A hostility toward religion?

by Reo M. Christenson

Does the struggle for a strict separation of church and state reflect...a veiled hostility toward religion by many of America's intellectuals?

Does the struggle for a strict separation of church and state reflect not only respect for the 1st Amendment but a veiled hostility toward religion by many of America's intellectuals? There are reasons to believe this may be so.

There seem to be two groups supporting the concept of strict separation. The first believes that any introduction of religion into public schools is unwise because that would be offensive to religiously minded parents who disagree with the particular religious exercise involved, and equally offensive to many parents with no religion. It would apply subtle pressures upon children from nonreligious homes to conform or be embarrassed by their nonconformity. It would involve a ritualized, mushy, watered-down religious activity that would tend to demean or trivialize religion. And it would raise a succession of litigious issues, be a divisive community influence and ultimately be detrimental to the best interests of religion itself.

These formidable arguments reflect no anti-religious bias. Many deeply religious people agree with them. But a second group shares

AND A NEW LEG TOO, SAM

many of the above views while also being antagonistic to religion per se. Its members are the ones whom G.K. Chesterton referred to when he noted, "Religious prejudice is the anti-Semitism of the intellectual."

Chesterton spoke an important truth, but he overgeneralized. Not all intellectuals fall into this category, by any means. And most of the others aren't hostile to Judaism, Oriental religions or liberal Christianity. It's conservative, evangelical or transcendental brands of Christianity that arouse their spleen.

Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles, who is interested in and impressed with the impact of religion on the lives of common people, has written that "when I have tried to describe how [these people] feel about Jesus and His words and deeds, then the result is either...silence...or, rarely, a puzzled, frustrated truculence." His university colleagues do not want to hear about it.

It could be argued that these intellectuals' apparent hostility is not toward religion as such but toward the dogmatism and intolerance exhibited by some religious groups. Partly, perhaps, but one literary phenomenon suggests that more than this is involved.

I have read many of the intellectuals' favorite magazines for more than 40 years. Religiously. During that period, I have seen the Soviet Union repeatedly and sharply criticized for its denial of political, economic and literary/artistic freedom. But I don't recall more than one or two brief comments chiding the USSR for its unrelenting practice of indoctrinating its children in atheism and contempt for religion. Or for routinely discriminating against children who openly adhere to their parents' religious beliefs.

If dogmatism and intolerance are resented so deeply, why the great silence about the official promulgation of atheism in the Soviet Union? I find this very revealing.

Finally, post-World War I fiction that wins favorable reviews frequently displays an animus toward religion—often reflecting

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childhood or adolescent experiences the authors found distasteful. Almost no books presenting committed Christians in a favorable light win the critics' acclaim.

The Christian faith held by mature, thoughtful, intelligent believers gets little attention from 20th Century writers whose books receive the accolades of intellectuals. But those who blemish that faith by their intolerance, narrow-mindedness and shrillness get attention aplenty.

The Supreme Court's current position represents, I think, not prejudice against religion but a tortured effort to live with the misinterpretation of the 1st Amendment that surfaced in the original "wall of separation" case [Everson v. N.J., 1947]. That decision was a quite startling judicial bolt from the blue, without judicial precedent. Before then the establishment clause was believed to forbid preference for one church above others but not to condemn a public posture friendly to religion in general.

When separation purists wax indignant over a period of silent meditation in the schools, over remedial aid in parochial schools or over the voluntary formation of student religious groups on school premises during nonclass hours, a suspicion arises that although hostility toward religion is not the only element involved, it is surely a significant contributing factor.

Intellectuals who harbor religious prejudices will rarely admit to them, of course; they may not even acknowledge them to themselves. But there are often two reasons for what people do: the reasons they give and the real reasons.

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Scholars say textbooks censor out religion

By Paul C. Vitz

Are public school textbooks biased? Are they censored? The answer to both is yes. And the nature of the bias is clear: Religion...

While media attention has recently focused on efforts in California to reject some proposed public school textbooks because of their inadequate treatment of the theory of evolution, a different textbook dilemma has gone largely unnoticed.

Funded by a grant from the National Institute of Education, several colleagues and I recently conducted a study of textbooks to answer some basic questions. Are public school textbooks biased? Are they censored? The answer to both is yes. And the nature of the bias is clear: Religion, traditional family values, and conservative political and economic positions have been reliably excluded from children's textbooks. This exclusion is particularly disturbing because it is found in a system paid for by taxpayers, and one that claims, moreover, to be committed to impartial knowledge and accuracy.

A total of 60 representative social studies textbooks were carefully evaluated. In grades one through four these books introduce the child to U. S. society—to family life, community activities, ordinary economic transactions and some history. None of the books covering grades one through four contained one word referring to any religious activity in contemporary American life. For example, not one word referred to any child or adult who prayed, or who went to church or temple. A few rare pictures (without captions) did depict Jewish or Catholic religious scenes, but not one word or image in these books showed any form of contemporary Protestantism.

The family was often mentioned in these books, but the idea that marriage is the origin and foundation of the family was never presented. The words "marriage," "wedding," "husband," "wife," did not occur once in these books. Nowhere was it suggested that being a mother or homemaker was a worthy and important role for a woman.

The fifth grade U. S. history texts included modest coverage of religion in Colonial America and at the early Southwest missions; however the treatment of the past 100 years was so devoid of reference to religion as to give the impression that it has ceased to exist in America. The sixth grade books dealt with world history or world culture, and they neglected, often to the point of serious distortion, Jewish and Christian historical contributions.

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Social studies books frequently selected individuals to serve as "role models," that is, to represent important, admirable Americans. Such figures were given a photo and special coverage of their lives. For grades one through six, 23 role models who had political or ideological significance for U. S. society since World War II were identified. Typical selections were Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., Margaret Mead, Rachel Carson and Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley. Only one individual (Clare Booth Luce) was a self-identified conservative. Most of the role models were Democrats and the few Republicans (former Rep. Millicent Fenwick and Sen. Nancy Kassenbaum) were women. Not one contemporary role model was conservative and male, no person from business since World War II was selected.

High school books covering U. S. history were also studied, and none came close to adequately presenting the major religious events of the past 100 years. There was not one reference to a prominent preacher, such as Billy Graham or Norman Vincent Peale. Most disturbing was the constant omission of references to the large role that religion has always played in America. This fact has been seen as a fundamental feature of American life by foreign observers since de Tocqueville.

A total of 670 stories and articles from grades three and six readers were also analyzed. A very small number of stories had religion as a secondary theme. Again, there was not one reference to Protestant religious life.

Another notable finding was that business was ignored. There were no Horatio Alger stories! No story featured an immigrant who made good in America in business or in a profession. No story featured marriage or motherhood as important and positive, nor did any story give any positive significance to babies. But there were many aggressively feminist stories that openly derided traditional manhood.

These results make it clear that public school textbooks commonly exclude the history, heritage, beliefs and values of millions of Americans.

Taken all together, these results make it clear that public school textbooks commonly exclude the history, heritage, beliefs and values of millions of Americans. Those who believe in free enterprise are not represented, those who believe in the traditional family are not represented, and those who are committed to their religious traditions—at the very least as part of the historical record!—are not represented. Since most of these citizens are taxed hundreds or even thousands of dollars a year to support public schools, this is a serious injustice. Quite simply, this is "taxation without representation." There is also a deeper injustice: Namely, the minds of many children are being coerced against the will of their parents since only the liberal portion of the spectrum of history and values is presented in these books.

What should be done? Obviously our textbooks must be changed to present a more truthful, balanced picture of America's past and present. But a fair presentation of all of the ethnic, racial, political and religious traditions important in American life is possible only at a level so shallow as to be meaningless or offensive. So parents should have greater freedom to choose their child's school, and with it the chance to sustain their values and heritage. This would not only help create new and more competitive schools—it would also support new publishers and more varied textbooks. Today, the vast majority of private schools must acquire textbooks designed solely for use in the public schools. Since the freedom to choose a different school should be available for all—not merely for the wealthy, as it is today—some kind of government voucher or tuition tax credit is needed. We must finally recognize that the very pluralism of American life requires pluralism in American schools.

An expansion of the freedom of parents to choose will end or limit the present injustices. Besides, isn't increasing freedom and reducing injustice what the American way is really about?

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