American Historical Association Statement on Oklahoma Mandate for Religious Content in Public Schools

The American Historical Association condemns the recent order from Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters requiring "all Oklahoma schools ... to incorporate the Bible, which includes the Ten Commandments, as an instructional support into the curriculum." This proclamation invokes the authority of state government to assert that the Christian Bible had a "substantial influence" on the founding generation and the Constitution, as if this were a settled question among professional historians, legal scholars, and the judiciary. This is not true, and Oklahoma students deserve history education that is accurate and consistent with professional standards.

The character and extent of the influence of the Christian Bible in the Founding era has stimulated decades of thoughtful historical investigation. This order, rather than helping students participate in and learn from those conversations, inhibits their ability to understand the culture of revolutionary America and the early republic. Moreover, the superintendent's proclamation imposes a rigid and dangerously undefined assertion about the Christian Bible's "influence" into a Constitution famously lacking even any direct reference to the Bible or Christianity. Indeed, Article 6 specifically guarantees that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

What will this order mean for Oklahoma students? The declaration fails to recognize that many Oklahoma public schools justifiably already teach *about* the Bible and its influence in both US and global history. The state's Academic Standards for Social Studies require students to learn about the origins, beliefs, and influence of Judaism and Christianity alongside other major world religions. In this context, students consider and interpret the Bible as a historic primary source to help understand how religious principles have shaped their adherents and influenced American culture. To do so is consistent with broad and deep traditions of professional historical scholarship.

But Walters's order goes far further. It demands that schools treat the "Bible, which includes the Ten Commandments," as "Foundational Texts in [the] Curriculum" to guide instruction and specifies that Oklahoma's Department of Education "may supply teaching materials" to "ensure uniformity in delivery." When presenting his order to the state Board of Education, Walters insisted that "every teacher ... in the state ... will be teaching from the Bible in the classroom." These requirements predict narrow and official assertions about the Christian Bible's influence in revolutionary and early national America that students may be expected to learn by rote. This "uniformity" precludes wide-ranging, interesting classroom inquiry into the extent, character, and role of the Bible in a new republic awash with multiple Protestant, Jewish, traditional African, Catholic, Native American, and Islamic religious traditions.

The silence of the Constitution on religious matters beyond Article 6, and the provisions of the First Amendment guaranteeing no "establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise" did not go

unnoticed in the republic's earliest years. The 1796 treaty between the United States and Tripoli stipulated that the young nation's government was "not in any sense founded on the Christian religion." Writing to Baptist supporters in Connecticut in 1802 Thomas Jefferson described the First Amendment protection of the free exercise of religion as "building a wall between church and State."

Oklahoma students deserve to learn about the complex and nuanced conversations among early national America's already diverse religious traditions, the Constitution, and the First Amendment. This order violates that right, threatening the integrity of history instruction in public education and the basic constitutional rights of Oklahomans.