

ALEX MOLNAR

The Issue at Hand: Religious Challenges to Public Schools

Every aspect of public school practice—from textbooks to use of buildings to codes of student conduct—is under challenge on religious grounds. The essays in this *Contemporary Issues* feature, "Religion in the Public Schools," offer educators the opportunity to reappraise the questions being raised about the relationship between secular authority and religious belief.

Five years ago, when I was sifting through responses to the "Social Issues and School Curriculum" survey published in the October 1982 issue of *Educational Leadership*, I was surprised to find that one respondent had identified religion as an issue of concern to educators. I had naively assumed that the broad national consensus about the relationship between public schools and religious practice was secure. Recent events certainly prove me wrong.

In the face of the current controversies, it's wise to remember there are two issues at stake. The first is substantive and calls for professional judgment: Is the approach being advocated educationally sound? The second is constitutional and requires professional affirmation: Within the constitutional framework of our democracy, public schools belong to the people. As educators, we must be careful not



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to attack the right of the public to control its schools even when, or perhaps especially when, we disagree with the substance of a proposal made by a segment of that public.

Just as religious doctrine was used by inquisitors of the middle ages as a vehicle of imposing the church's authority on an increasingly secular Eu-

rope, extremist groups today seek to impose their views on society in general by keeping "score cards" on the moral and social agenda of politicians. Nowhere are the scores kept more actively than in education.

The opposing viewpoints of R. Freeman Butts and Robert Cord on Supreme Court interpretations of the clauses on religious freedom in the Bill of Rights offer educators the opportunity to reflect on what each of us regards as the proper relationship between religious concerns and secular authority in our schools.

Charles Parks documents how religious belief can be used as a sword by religious groups that would have their will be done in the nation's schools. Donna Hulsizer notes many of the problems teachers would face as a result of the most recent court decisions, while Charles Haynes reports on the lack of discussion about religion in history textbooks.

This collection of essays provides thoughtful analyses to help inform our obligation to understand and respond to the concerns of parents and citizens. □

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