



## **Are Secular Textbooks All That Bad?**

Dan Olinger, PhD



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## Are Secular Textbooks All That Bad?

Christian schools exist for a reason. Some reasons are not worthy; for example, no Christian school should exist just to generate revenue for the supporting church or to serve as part of a larger empire-building program. The best reason, and the one at the foundation of the most successful Christian schools, is obedience to the Scripture: specifically, to help Christian parents exercise stewardship of their obligation to disciple their children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,” as Paul puts it (Eph. 6:4 KJV). This involves inculcating into the next generation a biblical worldview and the ability to live out that worldview in any sphere of life, including all the standard academic areas.

### Why Use Secular Textbooks?

A significant decision that Christian educators face is whether to use Christian textbooks or secular ones. There are several apparent advantages to using secular texts:

- There are many more major publishers of secular texts than of Christian. This makes sense, given that the nonreligious school market is exponentially larger than the religious one. In a free market, more choices are a good thing. It is worth noting, though, that the range of choice among secular publishers is not as broad as it appears. Over the past two decades, the K–12 textbook publishing industry has gone through a period of consolidation, with the result that the U.S. market is dominated by just four publishers, one of them not actually a U.S. company.<sup>1</sup>
- Due to the economies of scale provided by the larger secular market, secular textbooks are sometimes—but less often than most people think—less expensive than Christian, and they usually come with more trimmings—supplementary materials and teacher helps. Further,

<sup>1</sup> London-based Pearson PLC has subsumed Addison-Wesley, Allyn & Bacon, Longman, Prentice Hall, Scott Foresman, and Silver Burdett; New York-based McGraw-Hill owns Glencoe, Macmillan, and SRA; Boston-based Houghton Mifflin owns Edmark, Edusoft, Harcourt, D.C. Heath, Holt (Holt, Rinehart, & Winston) McDougal (Littell), Riverside, and Saxon math. With New York-based Scholastic (which owns Grolier), four publishers control more than 80% of textbook sales in the United States.

the secular companies’ larger advertising budgets often make it possible for them to provide free materials in order to encourage a purchase.

- For constitutional reasons, no Christian textbooks appear on lists of state-approved materials. It seems to make sense for a school to use materials that are standard across the state, especially for purposes of admission to secular universities.<sup>2</sup>
- Some teachers argue that secular textbooks help them fight the “hothouse effect” of the Christian school. They are concerned about being overly protective and in the process shielding the student from meaningful interaction with the philosophies that he will be confronted with when he leaves the hothouse. The secular texts, the argument goes, provide an opportunity to help the student learn what these opposing views say and how to defeat them from the Scripture.

### On the Other Hand . . .

These are logical reasons for a Christian school to choose secular textbooks. However, they do not completely answer the question. The real question is whether such materials, in the long run, will serve on balance as a help or an impediment to the fulfillment of the school’s mission: to produce students who have a biblical worldview and can apply it in whatever area they are called to serve Christ. The “hothouse” argument comes closer to making that point than the others, but there is more to consider.

So will using secular textbooks be a help or a hindrance in growing Christ-like character? Perhaps the first thing we notice in actual use is that if the textbook disagrees with, or even argues against, the philosophical underpinnings of the curriculum, it will be inefficient for the teacher and ineffective for the student.

<sup>2</sup> In 2005 the University of California decided to reject all high school biology credits that involved the use of Christian biology textbooks. The justification for this decision was that students who used those textbooks would not be prepared for science coursework in the UC system. Several Christian schools in California sued the university, charging that the decision constituted religious discrimination. In 2010 the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal by the plaintiffs. As a result, the University of California does not recognize the validity of Christian high school science textbooks.

### ***Inefficiencies***

The teacher will have to take class time to correct the inaccurate information, to counter the textbook's arguments, and to supplement it with arguments for the school's position. There are times, of course, where students should and will read opposing viewpoints in order to enhance their critical-thinking and evaluative skills, to understand an opposing view, and to strengthen their ability to defend their own. But if the textbook is in general opposition to the curriculum, the battle is never-ending, and an unnecessarily high percentage of the class time will be spent on correction rather than actual instruction.

### *Specific Areas*

An obvious example of this problem is the use of evolutionary textbooks in a science class; while it is certainly necessary for students to understand the evolutionary worldview accurately, the typical evolutionary book's general underrepresentation and misrepresentation of biblical creationism will require considerable time and effort for the teacher to counter. In fact, a good Christian textbook will likely give a more well-rounded and thorough presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of evolutionary theory than a secular text. For example, most secular biology textbooks provide examples of microevolution, which is indisputable and is accepted by most creationists, and then extrapolate from that directly to macroevolution, thereby assuming their entire premise. A Christian textbook will note the distinction between the two, thereby providing a more accurate presentation of evolution than the evolutionary text does.

A similar example is the discussion of sexual morality. All books will take a position on the morality of various types of sexual activity, even if their position is that the subject is not a question of morality. It is particularly important that adolescents be given appropriately comprehensive and accurate information about sexual issues, including STDs, within a clear moral context.<sup>3</sup> A secular text can provide no clearer moral foundation than the prevention of suffering<sup>4</sup> or some amorphous "social good." In fact, in many secular literature texts, the stories are chosen specifically for their moral

ambiguity, encouraging students to conclude that there are no moral absolutes and that an action's goodness or evil depends on circumstances or on his own existential sense. A Christian text, which balances the two complementary truths that all humans are in the image of God (and therefore worthy of respect and capable of great good) and are also fallen into sin (and therefore capable of great evil) will provide a cohesive and stable moral foundation that will serve the student well when social mores have moved on.

### *Comprehensive Problems*

We should note that the problem of secularism extends far beyond just a few examples or specific areas. Our entire worldview is at cross purposes with the worldview espoused in the current secular texts. The Scripture speaks of history as having a plan, as making sense. Secular history books cannot and do not acknowledge that, thereby missing the main point of the entire field. The Scripture speaks of us as creatures, owing allegiance to a sovereign Lord. Secular texts emphasize the student's rights of self-expression and self-determination, often under the aegis of a greater societal good, thereby placing the student directly on the side of what the Bible calls the *kosmos*, the "world" as organized in opposition to God. The Scripture speaks of our mission as evangelism and discipleship, doing all that we do for the glory of God; the secular text, again, misses the central point of our entire existence. How is a teacher going to counter that with simple supplementation? There are not enough hours in the day to mount an effective remediation.

And even if the teacher could accomplish that in the limited time allotted, why should he or she have to? Why can't the textbook help in that all-important task rather than being an obstacle to be taught around?

### ***Ineffectiveness***

Insufficient agreement between the textbook and the curriculum is also ineffective for the student. Especially for younger students, whose critical-thinking skills are not yet well developed, competing assertions from multiple authority figures are unnecessarily confusing and even morally unhealthy. To the young student, a textbook is as authoritative as a teacher or even a parent, and such authority figures should be in general agreement about at least the core values with which the parents and the school are trying to imbue him. Even older

<sup>3</sup> Of course, this is easier when the parents and the school are in agreement on these questions.

<sup>4</sup> This is Sam Harris's approach in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), 170–71.

students, who can be expected to exercise critical thinking more adeptly, struggle unnecessarily when the basic thesis of the textbook contradicts the basic thesis of their parents or teachers. Those who do not face that struggle still face inefficiencies by having to deal with more sources of information as they study for tests and other assessments.

In summary, using secular textbooks will involve a certain measure of risk. If the teacher does not effectively expand the material covered in order to present the biblical worldview and counter the secular, then the student will not be properly prepared to live biblically with reference to that subject area, and the school will have sinned against the parents and the student by failing to deliver what it has promised. The teacher may not have intended to do an inferior job—she may have been hampered by limitations of time or training—but she has done an inferior job nevertheless. We cannot quantify the spiritual damage that may be done, but there's no doubt that the school is shouldering a real risk by using the secular texts. And the fact that we can't quantify the damage—that the extent of the risk is unknown—makes the choice less attractive, not more.

### **About That Hothouse Thing . . .**

The hothouse analogy noted above deserves further consideration and evaluation. We should begin by noting that real hothouses do exist, and they are not evil things. They exist for a reason: namely, to serve as an environment during a vulnerable time in the development of a plant. Plants can grow without hothouses, of course. But many of them are lost along the way without the protection that the hothouse provides.

The analogy can be transferred nicely to the education of children. Christian children can be educated in an environment hostile to their faith, and those who survive will likely be strong for the experience. But there is logic—and grace—in nurturing them in a friendly environment and protecting them from the hostile one during times of significant vulnerability. We could argue over the precise limits of those periods of vulnerability, but the general principle is certainly worthy of consideration. And what is the cost of failure when we are dealing

not with plants but with the souls of those in the image of God?

### **Conclusion**

This means that teachers and administrators need to consider carefully whether a secular text in a particular class will in fact further the school's mission or hinder it. They need to determine whether they need the secular text in order to expose the student to opposing views or whether they can do so while using a text that is not in effect an assault weapon. Are they really choosing the secular text because it strengthens their students spiritually, or are they actually driven by financial considerations? Only the individual selection committees can know the answer to that question.

The Bible tells us that the human heart is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9). There is always the possibility that deep in our hearts we make choices for the wrong reasons. Perhaps we want our colleagues in secular education to look favorably on us; perhaps we dislike the hesitation, even the approbation we see in the eyes of the world when we associate ourselves with Christ and His people. Perhaps we find our security in attaching ourselves to a major player. Perhaps we want our textbooks to be the educational equivalent of Abercrombie & Fitch or American Eagle. Perhaps we just want to be cool.

But that is not our mission; it is the mission of the enemy, who was destroyed and deceived by the pride of his heart (Ezek. 28:12–17) and who has made a career of deceiving others into following him down that road (Jer. 49:16; Obad. 3).

Of course not everyone who uses secular texts does so as a nod to pride or godlessness. But the stakes are too high, the consequences too severe, the students too valuable, and the Master too exalted, for us to make important decisions for trivial reasons.

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Dan Olinger is Chairman of the Division of Bible at Bob Jones University. To read more articles in the “Issues in Education” series, visit [bjupress.com/go/ed-issues](http://bjupress.com/go/ed-issues).

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