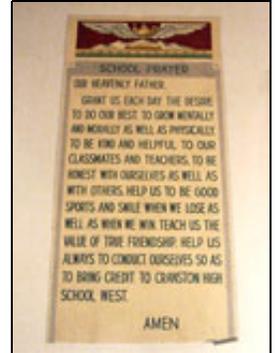


Religion in Schools

The debate over religion in public schools is in part a broader debate over the role of religion in public life, but it is also a debate over the ability of parents to raise their children in a manner consistent with the family's beliefs and values. The debate also concerns the U.S. Constitution and just what the framers intended when they tried to balance the freedom to practice religion with a freedom from a government-endorsed religion. The debate has taken many forms, but in the past century, it has tended to revolve around displays of religious beliefs and holidays, prayer in school, and religious versus scientific beliefs about human origins.



Traditionally, the public schools reflected the dominant Christian beliefs in the country.

Students were taught lessons of the Bible along with arithmetic. However, by the 20th century, these practices became increasingly problematic, with students and educators who held different faiths or none at all feeling disaffected. In many parts of the country, public schools began to slowly remove religious symbols and practices from the schools. But prayers often remained, as did lessons that suggested a divine creation of the universe and humanity.



In the case of teachings on human origins, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution provided the basis for the first scientific challenge to the notion that origins can be attributed to a divine hand. American politicians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reacted strongly to the new scientific theory and by 1925 had introduced legislation in 15 states that would ban the teaching of evolution in public schools. That year, Tennessee enacted a law that banned public school teachers from teaching "any theory that denies the story of divine creation as taught by the Bible and to teach instead that man was descended from a lower order of animals." Under the new law, John Scopes, a high school biology teacher, was charged and soon convicted with illegally teaching the theory of evolution. It was not until 1968, in the Supreme Court case *Epperson v. Arkansas*, that such laws were ruled unconstitutional.

The constitutionality of mandated prayer and Bible study came next. In fact, several U.S. Supreme Court rulings dramatically shifted schools towards less endorsement of religion. First, in 1948, the Court banned religious instruction in public schools with the decision in *McCullum v. Board of Education*. Second, in 1962, the Court ruled in *Engel v. Vitale* that schools could not compel students to pray in school. In a series of related 1963 rulings the Court overturned Pennsylvania and Maryland laws which required Bible reading as a religious exercise and mandatory prayers in school. These two rulings set the stage for the modern debate over religion in school and also led to the removal of religious artifacts and bans on observing religious holidays.

For many observers, it seemed that the courts had completely banned religion in schools, even though religious practices would still be allowed under certain circumstances. By the 1970s and 1980s, a grassroots movement to respond to the removal of mandated religion in school had grown dramatically around the country. Some parents responded by placing their children in private schools or by pushing for school voucher programs that would allow more children to afford the tuition of private religious schools. Activists like Mel and Norma Gabler fought to revise school textbooks to remove what they deemed as support for a secular humanist lifestyle. Others responded by developing new policies that would allow for prayer in school and the study of religion without running afoul of constitutional issues. Others focused on abstinence-only sex education programs.



By the 1990s, such legal groups as the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) and the American Family Association (AFA) were filing lawsuits against public schools for infringing upon the religious rights of students. Poor decisions by some school administrators, including not allowing a child to read a Bible, helped spur these lawsuits. Meanwhile, political activists associated with such groups as the Christian Coalition began running for and winning seats on local and state school boards around the country. From these positions, some officials began pushing for more prayers at school events and alternative approaches to understanding human origins.

These efforts have resulted in some victories. Although a 1992 Supreme Court decision in *Lee v. Weisman* prohibited prayer at graduation ceremonies, the ban only applied if the activity was conducted or sponsored by a public school board. Many schools have been able to allow such prayers if they are organized and led by students, and school boards have adopted general policies that allow students to conduct public prayers on their own. Likewise, most policies that allow for a moment of silence at the start of the school day have been upheld as constitutional.



More recently, battles over the teaching of creationism or intelligent design along with the theory of evolution in public schools have led to victories for both sides. In 1987, the Supreme Court overturned a Louisiana law requiring public schools to give balanced treatment to creation and evolution, but the ruling did not automatically ban the teaching of creationism. In Kansas, the State Board of Education in 1999 changed the language in suggested teaching guidelines to downplay evolution. These actions were reversed by a newly elected school board in 2001, but similar language was reinserted in 2005. Likewise, the Dover, Pennsylvania, school board had adopted a policy in October 2004 requiring teachers to read a disclaimer to students about the theory of evolution. But by December 2005, the board members who had voted for the proposal had been rejected at the polls and a court had

overturned the policy.

In the past 40 years, the debate over religion in the public schools has only expanded as activists bring a greater number of issues to the table. Additionally, relatively broad public support for religious values, prayer in school, and teaching alternative views has ensured that elected officials will repeatedly consider policies that allow for changes in these areas. It seems likely that the debate will continue to include these issues and expand to other areas as well.

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Further Reading

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