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### CREDIT FOR RELIGION

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## CREDIT FOR RELIGION

### WHY ASK THE STATE TO GIVE SCHOOL CREDITS FOR RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION?

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The query is raised as to the reasons for asking the state to give school credits for religious, including Biblical instruction. My answer is (1) that the subjects involved constitute a valuable element in education, and hence are entitled to academic recognition; (2) that the giving of credit will dignify them by encouraging young people to undertake them, by inspiring to thorough work and by improving the character and tone of the teaching; and (3) that in asking for credit we are not in any way violating the fundamental principle of the separation of church and state.

I waive the argument as to the value or lack of value of non-religious ethical training, and put forward the claims of religious, especially Biblical, instruction on the ground that without clear and definite knowledge of these things no American youth is prepared to enter into the heritage of general culture which belongs to his race and his age. This I regard as clearly demonstrable. In fact, I believe it is practically impossible to overestimate the part played by the Bible and by the fundamental Christian concepts in the development of Anglo-Saxon civilization. It is not only the religious and moral life of our people that has been thus influenced; the jurisprudence, the social customs, the art and literature—those great exponents of the noblest life of the race—have all been vitally affected. To understand these essential things—in other words, to be a full-fledged citizen of twentieth century America, *en rapport* with its best life and thought, I maintain that a youth must have gained a close and vital familiarity with the Bible and the great religious concepts which have been the well-springs of his racial culture.

Consider for a moment the matter of jurisprudence. In our mother country, whose common law we took over almost bodily, the elemental principles of the Mosaic law were for centuries regarded as a part of the constitution of the realm. In 1676 the Court of the King's Bench officially declared that "the Christian religion is a part of the law itself." In our own country learned jurists and legal commentators have frequently declared that Christianity is a part of the common law of the land, and while some

courts have held that this is true only within certain limitations, the fundamental assumption remains that our laws and institutions must necessarily be consonant with the basic ideas of the Christian religion. A good statement of the legal view was given by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in the case of *Mohney vs. Cook* (26 Penn., p. 347), as follows:

"The declaration that Christianity is a part of the law of the land is a summary description of an existing and very obvious condition of our institutions. We are Christian people in so far as we have entered into the spirit of Christian institutions and become imbued with the sentiments and principles of Christianity, and we cannot be imbued with them and yet prevent them from entering into and influencing, more or less, all our social institutions, customs, and relations, as well as our individual modes of thinking and acting."

Ideas which are thus declared by our highest judicial authorities to be basic in "all our social institutions, customs, and relations" certainly ought to enter into the education of our youth.

As to the influence of religion on art it is hardly necessary to point out the fact that Biblical story and religious aspiration have inspired most of the great sculptors, painters, and composers of modern times to their supreme achievements; and that, conversely, an accurate knowledge of Biblical ideals and characters is an absolute necessity for the appreciation of most of the world's great masterpieces.

The same is strikingly true of the principal works of English and American literature. Our greatest writers have drawn many of their finest themes, their choicest allusions, their aptest figures from the Bible, "Shakespeare," says Emerson, "leans on the Bible; his poetry presupposes it." Milton's debt is too obvious to require comment; Tennyson refers to the Bible over four hundred times; Browning, nearly seven hundred. Hall Caine declared that he derived every one of his plots from Biblical story; Ruskin insisted that it was because of his study of the Bible that he became the possessor of his marvelous English style; it was not so very long ago that Mr. Edmund Gosse advised an ambitious young writer to study the Bible every day if he wished to master all the niceties of expression. The fact is that for twelve centuries—from the time of that half-legendary Caedmon, of whom Bede tells us, down to the authors of our own day—we have had a succession of poets and prose writers who with remarkable accord have dipped their inspirations, their ideas, their aspirations, their ethical visions, their illus-

trations, their very form and style of expression out of a common source, the English Bible, the greatest classic in our language.

These facts explain why Professor Huxley, certainly no prejudiced witness, as a member of the London School Board, insisted on making the Bible a part of the curriculum, to be pursued by every child, because, as he declared, by no other book could children "be so much humanized." They are summed up in Ex-President Taft's statement: "Its (the Bible's) English has given shape to American literature. Its spirit has influenced American ideas in life and laws and government." They are emphasized by the oft-quoted words of the late Charles Dudley Warner: "Wholly apart from its religious or from its ethical value, the Bible is the one book that no intelligent person who wishes to come in contact with the world of thought and to share the ideas of the great minds of the Christian era can afford to be ignorant of. All modern literature and all art are permeated with it. It is not at all the question of religion, or theology, or dogma; it is a question of general intelligence. A boy or girl at college in the presence of the works set for either to master, without a fair knowledge of the Bible is an ignoramus, and is disadvantaged accordingly."

Here is an argument which I believe cannot be refuted. It is not based on theory; it is founded on evident facts. It is an argument with which we can go to school authorities and to which they will listen. It is an argument which we have used with entire success in North Dakota and which no one in that state has presumed to question.

But it may be said that this phase of education is sufficiently cared for in the home and Sunday school. This, I know, has been our comfortable Protestant feeling. But the facts are against us. There are, one has to confess, few homes in which the Bible is studied with anything like the thoroughness which characterized the average Protestant home of a generation or two ago, and there are multitudes of homes in which it has no place whatever. Again, altho the Sunday school has had a wonderful development and has no doubt accomplished much good, it has proved to be, in and of itself, clearly inadequate to the task proposed. The time of instruction is too brief; the teaching is too scrappy; there is no adequate inducement to study on the part of the pupils, and without individual study no series of lessons can have much scholastic value; moreover, the majority of young people, of high school age at least, do not attend Sunday school, and hence cannot derive from it even the educational advantages it might afford. The melancholy results of

tests on Biblical subjects given to high school and college students have been so frequently published of late that further comment on this point seems superfluous.

If, then, Biblical instruction and instruction in the fundamental religious ideas of our civilization are highly desirable—even essential in a truly generous education, and if existing agencies do not and cannot supply such instruction, it is certainly incumbent upon us to find some new agency to fill the gap. This leads us then to ask for recognition of these studies as being on a par with the other subjects at present generally recognized as of prime educational value. It does not mean that this work is to be taught in the schools or at public expense. It does not mean that the state is to dictate the precise sort of religious instruction to be given. It simply implies that the work should be based on the historic and literary facts generally agreed upon, so that examinations may be set and some evidence of proficiency secured; that the work done should be scholarly and thorough; and that the individual student should do some genuine studying; in short, that the work should be really worthy of academic credit.

If the securing of school credits for work of this sort can dignify and standardize the courses offered, if it can induce young people, hitherto careless or even scornful, to take up such studies as a serious part of their education, we ought certainly to ask for the credits, unless there are disadvantages and drawbacks not yet mentioned. Here again, happily, we need not depend on theory. The experiment has actually been tried. In North Dakota nearly five hundred young people have actually received credit for this kind of work, and many more are now engaged in it. Everywhere the testimony is the same: More serious Biblical and religious study than has ever before been attempted in the community; more careful preparation and sense of responsibility on the part of the teacher; more enthusiasm and real effort on the part of the class. Of course, it is not a panacea. Not every boy and girl is drawn to the work; not every community can supply an ideal teacher well equipped intellectually and temperamentally for the task. There are occasional disappointments; now and then the scheme is a flat failure. But in the main the results of the experiment are clear. The recognition of the subject by the giving of credit has dignified the work, has heightened respect for it, has improved both the quality of the teaching, and the zest of the learning.

One point still remains to consider. In thus asking the co-operation of the public schools, in thus seeking for the help of their

sanction and recognition, are we not getting back to a sort of union between church and state and thus violating one of the priceless principles of our national policy? I do not think so. A union of church and state implies some sort of control over the one by the other, some sort of dictation and compulsion. Now nothing of this sort is contemplated. The state is not to be asked to force any student to take up this work against his will: it is asked merely to encourage young people to elect the work under instructors of their choice, who in turn are to be encouraged to teach honestly and freely, without fear or favor, let or hindrance. The state only insists, as I have said before, that the work shall be thorough and scholarly, really worthy of academic recognition.

In asking for this recognition, the church may perhaps be considered as asking for something like a special favor, but even if this be the case, she is doing nothing new; she is simply acting in accordance with the well accepted principles of our law. It is fully recognized as in accord with public policy that the church should have special favors. Church property, used for church purposes, is everywhere exempt from taxation; disturbance of religious meetings is regarded as a misdemeanor; the Christian Sabbath is protected by laws in practically every state; in its recent anti-pass legislation Congress particularly specified that "ministers of religion" might be given passes by railroad companies, altho most people cannot be thus favored; in my state, at least, blasphemy is made a misdemeanor, and is there defined as including among other things, "words casting reproach or ridicule on the Christian religion." By the celebrated Ordinance of 1787, a document more venerable than even our federal constitution, "religion, morality, and knowledge" are linked together as "necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind," and it is declared that the means of education in these things "shall forever be encouraged."

Yes, there can be no doubt about it. Religion enjoys and always has enjoyed certain marked recognitions and privileges. To ask for one more slight favor, if one wishes so to regard it, is certainly nothing new or revolutionary. It is entirely in accord with our fundamental system of legislation. As a matter of fact, however, it is not a special favor. The advantage is the other way. The church is giving more than she receives. She is assisting the state to do something which is highly desirable to have done, but which the state can not well do alone. She is making an incalculable contribution to the education of our youth in ideas which, in the language of our courts, have "entered into and influenced, more

or less, all our social institutions, customs and relations." Surely this is a commendable work—a work of which no one need to be ashamed. It is therefore, right and proper for the church to ask boldly for the school credits which are so highly important in the successful accomplishment of her task.

What I have said of Christianity will apply equally to either great branch of the church. In North Dakota we have Roman Catholic teachers who are just as enthusiastic over the plan as are the Protestant teachers, and many Catholic young people, using the Douay version, have shown evidence of having done splendid work. Nor would I seem to limit my remarks to Christianity. The word "Christianity" occurs in various of the quotations I have cited; but, as we all understand, most of the great principles of Christianity are implicit in the Psalms and the Prophets. No one here, I am certain, and few, if any, intelligent Christians anywhere would deny to the Jew the same privilege I am claiming for the Christian. Biblical literature is Jewish literature and the competent Jewish teacher ought to be able to teach it in a way entirely worthy of respect and entirely worthy of academic credit.

To sum up, then, the whole matter, I ask the state to give school credits for religious and Biblical instruction because the subject is entitled to such recognition, because such recognition will be helpful to both church and state, and because in so doing I feel I am acting in accordance with the spirit of our laws and institutions and assisting in a real and vital way in the great task of educating our youth in things worth while.