

The Pro-Family Movement: A Response to Charles Park

CONNAUGHT MARSHNER

"Yes, Mr. Park, there are people—millions of them—in the USA in 1980 who adhere to the great tenet of Judeo-Christian civilization..."

J Charles Park's diatribe against what he perceives as a "right wing" threat is hardly exciting. In the last several years, Park has made a name for himself all over the education circuit as an "expert" on the New Right—an interesting feat for a man who has not personally interviewed even one of the arch villains whose motivations and thinking he purports to be exposing. But then, Park is probably on fairly safe ground using second- and third-hand sources because most of his followers probably do not read publications such as *Conservative Digest*, *Family Protection Report*, or *Education Update*. Were they to do so their stereotyped view of the Pro-Family Movement might be broadened.

Park wants educators to think the Pro-Family Movement is against "pluralism in democratic classrooms" and somehow opposed to the "rights of students to learn to think on their own." In fact, the contrary is true: the Pro-Family Movement has done more to promote educational pluralism than any other factor on the political scene. Pro-Family leaders and activists are for freedom of choice in education: we support the rights of private schools to exist, and we support the right of all parents to have access to the kind of education they want for their children. It is the education establishment which is so paranoid as to view the very existence of private education as a threat to them. Why are they so afraid of competition, one wonders? Because, somehow or other, their publicly-funded, lavishly ideologized product, public education, is having trouble competing.

The Pro-Family Movement has no desire to replace public education with some rigid fundamentalist orthodoxy. The goal of the movement is to enhance all parents' rights to choose

the kind and content of education for their children—a thoroughly pluralistic and all-American right.

Some parents will want their children taught progressive education. We say fine, that is their right to choose. But some other parents will want their children taught traditional education—why cannot Park grant that that is our right to choose? Why cannot public education be responsive to all parents' wishes? What would be so terrible about a smorgasbord of education options?

At least, under such a scenario, criticism of public education might lessen. At root of some of these attacks on the parents' rights/Pro-Family Movement (tarring it with the New Right brush is a diversionary tactic, since the concerned parents' movement has been around for at least ten years), one suspects there is a little scapegoating going on—finding excuses for why the public school population continues to decline. Demographics is part of it; the actual numbers of children are declining; there are by some estimates 16 percent fewer school-age children than there were 20 years ago.

But there is more to it; the fruits of progressive education are becoming

apparent. Despite the rationalization of the educationist establishment, many parents still believe in objectively-measurable criteria of educational success. The failure of the public schools to meet such criteria is causing many parents to opt out of the system, and more to be discontent because they see their children trapped in a dead end. For several years now, grassroots Christian schools have been opening across the country at the rate of two per day. That represents a lot of financial hardship prompted by a lot of profound concern on the part of a lot of parents.

The discontent of those left in the system basically takes the form of wanting objective standards in education content and achievement. Criticism gets leveled at the education establishment responsible for the failure to set or to meet standards, and demand is made to remedy the failures. That is what Park cannot swallow: the very idea that ordinary parents criticize educators who he assumes know best strikes his elitist mind as incomprehensible and intolerable.

Park would dismiss these parents' concerns as invalid because, to them, "truth is known." He reports that fact with such exaggeration as to ridicule the hypothesis: "a Star Wars conflict where . . . the battle is between the forces of political and religious truth and those of evil and godlessness," he blasts. His metaphor of public education as Darth Vader is charming, I must say. But it does appeal me that this self-styled champion of pluralism refuses to grant respect to those who hold beliefs he considers archaic and inferior.

Yes, Mr. Park, there are people—millions of them—in the USA in 1980 who adhere to the great tenet of Judeo-Christian civilization: that truth exists, and that we can know it. A logical corollary is that we want our children to also know it. (That Judeo-Christian civil-

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ization is respectful of human nature need not be proven here—ask any average citizen of Iran today whether he would rather live in a Judeo-Christian tradition or in the one he now has.) A political corollary is that citizens should not be forced to expose their children to the teaching of ideas they regard as harmful or contrary. Park evidently thinks they should. Indeed, he takes umbrage at the very idea of parents trying to supervise the moral and character formation of their children, mouthing rhetoric about the right of students to think on their own.

Even the most fundamentalist parents will grant adults that right, even if the adult happens to be their offspring. But schools are not populated with adults. To be sure, you can ask a fifth grader an opinion on the relevance of the NATO alliance, but if he has never studied history what, objectively, is that opinion worth? Should the nation's leaders follow that advice? You can ask a

13-year-old an opinion on sex outside marriage and receive an answer programmed by the family life education teacher, but what is the answer worth? Should a child base his future life on such an opinion? Yes, the Pro-Family Movement wants our children to learn to think for themselves but within the framework of the values of Judeo-Christian civilization. Those values have to be learned first. And when those values are taught at home, the public schools ought not to undermine them by teaching MACOS, or by holding Planned Parenthood rap sessions during school hours, or by having teachers practice psychiatry without a license using values clarification techniques. A child has the right to grow up in a moral tradition. He is free to reject it when grown, at peril only to his own soul, but at least he will know and understand what is being rejected.

All too frequently, families that adhere to traditional values find

themselves in adversarial positions with education establishments bent on being agents of change for the purpose of "rescuing" children from parental mindsets, as if this were doing the child a favor. Nature has a way of giving even the most docile child of the most orthodox parent that supposedly beneficial change in perspective; it is called adolescence.

If the school gives children basic competency in literacy and skills, whether auto mechanics or literacy research, and enough knowledge of where they find themselves in the world and in history, then the school will have taken a step toward genuinely preparing future citizens to "think for themselves." To pretend to give that responsibility to children objectively unprepared to cope with it is merely to condition them to being programmed by a peer culture or authoritarian figures while believing they are thinking for themselves. This is the abuse the Pro-Family Movement is seeking to correct. ■

J. Charles Park Replies:

Mrs. Marshner assiduously avoids discussing secular humanism or any excesses of the New Right. She knows these excesses exist, because she has helped create many of the tactics and has frequently instructed national, state, and local groups on ways to object to public education. Her book, *Blackboard Tyranny*,¹ describes the approach: "The parents' rights movement is imperatively concerned to cut back in every possible way the power of the education establishment" (p. 211). "Moral objections, ideological objections, and practical objections to the state of schools must all be exploited" (p. 321).

It appears that a national campaign is being waged to discredit public education.

Marshner's practical advice to national, state, and local groups should not be dismissed. In her book she advises, "If you mean to circulate a rumor, don't do it on your official stationery or in the name of your group" (p. 191). In opposing school board members she advises, "Make sure John Doe (the targeted board member) feels that opposition. (p. 260) The point is not so much to change the board as to *make a target*

of John Doe, thus teaching future board members a cautionary lesson" (p. 261). And, she advises, when mounting a letters to the editor campaign, "The crucial thing here is not to give the appearance of an organized campaign" (p. 242).

Blackboard Tyranny has been called the "bible" and the "gospel" of the pro-family movement by Richard Viguerie's *Conservative Digest* (May/June 1980). Such tactics raise serious questions regarding the pro-family movement's commitment to decency, evidence, and the democratic process. Educators, politicians, and members of the pro-family coalition should look more carefully at how they are being influenced.

Connaught Marshner Replies:

Park seems to find it somehow appalling that moral, ideological, and practical objections to the state of public schools are argued by the parents' rights movement. I wonder now, did the good liberals who supported the Department of Education shrink from advancing it on practical grounds, ideological grounds, or moral grounds? Of course not! If you have a political objective, you advance every argument for your side.

NEA does no differently. Neither does the AFL-CIO or Ralph Nader. Why does it become appalling for us to use tactics that go unnoticed when used by establishment or liberal movements?

Most significantly, I note that Park makes no attempt to respond to my elucidations of what the pro-family parents' rights movement in education is seeking. And indeed, how can he?

He could not make a frank attack on the rights of parents to control the moral formation and upbringing of their children, because such an attack would be indefensible. And he knows it. That is why the refutations of our movement inevitably degenerate into side issues. Principle is on our side, and Park recognizes that when principle is against you, you resort to diversionary tactics: try to change the subject, impugn motives or credibility, drag in some red herrings—all obvious defensive maneuvers.

Park, of course, may actually have fallen for the diversionary arguments. After all, his knowledge of the pro-family movement is strictly academic and third-hand at best. ■

¹ Connaught Marshner, *Blackboard Tyranny* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1978).

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