

NATIONAL CONCERNS

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Secular Humanism: Some See It as Threat to Schools

In the wake of the conservative political victory last fall, citizen watchdog groups have stepped up their demands for narrower definitions of appropriate subject matter for public education, public entertainment, and the public prints. The protesters, concentrated mostly in small towns and white suburbs, have founded national, regional, and local groups, of which the Moral Majority and the Eagle Forum are the best known.

The titles of the new citizens' groups - among them Pro-Family Forum, Young Parents Alert, People Concerned with Education, and Guardians of Education - convey righteous determination. Their messages express alarm. They warn that the quality of American life and even American power in the world are deteriorating because of the spread of "secular humanism," which protesting groups see dominating the public schools. They charge that today's youth are taught that "anything goes," and that there is no such thing as "right and wrong."

The citizens' groups describe secular humanism as a religion. Since religious teaching is prohibited in public schools, it follows, in conservative logic, that secular humanism (and humanists) should be barred from classrooms. A number of the new groups have ties with evangelical Christian organizations. As a result of court decisions in recent years,

Christianity no longer enjoys its former status as the de facto religion of many public schools. Some of the protest groups contend that the framers of the U.S. Bill of Rights never intended that the nation's children be brought up officially godless.

Semantics and the Protest Groups

The language these citizens' groups use to characterize secular humanism implies subversion and conspiracy. "Those of us who understand know how it is infiltrated, know how it is inculcated in the children," Terry Todd of a Minnesota group told New York Times writer Dena Kleiman. Todd's organization, calling itself Stop Textbook Censorship, asserts that traditional school reading such as The House of the Seven Gables and Robinson Crusoe have been "censored" from the schools and replaced with "humanist" literature. "Is Humanism Molesting Your Child?" is the title of a pamphlet from another group. Other titles: "Weep for Your Children" and "Anti-God Humanists Are Conditioning Your Children." "Brainwashing," "negativism," and "socialism" are other terms used to describe the humanist "threat."

"There is a philosophy called humanism, which places man at the center of the universe, encourages free thought and scientific inquiry without deference to a supreme being and offers no absolute standard of ethics," Kleiman notes in her article. She quotes philosophy professor Paul Kurtz, State University of New York at Buffalo, as saying the citizen groups have seized on humanism because they seek someone to blame for current social ills.

"There is an uneasy feeling that maybe we've bent over

backwards with being broadminded," Scott Thomson, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, commented in the Times.

What the Activists Want

The new activists' remedy for the schools calls not only for abolishing sex education and for teaching biblical creationist theory along with evolution theory, it also calls for removing literature dealing with present-day problems and realities, downplaying creative writing, and stressing spelling, penmanship, and phonics. Some such critics fault the schools for reducing competition among students. The concept of the American system as already perfected in some unspecified past time spurs attacks on social studies texts in particular. The Office of Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association reports sharp increases this year in pressure to remove specific books from schools and libraries. One teacher of English told the Times she worried about how her son will learn to evaluate conflicting ideas if all controversial content is sifted out of the curriculum.

Some of the New Right activists also want to sweep liberal thinkers out of government. According to Newsweek July 6, Tim LaHaye, San Diego minister and founder of the conservative Council for National Policy, states in his book The Battle for the Mind that "We must remove all humanists from public office and replace them with pro-moral political leaders."

A flurry of interest in the summer centered on a campaign by the Coalition for Better Television (CBTV), a group connected with the Moral Majority, to promote a consumer boycott

of products sold by firms advertising on shows featuring sex and violence. The boycott was cancelled, but not before executives of the sponsoring companies travelled to Memphis to confer with Coalition leaders. "All we're asking for is a little balance in programming," a coalition spokesman said.

The Rev. Donald Wildmon, director of the Coalition for Better Television, has stated the issue more bluntly: "Somebody's value system is going to be in dominant control."

Marketing Freedom of Expression

Television producer Norman Lear and others have responded to conservative pressure groups by founding a counter-group, People for the American Way (PAW). It has produced TV public service announcements advocating freedom of expression and, according to executive director Anthony Podesta, is attempting "to counter the intolerant messages of moral majoritarians and the negative climate they created."

PAW-sponsored TV spots score the conservative groups for implying that those who disagree with their views are not "good Americans, good Christians," etc. In one PAW message, a steelworker says that he considers himself and his family to be religious but can't accept the assertions of "a whole bunch of ministers on the radio and TV," who would class his wife as a bad Christian for disagreeing with them on some political issues.

The first PAW messages were broadcast in more than 30 television markets last fall. Podesta says 50 million viewers saw them and "tens of thousands of people responded with contributions and offers of assistance." PAW launched its

second media campaign this past summer. According to Podesta, the organization's other projects include talks to community groups, debates with opponents, monitoring and responding to "moral majoritarian" activities, and "citizen action training programs... to combat censorship in our libraries and intimidation in our schools and other public institutions."

The Moral Majority, Inc. announced in late July that it will counter TV commercials by People for the American Way with its own 30- and 60-second spot announcements featuring the Rev. Jerry Falwell and another Moral Majority official.

(WP: 7/25/81)

Is Moral Teaching Constitutional?

A report by the Thomas Jefferson Research Center noted recently that in 1775 (when the American colonies were still under British rule) 90 percent of the content of school reading concerned religion and morals. If demand for moral teaching escalates, how might such content be accommodated in public schools under the U.S. Constitution? Mark Cannon, an aide to Chief Justice Warren Burger, recently quoted a statement by a new Values Education Commission in Maryland, saying the commission had found "nothing in court decisions that would preclude the teaching of ethical content." (NYT: 5/17, 7/5; CSM: 6/29; USN&WR: 6/8; ET: 7/6/81)