

Society and the Teacher

Must the teacher become a mere reflection of the various dominant pressures of the moment? This article suggests that a humane society will protect the teacher as he leads young minds in search of knowledge and understanding.

SPECIAL interest groups in our American culture seek to influence what is taught in the schools. They are about as numerous as the number of particular public concerns that are strong enough to gather followers. Few would deny, moreover, that each group is entitled to fight for its own particular interest.

Private power corporations are not friendly to whatever advantages are to be found in government power projects such as T.V.A. Labor organizations hope that teachers will not inculcate views which are inimical to their aims. Manufacturers and realtors have axes to grind. The American Legion and citizens' groups have evinced a direct interest in the character of textbooks used in the schools. Others have concerned themselves with religion and its place in education, and some organizations express a fear that children are not adequately warned against the perils of using alcoholic beverages.

Important questions of public affairs are thus related to the schools by special groups that seek to make their views felt if not prevail, in public ed-

ucation. At the very least, each group seeks to keep its aims free from anti-propaganda. Although the teachers, this writer believes, reflect the total culture more than they mirror a homogeneous set of aims, the teachers may be regarded as a special interest group with regard to a limited number of concerns, as for example tenure and retirement.

Meanwhile, teachers find their conduct guided by the demands of these special groups. They are *expected* to act in certain ways. Fundamentalist religious groups may make certain demands on the teachers' conduct. Service clubs may propose a somewhat paternalistic solution to the problems of the needy. The teacher may find himself trying to emulate an official in the C.I.O. and the N.A.M., both at the same time, on such questions as a federal school building program, tidelands oil, federal reinsurance health programs, and many others.

But the teacher who tries to play the roles prescribed by numerous groups in our society may find himself hopelessly ensnared by myriad sets of expectations which conflict with one another. It is quite impossible to espouse both of two opposing views according to the demands of particular cultural groups on such questions as

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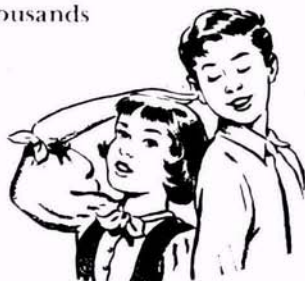
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the following: (a) Who has financial responsibility for education beyond high school? (b) Shall competition or cooperation be emphasized in the classroom? (c) Shall we indoctrinate for patriotism? (d) Is too much importance placed on athletics? (e) Shall we give more attention to general education or to vocational education? One could cite dozens of questions such as these that almost certainly force the teacher into the disagreeable position of offending some people in order to please others.

A State of Anxiety

Teachers who are in constant danger of displeasing groups—especially the more vocal, powerful groups—must live in a state of anxiety. The source of the difficulty is not a well de-

finer, clearly understood, enemy brought into sharp focus, as Lawrence Sears¹ points out in his article, "Anxiety in the United States of America." Rather, the teacher must live in dread of unexpected attacks from undetermined quarters, and unless he can order his emotional being according to Kipling's injunction, "If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you," the teacher is more likely to submit to worry and dread than to attain happiness.

In times of anxiety at the level of whole societies, one ready solution which would extricate the teacher along with all segments of the culture appears always at hand. It results,

¹ Lawrence Sears, "Anxiety in the United States of America," chapter 1, *Educational Freedom in an Age of Anxiety*. Edited by H. Gordon Hullfish.

however, in the curtailment or even the destruction of freedoms, including academic freedom, as for example, in the cases of Hitler's Germany or Lenin's Russia. It consists of three parts: (a) a "man on horseback," that is, a strong man or group who will take over the responsibility, authority and all the worry entailed in setting things aright; (b) the enemy singled out and made a scapegoat; and (c) a show of improvement along with the best propaganda devices for assuring people that everything is going to be all right. But such a dictatorial approach, however comforting for a short while, demands strict censorship of all communications. Men are not free to uncover the underlying sources of evil in their society and to examine them. Such a society, as Sears suggests, is more likely to gain the semblance of immediate security at the price of long range security.²

The "humane society," to borrow Joseph K. Hart's choice of language, is less rigorous in its demands. Censorship, thought control, insistence on conformal behavior, and all other forms of maintaining order by duress would be seen as crude solutions to problems, solutions left over from an age of barbarism. The writer does not mean to suggest that the old means of maintaining order in our civilization should be abandoned posthaste. Instead, the point is that imperfect solutions to problems might properly be given less stress, recognized as imper-

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

fect, and used only while more reasonable approaches are being worked out.

The humane society permits the old maxim to operate: "Live and let live." In a complex society wherein many different and conflicting views are held on innumerable questions of public concern, the humane spirit makes it possible to live in friendly relationship with one's neighbors while he disagrees with them. Perhaps a lesson from history makes the point most bold and palpable. Tragic wars and horrible persecutions down through the centuries bespeak man's fervor for making his view supreme at the expense of others. With respect to a shocking number of these cases the questions at issue are wholly unknown nowadays except to a minority of history professors. Perhaps the broad perspective of history at least suggests that all public questions do not need to be settled immediately at the cost of human suffering.

Finally, in a humane society, the teacher may act and feel like a full-fledged member of his community. He may stand on his own two feet and have a mind of his own. He is under no compulsion to maintain a sort of intellectual vacuity which, if it will not accommodate all divergent opinion, at least will not offend any. The teacher then has the privilege of leading young minds according to his own lights and with the force of all the techniques for understanding thus far devised which he can muster to the cause of human knowledge.

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