

Defending Public Education from the Neo-Puritans

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An Arizona official recently asserted a new American right: the right to ignorance. Speaking before a state legislative committee, Jim Cooper, education liaison to Arizona governor Evan Mecham, insisted that a student has the right to believe that the earth is flat and that "a teacher would have to acknowledge [that] right" as long as the belief is part of the child's religion (*Education Week* 1987).

A former legislator himself, Cooper made the remark as he testified on behalf of a bill to require the teaching of creationism in public schools. By his guideline, any opinion, no matter how absurd, must be respected as long as it is wrapped in the mantle of religion. That seems also to be the position taken by a Tennessee court in the Mozart case, in which parents' determination to raise their children to be narrow-minded was given precedence over the state's intent to teach them, among other things, to appreciate human differences.

Educators should, and usually do, try to accommodate parents' wishes. However courts, legislators, and religious leaders must recognize that dogmatism is irreconcilable with the basic tenets of modern western education, which relies on evidence, rationality, and thoughtful analysis.

This spring an Alabama court rendered an even more outlandish decision by banning textbooks on the grounds that their lack of reference to the deity as the basis for moral decisions constitutes an establishment of religion in reverse. Both cases will undoubtedly be overturned by higher courts, but they give temporary credence to the charge, which baffles most educators, that public schools teach "secular humanism."

In the same decision, secular humanism was made a religion by legal fiat, increasing educators' bafflement both by the method by which we acquired a new religion and by this use of words. The common definition of "secular" is, of course, "nonreligious."

Secular humanists can be identified, it seems, by the causes they espouse and by the way they make value decisions. For example, they are concerned about world peace, human rights, protection of the environment, and so on. True, but these concerns are not limited to the nonreligious; they are shared by devout members of many faiths and are reflected in the publicly adopted goals of most states and school systems.

As for values, the textbooks thrown out by Judge Hand in the Alabama case were condemned because they did not mention religious considerations in the making of personal decisions. It is an important omission; for many people religious and moral issues are inseparable, and that is what makes these matters so difficult in pluralistic public schools.

Even so, a growing number of both liberals and conservatives agree that the role of religion in human affairs should be more adequately represented in the school curriculum. A group of experts assembled by ASCD is preparing a policy paper, to be released this summer, in support of that position.

Those least likely to be satisfied with whatever schools do to develop "religious literacy" will probably be the neo-puritans who are now attacking the schools for neglecting religion. The only way, ethically and constitutionally, that the public schools can teach about the subject is objectively. They must not present one or another religious view as preferable. Their purpose should be for students to understand the traditions of others and to recognize the role of religion in human affairs. To some, such an even-handed approach is just more secular humanism. The challenge for educators is to listen to the critics and concede the depth of their anxiety while protecting our heritage of intellectual freedom. □

Reference

Education Week, 18 February 1987, 5.

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