

Good afternoon chair Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, and Ranking member Brennan,

My name is Nick Bates, and I am a called and ordained Deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, graduate of Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Capital University Law School.

Religion has had an impact on American and world society. It is important that we expose students to the study of humanities. Research from the University of Oxford found, “Students, graduates and employers noted that the resilience and adaptability developed during a humanities degree is particularly useful during big changes in the labor market.”¹ The research highlights that the study of humanities enhances critical and strategic thinking, an ability to present complex information, creative problem solving, and empathy. The world needs more empathy which can come from more education about world religions and different cultural movements in our country and around the globe.

I rise today in opposition to HB 486 unless it is amended. I studied World Religions and Ethics in my public High School back in 2001 and 2002. I sat in that 3rd period classroom with Muslim and Christian students on September 11th 2001 and watched the 2nd plane hit the World Trade Center. As Islamophobia swept across our High School and the nation, I was grateful for a room where we were able to unpack the fear sweeping our society and place it in a cultural and historic context, especially as all of us turned 18 and became eligible to vote.

The education about religious movements hasn’t been lessened from my perspective. My 15-year-old child is studying Latin in their public high school here in Central Ohio. About a week ago, they came home talking about the Council of Nicaea and are understanding the context that founded our statement of faith – the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was drafted and debated just like bills here in the General Assembly and in Congress. My kid, who has wanted more than Sunday School explanations of faith has grown in their understanding of what we confess every Sunday morning as a result.

So first, teachers have been teaching the impact of Christianity and other religions on American culture from a non-proselytization effort for many years.

As we look at the history to be taught, teachers should emphasize the nuance and complexity about the impact of faith communities on our society. Words in this text that encourage the positive impact of Christianity should be removed. We live in a complicated world, and our desire to know the divine is not a straight forward path with clear cut answers. This is why I believe all three Abrahamic faith traditions ban images of the Divine, because the Divine or God or YHWH or Allah are unknowable by us. In our quest to know the Divine, we often make God into a reflection of ourselves instead of us a reflection of the Divine.

¹ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2023-06-21-new-research-shows-how-studying-humanities-can-benefit-young-people-s-future-careers>

It is okay to acknowledge where the institution of the Church has fallen short. Martin Niemoller a Lutheran pastor in Germany wrote the poem, "First, they came for the socialists and I did not speak up for I was not a socialist..." first was a supporter of Adolf Hitler. Obviously, his views shifted. This doesn't make him a flip flopper but a broken human who helped lead the Church in the wrong direction before correcting his actions. To me, that correction is what my faith is about – confession, reconciliation, forgiveness.

Nuance.

There was a letter written in 1963 down in Alabama by clergy around the civil rights movement. This infamous letter begins by saying - "We the undersigned clergymen are among those who in January, issued "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense," in dealing with racial problems in Alabama". The letter concludes, "We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense."²

The above quotes are from religious leaders that opposed Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King's marches, voter registration drives, and boycotts. It was this letter that Dr. King responded to in his infamous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. We cannot forget that it was the majority of the Church lined up against the Civil Rights movement and about 2/3 of Americans had an unfavorable view of Dr. King by 1966.³

Nuance.

Growing up, I loved the movie *Amistad* about people fighting to free people held in bondage by using the courts. I really like the part of the story where those in prison were reading the Bible and trying to understand it by the pictures. As I continued my studies, I learned about the Quakers continuous moral outrage and activism against this evil institution of slavery.⁴ But as the Baptist and Methodists Churches grew in the South, their stance shifted to justify the institution of slavery as a moral good in society.⁵ The Lutherans would have followed this trend, but most Lutheran immigrants were in places like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the Upper Midwest and had the comfort to stay much more quiet on the matter.

Nuance.

² <https://www.samford.edu/arts-and-sciences/files/History/Statement-and-Response-King-Birmingham.pdf>

³ <https://www.newsweek.com/martin-luther-king-jr-was-not-always-popular-back-day-780387>

⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/quaker-activism/>

⁵ <https://daily.jstor.org/how-antebellum-christians-justified-slavery/>

Similarly, we must also acknowledge the harm Christians have done in the name of our faith. The Doctrine of Discovery written in 1493 granted Europeans the moral justification to conquer lands and kill indigenous people – even though this type of action should have been limited based on Christian teaching of *Just War Theory* and the Greatest Commandment to *love God and neighbor*. In 1823, this Papal Bull was cited by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Johnson v. McIntosh* to justify further taking away the lands of Native Americans.⁶ This doctrine led many faith communities, including my own Lutheran tradition, to run schools that basically abducted children and used violence and manipulation to strip them of their own culture and hide away the deaths of these children.

This was sin that my denomination is clumsily and awkwardly trying to do the work of repentance so that reconciliation can occur. We must remember our sin, confess it publicly, seek to repair the harm done, and seek forgiveness from those we harmed. I am not Jewish or Muslim, but I have heard similar values expressed in those traditions as well.

Nuance.

And of course, we cannot forget that the Pilgrims and the Puritans were the ones who declared a war on Christmas. The Puritans went so far as imposing a 5 shilling fine on people who celebrated Christmas in the 1600s.⁷ I have family lineage that traces back to the Puritans in New England, and in December, I wish people a Happy Advent, and not Christmas, because I don't want our cultural Christmas overtaking the Liturgical calendar. I do this because too often we want to rush to the big day. Opening presents and celebration, and forget about the anticipation and work that comes before. This is true in our world too. We too often want to rush to the positive, the happy ending of the story, and forget about the struggle and complexity that comes first.

In conclusion. Yes, students need to learn about our history – the good, the bad, the failures, the beautiful and most importantly the nuance. Ohio's education cannot be biased to let people think the Christian Church has only has a positive impact. That is dishonest to the history and dishonest to the message of the Gospel. The Gospel message that in our brokenness, God accompanies us. In our sin, we can seek forgiveness.

Our history is nuance and complex and difficult. It is in that nuance that the Divine Spirit resides. When we attempt to simplify it. When we attempt to break down the nuance into a social media sound bites or a podcast, we are limiting the Divine. We are limiting our story as humans striving for more, deeper, and profound connection to one another and to that which is beyond our understanding. Thank you and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

⁶ <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/doctrine-discovery-1493>

⁷ <https://www.obscurehistories.org/post/the-pilgrims-ban-on-christmas>