

# RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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American culture from the days of the Pilgrim Fathers has been characterized by the establishment throughout the land of churches and schools. They are regarded in this country as the essence of civilized living. In our towns both large and small the church and the school usually stand out as our best buildings symbolizing the eminent esteem in which the Christian philosophy of life is held.

The public school in America is in a very true sense the child of the church. In colonial times the school was supported by private subscription with the active encouragement and support of the church. The heart and core of education was the Bible, and the ethics and principles of the church were freely expounded. In the colleges Hebrew and Greek languages were taught that the future leaders of society might better understand the Word of God. Attendance at chapel was compulsory. Bible reading, sacred songs, and prayer constituted the daily agenda for opening exercises in all schools. Textbooks taught the choice lessons of life. Drama and poetry were inspired by the tenets of the church. Lessons in McGuffey's Fifth Eclectic Reader, dated 1879, began with such titles as "The Hour of Prayer," "Religion the Only Basis of Society," "The Bible the Best of Classics," and "My Mother's Bible." Religious teaching did not stop in the elementary grades. To give religious training was the very purpose for the founding and maintenance of church and other privately endowed universities and colleges. It is very frequently so stated in their original charters.

With such a foundation for an American school program it is amazing to discover that religion has not only lost its central position in the school program but is practically extinct as a subject of study. What has caused the almost complete secularization of our schools during the past half century? The original cause was the sectarianism of the churches themselves. The rise of state tax-supported schools and colleges in the nineteenth century aroused intense denominational controversy as to curricula content for these new schools. Sectarianism showed up here at its worst. Each church insisted that its particular tenets be exclusively taught. It was not, therefore, the protest of atheists but of sectarianism which took religion out of the schools. There were other significant contributing factors. The growth of knowledge increasingly crowded the curriculum. Many of the courses labeled "elective" vigorously competed for time and attention of students. A general secularization of life in America took place. The schools quite naturally reflected the prevailing cultural pattern. The work of life generally became more departmentalized. Individuals specialized. The various branches of science became popular specialties.

Certain popular theories of the universe presented by science were not sympathetic theistic beliefs. Pragmatism, the prevailing philosophy of the schools, substituted social idealism for traditional religious values.

In line with the trend to secularize and specialize, the administration of charity shifted from the church to the government and to private agencies. The treatment of the sick became, for the most part, a function of secular hospitals; settlement of disputes – the function of the courts; the teaching of manners – the function of an Emily Post. Movies arose as the most popular of an amazing variety of secular entertainments. Religion became a smaller and smaller segment of our cultural, intellectual life.

## Results of Secularized Education

We are now concerned with the second generation of Americans who have had nothing approaching adequate instruction in Christian philosophy and the teachings of the Bible. Having neglected of the Bible, having neglected the Word of God we are stolid and cold to the impulses of

religion. Being unimaginative and dull in this respect, we are dwelling in the lower ranges of the civilized practices of life. We enjoy the intense activities of the physical universe more than the cultural practices of the mind. "The unity of life which belonged to simpler societies has been lost because economic pursuits have been put under the domain of the acquisitive spirit, subject to a morality different from that of art, science, and religion."

It may be cogently argued that the evidences of disintegration in our social institutions and the collapse of established sanctions upon which the integrity of our social and political structure is dependent, are traceable in large part to the loss of a definite religious orientation in the education of American youth. This is not to infer that our public schools are at present without religious values. But if there is any validity in the assumptions of religion, all educative processes that have no inclusive spiritual frame of reference and that do not build lasting loyalty to ideals and purposes which only religious faith can permanently support are fatally weak and will in the long run result in social disintegration.

The subject may be approached from another angle with the same general conclusion. The trend in American educational philosophy in recent years has been to establish education upon a broad cultural base. It is contended that the school should be the community in miniature and that every legitimate community interest – civic life, industry, labor, social work – should find a place in its program. The curriculum should be built out of normal experiences in community living. The one conspicuous exception is religion. A school would naturally apologize for one of its graduates who does not know how government, industry, or recreation is organized in his town. How, then can the school be complacent over graduating people who are religiously illiterate? The fault cannot properly be placed upon school administrators but rather in the complex of suspicion and fear that surrounds religious effort wherever the public interest as a whole is involved.

### **The Task Ahead**

Is not our immediate task to rededicate ourselves to the right philosophy of life, to a thorough-going system of education? Let us start now by seeing to it that our teacher-training institutions prepare teachers to do something more important than merely quicken the minds of our children, or train them to be skillful in some narrow field. They must also be able to guide them into the fundamentals of Christian character. Teachers successful in this realm are the real sentinels entitled to places on the walls of the city.

Some say we do want religion, but add, "There is a law against its being taught!" Who made those laws? We did, largely by our indifference. We have been unable to agree on curricula for the school system. Meanwhile, school officials are pressed by an industrial age that knows what it wants. But even though Christian churches may seek and find a common basis for cooperation in teaching Christianity in the schools, what about the non-Christian minority? Present conditions emphasize the fact that their security today in America is insured because Christian teaching guarantees them equality, justice, and the protection of democratic institutions. Without the instruction, discipline, self-sacrifice, and patriotism characteristic of the gospel of Christ, their position is as insecure as democracy is insecure. Christianity and the democratic form of government must go hand in hand forward or backward. Our educational program has tended to disintegrate both by its indefiniteness and uncertainty and by its doubts and cynicism, at a time when it should be clear-cut and confident. Under strain and stress, our program has developed weakness where it should have been strong. The sure result is general lack of conviction and faith in tried conduct.

### **Emphasis on Character**

Educational statesmanship has not been blind or impotent in the face of these inadequacies in our school programs. The result has been a heavy emphasis upon character development as the goal of all educational endeavor. During the past decade, there has been a noticeable trend in the

public schools away from secularized education based on materialistic philosophy, a mechanistic science, and behavioristic psychology. We can observe a return to a greater emphasis upon spiritual values as the foundation for character development. The Tenth Yearbook of the Department of Superintendents of National Educational Association records these trends, and the social sciences definitely reflect the change. The increased concern for the development of the person instead of the acquiring of facts is an encouraging sign in public education.

Church people should be aware of these trends and definitely encourage the fine efforts of the schools to make effective in the lives of pupils high spiritual objectives. The public schools can greatly extend spiritual and moral training without being guilty of sectarian teaching or violating the principle of separation of church and state or infringing upon the right of freedom of worship.