Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the Ohio Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to provide proponent testimony for HB 486.

My name is Teja Paladugu, and I am a 24-year-old medical student who has lived and studied here in Ohio for most of my life. I was raised agnostic in a Hindu household, but out of intellectual curiosity, I began reading the Bible and now attend Bible study multiple times a week. While I am not Christian, I believe my experience has given me a unique perspective on Christianity's influence on American society and history, one that I would never have been able to appreciate had it not been for my journey. This perspective has emboldened me to speak before you today in support of this legislation, not just as an individual, but as a student, a citizen, and one concerned for the civic integrity of my peers in this great state.

An educated citizenry is a vital component of a healthy nation. While many of our founding fathers would have disagreed on theological integration into the curriculum, consensus would have been found on the discussion of Christianity's historical influence on America's founding and culture.

Multiple large-scale studies, both domestically and internationally, have consistently demonstrated that youth with higher civic knowledge and understanding of national values are more likely to vote, participate in lawful civic activities, and express a sense of civic responsibility. It is our responsibility as a state and a nation to cultivate a youth who understand the Christian values that propelled our founding documents, and many social movements that defined our nation so that they may better understand the country as a whole, for as James Madison so stated : "knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." I believe that not knowing the nation is equivalent to not being a part of it at all.

I know some of my fellow Ohioans, particularly opponents of this bill, worry that greater emphasis on Christianity in our history classes risks whitewashing or diminishing America's checkered past. But I believe that to recognize Christianity's roots in the fabric of our nation is not to deny the realities of slavery, the subjugation of Native peoples, or the compromise of civil liberties. Rather, it acknowledges the religious values that influenced our founding documents, social movements, and political activities, all of which played essential roles in the development of our country. If anything, understanding these roots gives us the tools to see where we have fallen short of our ideals and how to strive for a more just society. To discuss the history of Christianity in America is also to provide a deeper context for how our nation has grappled with injustice.

The Civil Rights Movement, for example, demonstrates this complexity. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister, drew on Christian theology to challenge America's failure to live up to its stated ideals. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, he wrote that 'an unjust law is a

human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law', citing Christian theologians St. Augustine and Aquinas to argue that segregation violated both American and divine principles.

When we read Frederick Douglass's speeches, we need to understand why he asked, 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' He was challenging America to live up to both its founding documents and its professed Christian values.

When we study the founding documents themselves - the Declaration's 'all men are created equal' and 'endowed by their Creator' - students should understand the philosophical and religious context that shaped these words, even as we examine who was excluded from that vision.

This isn't about claiming America was or is a 'Christian nation' in an exclusionary sense. It's about giving students the historical literacy to understand the ideas, movements, and debates that shaped our country. When Martin Luther King Jr. called America to 'rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed,' he was drawing on both civic and religious language, and understanding both dimensions helps us understand the power of his message.

Recognizing Christianity's roots in our nation's fabric means teaching history accurately, including how these religious values were invoked to both advance and resist justice. It means understanding that America's ongoing struggle to form 'a more perfect union' has always involved wrestling with foundational ideals, including religious ones. That wrestling itself is part of our history and helps us understand where we've fallen short and how to continue striving for a more just society. To create a more educated and civic youth who understand this, and are able to have productive conversations to identify our shortcomings and steer us onto the right path, is essential. This can only happen if we understand the values that built and continue to define our nation.

I again urge the passage of this bill, and want to thank the members of the Committee for your time and attention to this critical matter.

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