

J. CHARLES PARK

The Religious Right and Public Education

With money, political influence, and links with each other, religious right groups have determined to control school policy, curriculum, and textbooks.



What began as a political campaign by leaders of the New Right has become a religious battle led by a handful of televangelists. The Lord, it seems, is not pleased with public education. Armed with financial success, organizational links, and ideological fury, religious right leaders have found public education a useful target for political gain. Many of its members see the schools as evil, permeated by the godless ideology of secularism. Given the proven success of school issues for fund-raising and for organizing at the local level, the message for educators is that the religious right will continue to criticize public education.

A number of religious right groups have experienced phenomenal growth in numbers and financial resources during the last decade. Although not all of these groups are susceptible to the conspiratorial claims of godlessness in our schools, those that advance such views possess the ability to influence educational issues and policies. Beyond the debates about secularism, values clarification, sex education, and textbooks, a significant number of Americans seem to believe that education should not encourage freedom of thought or discuss values or feelings openly. Schools, they argue, should teach only ideologically correct ideas; any exploration of suspect ideas appears to advocate evil. It would be a mistake to underestimate the strength of such perceptions in our society.

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As Jeffrey Hadden and Charles Swann have concluded in *Prime Time Preachers*, it seems likely that the growth of the religious right represents a major ideological division in America.

What we are experiencing in the United States today is not the normal give-and-take of political parties that differ mainly in the mix of liberals and of conservatives in their ranks. We are experiencing an ideological struggle that in some respects is related to but is not to be equated with the civil rights struggle that began in the late 1950s.¹

This view is supported by the enormous wealth that has filled the coffers of leaders within the religious right. The Reverend Jimmy Swaggart, for example, has accumulated an estimated \$140 million a year by reaching into 197 markets. His Bible College recently attracted 18,000 applications for 400 openings. The Reverend Jerry Falwell has amassed \$100 million a year, and some 7,000 students attend his Liberty Baptist College. But by far the wealthiest network is Pat Robertson's, estimated to control over \$233 million a year; his 700 Club logs 4 million prayer calls using 4,500 volunteers manning telephone banks in 60 counseling centers.

"Such motivated constituencies," claimed a recent *Time* writer, "can—and do—bestow blessing aplenty, in the form of money and votes, upon candidates who win their favor."² With a little time for coordination, it is entirely possible for leaders of the religious right to engineer a million letters on the subject of their choice to any legislator in the nation.

Support for the religious right televangelists appears to be greater than initially supposed. One 1984 estimate from the University of Pennsylvania suggested that 13.3 million people, or 6.2 percent of the national TV audience, were regular viewers. However, a Nielson survey in 1985, which included cable data, showed that 21 percent of the viewing public tune into Christian TV for at least six minutes each week, and 40 percent for at least six minutes each month, yielding a total of some 61 million viewers. Robertson is seen in 16.3 million homes and reaches 27 million Americans every month.³ Educators and social scientists must acknowledge the impact that such programs have on the voting public.

Televangelists' audiences tend to have few years of education, be rural, have a low occupational status and low income.⁴ Of particular interest is a finding by Arbitron that two-thirds to three-fourths of viewers of virtually all the syndicated programs are 50 years of age or older. Audiences also tend to be disproportionately female; among those persons 50 or over who watch religious TV, two-thirds are women.⁵

The issues raised by religious right televangelists are not always supported by their audiences. Inconsistencies appear to be much more pervasive than initially supposed. For example, one study found that 41 percent of Moral Majority supporters agreed with the statement, "I believe in the ERA to guarantee women equal rights."⁶ Political allegiances are also mixed; a 1986 poll of born-again Christians found that only 20 percent of the Republicans in the sample would vote for Pat Robertson.⁷

Some rather sobering evidence, however, suggests that views about public education may unify the Moral Majority. Eighty-eight percent of the Moral Majority supporters agreed that biblical creationism should be taught



in schools, and 80 percent agreed that secular humanism undermines Christianity. A surprising total of 81 percent agreed that a major educational problem today is that secular humanists have been allowed to determine the textbooks used in the public school system.⁸ While opinion among television viewers is diverse, these findings suggest that some televangelists are influencing public opinion about our schools.

Secular Humanism

Perhaps the topic of secular humanism or godlessness in education has been the most intriguing issue to influence public debate. The religious right views secular humanism as the evil that controls public education. A glance at representative comments from leaders of the religious right can be instructive.

The public school system ... gutted by secular humanism, is literally attacking the home, the family structure in this country.

—Rev. Jimmy Swaggart⁹

You see the real controversy here today is not really between secular humanism and biblical Christianity. It's between God and Satan, Satan and the Christ.

—Rev. Jerry Falwell¹⁰

Oh, they don't call it humanism. They label it democracy, but they mean humanism in all its atheistic, amoral depravity.

—Rev. Tim LaHaye¹¹

For many teachers and administrators the *secular humanist* label comes as a surprise. A few years ago hardly anyone had heard of it. Some evidence suggests that the issue was engineered by a number of New Right organizations with perhaps the greatest impact from the Heritage Foundation. In 1976, Onalee McGraw, an educational consultant for the Heritage Foundation, advanced the view that the major problem with public education was the religion of secular humanism. Her pamphlet "Secular Humanism and the Schools: The Issue Whose Time Has Come"¹² was widely distributed to right-wing school critics. Under McGraw's leadership, new parents'-rights groups were created and fed information sympathetic to the New Right. Political and religious activists eagerly accepted the issue of secularism, some of whom were clearly seeking to impose right-wing ideology on

public schools or to find ways to fund private schools using public funds.¹³

Although secular humanism is a new reference in the verbal arsenal of school critics, it represents an old educational issue: whether schools should impose religious absolutes or promote independent judgment. Horace Mann, the founder of public education, would have understood. He too was involved in this classic and ongoing debate.¹⁴ Over 150 years ago he was bitterly attacked for espousing religious freedom and for warning against the teaching of sectarian creeds in common schools. A deeply religious man, he suffered the disdain of some of the leading clerics of his time for advocating nonsectarianism in schools. For this he was called "godless." Matthew Hale Smith, a Calvinist preacher and one of Horace Mann's many critics, attacked the Massachusetts State Board of Education for "allowing an individual, under the sanction of its authority, to disseminate through the land crude and destructive principles, principles believed to be at war with the Bible and with the best interests of the young for time and eternity." "What have I done that has brought upon me this contumely and bitterness?" cried Mann. "What have I done that renders me thus worthy of the extreme of ridicule and opprobrium?"¹⁵

It is important for educators and the public to understand the secular humanism debate. First, secular humanism has become a useful tool for arguing for tax credits for private schools. After all, if public schools are funded for teaching one religion (humanism), why not fund all religious schools? Second, and perhaps most important, the term has strength in its confusion. It has become a useful label for everything that leaders in the religious right consider evil or godless. Thus, under the epithet of secular humanism, they can attack values clarification, globalism, textbooks, the National Education Association, John Dewey, and sex education, among other issues. So, too, the rubric embraces a conspiracy theory that explains the ills of the world. Why is there evil? Because of the secular humanists who control our schools. Conspiracy figures frequently in the literature of the political extreme. Not too long ago, critics from

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the extreme right argued that schools were controlled by "Communists" or "Progressives" or "SIECUS." Today, the battle cry is "secular humanists."¹⁶

Selected Groups and Issues

By sharing issues, literature, and speakers, such groups as Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America, the Gablers' Educational Research Analysts, and a new group that actively seeks to control public schools, Citizens for Excellence in Education (CEE), have joined in a campaign to influence public education. Such groups use favorable support from televangelists, and their influence often exceeds their numbers. An illustration may be found in the Hatch Amendment controversy, which generated hundreds of letters from Schlafly's supporters and was aided by numerous groups on the religious right.

Educational leaders from over 26 professional groups determined after lengthy study that "the reason for promulgation of new regulations clearly was not need" and concluded "that the reason was conservative political pressure to gain control of local curriculum and instruction."¹⁷ Conservative groups used the Hatch Amendment as an organizing tool. For example, Schlafly published many of the abusive and unsubstantiated claims made at the hearings as declarative facts in *Child Abuse in the Classroom*, now in its third printing.¹⁸

The Department of Education, which was initially opposed by members of the right who feared government obstruction and ideological imposition, has become the resting place for political appointees, some of whom are clearly sympathetic to the religious right. A case in point may be found in the global education contro-

versy, which was apparently created by Thomas Tancredo, head of the Denver office of the Department of Education.¹⁹ A critical report, "Blowing the Whistle on Global Education," was written by a staff lawyer under the direction of Tancredo. Groups such as Schlafly's Eagle Forum, Robert L. Simonds' National Association of Christian Educators, and Sally D. Reed's National Council for Better Education used it as an authoritative report "approved by the Department of Education." Although the report was disavowed by the Department, global and international programs seem now to have become a central concern to the religious and political right.

The National Education Association, a historic target for extremist groups' discontent, has felt an increased number of attacks in the last few years; the intensity and depth of such criticism strongly suggests a coordinated effort by leaders of the religious and political right. Leading the opposition to weaken, if not destroy, the NEA is the National Council for Better Education, headed by New Right activist Sally D. Reed. Her booklet, *NEA Propaganda Front of the Radical Left*, and Sam Blumenfeld's *NEA Trojan Horse in American Education* have been widely circulated. Both Reed and Blumenfeld are frequent speakers for the John Birch Society's American Opinion Speakers Bureau.²⁰

Legal issues supported by the religious right warrant thoughtful attention. The case in Hawkins County, Tennessee, in which plaintiffs sought to remove their children from reading the Holt, Rinehart, and Winston series, received funds from the Concerned Women for America whose legal counsel, Mike Farris, is past president of the Washington State Moral Majority.²¹ A somewhat similar case in Mobile, Alabama, sought to establish that secular humanism pervades the classroom. This suit received support from the Freedom Council Foundation, an organization associated with Pat Robertson, and has the sympathy of the Presiding Judge Brevard Hand who claims, "It is common knowledge that miscellaneous doctrines such as evolution, socialism, communism, secularism, humanism, and other concepts are advanced in the public schools."²² On 4 March, he decided in favor of the

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plaintiffs, and it seems probable that the case will eventually reach the Supreme Court. If it does, it will be as a result of careful funding and support from the religious and political right; should the plaintiffs succeed in demonstrating that secularism is the "religion" of public education, the case will have a profound effect on the continuing debate about vouchers and, indeed, on the future of public education.

The Plan to Control Public Schools

The National Association of Christian Educators (NACE) and Citizens for Excellence in Education seek to implement what the director Robert L. Simonds calls "... our Lord's plan to bring public education back under the control of the Christian Community."²³ This is necessary, claims Simonds, because "the atheist groups espousing secular humanism and extreme left-wing socialism such as NEA, ACLU, PAW (People for the American Way), AHA (American Humanist Association), and others are totally committed to eliminating all of Christianity and morality in our schools and government."²⁴ Simonds' two-pronged effort involves organizing fundamentalist teachers through NACE/CEE to evangelize public school students ("always

meet [your students] at a public restaurant") and by orchestrating political control using fundamentalist parents.²⁵

"There are 15,700 school districts in America," claims Simonds. "When we get an active Christian parents' committee in operation in all districts, we can take complete control of all local school boards. This would allow us to determine all local policy; select good textbooks, good curriculum programs; superintendents and principals. Our time has come!"²⁶ In statements to the press, NACE/CEE claims to seek parental input. A closer look reveals tight-knit control from Simonds, who requires that all local officers attend a correct Christian church. "That church must believe that the Bible is God's word and Christ is our Lord. No exceptions to this requirement can be made."²⁷

Simonds maintains linkages among religious right groups by participating in numerous conferences. He appeared before the Continental Congress on the Christian World View in July 1986 sponsored by the Coalition of Revival, which is composed of over 100 member organizations. NACE/CEE has established numerous state coordinators, held organizing dinners in many communities across the nation, and is currently planning a national radio program to support its plan to take control of public schools. NACE CEE, though relatively small, is highly visible among major right-wing groups.

Educators' Responsibility: To Inform, To Comfort, To Lead

School criticism from the political and religious extreme is to be expected in a rapidly changing pluralistic society. We are all subject to discontent and shadowed by the same mushroom cloud.

Sensitive educators recognize that many of our citizens see the public schools as a target for their hostility in an increasingly incomprehensible world. If we are to offer alternatives to the demands of charismatic leaders for public support and funds, we must respond to the needs of citizens who look to us for reassurance, for information, and for support. Educators' role is to reinforce civic concern for

intellectual tolerance, decency, and the democratic process. To this we may add the need for critical thinking skills and an awareness that feelings are integral to learning and growth.

It is a pity that our critics mistake public education for the enemy. At their best, caring educators can help parents and children learn to cope with the challenges of the human condition, recognizing that persons who are susceptible to the claims of extremist leaders need our assistance. If we have learned anything from the political and religious right, it surely is that we must renew our precious responsibility to inform where there is confusion, to comfort where there is hurt, and to lead with confidence. □

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4. Anson Shupe and William Stacey, "The Moral Majority Constituency," in Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow, *The New Christian Right* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1983), 104-116.
5. Hadden and Swann, 60-63.
6. Shupe and Stacey, 108.
7. "TV Evangelist Robertson Finds Public Frowns on Clergy Candidates," *Church and State*, 39 (September 1986): 15.
8. Shupe and Stacey, 107.
9. Jimmy Swaggart, television presentation, 6 January 1985.
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13. J. Charles Park, "Contumely and Bitterness: Schools and the Religious Right," *Ohio Media Spectrum: Intellectual Freedom* 38, 3 (Fall 1986): 13-16.
14. For an interesting discussion of Horace Mann and the development of public education, see S. Alexander Rippa, *Educational Theory in a Free Society* (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman Publishers, 1984), 117-124.
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17. "The Hatch Amendment Regulations: A Guidelines Document," prepared by the Hatch Amendment Coalition and American Association of School Administrators (Washington, D.C.: September 1985), 22. A useful document for educators dealing with the Hatch Amendment controversy. See also Bert I. Greene and Marvin Pasch, "Observing the Birth of the Hatch Amendment: Regulations Lessons for the Education Profession," *Educational Leadership*, 44 (December 1985/January 1986): 42-48.
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For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil there is one striking at the root.
Thoreau

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