public schools was unconstitutional. A student questioned the relevance of the 1777 event to the court rulings, because in 1777 the country did not yet have a Constitution. “And what did we have at that time?” Dunbar asked. Answer: “The Declaration of Independence.” She then discussed a legal practice called “incorporation by reference.” “When you have in one legal document reference to another, it pulls them together, so that they can’t be viewed as separate and distinct,” she said. “So you cannot read the Constitution distinct from the Declaration.” And the Declaration famously refers to a Creator and grounds itself in “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” Therefore, she said, the religiosity of the founders is not only established and rooted in a foundational document but linked to the Constitution. From there she moved to “judicial construction and how you should go forward with that,” i.e., how these soon-to-be lawyers might work to overturn rulings like that against prayer in schools by using the founding documents.

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice, a Christian legal center, told me that the notion of connecting the

Declaration of Independence and the Constitution is “part of a strategy to give a clear historical understanding of the role of religion in American public life” that organizations like his have been pursuing for the last 10 or 15 years.

Besides the fact that incorporation by reference is usually used for technical purposes rather than for such grandiose purposes as the reinterpretation of foundational texts, there is an oddity to this tactic. “The founders deliberately left the word ‘God’ out of the Constitution — but not because they were a bunch of [atheists](#) and deists,” says [Susan Jacoby](#), author of “Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism.” “To them, mixing religion and government meant trouble.” The curious thing is that in trying to bring God into the Constitution, the activists — who say their goal is to follow the original intent of the founders — are ignoring the fact that the founders explicitly avoided religious language in that document.

And here again there is a link to Texas. David Barton specifically advised the writers of the Texas guidelines that textbooks “should stipulate (but currently do not) that the Declaration of Independence is symbiotic with the Constitution rather than a separate unrelated document.”

In 2008, Cynthia Dunbar published a book called “One Nation Under God,” in which she stated more openly than most of her colleagues have done the argument that the founding of America was an overtly Christian undertaking and laid out what she and others hope to achieve in public schools. “The underlying authority for our constitutional form of government stems directly from biblical precedents,” she writes. “Hence, the only accurate method of ascertaining the intent of the Founding Fathers at the time of our government’s inception comes from a biblical worldview.”

Then she pushes forward: “We as a nation were intended by God to be a light set on a hill to serve as a beacon of hope and Christian charity to a lost and dying world.” But the true picture of America’s Christian founding has been whitewashed by “the liberal agenda” — in order for liberals to succeed “they must first rewrite our nation’s history” and obscure the Christian intentions of the founders. Therefore, she wrote, “this battle for our nation’s children and who will control their education and training is crucial to our success for reclaiming our nation.”

After the book came out, Dunbar was derided in blogs and newspapers for a section in which she writes of “the inappropriateness of a state-created, taxpayer-supported school system” and likens sending children to public school to “throwing them into the enemy’s flames, even as the children of Israel threw their children to Moloch.” (Her own children were either home-schooled or educated in private Christian schools.) When I asked, over dinner in a honky-tonk steakhouse down the road from the university, why someone who felt that way would choose to become an overseer of arguably the most influential public-education system in the country, she said that public schools are a battlefield for competing ideologies and that it’s important to combat the “religion” of secularism that holds sway in public education.

Ask Christian activists what they really want — what the goal is behind the effort to bring Christianity into American history — and they say they merely want “the truth.” “The main thing I’m looking for as a state board member is to make sure we have good standards,” Don McLeroy said. But the actual ambition is vast. Americans tell pollsters they support separation of church and state, but then again 65 percent of respondents to a 2007 survey by the First Amendment Center agreed with the statement that “the nation’s founders intended the United States to be a Christian nation,” and 55 percent said they believed the Constitution actually established the country as a Christian nation. The Christian activists are aware of such statistics and want to build on them, as Dunbar made clear. She told me she looks to John Jay’s statement that it is the duty of the people “of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers” and has herself called for a preference for selecting Christians for positions of leadership.

Dunbar’s book lays out the goal: using courts and public schools to fuse Christianity into the nation’s founding. It may be unlikely that it will be attained any time soon, in which case the seeding of Texas’ history-textbook guidelines with “Christian nation” concepts may be mostly symbolic. But symbols can accumulate weight over time, and the Christian activists are in it for the long haul. Some observers say that over time their effort could have far-reaching consequences. “The more you can associate Christianity with the founding, the more you can sway the future Supreme Court,” Martin Marty says. “That is what Pat Robertson was about years ago. Establish the founders as Christians, and you have it made.”

"BROWN BEAR, BROWN BEAR, What Do You See?" It's not an especially subversive-sounding title, but the author of this 1967 children's picture book, Bill Martin Jr., lost his place in the Texas social-studies guidelines at last month's board meeting due to what was thought to be un-American activity — to be precise, "very strong critiques of capitalism and the American system." Martin, the creator of 300 children's books, was removed from the list of cultural figures approved for study by third graders in the blizzard of amendments offered by board members.

Over all, the TEKS guidelines make for impressive reading. They are thoughtful and deep; you can almost feel the effort at achieving balance. Poring down the long columns and knowing that the 1998 version of these guidelines served as the basis for textbooks in most U.S. states, you even begin to feel some hope for the future.

What is wrong with the Texas process, according to many observers, is illustrated by the fate of Bill Martin Jr. The board has the power to accept, reject or rewrite the TEKS, and over the past few years, in language arts, science and now social studies, the members have done all of the above. Yet few of these elected overseers are trained in the fields they are reviewing. "In general, the board members don't know anything at all about content," Tom Barber, the textbook executive, says. Kathy Miller, the watchdog, who has been monitoring the board for 15 years, says, referring to Don McLeroy and another board member: "It is the most crazy-making thing to sit there and watch a dentist and an insurance salesman rewrite curriculum standards in science and history. Last year, Don McLeroy believed he was smarter than the [National Academy of Sciences](#), and he now believes he's smarter than professors of American history." In this case, one board member sent an e-mail message with a reference to "Ethical Marxism," by Bill Martin, to another board member, who suggested that anyone who wrote a book with such a title did not belong in the TEKS. As it turned out, Bill Martin and Bill Martin Jr. are two different people. But by that time, the author of "Brown Bear, Brown Bear" was out. "That's a perfect example of these people's lack of knowledge," Miller says. "They're coming forward with hundreds of amendments at the last minute. Don McLeroy had a four-inch stack of amendments, and they all just voted on them, whether or not they actually knew the content. What we witnessed in January was a textbook example of how not to develop textbook standards."

Before the January board meeting, one of the social-studies curriculum writers, Judy Brodigan, told me that she was very pleased with the guidelines her team produced. After the meeting, with its 10-hour marathon of amendments by board members, she spoke very differently. "I think they took a very, very good document and weakened it," she said. "The teachers take their work seriously. I do believe there are board members on the ultraright who have an agenda. They want to make our standards very conservative and fit their viewpoint. Our job is not to take a viewpoint. It's to present sides fairly. I thought we had done that."

Regarding religion, the writing teams had included in their guidelines some of the recommendations of the experts appointed by the Christian bloc but had chosen to ignore most. I was led to expect that the January meeting would see a torrent of religion amendments, in which Don McLeroy would reinsert items that the team failed to include, just as he did with other subjects in the past. Last November, over dinner at a Tex-Mex restaurant across the street from the Texas A&M campus, McLeroy vowed to do so, saying, "I'll get the details in there." At that time, he and others were full of information and bravado as they pushed toward the "Christian nation" goal. But at the January meeting, while there were many conservative political amendments, there were only a few religion amendments. When I talked to him afterward, he shrugged it off in an uncharacteristically vague way. "We're basically happy with things," he said.

It's possible a wave of religion amendments will come in the next meeting, in March, when American government will still be among the subjects under review. But the change of tone could signal a shift in strategy. "It could be that they feel they've already got enough code words sprinkled throughout the guidelines," Kathy Miller says. The laws of Nature and Nature's God. Moses and the Bible "informing" the American founding. "The Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith" as America's original purpose. "We've seen in the past how one word here or there in the curriculum standards gets seized upon by the far-right members at adoption time," Miller says. "In the science debate, the words 'intelligent design' did not appear, but they used 'strengths and weaknesses' as an excuse to pitch a battle. The phrase became a wedge to try to weaken the theory of evolution, to suggest that scientists had serious problems with it. We've seen the board use these tiny fragments to wage war on publishers."

This squares with what Tom Barber, the textbook executive, told me: that in the next stage in the Texas process, general guidelines are chiseled

into fact-size chunks in crisp columns of print via backroom cajoling. “The process of reviewing the guidelines in Texas is very open, but what happens behind the scenes after that is quite different,” Barber says. “McLeroy is kind of the spokesman for the social conservatives, and publishers will work with him throughout. The publishers just want to make sure they get their books listed.”

To give an illustration simultaneously of the power of ideology and Texas’ influence, Barber told me that when he led the social-studies division at Prentice Hall, one conservative member of the board told him that the 12th-grade book, “Magruder’s American Government,” would not be approved because it repeatedly referred to the U.S. Constitution as a “living” document. “That book is probably the most famous textbook in American history,” Barber says. “It’s been around since World War I, is updated every year and it had invented the term ‘living Constitution,’ which has been there since the 1950s. But the social conservatives didn’t like its sense of flexibility. They insisted at the last minute that the wording change to ‘enduring.’” Prentice Hall agreed to the change, and ever since the book — which Barber estimates controlled 60 or 65 percent of the market nationally — calls it the “enduring Constitution.”

Last fall, McLeroy was frank in talking about how he applies direct pressure to textbook companies. In the language-arts re-evaluation, the members of the Christian bloc wanted books to include classic myths and fables rather than newly written stories whose messages they didn’t agree with. They didn’t get what they wanted from the writing teams, so they did an end run around them once the public battles were over. “I met with all the publishers,” McLeroy said. “We went out for Mexican food. I told them this is what we want. We want stories with morals, not P.C. stories.” He then showed me an e-mail message from an executive at Pearson, a major educational publisher, indicating the results of his effort: “Hi Don. Thanks for the impact that you have had on the development of Pearson’s Scott Foresman Reading Street series. Attached is a list of some of the Fairy Tales and Fables that we included in the series.”

If there has been a shift in strategy, politics may have brought it about. The Christian bloc may have determined it would be wiser to work for this kind of transformational change out of the public gaze. Of the seven members of the Christian bloc, Ken Mercer is in a battle to keep his seat, Cynthia Dunbar recently announced she won’t run for re-election and after 11 years of forceful advocacy for fundamentalist causes on the Texas state board, during which time he was steadfastly supported by everyone from Gov. [Rick Perry](#) — who originally picked him as chairman — to tea-party organizers, Don McLeroy is now facing the stiffest opposition of his career. Thomas Ratliff, a well-connected lobbyist, has squared off against McLeroy in the Republican primary and is running an aggressive campaign, positioning himself as a practical, moderate Republican. “I’m not trying to out-conservative anyone,” Ratliff told me. “I think the state board of education has lost its way, and the social-studies thing is a prime example. They keep wanting to talk about this being a Christian nation. My attitude is this country was founded by a group of men who were Christians but who didn’t want the government dictating religion, and that’s exactly what McLeroy and his colleagues are trying to do.”

Ratliff has received prominent endorsements and has outraised McLeroy in the neighborhood of 10 to 1. But hard-core conservatives tend to vote in primaries. Anyone looking for signs of where the [Republican Party](#) is headed might scan the results of the Texas school-board District 9 Republican primary on the morning of March 3. If Don McLeroy loses, it could signal that the Christian right’s recent power surge has begun to wane. But it probably won’t affect the next generation of schoolbooks. The current board remains in place until next January. By then, decisions on what goes in the Texas curriculum guidelines will be history.

Russell Shorto is a contributing writer for the magazine. His most recent book is “Descartes’ Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict Between Faith and Reason.”

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