

Three Atheists Explain Why the Bible Should Be Taught in Schools

Ask most Americans if the Bible should be read in schools and a majority will likely say no. After all, the Supreme Court [ruled in 1963](#) that states and school boards may not *require* the Bible to be read in schools... so doesn't that mean that its presence should be completely abolished?

Even though the Supreme Court insisted that this was not the case, many schools have taken this stance, not only in the U.S., but in European nations as well. But according to British broadcaster Melvyn Bragg, such a move is very detrimental to society.

As a liberal atheist, Bragg's opinion does not appear to be the result of religious proselytizing; instead, Bragg [argues](#) that failure to have children read the Bible will result in a dearth of cultural literacy:

"[The Bible] should be read so that people have depth to language and depth of reference, which they are without.

'I think it is a great deprivation. What have we thrown away? One of the greatest pieces of art, work, whatever way you want to put it. It's awful.'

Bragg specifically advocates for the King James Version of the Bible, comparing it to works of Shakespeare in beauty and relevance.

But Bragg is not the only modern atheist to argue that reading the King James Bible is essential to forming a culturally literate person. In 2012, Richard Dawkins [declared](#), "A native speaker of English who has never read a word of the King James

Bible is verging on the barbarian.” A year earlier, Christopher Hitchens [made a similar point](#) in *Vanity Fair* when he explained what a culture loses by ignoring the Bible:

“Though I am sometimes reluctant to admit it, there really is something ‘timeless’ in the Tyndale/King James synthesis. For generations, it provided a common stock of references and allusions, rivaled only by Shakespeare in this respect. It resounded in the minds and memories of literate people, as well as of those who acquired it only by listening. From the stricken beach of Dunkirk in 1940, faced with a devil’s choice between annihilation and surrender, a British officer sent a cable back home. It contained the three words ‘but if not ... ’ All of those who received it were at once aware of what it signified. In the Book of Daniel, the Babylonian tyrant Nebuchadnezzar tells the three Jewish heretics Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that if they refuse to bow to his sacred idol they will be flung into a ‘burning fiery furnace.’ They made him an answer: ‘If it be so, our god whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thy hand, o King. / But if not, be it known unto thee, o king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.’”

Hitchens goes on:

“A culture that does not possess this common store of image and allegory will be a perilously thin one. To seek restlessly to update it or make it ‘relevant’ is to miss the point, like yearning for a hip-hop Shakespeare. ‘Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward,’ says the Book of Job. Want to try to improve that for Twitter?”

It’s all very well and good to advocate for the Bible on the grounds of cultural literacy, but it bears asking: could today’s students actually read it? The King James Version is

written at a [12th grade reading level](#). In an age when half of American adults can't read a book written at an [8th grade level](#) that seems like a bit of a stretch.

Melvyn Bragg summarizes those who would use reading difficulty as an excuse for not teaching children the Bible as “[w]imps, terrible persons.”

He may have a point, especially when one considers that some 18th century 5-year-olds were [taught to read](#) in one day using the Bible as their sole textbook. If they were able to handle it but individuals today are not, then perhaps we need to consider whether modern man is really advancing in knowledge and ability.

In any event, do you believe the case for teaching the Bible which these three atheists advance is strong? Are we in danger of losing important cultural references, knowledge, and even intellectual ability if we fail to introduce the Bible to children?

[Image Credits: [Fri Tanke and David Shankbone \(CC BY 3.0\)](#), [Flickr-Gene Hunt \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)]