

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 27, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: dodea.director@dodea.edu

Director Paul Craft
Department of War Education Activity
4800 Mark Center Drive, Suite 04E12
Alexandria, VA 22350

Re: Constitutional concerns regarding DoWEA's "Western Civilization to 1500" curriculum

Dear Director Craft:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding constitutional and educational concerns raised by the Department of War Education Activity's introduction of a new "Western Civilization to 1500" course for students in schools serving military families. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 41,000 members across the country, including many active-duty personnel and veterans. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

According to reporting by the Associated Press, DoWEA operates approximately 160 schools in 11 countries, educating roughly 70,000 children of active-duty military personnel and civilian service members.¹ It is our understanding that beginning this fall, high school students may take "Western Civilization to 1500" to satisfy their world history graduation requirement. We understand that the course will use *The Golden Thread: A History of the Western Tradition, Volume I: The Ancient World and Christendom*, published by Encounter Books, with suggested lesson plans developed in partnership with Hillsdale College.

Historians and educators who reviewed excerpts of the textbook told the AP that it misleadingly conflates Western civilization with Christianity while portraying Islam as a threat to both.² This is particularly troubling given that the students subjected to this curriculum will include Christians, Muslims, Jews, atheists, agnostics and members of many other religious and nonreligious communities.

The federal government has a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. Public schools may, of course, teach objectively about religion and its role in history. But the government may not use our public school system to promote Christianity, denigrate other religions, or teach a sectarian interpretation of history designed to inculcate students with a

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/defense-department-school-classical-hegseth-c29537087c0dbf3271cf293a9b17053f>.

² *Id.*

preferred religious worldview. The reported content of The Golden Thread appears to cross that constitutional line.

The textbook reportedly credits Christianity with promoting humane treatment and a “humane cosmopolitanism,” while portraying Islam as inherently more violent. It characterizes Arabs as resentful or bitter toward Christians and Jews.

Even more concerning, in a section on “Holy War and Martyrdom in Battle,” the textbook reportedly portrays Christian warfare, including the Crusades, largely as defensive, while describing Islam as glorifying violence and warfare and invoking the Sept. 11 attacks and the Oct. 7 Hamas attack to characterize the religion. It further asserts that atrocities by radical Islamist terrorists have been “applauded by depressingly large numbers of ordinary Muslims.”

Matthew Gabriele, a professor of history and religion at Virginia Tech, reportedly concluded that the textbook strips important context from the Crusades and Christian-Muslim conflicts in a way that portrays Islam as aggressive while minimizing the religious motivations and violence of the Christian church. He further criticized the book for selectively using modern events to advance a contemporary political project rather than providing a scholarly history, concluding, “this is not a scholarly history in any kind of real sense.”³

The First Amendment bars the government from advancing religion or favoring one faith over another. As the Supreme Court has put it, “the First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty. v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). DoWEA should not place the federal government’s imprimatur on religious apologetics masquerading as history.

Our concerns are magnified by the context in which this curriculum has been adopted. Secretary Pete Hegseth has publicly advocated classical Christian education. In his 2022 book, *Battle for the American Mind*, he characterized secular education as a threat to America and Western civilization and urged parents to send their children to classical Christian schools.

Secretary Hegseth has also repeatedly linked the American founding, Western civilization, and Christianity, including arguing that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that troops should embrace God.⁴

Against that backdrop, DoWEA’s leadership has been reorganized expressly to promote “patriotic values and classical learning.”⁵ When you were appointed director in March, Secretary Hegseth described you as the appropriate leader to reorient the school system toward those goals. DoWEA subsequently hired Tiffany Hoben, who previously worked in the Florida Department of Education and oversaw implementation of a civics curriculum criticized for teaching that the Founders did not intend a full separation of church and state. It also hired Matthew Kirby, CEO

³ *Id.*

⁴ <https://bit.ly/4cymhAj>.

⁵ *Id.*

of Liberty Classical Schools, as the DoWEA Americas Regional Director for Student Achievement.

Most significantly, you reportedly told DoWEA employees that classical learning was a priority coming directly from Secretary Hegseth and that he had tasked DoWEA with determining how lessons from classical learning in private schools could be introduced into “a public school setting like us.”

That distinction between private and public schools is critical. It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in religion. *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *McCullum v. Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948).

Private religious schools are free to teach students that Christianity represents the pinnacle of civilization, that American institutions are divinely inspired, or that other religions are theologically mistaken. Federal public schools are not.

Military families should not have to wonder whether the education provided to their children by their own government comes with a religious agenda. Service members make extraordinary sacrifices on behalf of this country. Their children should not be treated as a captive audience for an ideological experiment designed to import elements of private Christian education into federal schools.

Public schools have a duty to ensure that instructional materials and lessons do not promote a particular religious viewpoint. “[T]he discretion of the States and local school boards in matters of education must be exercised in a manner that comports with the transcendent imperatives of the First Amendment.” *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 583 (1987) (finding unconstitutional a statute allowing the teaching of creationism, a religious belief, in classrooms). The Supreme Court in *Edwards* recognized that “[f]amilies entrust public schools with the education of their children, but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family.” *Id.* at 584.

Teaching about Christianity is constitutional. Teaching Christianity’s historical claims as preferred truth, whitewashing Christian religious violence, or juxtaposing an idealized Christianity against a threatening Islam is another matter entirely.

And this isn’t just a concern for Muslim students. Government promotion of Christianity necessarily sends a message to every non-Christian and nonreligious military family that their government has chosen a favored religious tradition. Our armed forces defend a nation whose Constitution protects the religious liberty of all Americans, not merely those who adhere to the beliefs preferred by current political leadership.

We therefore request that DoWEA immediately conduct a thorough constitutional and academic review of *The Golden Thread* and all accompanying curricular materials before permitting the course to proceed.

Specifically, we ask DoWEA to:

1. Ensure that the “Western Civilization to 1500” course presents Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other religious traditions objectively and academically rather than promoting certain religious beliefs over others;
2. Submit *The Golden Thread* and associated lesson plans to independent review by qualified historians and religious studies scholars without ideological or institutional ties to the textbook, Hillsdale College, Encounter Books, or organizations involved in developing the curriculum;
3. Make publicly available the curriculum, lesson plans, teacher guidance, textbook-selection criteria and academic reviews used in approving the course;
4. Provide information regarding the individuals and organizations involved in selecting *The Golden Thread* and developing the course;
5. Explain what safeguards DoWEA has adopted to ensure that “classical learning” initiatives do not become a vehicle for promoting classical Christian education in federal public schools; and
6. Suspend use of any instructional materials that promote Christianity, disparage Islam or any other religion, or otherwise fail to maintain the religious neutrality required of federal public schools.

Students in military families deserve rigorous history, not religious propaganda. The federal government must educate these students, not evangelize them. Please inform us in writing of the steps DoWEA is taking to address these concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Line", with a stylized, flowing script.

Christopher Line
Legal Counsel
Freedom From Religion Foundation