

Suicide rates go down on Super Bowl Sunday. They also tend to decline immediately after an extreme national tragedy.

The Columbia astronauts died because of a problem — foam insulation flying off one part of the craft and striking another — that NASA had seen many times.

A new book asserts that these strange and disparate facts explain a great deal about how and why people kill themselves. "Why People Die by Suicide," by psychologist Thomas Joiner, actually tells two stories — one about the suicide in 1990 of Joiner's father, a successful Atlanta businessman, and one about the forces that impel tens of thousands of Americans every year to end their lives.

Joiner, a psychology professor at Florida State University who was born at Piedmont Hospital and went to school at Westminster, believes he understands those forces.

Q&A with Thomas Joiner on page B3

OUR FEAR OF BURNING or falling from a high place is so highly evolved that 97 percent of suicides choose some other means of dying. The most common methods are by firearm, 54 percent; suffocation (usually hanging), 20 percent; and poisoning, 17 percent.

SUICIDE RATES DECLINED so dramatically in the days after John F. Kennedy's assassination that some major U.S. cities reported no suicides. And on Sept. 11, 2001, suicides nationwide dropped by nearly 20 percent from Sept. 11, 2000.

MICHAEL DABROWA / Staff

month, this first two or three weeks, people are scrambling to figure out what to make of all this, because it wasn't thought out very well to begin with.

The people who had Medicaid and Medicare before were auto-enrolled into a plan.

ly we've had a lot of success [at being reimbursed]. We just kind of did it on a leap of faith. The bottom line is we don't want people to be without their medicine.

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► Because suicide offends our most basic instinct, self-preservation, the suicidal person must work his way up to it — learning, practicing, building to a bleak precipice at which things that instinctively alarm most of us no longer seem dangerous.

When a person "habituates" to such behavior, and when the two most basic needs go unmet, that person is at extreme risk of suicide, says Joiner. He explained his theory last week in a telephone interview with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Inside is an edited transcript of that conversation.



CHRIS HUNT / Staff

BIBLE STUDY

Filtering out religion a recipe for blandness

By MICHAEL J. BROYDE

Michael J. Broyde is a law professor at Emory University, projects director of Emory's Center for the Study of Law and Religion, and a regular studier of the Bible in the original Hebrew.



Three state senators last week proposed a bill that would authorize a "nonsectarian, nonreligious academic study of the Bible and its influence on literature, art, music, culture, and politics."

Quite a firestorm erupted over the proposal, but examining the Bible as a literary work is not a recent concept. In fact, many academics and lay readers teach the course in this way, and even religious figures have sometimes advocated this method. Moreover, teaching the Bible as a form of literature or history in a public school certainly does not intrude in any way on separation of

church and state in the United States. Constitutional law is clear on this.

Not every lawful idea, however, is a good one, and I have every reason to suspect that the

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Bible: Combine civilization, literature

► Continued from B1

proposal to teach the Bible as stand-alone literature in Georgia high schools will prove to be both unwise and impractical.

To teach the Bible in a public school in a manner consistent with the constitutional obligation not to endorse religion in general, or any religion in particular, it would have to be taught in a dispassionate, analytical and often critical manner through the lens of an academic discipline.

The Bible can be taught as literature or anthropology or law or sociology in a public school — but it cannot be taught as sacred text. Teachers of these courses would need to be trained in literature and culture, and not in a specific faith or religion. Furthermore, the proposed bill insists that these teachers may not use class for the “teaching of religious doctrine or sectarian interpretation of the Bible” (as the bill itself notes).

Just another elective

I suspect that this approach — the only one the law will permit — would make no students happy or educated, would produce lackluster courses, bore the students and satisfy no



Sen. **Tim Golden** (D-Valdosta) is the lead sponsor of legislation proposing academic study of the Bible in Georgia public schools. The bill does not mandate such a course but gives the state Board of Education the option of creating one.

one. If this Bible course is just another elective, after a short while no one will take it.

The reason is obvious, but worth understanding: in our polarized society, the vast majority of students fit into one of two categories. One group of students seeks to study the Bible religiously, focusing on it as the moral touchstone of their life. These students (or their

parents) are largely uninterested in — maybe even repulsed by — what they would encounter in this course, from deconstructive approaches seeking to identify multiple human contributors rather than a unitary divine source, to literary comparisons with many other ancient works (such as Hammurabi's code), and so on.

The study of the Bible as an article of faith is generally not compatible with its examination through secular eyes.

A divisive subject

On the other hand, those students who are comfortably secular hardly view the Bible as a document worthy of study. We live in a society in which religious texts and study are not ideas that unite us. Indeed, one worries that students who do not see the moral code in the Bible as worth emulating would enroll in this course just to mock the subject — a posture we would find unacceptable in a course studying Shakespeare or Chaucer, Nietzsche or Solovitchik. Simply put, Bible study no longer unites us.

I would instead recommend an option not yet explored: incorporate the Bible as a significant unit of study into a mandatory 10th- or 11th-grade

course on Western Civilization and literature. Biblical texts are basic documents of Western civilization that have had a profound impact on our history, civilization, law, literature and culture — and their study should not be pushed to the corner of some high school elective no one will take.

Making Bible literacy mandatory, something all students must study in order to graduate, ensures three things. First, a diverse array of students will be in the class, allowing for many different points of view to be heard. This will ensure an interesting, dynamic class that thoroughly explores the impact of the word of the Bible and how it has been understood throughout our history by the various faiths that have made up Western civilization.

Second, it will require a level of biblical literacy for all our students. Atlanta, the capital city of the Bible Belt, and Georgia, its leading state, will produce students well-versed in the underpinnings of the many deep disagreements within our society.

Finally, our students will learn the skills of civilized discourse and debate about that which divides us — and this would surely make us a great society.