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Running Head: Oxford Presentation

Understanding the Role of Religion in the Formation of Schooling and Education in
America

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Education and issues surrounding access to literacy clearly reflect a culture's belief system regarding the deep philosophical issues of life. This can be seen when looking at the practices of the early European settlers to America. It is significant to note that the puritans or pilgrims who came in the 1600's to Massachusetts came primarily as intact families. The families came specifically to a land that offered freedom to raise their children away from the spiritual persecution they experienced in England. Radically different, trappers settled in Canada and British prisoners who chose to work off their sentences in Australia. The American colonies were established early on out of a desire to serve God and raise children according to a specific religious conviction.

The conviction to educate children was based on belief in the Bible as God's word. Hence, it is not surprising that teaching children to read was a core value since all individuals needed to be able to read the Bible. The time frame for this was a century past the Protestant Reformation in which the Bible had been translated into every day language in Germany. The invention of the printing press made Bibles available to the masses for the first time in history.

The early settlers, in the passing of the Massachusetts Law of 1642, established formal policies regarding literacy. The following succinctly articulates the rationale for such a law.

The concept of education came into existence more out of necessity than anything else. The masses had to be educated in order to be able to understand the written codes that the colonies were now living under, both religious and secular, and without some sort of education this idea would be impossible. The response to this was, once again, the Massachusetts Law of 1642.

The Law of 1642 required that parents and master see to it that their children knew the principles of religion and the capital laws of the commonwealth.

The Law of 1647 required that towns of fifty families hire a schoolmaster who would teach children to read and write. Towns of a hundred families must have a grammar schoolmaster who could prepare children to attend Harvard College.

It stated that parents and masters of those children who had been apprenticed to them were responsible for their basic education and literacy. All children, and servants as well, should be able to demonstrate competency in reading and writing as outlined by the governing officials. The idea behind this, once again, was that if all citizens could understand the written language on some basic level, all citizens would be able to understand and therefore, abide by the governing laws of the land.

<http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/masslaws.html>

Because all needed to be taught to read, instructional materials were needed. Most widely used was Benjamin Harris' publication, the New England Primer which was first printed in Boston in 1690. Used into the 19th century, the primer sold over 5 million copies.

Remember, the intent was that all children should read and that illiteracy was Satan's attempt to keep individuals away from the Bible.

Some examples from the New England Primer include:

- A In Adam's Fall
 We sinned all.

- B Thy Life to Mend
 This Book Attend.

- C The Cat doth play
 And after slay.

- D A Dog will bite
 A Thief at night.

- E An Eagle's flight
 Is Out of sight.

F The Idle Fool
Is Whipt at School.

<http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/%7Ecfrnb/neprimer.html>

In the 1700's, colonial schools were influenced by Christianity and moral teaching was combined with reading instruction. While northern indentured servants were taught to read, the same did not hold true for slaves in the south. The Jamestown Settlement in 1607 saw slaves arrive within three weeks.

By the time the thirteen colonies merged into a tenuous union, education was widespread, although varied significantly. Southern colonies, with more rural populations tended to educate children at home. In spite of these variations, education in the colonies emphasized a spiritual commitment. George Washington, warrior, general, first president, and slave holder said, " True religion affords government its surest support. The future of this nation depends on the Christian training of the youth. It is impossible to govern without the Bible." (Kienel, 1995)

In order to secure a union, the founding fathers chose to ignore the issue of slavery and so left in place a disparate, oppressive and yes, evil practice that had serious implications for educating freemen and slaves. The issue of sin and balance of power was forefront in the writings of James Madison who made the case for separation of power.

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. (Madison, 1964)

Choosing to ignore slavery was significant because many on the northern colonies had gotten involved in the abolition movement, spreading most specifically from England and William Wilberforce who personally knew Ben Franklin and others.

A study at the University of Georgia found,

“During the 1840’s though 1850’s, less-affluent blacks where able to join schools though benevolent associations. Trade schools were also started for the lower classes. Woman went to sewing schools, for example. The elite black community went to college prep schools that were underground. Students studied the same curriculum as students at College of Charleston. Most students after high school went to Europe for college. The great majority of students graduated with honors. This shows the high standards of these schools.

“One school Master was arrested and was told that the only way that they would be allowed to keep his school was that there were to be no slaves and a white person was to be in school during school hours. So he was forced to hire a white man to sit in the school. This shows how the whites were afraid of the effect knowledge would have on blacks. Some parents even sent their kids to white schools. This was quickly stopped and parents that were caught were sent to solitary confinement for 30 days. This shows what parents were willing to do for their children’s education. (Drago, 1990)

Another author put it this way,

“Knowledge is Power” and as events conspired to bring the Civil War ever closer, the Southerner asked, “Who should be entrusted with this power?” Certainly not slaves. Southern colonies began passing laws to make it a crime to teach slaves to read and write. Only the Catholics and Friends (Quakers) continued their efforts to educate the black people in the South, and they were few in number. The North, with its Puritan heritage, had for many decades supported education as a means of providing religious training to its children. In the South, where the religious emphasis was Anglican (Church of England), the religious leaders supported the slave owners by providing oral (not written) religious training for the slaves. One minister commented that instead of reading the Bible, literate slaves would soon be reading documents filtering down from the North inciting rebellion, and pose a threat to the Southern family. Supporting slavery as an institution became the patriotic thing to do.

<http://www.nd.edu/%7Erbarger/www7/soucolon.html>

Abraham Lincoln wrote and spoke extensively about the scourge of slavery and that we as a nation would invoke the wrath of God for such sin. He spoke of the power of the classroom when he stated that the “the philosophy of the classroom is the philosophy of the government of the next generation.”

<http://www.nd.edu/%7Erbarger/www7/soucolon.html>

Following the Civil War, Native Americans also faced horrific destruction of families and home as a result of the growing policy in the late 1800's to remove children from reservations. This was seen as the only way to assimilate children and thousands were sent to off reservation boarding schools. Removed from family, they were forced to abandon on the outside their dress, native tongue, and religion. Children were often taken for years at a time. This occurred at the same time settlers were building churches and schools based on Christian teaching.

One key advocate, Charles Lummis stated in 1884 that the new schools would, “Kill the Indian and save the man.” Lummis reversed his view following his move to New Mexico. “Surrounded by grief-stricken parents whose children were being held against their will at the Albuquerque Indian School, cut off from their families, prevented from returning home even during summer vacations, Lummis came to regard the U.S. government's Indian education policies as an abomination.”

<http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/09-03/native.php>

Chief Illim-Spokanee

You see, we have given you our children, not our servants, or our slaves, but our own. We have given you our hearts—our children are our hearts—but bring them back again before they become white men. We wish to see them once more

Indians, and after that you can make them white men if you like. But let them not get sick or die. If they get sick, we get sick; if they die, we shall die. Take them; they are yours.

<http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/09-03/native.php>

Clearly Christianity has been misused in significant ways. Wilberforce, father of the abolition movement and member of the Parliament of the County of York warned in 1797 “We must be careful to distinguish twisted zeal for true Christian commitment. History provides too many examples of people who call themselves Christians but were in fact devoid of the love and kindness of Christ. It is as if a healing medicine had become a deadly poison.” (Wilberforce, 1797/2006)

Following his travels throughout the United States, Tocqueville returned to Europe where he wrote his classic, *Democracy in America*. The role of Christianity in American life was acknowledged when he stated,

There is no country in the whole world, in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America; and there can be no greater proof of its utility, and of its conformity to human nature, than that its influence is most powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation of the earth. (Tocqueville, 1835/2000)

In conclusion, our challenge today is the same. We must avoid twisted zeal which easily turns to oppression. The love and kindness of Christ that Wilberforce talks about is visible at the Philadelphia Mennonite High School led aptly by Dr. Barbara Moses. In the midst of poverty and ongoing discrimination, 100% of graduates are accepted to college. The role of faith and Christian beliefs continue to impact education in America.

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