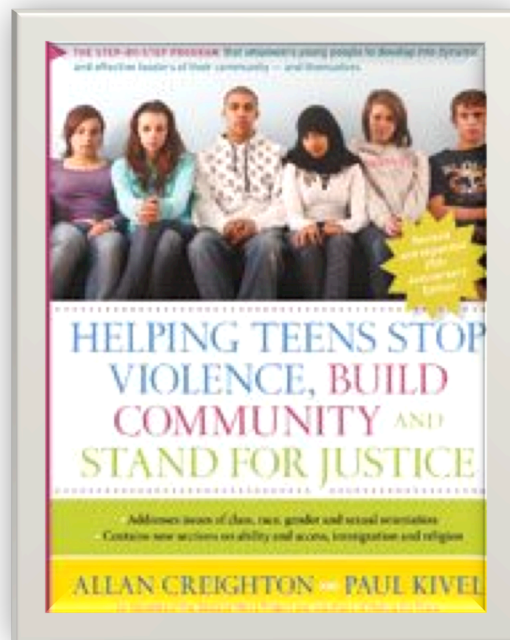


This article is adapted from the book *Helping Teens Stop Violence*, by Paul Kivel. To learn more about the book, or do purchase a copy, click [here](#).



Approaching the topic of Christian culture in US schools in the twenty-first century means entering a battleground of school boards, parents, administrators, and teachers — all of whom are adults — about what young people are to learn. Conflicts range (and rage) over evolution versus creationism and intelligent design, prayer in school, observed and ignored religious holidays, school attire, sex education, and the separation of church and state.

The ferocity of these conflicts is exacerbated by the perception that wider global conflicts are generated by “clashes of civilizations,” most notably Christian and Muslim, with the subtext that US life possesses (Christian) values that are “under attack.” The widespread belief that mainstream US culture and its educational institutions have become secular or even antireligious

further shapes these debates. To even suggest that Christian institutions, beliefs, and practices dominate US culture can bring sharp denials.

How does this look in the classroom? Young people can be anywhere on the spectrum of religious involvement, in any religion, from fundamentalist conviction to occasional observance to indifference to active atheism. The kinds of Christian practice some students observe vary widely based on the differing roles of churches in communities of different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some evangelical denominations actively market to youth and train them to proselytize. For groups targeted for oppression by race, class, or other differences, Christian (and other) religious communities may function as bulwarks, or at least familiar community settings, against daily experiences of mistreatment. Finally, some forms of Christian practice, such as fundamentalist or evangelical forms, may be frowned upon or made fun of by student and adult culture at a given school, making individual Christian students feel persecuted.

Of course, Christianity is the dominant religion practiced in the United States — recent polls show that about 75 percent of the population believes in a Christian deity.²⁶ The structural role of Christianity in the formation of the United States, from justifications for bloody conquest of the continent to laws governing citizen behavior, is a well-known part of the US narrative. Christian doctrines of hard work, individual responsibility, industry, and development, sometimes popularly called the “Protestant ethic,” have played a role in the creation and maintenance of a global capitalist economic system. Overtly Christian movements have been active, sometimes violently so, in formats from right-wing talk radio to governmental lobbying; speaking against reproductive rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights; and other issues that affect non-Christian minorities.

Christian institutions have also played a deep, founding, and shaping role in US school systems. The spiritual practices of students and their families and communities are not the issue here but rather how all students become oriented in a society in which Christianity plays a dominating role as Christian hegemony. Hegemony in this sense refers to whatever is part of the systematic, day-to-day, institutionalized, taken-for-granted routine in a given culture: the “default position.” Because we identify “oppression” as the systematic, daily, routine dominance and mistreatment of a target group by a nontarget group, we in effect identify such “isms” as racism and sexism as hegemonies. An easily understood, obvious example of Christian hegemony in the United States is the observance of Christmas, observed throughout the business and civic world as a holiday that saturates all aspects of US culture for believers, nonbelievers, and “secular” Christians alike for more than a month every year.

It may not be as openly acknowledged that education in US and European societies is, to a great extent, modeled on a conception of education as moral training, development, and maturation of what is designated as the human soul — the training of individuals in how to behave, how to strive, and whom or what to obey — found in Christian-based pedagogies begun in medieval Europe. The use of Christian parables and moral instructions in the early New England primers for learning the ABCs are easily cited examples. Even today, many of our taken-for-granted assumptions about how teachers are to educate young people and what young people should be taught reflect Christian concepts of good and bad, light and dark, chosen and condemned, and educational progress as the analogue of salvation. These assumptions are implicit in the pedagogical approaches taken in most US school systems, quite apart from more explicit expressions of Christian hegemony to be found in such practices as Christian prayers in classrooms, school assemblies and sports events, and dress codes in some schools that forbid the Islamic head-scarf while

ignoring the crucifix.

What other taken-for-granted practices in US life are based on Christian values? We use the following exercise to promote students' awareness of the influence of these values, regardless of the particular religious practices, if any, they have been raised to observe. As with previous exercises in this book, this is a stand-up exercise using categories you may preselect from the list. If any participants have limited mobility, they may participate by raising hands if they are able.

Living in a Christian-Dominant Culture

Please stand silently if...

- 1 you have been baptized or otherwise ceremonially introduced, as a child or adult, into "being a Christian"
- 2 you have ever attended church of a Christian denomination regularly
- 3 you have ever attended Sunday school as a child or attended church periodically (for example, during Christian holidays)
- 4 you have ever attended a Christian-based recreational organization as a young person, such as the YMCA or YWCA, or church-based summer camp or participated in a program of a nonreligious youth organization that was based in Christian beliefs, such as the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts
- 5 you have ever been told or instructed that things that you do with your body, sex with others, or sex by yourself was sinful or unclean
- 6 you have ever been told that sexual acts other than intercourse between a man and a woman or sexual orientations other than heterosexual are sinful or unclean

- 7 you have ever heard heaven and good described as light or white and hell and evil described as dark or black
- 8 you have ever been told something you did was sinful or evil or that you were sinful or evil
- 9 you have ever been approached by family members, friends, or strangers trying to convince you to become Christian or a Christian of a particular kind
- 10 you have ever been rejected in any way by family or community members, because you were not Christian or were not Christian enough
- 11 you have ever experienced the church in your community as a major center of social life that influences those around you and that would be difficult to avoid if you wanted to
- 12 you have ever taken Christian holidays, such as Christmas or Easter, off, whether you observe them as Christian holidays or not, or have taken Sunday off or think of it, in any way, as a day of rest
- 13 you have ever been given a school vacation or paid holiday related to Christmas or Easter when school vacations or paid holidays for non-Christian religious celebrations, such as Ramadan or the Jewish High Holidays, were not observed
- 14 public institutions you use, such as offices, buildings, banks, parking meters, the post office, libraries, and stores, are open on Fridays and Saturdays but closed on Sundays
- 15 the calendar year you observe is calculated from the year designated as the birth of Christ
- 16 you have ever seen a public institution in your community, such as a school, hospital, or city hall, decorated with Christian symbols (such as Christmas trees, wreaths, portraits or sculptures of Jesus, nativity scenes, "Commandment" displays, or crosses)

- 17 you can easily find and access Christian music, TV shows, movies, and places of worship in your community
- 18 you can easily access Christmas- or Easter-related music, stories, greeting cards, films, and TV shows at the appropriate times of the year
- 19 anyone in your family have ever received public services — medical care, family planning, food, clothing, shelter, or substance-abuse treatment — from a Christian-based organization or one marked by Christian beliefs and practices (for example, Alcoholics Anonymous or other twelve-step programs, “pro-life” family planning, hospital care, and so forth)
- 20 you daily use currency that includes Christian words or symbols, such as the phrase “in God we trust”
- 21 you have ever been told that a war or invasion, historical or current, was justified, because those who were attacked were heathens, infidels, unbelievers, pagans, terrorists, sinners, or fundamentalists of a non-Christian religion
- 22 your parents or ancestors were ever subject to invasion, forced conversion, or the use of missionaries as part of a colonization process either in the United States or in another part of the world
- 23 in your community or metropolitan area, hate crimes have been committed against Jews, Muslims, gays, transgender people, women, or others based on or justified by the perpetrator’s Christian beliefs
- 24 you have ever attended public nonreligious functions, such as civic or governmental meetings, that were convened with Christian blessings, references, or prayers
- 25 you have ever been asked or commanded to sing or to recite, in public, material that contains Christian references, such as the Pledge of Allegiance or

“America, the Beautiful”

This exercise, like the other stand-ups, ends with students breaking into dyads to discuss how they felt during the exercise. A group discussion follows.

A good starting point for such a discussion, and for conducting the above exercise, is to assure students that their and their families' individual religious commitments are not at issue. Christianity itself is not at issue. Professing Christians have been part of almost every social justice movement in the United States and elsewhere in the hemisphere, from the abolition of slavery to antipoverty work to civil disobedience against war to liberation theology across the Americas. As noted above, some churches have served as sources of family and community protection against and healing from oppression. To make being a Christian as such seem wrong or misguided only plays into popular stereotypes about Christian believers, alienating observant youth and giving credence to their potential self-righteous feelings of being persecuted while enabling everyone else to ignore the presence of hegemony in their lives.

What is at issue, rather, is the seventeen-hundred-year history of Christian institutional dominance in European and US internal governance and external, exploitive colonizing “missions,” as well as the oppressive effects of this history that persist in our society. The history is difficult to tell, partly because it is hidden by Christian hegemony itself, and partly because the history is ridden with horrible events committed in the name of or under the auspices of Christianity, including “witch” burnings; inquisitions; pogroms; justifications of slavery; Christian boarding-school kidnappings of Native American youth; clergy sexual abuse; the killing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people; the bombing of mosques and temples; the murder of reproductive health physicians; and many other acts. Like the histories of the real effects of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and adultism, the depths and reaches of

these brutalities extend far outside the classroom and what students can absorb and understand in the classroom space.

The persisting effects of that history, in turn, can be hard to define, because they are so deeply layered in the institutions that shape our lives now. To take other examples besides educational practices: In our mainstream Western medical/healthcare systems, the concepts of dirt and cleanliness, hygiene, germs, infection, illness, disease, quarantine, healing, cure, twelve-step programming, and sexual and reproductive health reflect Christian ideas and values. Our legal systems are built upon Christian concepts of sin and innocence, aberration, error, confession, guilt, judgment, punishment, penitence, obedience, rehabilitation, and redemption. Our workdays and civic lives are ordered by the Christian-based structure of the work week, the cultural meanings of T.G.I.F., Saturday night and Sunday morning, and the year-round schedule of holidays: Halloween, Christmas and “Christmas bonuses,” Good Friday, and Easter. From within such frameworks, it is hard to see what alternative ways to deal with such social systems as health and law would look like.

What we can do is build awareness of Christian hegemony among our students. To begin with, students should be enabled to recognize the contemporary effects of Christian hegemony on those who are not from Christian households. Elements of those effects can be seen in the stand-up, in the invisibility of non-Christian religious holidays, and general culture-wide unawareness about and often demonization of some religious practices (for example, Islamic) and the romanticization of others (for example, Native American).

On the surface, invisibility may mean that if you are from a household with a spiritual affiliation other than Christian, your holidays and practices, such as dietary concerns, will not be recognized, honored, or allowed for at school or in the workplace.

Your normative cultural beliefs about such topics as physical contact, dress, and gender and family relationships may be ignored or ridiculed. Your peers can ostracize you. If you are Native American, your sacred sites, including cemeteries, can be desecrated or archaeologically plundered, your rituals legally prohibited, your ritual objects sold as tourist objects, and your entire culture appropriated or turned into degrading symbols and mascots. If you are Jewish, your religious background can be lumped together with, and thereby absorbed into, Christianity under the label “Judeo-Christian.” If you or your family is openly atheist, you can be targeted for condemnation, proselytization, or both. If your family or you are Muslim, you can be called a terrorist, be treated as dangerous, and have your loyalty to this country questioned.

But more deeply, invisibility can mean a profound assumption about the normality of Christianity and the abnormality of everything else: that your or your family’s faith or practice — or refusal to follow any faith or practice — can become caricatured or stereotyped, which can mushroom into discrimination and violence. These distortions can show up, for example, in persecution of Muslims, Native Americans, Jews, or other religious minorities, from epithets and name calling at school to violent attacks on religious centers and subjection to airport searches, profiling, and surveillance in a national setting — in other words, a full-scale climate of fear and hatred of people perceived to be not Christian. Many of your non-Christian students will have family members (or they themselves may be) experiencing such persecution, and most will know stories of such persecution occurring within the last several decades in their communities.

What are the effects of hegemony on students from households that are actively or tacitly Christian? At the top of the list are the presumptions of Christian-based value systems passed on to Christian children. Like those of other world religions, Christian

practices have as one function the reproduction of such systems generation by generation. Children learn early on the do's and don'ts of human behavior — what's right and wrong, what's good and bad, as structured by Christian beliefs — well before developing capacities to understand, to judge, to challenge, or to freely subscribe to the deeper imports of these lessons. Even such a binary framework reflects a Christian worldview.

Our survival as human beings depends upon our healthy relationships with each other, and Christian practice is one form of such learning. But one major institutional form Christian practice has taken historically is a demarcation between those who are Christian and those who are not. This demarcation implies a separation between those who know what is good and bad and those who don't; those who are “clean” and those who are “dirty”; and, by further implication, those who are good or capable of being good and those who are ignorant of good or actively evil. This inculcation can generate fear and hatred of others and the fostering of the stereotypes that appear throughout the Christian era from “ignorant savages” and “Godless sinners” to Jewish financiers and Islamic terrorists. A final aspect of hegemony Christians may internalize is the confusing feeling that one is good and bad, divided within oneself — subject to feelings of self-righteousness and innocence juxtaposed with self-doubt, self-hate, and guilt. Commonly, this split happens around the body, which is considered unruly and in need of discipline or punishment, while one's thoughts and intentions are considered virtuous and “good.” A Christian's feelings of innocence can make it possible to stay unaware of the benefits that accrue to them as an active or secularized Christian in the United States; treat any criticism of themselves as persecution; and justify remaining on guard against, uninformed about, afraid of, and hostile to those defined as other than Christian. Pervading all this, guilt can make one feel helpless about addressing any of the above.

What can be done to offset effects of Christian hegemony that might be affecting students? The following are some bottom lines:

1. Social justice work with young people is always about fostering community. This effort always means building alliances across lines of race, gender, ability, and other differences to bring everyone into the room. In such a community, people of all religions and those eschewing religion are recognized and welcomed. At least one intent of the First Amendment of the US Constitution was to separate matters of church from matters of state, freeing all churches from the state persecutions that many immigrants from Europe experienced. It is in the spirit of that intention that full recognition from the community and the separation from government-based and hegemony-based mistreatment be extended to institutions beside churches, including other religions, indigenous practices, and the rights of those outside religious practices — an inclusive community. In the classroom this means, minimally, that students are not to be joked about, faulted, or ignored for religious practice or nonpractice outside Christianity but rather acknowledged and respected. To the extent that religion is a topic of discussion, you (and your students) can research and call upon liberation practices within Christianity, within other religious traditions, within practices of agnosticism and atheism, and within democracy itself to build this inclusive community.
2. Much of the educational process, especially as encoded in the hidden curriculum, is about teaching students how to behave “properly”: decorum. The decorum invariably reflects mainstream conceptions of “appropriate” behavior or comportment; invariably, this task places school authorities, including you, in the position of enforcing this decorum. And students are judged according to this decorum — indeed,

they may stake out positions in relation to it, from model student to rebel/outsider. The judgment amounts to an evaluation of student character. So to the extent that the decorum is modeled on Christian conceptions of right and wrong, students' characters are being evaluated according to their conformity to Christian standards. And if a Christian worldview is hegemonic, deeply imbedded in our social structures, it can be very difficult to understand what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, outside the automatic reference to such standards. This difficulty can play out in how people judge other groups of people: to divide female students, for example, into good girls and sluts; or to label non-Christian students as different, exotic, or weird. By mid-adolescence, young people have certainly internalized such standards, using them to brand and to separate from each other.

To call such standards into question is not to forgo having standards. It is important to continually invite students to think about moral action. It is crucial to be clear with students (and with other teachers and school authorities) that personal integrity and moral action are not dependent upon quality of religious affiliation or practice, nor adherence to one particular moral code. It is always appropriate to bring into discussion how students treat each other and how adults treat them. It is always appropriate to act as allies against mistreatment. Examples of these forms of "decorum" can be found in social justice movements within and outside all religions and spiritual practices.

3. A more difficult matter to address in the educational process has to do with what actually counts as "knowledge" or "truth" in our curricula, particularly in the sciences. The practices of Western science are grounded in academic systems set up in the Christian abbeys and schools of medieval Europe and,

as a result, focus on determining what is true. The notion is that a universal truth exists, and those in authority, whether priests or scientists, have found and possess it. Little room for complexity, nuance, and multiple perspectives exists within this framework. Most of our standards of evaluation, most prominently the vast multilayer system of testing of students to determine how much of this truth they know, rely on the assumption that knowledge is discrete, noncontradictory, and knowable. In this view, students must learn the right answers and put their different perspectives, understandings, and creativity aside to succeed in the educational system.

Generally, the story of how the “truth” has been decided at different times — who decides and in whose interest those decisions have been made (by historians, physical and social scientists, and political leaders) — is not taught. This omission thwarts students’ participation as active learners in the educational process, undermining their ability to understand movements for social justice. One way to undermine the impact of Christian hegemony within the classroom is to teach students how to analyze competing truth claims, how to assess the interests of the groups that decide what counts as truth, and how to increase or “complexify” their abilities to hold different perspectives.

4. With the participation of your students, inventory your school rules, protocols, ceremonies, newsletters, bulletin boards, sports games, theater productions, and, of course, holidays to determine how Christian hegemony might show up day to day at school. Enlist students’ help in identifying the issues and promoting forums in which to bring other traditions of belief — and nonbelief — into school life. In doing this, you are performing one of the basic functions of all spiritual practices — to acknowledge our dependence upon and

need for each other and for meaningful connection to the natural and social world.