

Religion and Public Education

A few opinions from the enlightened (and un-enlightened) world

Court Opinion

The public school is supported by the taxes which each citizen, regardless of his religion or his lack of it, is compelled to pay. The school, like the government, is simply a civil institution. It is secular and not religious in its purposes.

[*Ring v. Board of Education* (1910) Illinois Supreme Court, 245 ILL.334,92 NE 251]

The public schools are not supported entirely, in most communities, by public funds—funds exacted not only from parents, nor alone from those who hold particular religious views, nor indeed from those who subscribe to any creed at all.

Justice William J. Brennan [concurring opinion in *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963), USSC]

The modern public school derived from a philosophy of freedom reflected in the First Amendment. ... The non-sectarian or secular public school was the means of reconciling freedom in general with religious freedom.

Justice William J. Brennan [concurring opinion in *McCullum v. Board of Education* (1948), USSC]

The Supreme Court has continually been zealous in protecting the right of school children to be free from sectarian influence by school authorities. Thus, practices which may be acceptable for an adult audience or a public forum may be unacceptable for public schools where attendance is mandatory and the desire to conform is typical among youth of such age.

Judge Dennis Brett [in *Mainger v. Mukilteo School District* (1986), Superior Court for the County of Snohomish, WA in No.85-20467102]

School Boards

Religious instruction and the reading of religious books, including the Holy Bible, are prohibited in the common schools in Cincinnati. The children of the parents of all sects and opinions, in matters of faith and worship, are to enjoy alike the benefit of the common school fund.

Resolution, Cincinnati Board of Education, 1869

Few issues have stirred greater controversy in Americans' attitudes toward public education than the role of religion and values in public schools.

In *History-Social Science Framework* adopted by California State Board of Education, July, 1996

Newspapers

The simple and lamentable fact is that there is far more prejudice and bigotry about religious matters than most of us want to admit. If sectarian doctrine is introduced into

our schools, we run the risk of transmitting the prejudices of adults to our children, who, fortunately, are comparatively free of it. The differences which divide adults might well become a part of the life of school children and do serious damage to public education.

Editorial, *Madison Capital Times* (WI), December, 1952

A public school teacher occupies a position of great trust, with potentially great influence over young people whose attendance is compulsory. A person should not be allowed to take advantage of such a position to promote his or her own—or any—religion.

Editorial, *Eugene Register-Guard* (OR), January, 1984

Public schools, controlled by public boards of education maintained by public funds and open to all the public regardless of race or religion, have served this country magnificently well. They have been usefully supplemented by private schools, privately controlled and maintained, offering special forms of education and indoctrination to pupils with special needs and desires. It would be a misfortune to confuse the two, especially where religion is concerned. For a separation of church from state has been proved by history to be an indispensable condition alike for political liberty and for religious liberty. Let religious teaching remain within the province of homes and churches and private schools. Let secular education remain within the province of governments controlled by the people and open to all the winds of politics.

Editorial, *Washington Post*, June, 1969

We respect the right of parents to send their children to religious schools if they wish, but they should recognize that this is a voluntary choice on their part. The state has no obligation to further religious training in this way. In fact, it has an obligation to keep hands off.

Editorial, *New York Times*, March, 1967

Statements by Authors or Authorities

The public school, like the state, under whose authority it exists, and by whose taxing power it is supported, should be simply a civil institution, absolutely secular and not at all religious in its purposes, and all practical questions involving this principle should be settled in accordance therewith.

Samuel T. Spear (Episcopal priest, Brooklyn NY) in *Religion and the State*, 1876, p.141.

We want the public school to remain a neutral institution open to the children of all creeds and of no creed, without discrimination or sectarian promotion.

Paul Blanshard in *God and Man in Washington*, Beacon Press, 1960, p.220

To call public education godless betrays invincible ignorance, infinite prejudice, and complete misunderstanding of what religion is all about.

Conrad Henry Moehlman, *School and Church: The American Way*, 1944, pp.97-8

In the realm of First Amendment case law, court decisions governing the role of religion in public school curriculum exhibit general consistency. This uniformity offers school

officials a valuable opportunity to distill coherent, practical lessons from court opinions. The establishment clause permits any instruction—including instruction about the controversial topics of religion, evolution and sex education—that, by virtue of its form and content, serves secular educational goals.

Benjamin B. Sendor in *A Legal Guide to Religion and Public Education*, Topeka KS, 1988

Keeping education in the United States free of sectarian influence has long been one of the primary struggles of believers in freedom of religion.

Joseph L. Blau in *Cornerstones of Religious Freedom in America*, Beacon Press, 1949

From Noted Individuals

(T)he public schools shall be free from sectarian influences, and above all, free from any attitude of hostility to the adherents of any particular creed.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, quoted in *The Wars of the Godly*, by Reuben Maury (1928, p.213)

Resolve that neither the state nor nation, nor both combined, shall support institutions of learning other than those sufficient to afford every child growing up in the land of opportunity of a good common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan, or atheistical dogmas.

Ulysses S. Grant, Address to the Army of the Tennessee (DesMoines IA, Sept. 25, 1875)

God, the source of all knowledge, should never have been expelled from our children's classrooms.

Ronald Reagan, Address to National Religious Broadcasters, Washington, DC, January, 1984.

Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither justice nor freedom can be permanently maintained. Its interests are entrusted to the States and the voluntary action of the people. Whatever help the nation can justly afford should be generously given to aid the States in supporting common schools; but it would be unjust to our people and dangerous to our institutions to apply any portion of the revenues of the nation or of the States to the support of sectarian schools. The separation of Church and State in everything relating to taxation should be absolute.

James Garfield, Letter of acceptance of presidential nomination, July 12, 1880

The separation of church and state is extremely important to any of us who holds to the original traditions of our nation. To change these traditions by changing our traditional attitude toward public education would be harmful to our whole attitude of tolerance in the religion area. If we look at situations which have arisen in the past in Europe and other world areas, I think we will see the reasons why it is wise to hold to our early traditions.

Eleanor Roosevelt, *New York World-Telegram*, June 23, 1949

If religious freedom is to endure in America, the responsibility for teaching religion to public school children must be left to the homes and churches of our land, where this responsibility rightfully belongs. It must not be assumed by the government through the agency of the public school system.

Sam J. Ervin, Jr. in *Preserving the Constitution*, Michie, 1984

We are a people of many races, many faiths, creeds, and religions. I do not think that the men who made the Constitution forbade the establishment of a State church because they were opposed to religion. They knew that the introduction of religious differences into American life would undermine the democratic foundations of this country. What holds for adults holds even more for children, sensitive and conscious of differences. I certainly hope that the Board of Education will think very, very seriously before it introduces this division and antagonism in our public schools.

Testimony at Board of Education hearing (opposing "released time" for religious instruction), *New York Times*, November 14, 1940

The Supreme Court has made atheism the only acceptable religion for America's public school children.

Rev. Marion (Pat) Robertson, Freedom Council fundraising letter, August 5, 1985.

The public schools of this country serve the admirable function of bringing together on common ground students from a diversity of cultural and religious backgrounds. The introduction of public prayer into such a setting jeopardizes the sense of community and unnecessarily intrudes an emotional and divisive faction.

Rabbi Daniel Polish, Testimony to US House of Representatives, on behalf of the Synagogue Council of America, September 8, 1980.

I hope to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be!

Rev. Jerry Falwell in "America Can Be Saved," *Sword of the Lord*, 1979, p.52

From Organizations

A free and secular democratic state guarantees religious liberty. It guarantees equal freedom to the religious and the nonreligious. It makes religious faith a private matter and gives no special privileges to any religious idea or practice. Both prayers sponsored by public schools and public aid to private schools are violations of its integrity.

In "Statement of Principles," Americans for Religious Liberty, 1982

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