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# Children's Education And the Kingdom of God in America



**By Ron Highfield**

An unprecedented educational crisis now faces the church. The one hundred fifty year unofficial Protestant alliance with public schools, which showed signs of strain in the 1960s, now lies in tatters—no, in ashes. Cool, wind-scattered ashes. Until a few years ago, what concerned Christian parents most about public schools was the bad influence of other children. I am convinced that the greatest threat to the church's children today, however, comes from the schools themselves. The schools threaten our children with the very essence of what they proudly offer: de-Christianized curriculum, socialization into a relativistic culture, and the school as surrogate parent.

## **Education's Two Masters**

Perhaps you are skeptical of my assessment. I thought you might be. That is why I begin by asking you to rethink your understanding of education. When you realize that education is the way a community perpetuates itself, you will see that there is no religiously neutral education. State-funded and -regulated schools teach what they believe is good for the state. Historically, it was merely a happy coincidence that what was good for the state was also good for the kingdom of God. Many of today's most influential educational theorists, however, have concluded that serious commitment to Christianity is no longer one of those goods. Perhaps we should ask, What is Education?

When we consider education, we usually think of the obvious. We visualize schools, classrooms, professional educators, curricula, and graduations. We view education as a means of gaining the basic proficiencies, social skills, and professional training we need to climb the social and economic ladder. We rarely catch sight of the deeper structures and goals of education—the social, political, and religious dimensions. Yet these are the heart of education.

Education is about the transfer of knowledge—knowledge broadly enough defined, of course, to include skills and attitudes. But where does knowledge originate? How is it produced? Despite the mesmerizing impression that textbooks create, these books are not collections of ready-made bits of knowledge to be found lying about in nature or history. A subtle process is at work in their synthesis. A community of interpreters, which depends upon and extends a tradition of interpretation, produces the “knowledge” contained in textbooks by arguing to a consensus. I know that this sounds complicated (and I deal with it extensively elsewhere<sup>0</sup>), but it is really just common sense.

The people who produce textbooks and write curricula (the academic historians, natural scientists, educational theorists, sociologists, literary critics, etc.) belong to schools of thought. We can call them academic communities because they are cooperative efforts among people who share common values, skills,



and goals. These academic communities have multi-generational lives in which later generations build upon the work of the former generations. In other words, they work within a tradition. The academic community arrives at its beliefs through constant debate among those within and with those outside the community.<sup>1</sup> Now we can see that what textbooks teach as knowledge is actually the current consensus of a particular academic community identified by a coherent tradition of values, beliefs, and skills.

For a community to continue producing knowledge, it must continue to exist. A community can maintain its identity and extend its life only by teaching its traditions to its young (or to its students or converts) and drawing them into active participation in its life. So, then, we may define education as the process by which a community passes its treasured worldview, its morality, its wisdom, and its practical skills to its individual members.

### **No Neutrality**

Clearly, given its intrinsic nature as defined above, no educational strategy can be neutral with respect to the many competing academic, religious, and political communities in our culture. A particular strategy will affirm the beliefs and values of some communities and undermine those of others. Yet the educators who represent the dominant (secular) paradigm of education in America argue for their right of continued dominance by citing their neutrality and scientific objectivity. A bit of history will expose this claim as a myth.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, one could get a Roman Catholic education, a Presbyterian education, or a Jewish education; but one could not get just a “plain education.” By the late nineteenth century, teachers and professors had begun to see themselves as members of a distinct profession, and they no longer viewed themselves as functionaries of religious communities.<sup>2</sup> Ideally, dreamed the new professionals, educators should be totally free from the control of religious or political communities. Trumpeting the virtues of value-free science and the new professionalism, they claimed to transcend the old “sectarian” method of education. In an amazing piece of self-deception, they convinced themselves of their ability to give Americans a “nonsectarian” education—one they thought was universal and unprejudiced toward the perpetuation of any particular community.<sup>3</sup>

The fledgling guild’s promises proved deceptive, however, because the profession of teaching can never be an autonomous community. It cannot free itself from

dependence on the resources and subservience to the goals of other communities. Educators need money, students, and other resources that must come from outside their jurisdiction. Unless they serve the goals of those other communities, the resources will not be forthcoming.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the new profession found another patron. Simultaneously with its disavowal of the church, it pledged its allegiance to another community—the growing community of secular progressives who looked to the democratic state rather than to the church for salvation (e.g., John Dewey<sup>5</sup>).

It is hardly surprising that the new professionals did not fulfill their promise to provide a “plain education” undefiled by sectarian fantasies—though they continued to use the rhetoric of neutrality to their advantage. Educators left the service of the church and flocked into the service of a rival community which had its own political and religious agenda for education. Education in America henceforth would serve as the process by which the secular progressivist sect passed its worldview, its morality, its wisdom, and its practical skills to its individual members.<sup>6</sup>

### **Church and State**

Since the days of the Roman Empire, only two communities have had a credible claim to true autonomy: the religious community and the political community, or the church and the state. The state bases its claim to autonomy on its obvious necessity as a common defense against threats from within and without, and it backs its claim by the power of the sword. The church rests its claim to autonomy on its devotion to God’s higher authority and guarantees this claim by its willingness to suffer. During the long history of their interaction, the church at times seemed to dominate the state. At other times, the state persecuted the church or used it for its own ends. Most of the time, church and state compromised by negotiating a division of labor. At no time in this history were educators an autonomous community. They always served church or state or some combination of the two.

In colonial America, education served the civil and religious communities in a remarkably harmonious marriage. Chartered by the civil government, supported by public funds, and administered by a board of clergy and magistrates, Harvard college served the church and civil society.<sup>7</sup> As long as the church had the state’s exclusive legal recognition and financial support, educators easily reconciled their dual loyalty.

The founding of the American Republic and the eventual disestablishment of state churches called for a



reevaluation of the role of education. Thomas Jefferson argued for a state takeover. Without an established church, he reasoned, the government would need to control the educational system to promote the moral and religious principles necessary for democracy, that is, a civil religion. He shuddered to think that the education of the new republic lay in the hands of scores of Christian sects, each promoting its own limited

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vision. Oblivious to the irony, Jefferson believed his own enlightened Deism was the best candidate for the nation's civil religion. He understood his own religious and moral convictions to be common sense.<sup>8</sup>

Jefferson's dream was not to be realized. He and his followers were defeated on every front. Outnumbering the Jeffersonians a hundred to one, evangelical Christians would not tolerate the removal of evangelical Christianity from their educational institutions and its replacement with Jefferson's moralistic Unitarianism. Evangelicals preserved education's dual function of service to church and civil society. They reasoned that education's promotion of evangelical Christianity was in itself a service to Christian civilization since it facilitated personal conversion and moral transformation and encouraged civic virtues. The new evangelical theory inextricably linked democracy and Protestant Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1840s, Horace Mann, a Unitarian with Jeffersonian convictions about education, succeeded in centralizing the common schools of Massachusetts and in bringing them under state regulation. The state denied funds to those schools that opted out of the new system. At first, evangelicals objected to the state takeover as an "elevation of the intellectual over the moral, and man over God."<sup>10</sup> Mann answered these objections to the satisfaction of most, pointing out the presence of "daily reading of the Bible, devotional exercises, and the constant inculcation of the precepts of Christian morality in all the public schools."<sup>11</sup>

Evangelicals eventually became supporters of state-regulated and state-supported school systems because, the culture being dominated by Protestant evangelicals,

the public schools were Protestant academies in all but name. Roman Catholics were acutely aware of the Protestant nature of the public schools, and they argued for their fair share of school taxes. But the anti-Catholic Protestants of the nineteenth century were not interested in fairness to Roman Catholics. They argued that the public schools, unlike Catholic schools, were non-sectarian and deserved exclusive public support.<sup>12</sup> Protestants were blind to their own sectarianism. With an eye to their self-interest, they created a dangerous myth: the notion of a religiously neutral education.

The Protestant church made a fatal mistake. Envious of the state's power to tax and determined to maintain its cultural dominance, it delegated the education of its children to the state—with the unspoken understanding that the education be "nonsectarian" Protestant. It is now clear that this arrangement was unjust and dangerous from its beginning. The church must now pay its Faustian debt to the devil, and the medium of exchange is our children's souls.

### **Public Education Today**

The unofficial Protestant establishment is dead. Weakened by the evolution controversy of the early twentieth century and undermined by the growing consciousness of pluralism after mid-century, it was officially laid to rest by *Engel v. Vitale*, the 1962 Supreme Court decision outlawing state sponsored prayer in public schools.<sup>13</sup> The public school system no longer operates on the premises that good Christians make good citizens and that whatever promotes Protestant Christianity advances democracy. State-supported education no longer feels obligated to the church, as it had from 1620 to the mid-twentieth century. The secular progressivist sect has finally gained control of American education. Jefferson has finally won.

Public schools of today function ultimately, if not solely, as organs of the political community. They aim to produce good, loyal, and productive citizens of the American democracy. Since, however, public schools reject their former role as servants of the Christian community, they must define a "good, loyal, and productive citizen" wholly on the basis of secular standards. Underlying this approach is the belief that the values necessary for good, loyal, and productive citizenship can be grounded in humanity itself, without reference to God.

Public school curricula seldom assault the Christian worldview directly. Nevertheless, they place all knowledge within a secular framework, which implies that one does not need to believe in God to have a proper



understanding of the world and that religion is at least superfluous, perhaps an obstacle, and perhaps even a threat to human happiness. Public schools function today just as Jefferson dreamed. They undermine the “narrow, sectarian, and undemocratic” views that children learn from their parents and their churches. They teach children to see themselves primarily as members of the civic community, living by a politically acceptable morality. They subtly picture as fanatics those who maintain a higher loyalty to the church than to society as a whole. The public school is the national church, and secularism is the only worldview the government will allow its schools to teach to our children.

### **The Church and Education**

By God’s design, the church is an autonomous community. It does not depend on the state for support, and it does not serve the ends of the state. It does not exist to produce virtuous, compliant, or productive citizens. It recognizes only one Lord, and it acknowledges only one political entity as finally legitimate: the coming Kingdom of God. It exists to bear witness to the living God and to call all men and women into repentant waiting for the coming Kingdom.

Clearly, at the very heart of its mission is the church’s educational task of passing its treasured worldview, its morality, its wisdom, and its practical skills to its individual members—especially to its children and its converts. Its aim should be to teach people to think, feel, live, and die as Christians. It should teach its members to recognize and flee the idolatrous trinity of nationalism, materialism, and humanism. If it fails here, it fails utterly. And yet, we have failed. Who can deny it?

Two mistakes lie at the root of our failure. First, we have not sufficiently realized the communal and political functions of education. The public school system of today does not understand itself as a servant of parents or the Christian community. It serves the ends of the civic community. As I illustrated by my brief glance at American educational history, educators can understand the nature of the civic community in many different ways. The ends and means of the political community need not always be in competition with the Christian community. At the present time, however, the courts allow public schools to teach only one view of civic values. The one view promoted by public schools is secularism, a quasi-religious philosophy accepted in a community with its own sectarian interpretation and vision of American civic life. When we send the church’s children to public schools, we send them to catechism

in another religion—a godless one. We present them for initiation into another community.

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Second, we have naively accepted the dichotomy between religious education and secular education. We thought we could secure neutral secular education from public schools and then supplement it with religious education at church. Or, even if we were aware of the anti-Christian nature of public school philosophy, we hoped we could check its influence at home. This strategy misunderstands our historical situation and the nature of knowledge. Today, educators wish to be autonomous over against the church. They can gain such autonomy only by pledging allegiance to the political community and serving its ends. Defending this rebellion requires the academic community to articulate a worldview that relegates religion to a subordinate, superfluous, or villainous role. In other words, to maintain independence from the claims of the Christian community, the political community and its educational functionaries must invent a surrogate religion that performs the same legitimizing function that the Christian faith does for the Christian community. The state stands in the place of God, and the educational community replaces the church.

The church cannot be content to deal merely in so-called religious knowledge. The Christian community has definite beliefs about some “secular” subjects as well. We believe the world is God’s creation, created for his purposes and to his glory. A natural science that denies or ignores God is false as a whole, even if it is correct in detail. The Christian faith proclaims that God created humans in the divine image, but that we are now sinners in need of God’s grace. Any biology, psychology, sociology, or cultural anthropology that ignores or denies these Christian beliefs is faulty beyond repair. An ethical or political theory that attempts to base itself only on the human phenomenon, deprived of any reference to God and his coming kingdom is hopelessly out of touch with reality.

The church must face its drastically altered historical situation. The American educational establishment no longer supports even our most basic values. It intentionally undermines them. I challenge the church



to form a partnership with Christian parents to do whatever it takes to protect our children's souls and minds. Start a Christian school. Support a home school cooperative. Found evening, weekend, and summer institutes for training our youth in the faith. Do something creative. Do something daring.

## Conclusion

If education is the way a community perpetuates itself, the church should no more delegate the education of its children to the state than it should give over the

evangelization of the world to the state. The church should renounce its failed alliance with the state, take up its right, and exercise its responsibility to educate its children. If it refuses, it risks compromising its integrity and autonomy as a community and abandoning its God-given mission.

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## Notes

<sup>0</sup> Ron Highfield, "An Essay on the Christian Mission in Higher Education," *Faculty Dialogue* 23 (Winter 1995) 97–114.

<sup>1</sup> *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory* 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 222. See also MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> George Marsden tells the story of the waning influence of Christianity in higher education in America in his important book *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). I depend on Marsden for much of the historical detail of what follows.

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive study of the pretended neutrality of modern academic theories see Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Allen S. Horlick documents the inherent (but hidden) political nature of education in his study of educational reform in early industrial America in his work *Patricians, Professors and Public Schools: The Origins of Modern Educational Thought in America* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Horlick, 172–242.

<sup>6</sup> Allen S. Horlick (cited above) documents the political nature of the educational careers of architects of modern American educational theory: El Godkin, Charles Francis Adams Jr., John Philbrick, Felix Adler, Nicholas Murray Butler, and John Dewey. For example, Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University (1904–1945) and winner of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize (with Jane Addams), "never saw education as any less a way to achieve political goals." Butler believed that his

position as a leader in American education gave him more political and social influence than any other office other than the Presidency of the United States. John Dewey's educational theory turns on his understanding of the recent class conflict in newly industrialized America. In *Democracy and America*, he struggles with striking a balance between advocacy of social adjustment to unchangeable conditions and promoting the possibility of social change in the direction of opportunity and justice. With Dewey as with Butler, education serves primarily political ends.

<sup>7</sup> Marsden, 34–44.

<sup>8</sup> Rockne McCarthy and others, *Society, State and Schools: A Case for Structural and Confessional Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981) 81–86. See also Marsden, 68–76.

<sup>9</sup> Marsden, 68–76.

<sup>10</sup> The words of the Reverend Matthew Hale Smith (1846) quoted in Frederick M. Binder, *The Age of the Common School, 1830–1865* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974) 61.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Marsden, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Rockne McCarthy and others, *Disestablishment a Second Time: Genuine Pluralism for American Schools* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1982) 60–70.

<sup>13</sup> For the text of the decision, see Robert S. Alley, *The Supreme Court on Church and State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 194–203. For a discussion of the church-state issues that face us today, see Ronald B. Flowers, *That Godless Court: Supreme Court Decisions on Church-State Relations* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).