

THE NEW RIGHT: THREAT TO DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION

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Beyond the political rhetoric of left or right, Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, lies an arena of agreement about American education. In our pluralistic society we agree on the right of students to learn to think for themselves, to have access to information, and to respect the rights of others to hold alternative views. Such are the dimensions of freedom in our land and in our classrooms. Few nations are prepared to trust children to become humane, independent thinkers. Most choose instead to indoctrinate, to convert, or to impose. As our nation renews political debate during this election year, we can hope for a reaffirmation of support for the tenets of democratic schools. A commitment to the goals of freedom and democracy appears to be very much in order.

Absolutism and anti-intellectualism appear to surface during times of stress. As change, uncertainty, and frustration build within society, we can expect some to use the rhetoric of absolutism for political gain, and to seek to impose such absolutes on others.

During the last few years a rather sophisticated coalition has emerged on the political right. Calling itself the New Right, a series of well-heeled organizations, operating outside traditional Democratic or Republican organizations, have used issue politics for the purpose of turning America back to God and away from uncertainty. Under the leadership of Richard A. Viguerie, the direct mail genius of the New Right, the names of millions of supporters of ultra-conservative and right-wing causes have

been fed into a computer for the purpose of gaining funds and supporting right-wing causes. Using such emotional issues as taxes, abortion, equal rights for women, gay rights, and a host of related issues, the New Right has tried to coalesce with dominant organizations to obtain a broad base of political support. Aside from the strictly political New Right organizations such as Committee for Survival of a Free Congress, Conservative Caucus, and the National Conservative Political Action Committee, a number of steady advances have been made with leaders of organizations related to specific issues such as abortion, women's rights, and selected fundamentalist groups. The leaders of the New Right appear to be committed to establishing a conservative political base to impose what they call "traditional values" in American society.

A recent article in *Viguerie's Conservative Digest* illustrates the significance of the new coalition and raises serious questions regarding the protection of pluralism, diversity, and the opportunity of citizens and students to explore alternative ideas in a democracy. Paul Weyrich, an active member of the New Right and leader of what is described as the "Pro-Family Movement," suggests the movement is necessary in order to prevent evil and godlessness from taking over society. The world is perceived as a battle ground between two irreconcilable forces—the pro-family movement and the anti-family movement. Weyrich, speaking for the New Right's pro-family movement, claims:

From our point of view, this is really the most significant battle of the age-old conflict between good and evil, between the forces of God and the forces against God that we have seen in our country. We see the anti-family movement as an attempt to prevent souls from reaching eternal salvation, and as such we feel not just a political commitment to change this situation, but a moral and, if you will, a religious commitment to battle these forces. I don't mean

to be simplistic about it, but there is no other way to view what is happening, especially if you read, and believe in and understand Holy Scripture (Weyrich, 1980, p. 15).

For Weyrich and other leaders in the coalition, the world is cast into a Star Wars conflict where truth is known; the battle is between the forces of political and religious truth and those of evil and godlessness. Not surprisingly, public education, with its commitment to pluralism and religious neutrality, is cast in the role of the arch-enemy Darth Vader. The rhetoric of leaders of the pro-family coalition deserves a careful review by liberals and conservatives concerned about the future of public education.

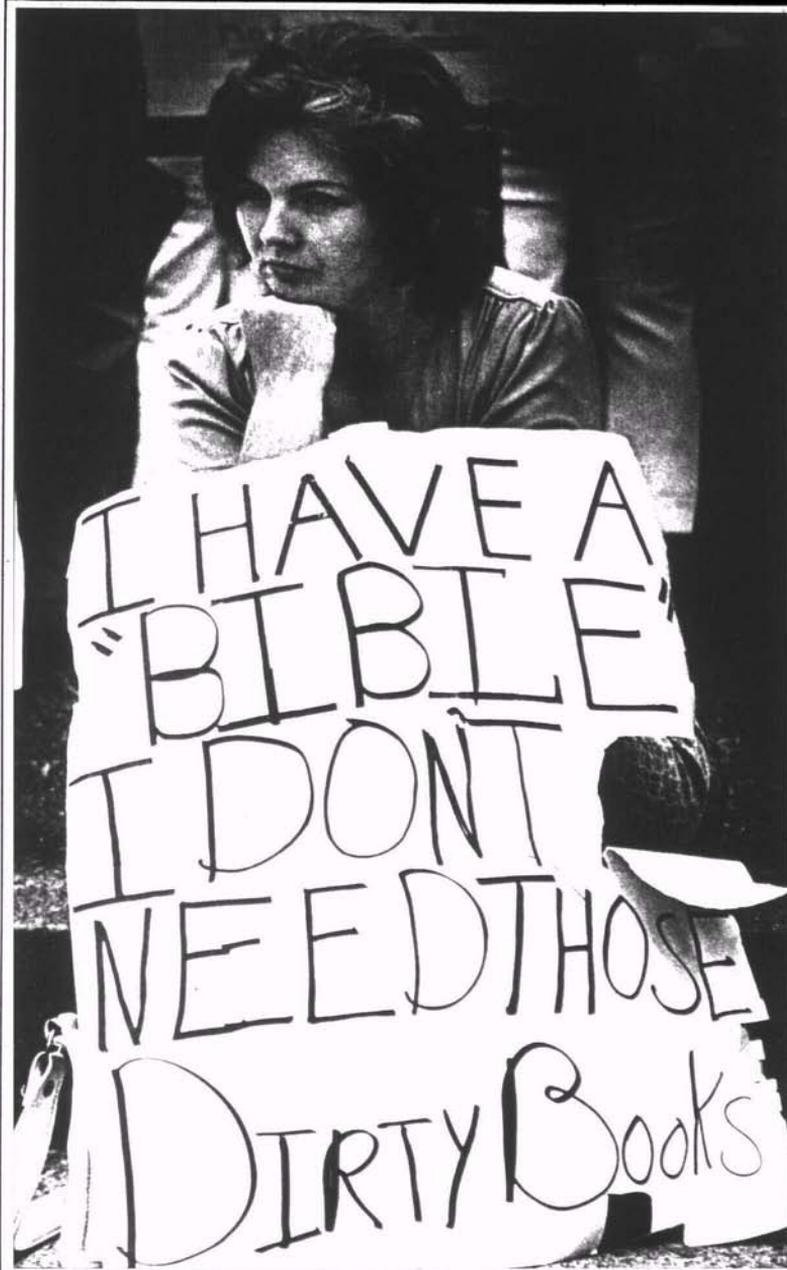
Leaders of the pro-family movement include the following individuals (Weyrich, 1980):

Congressional Component: Jake Garn (R-Utah), Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), Gordon Humphrey (R-N.H.), Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.), John Ashbrook (R-Ohio), Bob Bauman (R-Md.), Phil Crane (R-Ill.), Jim Jeffries (R-Kan.), Larry McDonald (D-Ga.), Bob Dornan (R-Calif.), Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), and Bob Walker (R-Pa.).

The Washington Connection: Bob Baldwin of Citizens for Educational Freedom; Bill Billings of National Christian Action Coalition; Robert Billings of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority; Jo Ann Casper, editor of the *Right Woman*; Connie Marshner, author of *Blackboard Tyranny*—described as "The Bible of educational groups in the pro-family movement"; Howard Phillips, national chairman of the Conservative Caucus; Susan Phillips, director of Research and Publications for the Conservative Caucus Research and Education Foundation; Kathy Teague, executive director of the American Legislative Exchange Council; William Ball, attorney; Father Virgil C. Blum, president of the Catholic League for Re-

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Schools facing critics of "secular humanism" must shore up their defenses to protect the right of students to think for themselves.



ligious and Civil Rights; Margaret Hotze, head of Life Advocates; June Larson, head of Citizens for Constructive Education; Ron Marr, editor of *Christian Inquirer*; Phyllis Schlafly, head of Stop-ERA; Rosemary Thompson, a leader in the campaign to influence the White House Conference on the Family; and Martha Roundtree, head of Leadership Foundation.

Evangelicals committed to the Pro-Family Movement or to the view that the give and take of political debate should be couched in religious certainty include: John Beckett, head of Intercessors; James Dobson, psychologist; Jerry Falwell, director of Moral Majority; Richard Hogue, Evangelist; Ed McAteer, founder of Religious Roundtable; Paige Patterson, president, Criswell Institute of Biblical Studies; Jerry Prevo, Evangelist; Pat Robertson, host of "700" Club; Adrian Rogers, president of Southern Baptist Convention; Richard Zone, executive director of Christian Voice.

Pro-Life leaders include Paul Brown, director of Life Amendment Political Action Committee; Judie Brown, president of American Life Lobby; Randy Engel, head of U.S. Coalition for Life; Father Charles Fiore, national chairman of Pro-Life Political Action Committee; Peter B. Gemma, national director of Pro-Life Political Action Committee.

Anti-Pornography leaders include: Father Morton Hill, S.J., president of Morality in Media; Donald Wildmon, founder of the National Federation for Decency.

Anti-Homosexual leaders include Fletcher Brothers, a leader in efforts to draw preachers into the battle against immorality; and Anita Bryant, leader of Save Our Children.

Education leaders include Norma and Mel Gabler of Educational Research Analysts, and Onalee McGraw, educational consultant to the Heritage Foundation.

For McGraw and the Gablers, public education is permeated with the religion of "secular humanism." The claim is made that humanism is godless, that it has no right or wrong, and that it is designed to instill a disrespect for American values and the family. The educational issue of godlessness as described in the literature of the Gablers and McGraw warrants particular attention. Given the zeal, the political skill, and the organizing ability of leaders within the New Right's pro-family movement, the issue and the inflammatory rhetoric in which it is couched are likely to become major ingredients for public debate about education. An example of the issue development is found in much of the literature in the pro-family coalition. A pamphlet distributed by Pro-Family Forum entitled "Is Humanism Molesting Your Child?" (1980) provides an interesting example. The pamphlet claims Humanism

... denies the deity of God; denies the existence of the soul, life after death, salvation and heaven, damnation and hell; denies the Biblical account of creation; believes in sexual freedom between consenting adults, regardless of age, including premarital sex, homosexuality, lesbianism, and incest; believes in the right of abortion, euthanasia, equal distribution of America's wealth, control of the environment, control of energy and its limitation; and, in the removal of American patriotism and the free enterprise system.

Not surprisingly, humanism is seen as a threat to our entire society and particularly to our public schools. The threat is often described in insidious terms. Note the following: "Skilled change agents (teachers) can manipulate discussion to create peer pressure to conformity to non-Christian values." "Let's protect our families from child molesters!" "Slowly he (the child) is conditioned to view his parents with distrust and disrespect" ("Is Humanism . . ." 1980).

One need not be a prophet to note that the claim of humanism in public education will provide an issue for debate. How might the concerned educator or citizen respond intelligently to the claim of "religious" humanism in public schools? Perhaps one approach is to examine the factual evidence. Are teachers deliberately teaching a "religion" in public education? Another approach examines the term humanism as used by professionals in the field of education. Yet another approach, perhaps the

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most important, examines the context in which education is perceived by leaders in the pro-family movement. It appears likely that some, perhaps most, are suggesting that schools should instill absolutes rather than establish a forum that trusts the learner to examine the evidence and to arrive at independent conclusions. Should a student be allowed to learn to think for himself/herself?

On the surface, the contention that millions of American teachers, representing the spectrum of religious beliefs, are deliberately seeking to impose a religion of humanism seems remote and silly. Paul Kurtz, editor of *The Humanist*, categorically denied the charge of a religion of secular humanism in our public schools,

... the majority of the more than two million school teachers identify with the Judeo-Christian tradition, nominally or otherwise, whereas the official membership of the humanist religious bodies are numerically only a small portion of the total. Moreover, the organizational activities of secular humanists have no role in the schools, hence they are in no way leading to the establishment of a religion (Kurtz, 1976, p. 4).

A number of mainline religious organizations have spoken to the charge of humanism in public education, pointing out that many of the critics are frequently associated with groups seeking aid for private religious instruction or the imposition of specific religious ideology in public education. One of the leading statements was made by James E. Wood (1977), executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee of Public Affairs. He

argued that the "myth" of secular humanism in public schools must be rejected as "dangerous," "unfounded," and "unjustified." "Much of the myth," claimed Wood, "has been predicated by those who seek to harass the public schools, to make them more responsive to their own particular moral and religious values, rather than remain schools in which a secular or nonreligious approach to the study of history, science, and government and literature prevails" (Wood, 1977, p. 17).

Frequent examples of lengthy and bitter rhetoric centered on the issue of secular humanism may be found across the nation. One of the earliest and perhaps most time-consuming confrontations occurred in 1972 when a Maryland group called Parents Who Care charged that schools were "providing instruction based on the tenets of Secular Humanism." The confrontation raged for several years and resulted in the Maryland State Board of Education taking testimony over a period of 21 months, producing a record of some 1,688 pages of reading material, and costing the taxpayers as much as \$200,000. The State Hearing Examiner, James P. Garland (1977) concluded that "as a fact and a conclusion of law . . . The petitioners have not satisfied their burden of showing the establishment, in a First Amendment sense, of Secular Humanism in the Montgomery County Public Schools." The report pointed out that "when one attempts to define secularity itself as a religion, by demonstrating nothing more than its similarity to, or compatibility with, certain beliefs of those who profess to be 'humanists,' one's proof falls short of the requirements of this case. The position [of] the schools . . . would be intolerable. . . ." Garland concluded that "as a matter of fact there is no evidence sufficient to show a conspiracy on the part of the Montgomery County Public Schools, its administrators, or teachers to instill in the students any particular form of life concept whether in accordance with or in opposition to the Judeo-Christian heritage" (p. 5).

There appears, as well, to be semantic confusion within the rhetoric about humanism in public education. There does exist a group calling itself *Humanists*. But there is also a rather broad range of *individuals* subscrib-

ing to the view that it is appropriate to be (1) humane and (2) sensitive to the students' rights and needs. The referent to humanistic education, variously interpreted even within the field of education, may be in need of some refinement if the debating climate is to be cleared of misunderstanding. Given the diversity of interpretations and meanings of humanistic references, leaders in the pro-family coalition continue to charge that humanism is being taught as religion in public schools, that it is wrong, and that it should be opposed. Educators will need to clarify terms, to inform the public of the purposes of public education in a democracy, and to refute the unfounded references and abusive rhetoric now being circulated by some leaders in the New Right.

Beyond the misinformation and semantic confusion about humanism lies a more significant concern about the role of public education in a pluralistic democratic society. It appears that for many in the pro-family movement, education is

conceived as a means of instilling absolutes; as a means of converting, imposing, or instilling truths as seen by leaders in the movement. A dogmatic view of education invites censorship, anti-intellectualism, and a weakening of democracy.

In a free, open society, it is crucial that students have access to information, that they be allowed to learn to think and explore on their own, that they be invited to wonder, and to appreciate the diversity of human experience in our world. Within the context of democracy the ground rules for responding to pressures from the New and Evangelical Right must be centered. And it is wise, perhaps, to consider the advice of Senator McIntyre (1979), in his book *The Fear Brokers*, that attention should be centered on the brokers of fear rather than on those who are influenced by the rhetoric of fear. At the base of much of the literature claiming humanism is against the family and against God, is the pervasive influence of a handful of well-organized political interests in the New and Evangelical far-right. For

educators, our responsibility, to the citizens of our nation and to the students whom we are honored to serve, lies in reaffirming our commitment to evidence, decency, democracy, and to the right of students to learn to think on their own. Such a commitment is beyond left and right; it is the very glue that holds our great nation together. ■

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