

September 28, 2006

Becky Rosales, Assistant Superintendent  
Chair, Curriculum Advisory Committee  
San Rafael City Schools  
310 Nova Albion Way  
San Rafael, CA 94903

Dear Ms. Rosales and Members of the Curriculum Advisory Committee:

I am writing to express concerns about the use of *The Bronze Bow* by Elizabeth George Speare as assigned reading in the San Rafael City School District. Although this is a book of literary merit, it is not, in my opinion, a book that a public-school teacher should assign to students. Although this is not a legal opinion, let me state briefly my reasons:

As the California standards make clear, students need to learn about religions as part of a good education. But as the California Education Code also makes clear, materials used to teach about religions must not be devotional in nature, but rather objective and accurate. Under the First Amendment, public schools must be very careful to neither promote nor denigrate any religion when teaching students about a variety of religions.

It is, of course, easier to draw bright lines in social studies courses where classroom materials must represent good scholarship presented in an unbiased way. Primary sources, including the scriptures of various faiths, may be studied – but always in the context of teaching *about* how adherents and scholars interpret those sources.

In other subjects such as literature, music and art, the line is sometimes more difficult to see. It is appropriate for religious music, for example, to be included in a course that looks at a broad range of important music. The same is true of important works of art, poetry and literature that have religious themes. The First Amendment does not prohibit public schools from teaching T.S. Elliot or Wallace Stevens or Flannery O'Connor (to cite just a few of the many significant writers whose work is infused with religious ideas and meaning).

*The Bronze Bow*, however, falls into another category. However well-written, it is not one of the great works of art that must be included in a good middle-school curriculum. It is, at heart, a conversion story – a testimony to the power and truth of Jesus as the true Messiah. Moreover, the Christian message of the book is told at the expense of the Jewish faith. Judaism is portrayed (inaccurately) as a legalistic, even immoral religion. And Jewish leaders are depicted as plotting to kill Jesus, an inflammatory image that has been used to fuel anti-Semitism for centuries. In short, this book promotes one religion and denigrates another.

In my opinion, assigning this book in a public school is highly inappropriate – and may well be unconstitutional. I urge the Curriculum Advisory Committee to ensure that *The Bronze Bow* is not assigned by teachers in the San Rafael City Schools.

Sincerely,

Charles C. Haynes  
Senior Scholar  
First Amendment Center

## First Amendment topics >



### The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. [ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT >](#)

## Biography



### Charles C. Haynes

[Charles C. Haynes](#) is senior scholar and director of education programs at the First Amendment Center. He is best known for his work on First Amendment issues in schools and communities throughout the nation.

Over the past decade, he has been the principal organizer and drafter of a series of consensus guidelines on religious liberty in public education endorsed by a broad range of civil liberties and educational organizations. In January, 2000, three of these guides were sent by President Clinton to every public school in the United States. [The Bush administration updated the guidelines in 2003.](#) (See also [A Parent's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools](#), [A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools](#) and [Public Schools & Religious Communities.](#))

Haynes is the author or co-author of six books, including *The First Amendment in Schools* and *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools*. His column, Inside the First Amendment, appears in newspapers nationwide.

Widely quoted in news magazines and major newspapers, Haynes is also a frequent guest on television and radio. He has been profiled in *The Wall Street Journal* and on ABC's "Evening News."

Haynes currently serves as president of the Character Education Partnership. He holds a master's degree from Harvard Divinity School and a doctorate from Emory University.

Mailing address: Charles Haynes, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 1101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22209.

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