



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO PRESENT CONFLICT ABOUT EDUCATION AND RELIGION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Controversies have arisen regularly for the last two centuries in most Western democracies over the role which religion should play in education, especially that of children. The whole world has been following the debates in France about whether pupils may wear tokens of their religious identity in public schools, while ten and twenty years ago massive demonstrations in the same country protested proposed changes in the relationship of government to private religious schools, as occurred also in Spain in 1984. In some other Western democracies, religious instruction is provided as part of the regular public school program, with students or their parents allowed some choice among alternatives. In English schools, each school day is supposed to include a daily act of worship “of a predominantly Christian character”, even in schools where most of the children are Muslim or Hindu.

Why is religion such a presence in public schools in Germany and England, while it is banned completely from public schools in the United States, a country where religious practice has remained much stronger? Why, given the strict secularity of public schools in the United States, are Muslim girls allowed

without question to wear the *hijab* while in France, with a similar “republican” tradition of schooling, is it a continuing source of controversy? Why have most Western democracies organized their systems of publicly-funded education on a religiously-pluralistic basis –the Netherlands, Belgium, Northern Ireland, Australia, much of Canada, for example– while in others, such as the United States and Italy, a system of government monopoly of the provision of public education is only beginning to change?

In the United States, the First Amendment to the *Constitution* has been interpreted to forbid any level of government from engaging in or directly supporting religious practices, either in public school classrooms and assemblies or –until very recently– through financial support to private religious schools. In short, the American government is required to be neutral between various religious beliefs, and also to be neutral between belief and non-belief. Schools operated directly by government must act in ways consistent with that requirement, and so must each of their teachers. They must not seek to promote any particular religious belief, nor may they in any way promote secularism (a way of understanding the world that explicitly rejects any idea of divine purpose or meaning) in preference to religion.

This does not mean that teachers should not mention religion, should not present in accurate ways the role of religious belief and religious institutions in history and in contemporary societies, including that of the United States, or should fail to mention religious motivations in discussions of how we should make decisions about sexuality, social justice, and other issues. The Supreme Court has noted that it would be an inadequate education which did not give students an understanding of the role that religion has played in history and plays in society. After all, as Justice Clark wrote for the majority in an important case:

“one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study



for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment” (*Abington v. Schempp* (374 U.S. 203 (1963))).

Justice Brennan, one of the most liberal on the Court, pointed out in the same case that:

“the holding of the Court today plainly does not foreclose teaching *about* the Holy Scriptures or about the differences between religious sects in classes in literature or history. Indeed, it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion”.

It is entirely possible to teach about religion as a social reality, and about the scriptures of different religious groups, without seeking to convert anyone or to favor any particular faith. That has sometimes been done in American public schools, and good curriculum and materials exist to support teachers who seek to do so in an objective way. But few do, lest they offend, nor is there room for that in the curriculum of most schools. Until curriculum standards and textbooks change—which is beginning to happen—we cannot expect much better, and many American parents believe that the public schools are hostile to religion.

II. PRE-HISTORY OF CONFLICT OVER RELIGION AND EDUCATION

Conflict over how to accommodate religious convictions in formal schooling is a recent phenomenon in the long sweep of human history; so, curiously, is the idea that schooling should have a fundamentally religious purpose, in the sense of seeking to develop religious convictions.

As writing systems developed in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, scribal schools taught the specialized craft of writing and reading; in some cases these were sponsored by government to

ensure a supply of officials capable of recording tax receipts and other administrative work. Ability to read and write was also needed by many “religious professionals”, just as medieval cathedral schools taught Latin to future priests: these were simply skills needed for the exercise of a religious function, but not intended to promote religious conviction as such.

When we encounter what we would now consider “religious education” in ancient texts, it is described as a function of the family (as in Deuteronomy 6) or of participation in religious ceremonies, not as an aspect of formal schooling. This was also true of the schooling provided in the Greco-Roman world; we find, in the discussion by Isocrates, Plato, and others, the idea that its purpose is to build upon the moral character already formed at home, but not to shape religious convictions or a fundamental understanding of the world. It was through participation in civic life and in religious ceremonies and drama festivals that what we would today consider religious education was provided.

In general, distinctively and self-consciously Christian schooling did not emerge during the centuries when and in countries where the Roman Empire survived. Not that teaching was neglected in the churches, even during difficult times. In one of the epistles of Clement, the third or fourth bishop of Rome, written in about 90 A.D., the Christians in Corinth are urged

“Let us instruct the young in the fear of God, let us lead our wives to that which is good... Let our children share in the instruction which is in Christ” (*Clement*, xxi, 6, 8; see also lxii, 3).

The Greek word translated in each case by “instruct” is a form of *paideia*, the evocative word which, as Werner Jaeger has shown, means far more than simple instruction and is a central concept in Hellenic thought. “Education in Christ”, while it posited a fundamentally different goal than, for example, that of the Athenian gentleman (*kalos kagathos*) five centuries earlier, had at least this much in common with the Hellenistic under-



standing of education, that it was not the same thing as instruction “to perform certain definite external duties” but rather was concerned with the shaping of a life. And it had this in common, as well, that it was not primarily something that was expected to occur in school. “Education in Christ” would occur through the whole life of the local Christian community, including its worship, its charitable activities, its fellowship, as well as its baptismal instruction, since “the early generations of Christians had not worked out any specifically Christian form of education, any more than they had worked out a Christian system of politics” (Marrou, 319).

The “catechesis” provided to new Christians, whether adults or children, was supplemental to the instruction which Christian children received (as their families’ means allowed) in ordinary schools of the sort which their non-Christian peers attended. “Augustine... never proclaimed the need for separate parochial schools. To him and to others, the Roman schools remained sufficient, if supplemented by catechizing in the faith” (Graff, 36).

Children of Christian families read the same pagan texts that had been read for hundreds of years; in schools that provided advanced instruction, Christian authors might be added, as is evident from papyri containing them along with Menander’s comedies and other traditional material (Cribiore, 200). Not that this easy acceptance of the pre-Christian curriculum was never criticized. One of the critics was the Assyrian Christian Tatian (120-173), who challenged the Greeks, “What noble thing have you produced by your pursuit of philosophy? Who of your most eminent men have been free from vain boasting?” Tertullian (155-220), one of the early Latin theologians, famously asked, “What indeed does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?” (in Elias, 26). Similarly, a manual for Christian living, in 211,

advised converts who were teachers to find a profession more appropriate for a believer (Paul, 22).

Other early theologians, however, were convinced that Christians could benefit from what was ethically sound in the pagan authors without accepting their underlying beliefs. Pagan philosophy, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150 - ca. 220) wrote in an influential treatise on education, was “a slender spark, capable of being fanned into flame, a trace of wisdom and an impulse from God”. Clement “portrays Christ in his role as the divine educator” (Jaeger 1981, 60); study of pagan philosophy would be a preparation for penetrating to the depths of Christ’s message. It was in fact better, his successor Origen (died ca. 254) argued, to come to understand this message through reason than simply to accept it by simple faith (Paul, 17). Augustine (354-430) pointed out, in *Christian Education* (ii, 28):

“that the pagans have dedicated temples to Justice and Virtue and prefer to worship in the form of stones things which ought to be carried in the heart is no reason we should abandon justice and virtue. On the contrary, let everyone who is a good and true Christian understand that truth belongs to his Master, wherever it is found. And while he recognizes and acknowledges truth, even in the pagans’ religious literature, let him reject their superstitious imaginings at the same time” (in Howie, 351).

After all, “if those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said anything which is true and in harmony with our faith, we should not shrink away from it but appropriate it for our own use, as though we were taking it from people who were in unlawful possession of it”. Nor is the study of the best of pagan literature simply permitted; according to Augustine, “the souls of those who have not drunk from the fountains of the liberal arts are, as it were, hungry and famished; ... the minds of such people are full of diseases, which betray their malnutrition” (in Howie, 363, 18).



Over the next thousand years of European history, the Church frequently expressed its concern about schooling and took many practical measures to extend it to at least a small part of the population, both in the context of monastic life and also as an activity associated with cathedrals and parish churches. This schooling was not designed to promote a religious worldview, which was taken for granted. When a handful of boys were gathered together to learn Latin or the proper way to conduct the liturgies, the “school” that resulted was a utilitarian rather than an ideological institutions, offering *instruction* with little emphasis on *education* in the broader sense. The church needed priests, and priests needed to be literate to administer the sacraments and to read the appointed scriptures.

The education provided in monasteries was designed to enable novices to participate in the regular cycle of chanting the psalms in chapel, and to make use of devotional writing. The founder of monasticism in the West, Benedict of Nursia (480-547), required that monasteries of the Benedictine Order provide education to all of their novices. Isidore of Seville (570-636), compiler of a very influential encyclopedia, pressed his fellow-bishops to establish schools, while in England Bede (c. 673-735) wrote textbooks on grammar, poetry, and science for the education of monks.

Nor, at least in theory, was schooling confined to those in monasteries. A Church council in 529 called upon “all parish priests to gather some boys round them as lectors, so that they may give them a Christian upbringing, teach them the Psalms and the lessons of Scripture and the whole law of the Lord and so prepare successors to themselves” (Marrou, 336).

Members of the nobility began, in some cases, to have their sons taught at schools operated by monasteries. This began to be a feature of Irish society in the seventh century, of Anglo-Saxon in the eighth, and of the “Carolingian Renaissance” in France in the ninth century. “Charlemagne was... aware of the cultural chaos caused by the painful era of weak government, civil strife,

and religious decline that preceded [his] accession to power. He openly conceded that his predecessors had neglected learning, complained of the crude Latin written by monks with whom he corresponded, and charged bishops who were otherwise assiduous in their conduct with neglecting the education of the clergy” (Sullivan, 148).

While (at least sporadically) kings like Charlemagne sought to arrange for the schooling of future elites, there was nothing like a government concern for popular schooling. What was provided before the rise of cities was under church auspices. Again and again, church councils as well as local bishops made efforts to ensure that basic instruction was provided, though the results were extremely uneven and generally ineffective except where social conditions made literacy a valuable asset. The Third Lateran Council of 1179 ordered that each cathedral appoint a teacher for poor children and orphans whose parents could not pay for their schooling. This was extended by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which required that each parish (within the limit of its resources) provide a teacher for poor children, so that children would learn to sing and to make the liturgical responses, and so that promising candidates for the priesthood could be identified.

The constant repetition of these admonitions is evidence not for the flourishing of instruction but for the contrary. Even many priests were barely literate and could not understand the words of the Latin Mass which they celebrated, and few preached or taught the laity entrusted to them. During the later Middle Ages, faced with the challenge of staffing parishes as the population grew, “the church began to recruit more of its clerics from lower in the social structure. In some small ways, literacy began to be associated with limited opportunities for social mobility and changes in position” (Graff, 54). A man of peasant background who had learned to read and write Latin could aspire to a variety of careers, many of which were filled by priests with no pastoral



responsibilities. Thus studying for the priesthood provided, for those with an aptitude for academic work, an opportunity for considerable advancement. Studies of literacy in the late medieval period have demonstrated, however, that these efforts were very uneven from one region to another.

While in recent centuries seminaries to train priests have placed a strong emphasis on “spiritual formation”, on the special vocation of being a priest, the training of priests in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages seems to have been a more matter-of-fact business. If a boy had an aptitude for study, he was likely to be trained for the priesthood, though perhaps with no strong sense of calling to actually become a priest.

One of the most distinctive features of the Renaissance of the fifteenth century was a rediscovery of the classical concern for schooling as a vehicle for *education* in a broader sense.

“The overwhelming emphasis of medieval scholastic education was on practical, pre-professional, and scientific studies; it prepared men to be doctors, lawyers, or professional theologians and taught primarily from approved textbooks in logic, natural philosophy, medicine, law, and theology. Humanist educators reacted against this utilitarian approach to education. They believed education should have a moral purpose and should fit youths to take up leadership roles in courts and civic life. The best way to bring about this result, they believed, was to immerse young men and women in the best literature of classical antiquity, especially its poetry, history, oratory, and moral philosophy” (Kallendorf, vii).

This humanist education –similar to that recommended by Isocrates– was intended “to create a particular type of person: men and women who would be virtuous because they had read and identified with powerful examples of classical virtue; who would be prudent because they had extended their human experience into the distant past through the study of history; and who would be eloquent, able to communicate virtue and prudence to others, because they had studied the most eloquent writers and speakers of the past” (Kallendorf, viif). Most humanist schools

were formally and explicitly Christian, like St. Paul's in London, founded in the early 16th century. Instruction stressed learning to write and speak Ciceronian Latin, but also made extensive use of Christian authors (Bolgar, 338, 341). This approach was promoted in England and then in France by the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540) who, like other humanists, urged that girls as well as boys be educated, and who proposed a system of universal basic schooling with public funding for teachers.

III. BEGINNING OF CONFLICT OVER RELIGION AND EDUCATION

While Humanism placed a new emphasis upon elite schooling as *education* and not merely *instruction*, it was the Reformation and Counter-Reformation which gave a great impetus to popular education, and at the same time made schooling a focal point of controversy. In some territories which became Protestant, there was an initial decline of schooling, since many of the endowments that had supported schools were confiscated as part of the general seizure of church properties. In addition, the Reformation slogan of "the priesthood of all believers" convinced some that no training was required for the ministry. The followers of the radical reformers Karlstadt and Münzer, for example, persuaded many students to abandon university study on the grounds that such learning was not needed since the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth. Luther himself felt obliged to respond to these misinterpretations of his intentions, insisting that a true understanding of the Gospel should lead to a renewed commitment to education, from municipal officials as well as from parents. Luther's great contribution to popular education in Germany was through his hymns and his Bible translation, which created for the first time a widespread interest in being able to read.



“Luther made necessary what Gutenberg made possible: by putting the Scriptures at the center of Christian eschatology, the Reformation made a technical invention into a spiritual obligation... If the Reformation is not the sole origin of this change [in literacy], it was certainly the most spectacular sign of it, a revolution in society even more than in the Church. The proof is the rapidity with which the Catholic Church adapted itself to the new socio-cultural conditions: to respond to the Protestant challenge, it had to accept the battlefield of its adversary, fight the Reformation with the Reformation’s weapons” (Furet and Ozouf, 71-72).

Careful research on the literacy rate in France during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries shows that it was significantly higher in those communities with strong Protestant traditions. This was true even in areas where Protestantism had been suppressed or driven out, because of the efforts made by the Catholic Church to provide education capable of countering the Protestant influence. French Protestants had a strong tradition of schooling their children; for example, they supported four schools in Metz in 1562, ten in 1594, and nineteen in 1662; when the government of Louis XIV made it difficult to operate Protestant schools, individuals or groups of parents would employ a tutor to teach their children rather than send them to Catholic schools (Grosperin, 13, 18).

Schooling became a priority in Protestant areas, since each person was expected to read the Bible for himself... or herself. John Calvin (1509-1564) had an even greater effect upon the future of popular education than did Luther, to judge by the areas with the highest literacy by the end of the 18th century. It was in Geneva, in the Netherlands, in Scotland, in New England, among the Huguenots in France and in exile, and in Prussia, that the most concerted and successful efforts were made to achieve universal literacy for the sake of each individual’s salvation and sanctification through Bible-reading. These were all areas where Protestantism was in the Calvinist or Reformed tradition.

“It was the Protestant heresy which democratized writing among the masses... after the end of the 16th century, Catholics after [the Council of] Trent were in agreement with their Protestant rivals: literacy is a universal vocation. This was the great revolution, separating two epochs... The history of mass literacy, like that of the school, has its origins in the conflictual but nevertheless complicit confrontation of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation” (Furet and Ozouf, 355, 70).

The Catholic Counter-Reformation was in important ways itself an educational movement. Church leaders insisted, at the Fifth Lateran Council (1514), that schools should teach prayers, the creed, hymns, and stories about the saints, implying that this was not already common practice (Paul, 158). The Council of Trent (1545-1563), called to respond to Luther’s challenge, took a number of measures to make the Church’s influence on the laity more effective than it had ever been during the Middle Ages. The council issued a catechism in 1566 to make preaching and teaching more consistent, and the promotion of education in the articles of faith was made an obligation upon all bishops.

The Jesuit Order, founded in 1540, became the major provider of secondary education in Catholic countries. Jesuit schools, of which there were 245 across Western Europe by 1599 and 444 by 1626, followed the humanistic model. While the Jesuits provided essentially an elite education, other orders were founded to assist the educational efforts of local pastors, most notably in the cities where the religious habits of peasant life no longer sustained religious practice. The Ursulines, an order of teaching sisters founded in Italy in 1535 and then in France in 1609, were committed to the education of poor children, though the good quality of their schools soon made them popular with the middle class; the same process of upward mobility from an original commitment to the poor occurred with the Piarists, an order founded in 1602 to educate poor boys. The Oratorians, founded by Philip Neri, also expanded their work into France, where they operated over thirty secondary schools and two teacher training institutions.



“The multiplication of Catholic primary schools [*petites écoles*] starting in the second half of the 16th century is due in large part to the new situation of the confrontation of the rival confessions. In the disputed regions, it was not possible to leave to the Huguenots the monopoly of elementary instruction... It was therefore with the intention of rooting out heresy rather than that of raising the cultural level of the nation that the State intervened by legislation, in a completely unprecedented fashion, in the organization and expansion of primary schools, while however leaving the entire financial charge on communities” (in Groperrin, 15).

Thus the Congregation of Notre Dame, founded in 1598, and several other orders of women teachers were established in regions of France where the competition between Catholics and Protestants was most lively (Groperrin, 130-32).

The instruction provided in these schools was concerned above all –and even more than in contemporary Protestant schools– with developing piety and loyalty to the Catholic Church. The charter issued by the Pope, in 1616, for the Ursulines in Toulouse required them to provide:

“free instruction to little girls, above all through teaching them, in addition to piety and virtue, all that is worthy of a Christian maiden: how to examine her conscience, to confess her sins, to receive communion, to hear the Holy Mass, to pray to God, to recite the rosary, to meditate and read spiritual books, to sing hymns, to flee vice and opportunities for it, to do works of mercy, to manage a household, and finally to do all the actions of a good Christian... secondly, to bring [pupils] more eagerly to this school and to draw them away from heretical schools, they shall teach them to read, write, do needle-work of various types, in short all the sorts of work which are decent and appropriate for a well-brought-up young girl” (in Groperrin, 15).

This theme of using secular instruction as a means of attracting pupils appears frequently in the mission statements of Catholic *petites écoles*. For bishops intent upon reinforcing the commitment of Catholics and converting Protestants, extension of the network of schools was the most important instrument. In the

diocese of Montpellier, for example, the number of such schools was expanded from 47 to 86 in a decade (Grosperin, 16).

The Brothers of the Christian Schools, the leading order teaching boys, founded in 1683 by Jean Baptiste de la Salle (1651-1719), was a lay order under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and committed to providing elementary education free of charge to the poor.

As a result of this emphasis upon teaching religion, and with the support of these new teaching orders, “after 1650, all French dioceses seem to have had legislation imposing catechism as a duty on parish priests and parents” (Graff, 148). Not all of the initiatives, indeed, were taken by the new orders; in the diocese of Lyon, for example, it was a diocesan priest, Charles Démia (1637-1689) who founded sixteen free schools for boys and girls, as well as offering teacher training at the diocesan seminary.

It is in this period that we can see the religious content of schooling –previously taken for granted as the air which society breathed– coming to be an issue. “The Reformation raised for everyone, even the ignorant, the problem of doctrine” (Furet and Ozouf, 70).

The effort to compete with Protestantism on –so to speak– its own ground led to what may be the earliest mandatory school attendance law, in the 1690, when Louis XIV required Protestant parents to send their children to Catholic schools. Coming to the French throne after a number of decades of intermittent civil war, some of it with religious pretexts, the king’s “concern for indivisibility extended to the domain of conscience, disallowing even the division between the interior conviction and exterior conformity” (Van Kley, 39).

As he sought to achieve religious unity, Louis XIV turned to compulsory education, legislating for the first time in a field which the monarchy had always before left to the exclusive initiative of the Catholic Church (Grosperin, 17). When the king repealed the Edict of Nantes which had granted toleration to



Protestants, in 1685, he devoted articles 6 and 7 of the Edict of Fontainebleau to ensuring that these schools could not continue and that Protestant parents, on pain of a very large fine, would raise their children “in the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion” (Garrison, 12).

In an administrative instruction issued in 1698, he required every Catholic parish to maintain a school (“to the extent that it is possible”) and all parents (“especially those whose parents profess the supposedly reformed religion”) to send their children to these schools until the age of 14 unless they had made other acceptable (that is, Catholic) arrangements (Grosperin, 17). Along with all the other pressures –including military compulsion– which forced them either to go into exile or to go through the motions of conversions to Catholicism, parents had to suffer the “bitterness of seeing their children in the hands of the Jesuits, Oratorians, and other [Catholic] educators” (Garrison, 264).

“It was thus with the intention of stamping out heresy and not that of raising the cultural level of the nation that the State intervened through law, in a completely unprecedented fashion, in the organization and expansion of primary schools [*petites écoles*], while moreover leaving all the financial burden upon communities” (Grosperin, 18).

Municipal government sometimes sought to exercise a degree of supervision over the many schools operated by individuals as well as by religious orders and parishes, not to ensure quality but to prevent schools operated by “heretics or libertines”, which had not been authorized by the designated diocesan official (Grosperin, 146, 56).

The “second Reformation” of Pietism gave new energy to the effort, spearheaded by local pastors and by devout members of the landed nobility, to provide popular schooling. Pietism grew out of the work of Jacob Spener in the late 17th century, seeking to renew the fervor of the Lutheran churches with an emphasis upon

personal devotion and sanctified living. Schools inspired by this new emphasis upon religious experience and a virtuous life were established by A. H. Francke (1664-1727) in Halle. The goal of schooling, wrote Francke in his instructions for the schools for orphans, was that children come to a living knowledge of God and to a solidly established Christian character. He founded the first such school in 1695, and over the following decades was able to expand his efforts considerably through charitable contributions. Pupils in these schools should also learn to read and write and to do arithmetic, while those who went on to the secondary level should study Latin, Greek and Hebrew (text in Reble 1999, 139-47).

Francke's efforts were supported by Prussian king Frederick William I, and the model spread throughout Protestant Germany, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and the German settlements in the American colonies. The Methodist movement, and "revivals" within the established churches in England and the United States, were echoes of this Pietist movement, and led to founding similar schools (Ward, 79-82). Nor was this movement of educational renewal limited to Protestant countries; Catholic education reformers in Austria and Bavaria were often in close contact with their Pietist counterparts.

IV. ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE EDUCATION STATE

It is an apparent paradox that the 18th century was a period of unprecedented criticism of religion but also of unprecedented religious enthusiasm, of Pietism, great revivals, and the Methodist movement, in Protestant areas where the established churches had grown cold and formalistic. This is explained in part by the fact that the anti-clerical Enlightenment was largely a feature of Catholic countries and –though it included a handful of atheists– was primarily directed against the authority and the



social and political role of the Catholic Church. Historian Peter Gay, no apologist for religion, has pointed out that:

“[m]uch of the decency in seventeenth-century civilization, much of its intelligence and critical acumen, was exercised by Christians for Christian purposes. And it was largely these Christians who established the atmosphere of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century into which the philosophes were born, when manners were beginning to be polished, toleration became fashionable, and pulpits filled with Latitudinarians, Arminians, and rational Catholics” (Gay 1977, 325).

Many *philosophes* and their admirers, however, saw the Catholic Church, even in the milder form characteristic of the 18th century, as the enemy of reform and reason itself. La Chalotais, for example, complained that immense problems had arisen in France because instruction had remained under the control of the religious orders; “the well-being of society manifestly requires a civil education, and if ours is not secularized, we will live forever under the slavery of pedantry” (in Lehembre, 13). The ‘enlightened’ elites were unfair in their accusation that the Catholic Church had been a force against popular enlightenment. In fact, the Church, “far from being unanimously that obscurantist force in favor of popular ignorance, had animated a great effort of elementary education, had invented and given dignity to the identity of schoolmaster [*le personnage du maître d’école*], ancestor of the teacher. If there were, in pre-revolutionary society, forces hostile to the schooling of the people, these forces were generally recruited among the administrative and political elites and among the intelligentsia of the Enlightenment” (Furet and Ozouf, 75).

The desire for reform, however, often identified as its primary opponent what it took to be the conservative influence of revealed religion and of the churches. Education, it was believed, could dispel the clouds of superstition and lay the basis for a “rational religion” and human happiness. As Chisick points out, “by defining popular education as the freeing of the people from

superstition and consequent oppression, [the enlightened elite] prejudged the question” (9). This was a period when, as La Harpe would point out in 1797, for enlightened opinion “the word ‘religion’ was effaced from the French language... replaced generically by that of ‘fanaticism’” (in McMahan, 117).

Can an authoritarian state be an agent of liberation? Helvétius and other *philosophes* saw no difficulty, since in their minds oppression was identified completely with revealed religion. As Tocqueville pointed out:

“[O]ne of the earliest enterprises of the revolutionary movement was a concerted attack on the Church, and among the many passions enflamed by it the first to be kindled and the last to be extinguished was of an antireligious nature. Even after the urge to a new freedom had spent its force... the revolt against Church authority lost nothing of its virulence” (Tocqueville, 5).

An anti-*philosophe* journalist warned, in 1772, that “if the wise philosophes of the century, who demand tolerance with so much ardor and interest... were ever themselves at the head of government, armed with the sword of sovereignty or of law, they would perhaps be the first to deal severely with those who had the audacity to contradict their opinions” (McMahan, 45, 103). A similar warning was expressed by the German Albrecht von Haller in 1759: “Among the most outspoken freethinkers we encounter a desire for persecution that is as forceful as it could be on the part of a Dominican, even though, for lack of opportunity, it can be expressed only through abusive language. Passionate zealots like Helvetius and Voltaire would initiate persecutions and even cause blood to flow on scaffolds, if they had the power to do so” (in Groen van Prinsterer, 144). Not many years would pass before they had that power, at least in France.

Many historians have assumed, like Peter Gay, “that the philosophes wished to ‘transform silent subjects into selfreliant citizens’ and that they sought to do so by means of education. Gay even calls this ‘the logic of enlightenment’”. In reality,



however, Chisick found, this was far from being the case. They did not support enlightenment in the sense of “developing a critical, secular and analytic habit of mind, allowing the mind to encounter all known facts and letting the argument lead where it may”, but were rather in favor of using schooling as a means of control and indeed of social progress through the banishment of superstition and other forms of backwardness. “To the question, ‘Should the people be enlightened?’ virtually all spokesmen of the Enlightenment answered with an emphatic ‘No’. To the question, ‘Should the people be educated?’ they responded with a reserved ‘Yes’” (Chisick 1981, 263, 274). The goal was not to enable the common people to think for themselves, but rather to make them more efficient instruments of the economy, more obedient subjects.

While discussions on the part of political theorists had, for centuries, focused on preparing future leaders –on the education of the prince– there was a notable shift at the time of the Enlightenment to concern about the education of the common people (Puelles Benítez, 30). This emphasis had nothing to do with egalitarianism or democracy; it was concerned with social control. The enlightened elite’s “writings and letters show them as despising the people as little higher than animals, because they were illiterate and unable to reason. This was not a base on which to build a new enlightened social order” (Graff, 178).

Contrary to what might be assumed, the religiously-motivated writers about popular education took a more expansive view of its possibilities than did those who were more thoroughly secular. For the Jansenists and other religiously-serious writers identified by Chisick, the advocacy of schooling was based upon convictions about the absolute spiritual value of individuals of all social classes in their relationship with God. By contrast, “men who valued the *lumières* [enlightened ideas] were reluctant to educate the lower classes”. “Man belongs to God before belonging to the state”, one of the devout Christians wrote.

“There is, one cannot deny it, even in relation to education, an order of duties independent of the laws and the constitutions of states” (Chisick 1981, 127, 99).

This insistence upon a universal right to the education required to be a good Christian was not necessarily, it should be noted, associated with a concern to change social conditions or facilitate economic mobility. The same association of religious fervor with support for popular education was characteristic of the Pietist movement and of the Great Awakening and Methodist movements in the English-speaking world. Of course, having been taught to read in order to read the Bible, many individuals also went on to use that skill in ways which benefitted them in this world as well as (presumably) the next.

In his 1755 discourse, written as an article for the *Encyclopédie*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau placed great stress on education under State direction as essential to a sound political system.

“To form citizens [he wrote] is not the work of a day, and in order to have men it is necessary to educate them when they are children... government ought the less indiscriminately to abandon to the intelligence and patriotism and prejudices of fathers the education of their children, as that education is of still greater importance to the State than to the fathers... Public education... under regulations prescribed by the government, and under magistrates established by the Sovereign, is one of the fundamental rules of popular or legitimate government” (147-49).

Through such a system of education, Rousseau argued, the future citizen could be taught “to will nothing contrary to the will of society”. So important was this instrument of government, subordinated to “the Magistrates destined to preside over such an education”, that it should be considered “certainly the most important business of the State” (149).

The same emphasis upon education as an instrument of government marks Rousseau’s most influential political writing, *The Social Contract*:



“He who dares to undertake the making of a people's institutions ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being; of altering man's constitution for the purpose of strengthening it... He must, in a word, take away from man his own resources and give him instead new ones alien to him, and incapable of being made use of without the help of other men... each citizen is nothing and can do nothing without the rest” (214).

Taken as a whole, Rousseau's writing about civic education seems to support the charge that he sees it as a form of indoctrination into loyalty to the State at the expense of all other attachments, and thus as a major step in the direction of a totalitarian system with no scope for the institutions of a pluralistic civil society (Talmon). This was certainly the view, not only of Edmund Burke, but of important 19th century French historians such as Edgar Quinet (who referred to Rousseau as “the legislator of the Revolution”).

How seriously the radical Jacobins of the Revolution took this mission, anticipated by Rousseau, of reshaping and mobilizing the entire population is evident from the insistence of Robespierre's closest ally, Saint-Just, that: “You must punish not only traitors, but even the indifferent; you must punish whoever is passive in the Republic and does nothing for her” (Saint-Just, 23). “Punish”, during the Terror, was not a word to be taken lightly: it usually meant the guillotine.

The history of education for the next two hundred years, in France and a dozen other western nations, could be written in terms of the struggle between government and churches—above all but not exclusively the Catholic Church—to employ the instrument of schooling as a means of influencing how children and youth would perceive the world and their own place in it. The ambition was, on both sides, entirely understandable. Schools seemed, and seem still, to offer to the State an opportunity to achieve “a certain government of minds”, in Guizot's phrase from

the 1830s, which would make less necessary the employment of police to maintain order; thus Horace Mann and other advocates of an increased state role in education have often promised that it would inevitably lead to a great reduction in the need for prisons. Churches and other religious organizations, on the other hand, have often insisted that religious perspectives should not be relegated to the private sphere but should permeate all of education, lest they be seen by children as marginal and irrelevant. Governments have often claimed that their own schools were “neutral”, while religious groups have retorted that no education worthy of the name is ever lacking a perspective on the world and the purposes of life.

A) *France*

It is in the education projects of the French Revolution—drawing upon at least some of the positions explored during the previous century—that we find the first well-articulated project to make secular, state-controlled schooling a replacement for Catholic and Protestant schools. This new development involved far more than a new administrative arrangement; it represented a claim to shape the beliefs and loyalties of the people through their children. Although adumbrated by Plato and by Rousseau, it was in the 1790s that for the first time the State set itself up as a rival to religion and in effect defined for itself a religious role.

The radical leaders of the Revolution, while making every effort to suppress Christian belief and practice, were convinced that something would have to be put in its place. The pageants staged to celebrate “the victory that Reason has achieved over the prejudices of eighteen centuries” were replaced, at Robespierre’s insistence, by something much closer to the liturgies of a deistic religion (Ozouf 1976). The secular, ‘Republican’, Feast of Reason, celebrated in Notre Dame Cathedral in November 1793,



was followed by the Feast of the Supreme Being in June 1794, seen by Robespierre's ally Saint-Just as "the beginnings of a pedagogic program that might truly inculcate virtue in a corrupt world. Here at last was Sparta plus song" (Billington, 69). The impulse for this new religion was given by Robespierre, who was convinced that the Cult of Reason had been too secular to have the desired effect of replacing Catholic worship as a source of social unity and moral authority. The revolutionaries wanted not only to liberate the people from the yoke of theocracy, as Marie-Joseph Chénier put it in a much-admired discourse, but also to create an equally strong (we might say blind) attachment to the Republic itself.

"For those Jacobins who shared Robespierre's vision, there were two necessary stages to this enterprise of moral regeneration. First, the appalling cultural anarchy unleashed by the dechristianisers... had to be stopped in its tracks; second, it had to give way to an imposing and orderly program of republican edification. That program would leave no part of a citizen's life untouched" (Schama 1989, 829; see Ozouf 1976 for details).

This can perhaps be seen most clearly in the textbooks that the Committee on Public Education established by the revolutionary National Convention provided to replace the Catholic catechisms, lives of saints, and other "poison for young republicans". The new texts, for which substantial cash prizes were offered by the Convention, included an edition of the *Rights of Man and the Citizen*, of the *Constitution*, and a specially prepared book called *The Heroic Traits of French Republicans* which was intended to replace the lives of the saints. There was a *Republican Catechism*, a *Republican Epistles and Gospels*, a *Catechism of Republican Morality*, a *Republican Thought for Each Day*, a *Manual for Young Republicans*, and a *Republican Grammar*, together with other works along the same line. The Convention also sponsored a variety of "service books" for use during the celebrations each *décadi*; intended to replace the Sunday mass in popular life, these

services required *Hymns and Prayers for Use in Temples of Reason*.

The *Republican Epistles and Gospels* devoted its first “epistle” to Rousseau, and its first “gospel” began by reporting that Jesus –the “revolutionary of Judea”– predicted that priests would always be scoundrels. The National Convention awarded the author 1,500 francs, a considerable sum (Babeau, 106-113; see also Pierre, 93).

As the Revolution passed out of its most radical phase and religious liberty returned, private schools –almost all explicitly Catholic– provided serious competition for the secular public schools. A study of nine departments found that 76.7% of the schools were private in 1798. Gradually the teaching orders were allowed to re-establish themselves, welcomed not only by parents but also by local officials who had been unable to staff schools with qualified substitutes. “The spectacular development of private education, begun in 1791-1792 and accelerated starting in 1795, compensated substantially for the undeniable decline of public schools” in the revolutionary period (Grevet, 145-46, 148).

Inevitably teachers in public schools, proclaiming their loyalty to the Republic, complained about this competition from “schools of fanaticism” and demanded that these rivals be suppressed. “Citizen legislators”, one complaining teacher wrote, “for how long will you permit true patriots to be oppressed?” He was facing competition from several priests and other persons who had organized schools to which many parents preferred to entrust their children, rather than to the “patriotic” school (Babeau, 143-49). Under the Directory, indeed, private schools were systematically investigated and many closed on the basis that they did not conform sufficiently to republican principles.

Despite the intermittent help of government, teachers of public schools in many areas found that parents were offended by the lack of religious instruction and were sending their children to the private alternatives which continued in the tradition of the pre-



revolutionary *petite école*. Inevitably, many public school teachers began to conform their teaching to that model. The secularization of public schools was abandoned and religious instruction officially restored to the program in 1801 (Grevet, 324, 326, 235), as Napoleon sought to stabilize French society as the basis for his own rule.

Obsessive anticlericalism was a major theme of French political life throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th, often bringing together activists who could agree on no other issue than their opposition to the influence of the Catholic Church. Popular schooling was the sphere where this concern was expressed most strongly, and the strong growth of Catholic teaching congregations around 1850 caused grave concern in these circles. Anticlericals assumed that the education received in Catholic schools would make their pupils unfit to be citizens. In a celebrated formulation in 1822, General Foy lamented that “they will have received in these establishments, which are not national, an instruction which is not national, and thus these establishments will have the effect of dividing France into two youths (*deux jeunesses*)” (in Rémond 1985, 114). A generation later, influential Catholic layman Charles Montalembert described “two armies face to face, each of about thirty to forty thousand men: the army of teachers and the army of priests. The demoralizing and anarchical army of teachers must be countered by the army of priests” (Ponteil, 230-31, 235).

It is in fact during this period that the term *laïque* (secular) began to be applied to a program of opposition to clerical influence on social institutions. “Anticlericalism”, Rémond points out, “is not religious indifference, quite the contrary”; it is more a counter-religion than a non-religion. The term itself began to be used around 1852 (Rémond 1985, 46, 0). Thus Arsène Meunier published a book entitled “struggle between the clerical principle and the secular principle in education” (1861), insisting that “the State is secular, and in consequence the instruction given in its

name must be secular, and if this word doesn't seem clear, we will say that it signifies for us that public education, without being irreligious, must forget all positive religion" (in Barbier, 7n). The word *laïcité* (secularity) has been traced to 1871, in connection with a debate about schools.

Not that this *laïc* position was neutral with respect to the worldview to be promoted in public schools. The Republicans who shaped French institutions in the last quarter of the 19th century "had all borrowed from [Auguste] Comte the idea that a *spiritual power* was necessary to establish a republic... and all ended by joining the Freemasons... and all wanted to make the School and the University this new Church" (Nicolet 1982, 156-57). "For Comte as for all his disciples, instruction and education—for the two are inseparable—were at the very base of the regeneration of humanity". Their educational program forbade "all illusory questioning about prime causes or final ends, which absolutely excluded all transcendence" (Nicolet 1985, 28).

The non-transcendent worldview promoted by state schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not hesitate to call itself a "religion of humanity", or a *foi laïque* in the title of a book by Ferdinand Buisson, long-time director of elementary education in France, or *A Common Faith* in the title of a book by America's John Dewey.

In the political struggles over education which troubled France for many decades—indeed, which have never really ceased—both sides invoked "freedom" as their guiding principle. "It was a conflict of two freedoms. Two divergent conceptions of liberty were in confrontation: one defended the right of [members of religious orders] to teach freely; the other sought to liberate the country from the grip of [teaching] congregations which surreptitiously educated youth in the 'hatred' of the Republic" (Baubérot 1990, 47).

Paradoxically, as Charles Renouvier and other moderate anticlericals had warned (Blais, 323), measures to drive religion



out of the public schools actually had the effect of strengthening alternative Catholic education. Abolition of the public funding of the salaries of bishops and priests, which had prevented effective resistance to the measures secularizing public schools in the 1880s, freed them to make Catholic schools a priority. In areas of strong religious practice many new schools were established (Déloye, 233). Faced with the refusal of Catholic schooling to disappear, in 1909 some secular activists began to advocate a state monopoly of schooling (Ozouf 1982, 231). Opponents of religion were found not only in the masonic lodges but also in more than a thousand organizations of “freethinkers”, “pursuing ardently the completion of the work of the French Revolution and intervening in all sectors of the life of the country to secularize the State and the society, to ‘ensure the complete *laïcité* of the French spirit”. Educational freedom, they insisted, was merely a sophism as long as there was a church seeking to distort the souls of children. “There can be no freedom in the presence of clericalism” (Lalouette, 292).

Gradually, the political climate grew less polarized, and compromises became possible. Supporters of subsidies for private schools were able, under the Fifth Republic, to achieve passage of the *Loi Debré*, adopted December 31st, 1959. As Prime Minister Michel Debré said in parliamentary debates, the private sector, with 1,797,000 pupils, “brings to the education of French youth a cooperation which it would be unjust to fail to recognize” (Visse, 62). Despite strong opposition from teacher unions and anti-clerical organizations, the system of contracts with private schools has continued for more than forty years to offer an alternative education to hundreds of thousands of pupils, many of them “zapping” between the public and private sectors for a variety of reasons (Langouet and Leger).

B) *The Netherlands*

In the Netherlands, a country long characterized by religious tolerance and pluralism, public schools in the 19th century were required to teach a “general Christianity” which would develop in their pupils “all social and Christian virtues”. Public schools were intended to be *national*, bringing together all children whatever their social background, their (Christian) denomination, or their sex. However, many Protestants who continued to hold to orthodox Calvinism objected to the liberal, non-doctrinal version of Christianity promoted by the public schools, which rested upon an anthropology denying the power of sin and the need for a Redeemer. In protest, some kept their children home, or sent them to illegal schools; fathers were in some cases sent to jail. In 1834, for example, local authorities in one community ordered the police to issue a warrant against orthodox Protestants who has begun to educate their children in a barn to avoid the objectionable teaching of the public school. The school inspector offered an official opinion that “the founding of a new school is a disruptive movement against the standing order of things” (in Bos, 10), no light charge in that period of social unrest.

There were also objections from Catholics, which took the most dangerous turn in the southern provinces that had formerly been an Austrian possession and had been awarded to the new Kingdom of the Netherlands under the peace concluding the Napoleonic wars. Efforts to impose the Dutch model of “general Christianity” on elementary schools and to bring the training of priests within the public system of secondary and higher education aroused growing resistance (Boekholt, 140). The government “recognized the principle of educational freedom, but joined to it such control that there was a risk of a state monopoly”. The Catholic leadership, in turn, objected to the oversight of schooling by a Protestant king, however lightly that oversight was exercised, and education became one of the issues leading to the



successful rebellion of what became Belgium (Wynants, 20). The use of schooling as an instrument of nation-building, in this instance, led ironically to the break-up of the United Netherlands and the foundation of a new nation whose 1831 *Constitution* made explicit provision for educational freedom.

Over the next decades –some would say for seventy years– one of the dominant issues in Dutch political life was the so-called ‘school struggle’ (*schoolstrijd*) over, first, the freedom to establish and operate non-state schools with a confessional basis and, second, the right to public funding for these schools. The new Constitution adopted in 1848, partly in response to the political upheavals in France and elsewhere (Bruin, 246), reflected the Liberal desire to reduce the supervision of the state over society, including with respect to schooling.

The cost of schools continued to be borne almost entirely by local authorities and by parents until 1878. A new generation of Liberals, more committed to government intervention and less to parental freedom, and explicitly hostile to confessional schools (Langedijk, 140), enacted education legislation providing that the state would pay 30 percent of the cost of schools, and under some circumstances even more. Other provisions of this law increased significantly the costs of schools. The legislation was opposed by supporters of confessional education, since it would make their schools much more expensive to operate. Confessional schools would remain free, Protestant leader Abraham Kuyper noted, “yes, free to hurry on crutches after the neutral [school] train that storms along the rails of the law, drawn by the golden locomotive of the State” (Gilhuis 1975, 152).

The Liberals had overreached. This threat against the schools that many of them had labored to establish aroused the orthodox common people and created a movement that, in a decade, reversed the political fortunes of the Liberals and brought state support for confessional schools. A massive petition drive collected, in five days, 305,102 signatures from Protestants and

164,000 from Catholics asking the king to refuse to sign the new legislation. When that failed, a national organization, “The Union ‘A School With the Bible’” created a permanent mechanism for the mobilization of orthodox Protestants, and soon led to the establishment of the first real political party in the Netherlands, significantly called the Anti-Revolutionary Party.

Catholics were equally active, and together with the orthodox Protestants gained a majority in Parliament by 1888. As an historian of Dutch liberalism has pointed out, the effort to smother the last flickering flame of orthodox religion only succeeded in fanning it into vigorous life (Riel, 108, 111).

The School Law of 1889 provided the same 30 percent state subsidy to confessional schools as to local government schools and began a process that would lead, in 1920, to the full financial equality of all schools meeting the quality requirements set by the state. The 1889 law also forbade local authorities from making their schools free, a strategy which many had employed to compete with private confessional schools (Boekholt, 219). The intention was to create a more level playing-field, though it would require another thirty years of political struggle to establish the present Dutch system, under which there is no financial incentive to send one’s children to a secular public schools rather than to a religious schools... and about seventy percent of all pupils attend non-public schools, most of them Catholic or Protestant.

The “politics of accommodation” (Lijphart’s phrase) allowed –and continues to allow– policy issues involving religious institutions and the religious convictions of what is now a minority of the population to be resolved without the bitter conflict that periodically troubles France.



C) *United States*

For Horace Mann, often considered “the Father of American public education”, it was beyond question that the school day should include reading from the Bible –passages carefully selected to reflect his optimistic and moralistic Unitarianism, and intended to be universally acceptable. He and his allies were promoting the common public school, he wrote in 1846, in order “to elevate mankind into the upper and purer regions of civilization, Christianity, and the worship of the true God” (Glenn, 172-175). His religious critics, both Protestant and Catholic, charged that he was advocating an understanding of religion which had little to do with its real power or with what they believed.

The 1830s in the United States, as in Western Europe, was a period of intense interest in popular schooling. Dispersal of the native population beyond the reach of the civilizing institutions of the East Coast was one of the pressing concerns of this movement of reforms; another was the growing number of immigrants. When Catholic immigrants (Germans first, then other groups) began to organize their own schools, this was perceived by many as an expression of refusal to accept the requirements of life in American society. “They will be shut up”, warned a prominent Protestant minister in 1853, “in schools that do not teach them what, as Americans, they most of all need to know... They will be instructed mainly into the foreign prejudices and superstitions of their fathers”. If, instead, the children of immigrants could be gathered into the common public school, “we may be gradually melted into one homogeneous people” (Bushnell, 299-303).

Catholic schools, influential Americans believed, were a menace to society, and their religious justification was in fact no justification at all. In such schools, the children of immigrants “will be instructed mainly into the foreign prejudices and superstitions of their fathers, and the state, which proposes to be

clear of all sectarian affinities in religion, will pay the bills!'. Bushnell found it "a dark and rather mysterious providence, that we have thrown upon us, to be our fellow-citizens, such multitudes of people, depressed, for the most part, in character, instigated by prejudices so intense against our religion" (Bushnell, 299).

It was in large part in order to remove any excuse for Catholic immigrants to refuse to enroll their children in public schools that these were increasingly emptied of positive religious content, though a residual element of generalized Christianity persisted until recent decades in many places. In the hope of persuading immigrants to send their children to public schools where they could be made into 'real Americans', school officials in northern cities—usually without much discussion—gradually removed any elements of instruction or school life that reflected the Protestant past of the educational system. The effort was largely a failure. Making public schools religiously void did indeed remove a Catholic objection, but it did not satisfy the desire of Catholic parents for schooling that reflected their convictions. By 1950, there were three million pupils attending private Catholic schools, and many hundreds of thousands attending the schools established by Protestant groups, often quite recently.

American *public* schools are among the most secularized in the world, and have been largely unsuccessful in developing a secular approach to teaching altruism and other civic virtues. There is abundant evidence that many parents are uneasy about the inability of most public schools to provide an effective counter to a popular youth culture that they see as a threat, and this has helped to produce the extraordinary phenomenon of around a million children and youth who are being schooled at home as an alternative to school attendance.

The secular character of American public schools has become so deeply-rooted that nothing seems likely to change it. To the extent that educational vouchers continue to gain both popular



support and legal legitimacy, it seems likely that religious expression and even study about religion will continue to be a characteristic of most private but few public schools.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This brief historical survey suggests that conflict over religion is less likely to be an issue when alternative schools expressing a distinctive worldview are made widely available, either within the public system, as in England and Ontario, or through public funding of private religious schools, as in the Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, and other western democracies. Such a policy would greatly reduce such conflict in the United States.

Even such funding of alternative schools is not sufficient, as the example of France shows, if the public school comes to be symbolically and uniformly identified with a particular worldview—in this case a denial of the significance of religion, for believers, in all spheres of life and identity. French and American policymakers might usefully reflect whether a free society should not so structure its educational system that religious conviction—the dimension of culture that, for many citizens, matters most profoundly—can find an honored place.

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