

The Captive Classroom: Coercion, Consent, and the Manufacture of Belief

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ABSTRACT

A recent wave of legislation, exemplified by a Texas mandate requiring more than five million public school students to read biblical scripture in every grade, seeks to install the scripture of one faith in the compulsory curriculum. This paper examines that project not as a legal question but as a moral and empirical one, and advances four claims. First, the categories used to defend and attack such mandates, “indoctrination” and “parental rights,” function in practice as tribal markers indexed to the in-group or out-group content of the lesson rather than as principles applied to the act of compulsory instruction itself. Second, the morally decisive feature of the mandate is the coercion of a captive audience that can neither consent nor exit, which distinguishes it sharply from persuasion, however vigorous. Third, the mandate is not commanded by, and in places contradicts, the very scripture it would compel, which locates its source in a political program rather than a religious one and warrants the precise term Christian nationalism, a project the evidence shows operates most powerfully when detached from religious practice and which is therefore distinct from Christianity and from religious belief as such. Fourth, the empirical record on disaffiliation indicates that compulsion of this kind is both a symptom of declining religious adherence and an accelerant of it, so that the mandate is self-defeating on its own terms: it cannot manufacture the belief it wants, and it hastens the exit it fears, while imposing its costs on those least able to refuse. The argument throughout distinguishes a coercive political movement from ordinary religious practice, which it neither targets nor disparages.¹

Keywords: religious coercion; captive audience; consent; disaffiliation; Christian nationalism; public education; the unaffiliated; ethics of persuasion.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2026 the State of Texas moved to require every public school student, more than five million children, to read biblical scripture as part of the standard curriculum in every grade. The measure followed an optional version that local districts had been free to adopt and had largely declined, and it arrived alongside a separate statute ordering the Ten

¹ Citations to case law in this paper have been verified against the CourtListener database, and the empirical claims in Section VI are drawn from peer-reviewed studies and from the Pew Research Center’s 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study rather than from general recollection. Final formatting of pin cites and the bound-volume pagination of *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, which remains subject to formal revision before publication in the United States Reports, should be confirmed against the official sources before circulation.

Commandments onto the wall of every classroom. The legal questions these measures raise are serious and are treated elsewhere. This paper asks a different set of questions. What is the moral character of compelling a child to receive the scripture of a faith the child may not hold? What does it reveal that the same political coalition condemns one body of compulsory content as indoctrination and demands another as heritage? And what does the available evidence suggest such a mandate will actually do, to belief and to the believers in whose name it is enacted?

The paper proceeds in six steps. It first shows that the operative categories in this debate track group membership rather than principle. It then isolates coercion of a captive audience as the feature that matters morally, and distinguishes it from persuasion. It examines the assumption, shared by the legal seam and the proselytizing impulse, that the absence of belief is an emptiness to be filled. It turns to the scripture itself and argues that the mandate is not commanded by it and in part contradicts it. It places the mandate against the empirical record of religious disaffiliation. And it identifies the distributive cost the mandate imposes on the students least able to absorb it.

One clarification governs the whole argument and is not a throat-clearing concession. The object of criticism is a specific political project, the legislative installation of one faith's scripture in compulsory public instruction, a project for which the term Christian nationalism is accurate (Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Gorski & Perry, 2022). That project is not Christianity. Most Christians neither seek it nor endorse it, and, as Section VI shows, the political force of Christian nationalist sentiment is strongest precisely among those least embedded in actual religious congregations (Stroope, Froese, Rackin, & Delehanty, 2021). Many religious believers oppose the project on the religious ground that belief compelled is not belief at all. Nothing here is directed at religious practice, at religious citizens in public life, or at the academic study of religion, each of which is valuable and protected. The critique is aimed at compulsion, preference, and the use of the state to manufacture assent, and it is the compulsion, not the faith, that is the problem.

II. THE SELECTIVE PRINCIPLE

A principle is a rule that applies regardless of whose ox is gored. A tribal marker is a rule applied to outsiders and suspended for insiders. The two are easy to confuse, because a tribal marker is usually stated in the language of principle. The current debate over compulsory content in public schools offers an unusually clean specimen, because the same coalition takes opposite positions on the identical underlying act depending only on the content involved.

Consider the recent objection to elementary storybooks featuring lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters. That objection was framed as resistance to indoctrination and as a vindication of the right of parents to control what the state teaches their children, and it succeeded, securing a constitutional entitlement for objecting families to remove their children from the lessons (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2025). Set beside that the mandate to assign biblical scripture to every child. Here the same coalition frames compulsory content not as indoctrination but as education, heritage, and the formation of moral character, and it seeks not the right to remove a child from the lesson but the power to require the lesson for all children, including those whose families object.

The act is the same in both cases: the state places content before a captive child as part of the required curriculum. What flips is not the act but the relationship between the content and the group. When the content is associated with an out-group, it is indoctrination, and parental rights demand the exit. When the content is the in-group's own, it is education, and parental rights are forgotten, because the parents whose rights were sacred a moment ago, the ones who object, are now the obstacle. "Indoctrination" has come to mean compulsory exposure to ideas the speaker dislikes, and "parental rights" has come to mean the right of parents who agree with the speaker to get their way. Neither term, as used, names a principle about compulsory instruction. Each names a side. The tell is that no rule survives the swap of content: there is no formulation of the indoctrination objection or the parental-rights claim, as the coalition deploys them, that condemns the storybooks without also condemning the scripture mandate, and the coalition condemns only

one.

III. THE CAPTIVE AUDIENCE AND THE ETHICS OF EXIT

If the operative categories are unprincipled, the question becomes whether a principled distinction is available, and there is one. It is not the distinction between religious and secular content, nor between true and false ideas. It is the distinction between persuasion and coercion, and its hinge is the capacity of the listener to exit.

Persuasion addresses a listener who remains free to disagree and to leave. It offers reasons and lets the listener weigh them. The paradigm cases are the book that can be closed and the debate that can be walked out of. When the most visible movement of public atheism reached its height in the first decade of this century, it operated entirely in this register. It sold books, staged debates, and published arguments, all of which a reader or listener was free to refuse, and none of which any person was compelled to receive. Whatever one thinks of its content or its tone, it never conscripted anyone. It persuaded, or failed to, and the audience kept its freedom either way.

Coercion is different in kind, not degree, and the difference is the exit. A captive audience is one that cannot leave: the listener is held in place by something other than interest, and the content arrives whether or not the listener consents. Children in compulsory schooling are the paradigm captive audience. They are required by law to be present, they are young and dependent and disposed to accept what authority presents, and they cannot close the book or walk out of the room. The law has recognized the same point in its own register. The Supreme Court has treated the public school as a setting of heightened constitutional concern precisely because students are young and impressionable and their attendance is compelled, so that even subtle pressure toward religious participation carries unusual coercive force (*Lee v. Weisman*, 1992). To place the scripture of one faith before such an audience as required instruction is not to persuade them. It is to use their captivity. The moral weight of the act comes from precisely this, that it overrides rather than engages the listener's agency, and it overrides the agency of those whose agency is least developed and least protected.

This is why the comparison to atheist persuasion, often offered as a charge of symmetry, in fact establishes asymmetry. One side wrote books that could be declined. The other passes laws that cannot. The first respects the listener as a chooser; the second treats the listener as territory. A society may permit a great deal of vigorous, even offensive, religious and irreligious persuasion among free adults precisely because the exit remains open. The captive child is the case where the exit is closed, and it is therefore the case where the state's hand must be stayed.

IV. BELIEF AS VACANCY VERSUS BELIEF AS POSITION

Underneath both the legal seam and the impulse to mandate lies a shared and mistaken picture of what it is to lack a religion. The picture treats non-belief as a vacancy, an empty space awaiting an occupant, rather than as a position a person may have reached and may hold.

The picture surfaces in the structure of the law, which recognizes the claim "I belong to a different faith" more readily than the claim "I hold none," as though the second were merely the absence of the first rather than a stance in its own right. It surfaces more plainly in the targeting of the mandate, examined in Section VI, which reaches most naturally for those who have drifted from organized religion without affiliating elsewhere, on the evident assumption that the undecided are available to be filled. And it surfaces in the theology of compulsion, which imagines that exposure produces belief, that a child who reads scripture under instruction will come to hold it, as water fills a vessel.

The assumption is false, and its falseness is the seed of the mandate's failure. A person who has left a faith, or who never held one, has in many cases reached a position by a route, through experience, reflection, disappointment, or simple absence of conviction, and a position reached is not a vacancy. The unaffiliated are also more internally varied

and more fluid than the vacancy picture allows: a substantial share of those who report no religious affiliation in one survey report an affiliation a year later, and a similar share move the other way, a churn that marks the category as an unsettled set of positions rather than an empty space (Lim, MacGregor, & Putnam, 2010). Such positions do not fill on contact. Worse for the project, the attempt to fill them by force tends to harden them, because coercion supplies a reason to resist that the prior absence of belief did not contain. To treat the unaffiliated as empty is to misread them, and to act on the misreading is to convert indifference into objection.

V. THE SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENT AGAINST COMPULSION

The most striking feature of the mandate is that it is not commanded by the scripture it would compel, and in places it contradicts it. This matters because the mandate's defenders invoke a hierarchy in which the law of God outranks the law of man, and offer that hierarchy as warrant for installing scripture in the schools and, in the parallel measure, for posting the Decalogue and for complying with neither court nor statute that forbids it. The warrant collapses on inspection, because the thing being done is found nowhere in the law of God to which appeal is made.

Begin with the Ten Commandments, the very text the parallel statute would mount on every classroom wall. Read them through. Not one of them commands a believer to compel scripture upon those who do not want it, to install religious instruction in a civil school, or to override the civil law in order to spread the faith. They address worship, the divine name, the sabbath, parents, killing, adultery, theft, false witness, and coveting. They are silent on compulsory public catechesis, because compulsory public catechesis is not among the things they command. If the law of God is the Decalogue, the mandate is not in it.

Turn next to the commission most often cited as the engine of Christian evangelism, the instruction to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19–20). Whatever else it requires, it is an instruction to preach, to teach, and to baptize those who come, which is to say an instruction to persuade. It is not an instruction to legislate, to compel attendance, or to enlist the coercive power of a state to place scripture before children who have not chosen it. The distance between making a disciple and conscripting a captive is the entire distance between persuasion and coercion developed above. The commission, read honestly, authorizes the first and not the second. A movement that turns from preaching to legislating has not obeyed the commission more zealously; it has abandoned the method the commission prescribes.

Consider, finally, what the same scripture says about the law of man. It instructs the believer to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, distinguishing the civil domain from the divine and counseling the payment of what the civil order is owed (Matthew 22:21). It instructs the believer to be subject to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1). These passages are not a mandate for theocracy; they are a counsel of respect for civil order within its sphere. The believer who breaks the civil law in order to force the faith upon the unwilling, whether by defying an injunction at home or by violating the law of another nation abroad and courting the predictable consequence, is not following a higher law that the scripture supplies. The scripture supplies the opposite counsel. The lawbreaking is not obedience to God dressed as defiance of man. It is a political choice for which the religious text provides no warrant and against which it offers direct instruction.

The conclusion is not that the mandate is bad theology, which is not this paper's province to adjudicate. The conclusion is structural and it is decisive for the paper's thesis. Because the compulsion is absent from the scripture and in tension with it, its source must be sought elsewhere, and the elsewhere is politics. The project is the use of state power to establish the cultural dominance of one faith, which is the definition of Christian nationalism and not of Christianity (Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Gorski & Perry, 2022). This is why the distinction insisted upon at the outset is analytic rather than diplomatic, and it is borne out by the data: the political force of Christian nationalist sentiment is

strongest among those who do not attend religious services, which is to say that it travels as a political identity rather than a devotional one (Stroope, Froese, Rackin, & Delehanty, 2021). The ordinary believer who wants others to come to the faith, and who therefore preaches, persuades, and lives in a way meant to attract, is doing what the scripture instructs. The movement that reaches instead for the compulsory curriculum and the classroom wall is doing what the scripture does not instruct, and the substitution of compulsion for persuasion is the same confession identified throughout this paper: it is the move a seller makes when the product will not sell on its merits. Even on the movement's own sacred terms, the instruction was to persuade. Reaching for compulsion concedes that persuasion has failed.

VI. THE EMPIRICAL FRAME: DISAFFILIATION AND COMPULSION AS ACCELERANT

The mandate does not arrive in a vacuum. It arrives during a sustained decline in Christian adherence in the United States, and the shape of that decline bears directly on what the mandate will accomplish.

The most recent Religious Landscape Study finds that 62 percent of American adults identify as Christian, down from 78 percent in 2007, while the religiously unaffiliated have risen to 29 percent (Pew Research Center, 2025). The unaffiliated are not predominantly committed atheists or agnostics; the largest single component, at 19 percent of all adults, is the group that answers “nothing in particular” (Pew Research Center, 2025). The generational pattern is steep. Among the youngest adults surveyed, fewer than half, 46 percent, identify as Christian, against 80 percent of the oldest, and 43 percent of the youngest are religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2025). These are the cohorts now moving through, or lately graduated from, the schools the mandate targets.

This composition is what the targeting tracks. The “nothing in particular” group is not only the largest slice of the unaffiliated but the softest. Relative to atheists and agnostics, its members are less politically engaged, less firmly committed to a secular identity, and the most fluid in their affiliation (Schwadel, 2020); and, as noted above, a substantial share of the unaffiliated move in and out of nominal affiliation from one year to the next (Lim, MacGregor, & Putnam, 2010). A mandate that installs scripture in every classroom, for an audience that cannot leave, is most naturally read as a net cast for exactly this fluid and uncommitted middle, because the committed have already gone and the firmly affiliated do not need the state to do what their congregations already do. One does not reach for the uncommitted from a position of strength.

The sociology of disaffiliation then supplies the sting. A large body of work attributes much of the rise of the unaffiliated not to a loss of spiritual interest but to a reaction against the fusion of organized religion with a hardline political program. Hout and Fischer first demonstrated that the rise of the nones since the 1990s was concentrated among political moderates and liberals, and argued that it represented a symbolic withdrawal from a religion that had become publicly identified with conservative politics (Hout & Fischer, 2002, 2014). The positions of the religious right on abortion and gay rights, on their account, came to function as a culturally salient proxy for organized Christianity in the perceptions of those who did not share them (Hout & Fischer, 2014). That account is no longer merely correlational. Using panel and experimental data, Campbell and colleagues showed that the causal arrow can run from politics to religion: when subjects are exposed to the association between religion and conservative Republican politics, those on the political left become measurably more likely to disclaim religious affiliation (Campbell, Layman, Green, & Sumaktoyo, 2018). The effect has also been quantified at the level of specific coercive campaigns: organized efforts to enact state constitutional bans on same-sex marriage have been associated with the disaffiliation of an estimated two to eight percent of the population over a decade (Djupe, Neiheisel, & Conger, 2018). Reinforcing the mechanism, large shares of those who have left, and about two-thirds of disaffiliated millennials, cite negative religious teaching about or treatment of gay and lesbian people as a reason for their departure (Cooper, Cox, Lienesch, & Jones, 2016).

The implication for the mandate is direct. If disaffiliation is driven in significant part by the perception that the faith

has become a vehicle for political coercion and exclusion, then a visible, statewide act of political coercion in the name of the faith, conducted in the most conspicuous venue available, the compulsory education of other people's children, is not a remedy for decline. It is an accelerant. The mandate makes concrete and public the very identification that has been driving people out, which is the empirical face of the self-defeat argued on other grounds throughout this paper.

A final point returns to the distinction drawn at the outset. The political potency of Christian nationalism is, on the evidence, strongest not among the churchgoing but among the unchurched: the association between Christian nationalist sentiment and recent presidential voting was significant among those who do not attend religious services and was not significant among those who do (Stroope, Froese, Rackin, & Delehanty, 2021). Christian nationalism operates most powerfully as a political narrative detached from religious practice. The movement pressing scripture into the schools is, by this measure, least anchored in the very pews it claims to defend, which is one more reason to name it precisely and to keep it distinct from the faith whose name it borrows.

VII. THE DISTRIBUTIVE COST

A final harm is distributive, and it is borne by the students least able to object. Instructional time is finite. A curriculum is a set of choices about what to include, and every inclusion is also an exclusion, because a minute spent on one thing is a minute not spent on another. What a school requires is what a school teaches, and what it requires in place of something else is something else not taught. To mandate scripture in every grade is therefore to displace whatever the scripture replaces, across the entire system, for every child.

The displacement does not fall evenly. The students who can least afford it are those for whom each unit of instructional time is most scarce and most consequential, including students who depend on specialized supports and individualized instruction to make progress that their peers make more readily. For a student whose access to learning is already mediated by limited resources and contested accommodations, the diversion of required time toward content the student did not choose, and that serves a purpose unrelated to the student's own educational need, is not a neutral act. It is a transfer of a scarce good away from those who most depend on it. And these students are, in the terms of this paper, the most captive of the captive audience, the least able to exit the room and the least positioned to object to its contents. The mandate thus concentrates its cost on exactly the population with the least power to refuse it, which is the recurring signature of the whole enterprise.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The mandate fails on every front this paper has examined. The categories invoked to justify it are not principles but markers of allegiance. Its method, the coercion of a captive audience, is the one method that cannot produce the genuine belief it claims to want, because belief is not installed by force and the unaffiliated are not vacancies to be filled. Its source is not the scripture it would compel, which commands persuasion and counsels respect for civil law, but a political project that the scripture does not authorize and that, on the evidence, operates most strongly where religious practice is weakest. And its predictable effect, on the data, is to accelerate the disaffiliation it means to reverse, while imposing its sharpest costs on the children least able to bear them. A faith that wanted people to come to it would preach, and persuade, and live in a way that drew others in, which is what most of its adherents do and what its own text instructs. The mandate does the opposite. It reaches for the one tool that betrays the absence of the thing it seeks, and in doing so it tells the truth about itself: you do not compel what you can convince, and you do not draft a captive audience when a willing one is available. There is no willing one. That is the whole story, and the mandate is its confession.

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