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Religious Rights for Children in 21st Century Education

By

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Attending our public schools as a student has become a fascinating challenge. There cannot be an adequate discussion within the topics “Children's Rights for 21st Century Education” and “No Child Left Behind” without discussing the religious rights of those same students. Students attending our public schools are citizens of two worlds. They do not shed the rights guaranteed them within their first citizenship as they enter the door-way of the world forming their second citizenship.

To considering laws governing education and religious conflicts within the public school domain will help us understand the demands, restrictions, and provisions for what is called “separation of church and state” within this domain. It would benefit us greatly to devote much time and effort in this because much of today’s growing parental and student unrest with public education can be connected to the diminishing traditions, changing values, and moral unrest throughout our nation.

In the midst of this turmoil, public education must determine what is and what is not legally acceptable when traditions, values, and moral issues face its faculty, curriculum, and students. If the electoral-college is the only factor considered (blue states and red states) one would see a nation divided on political issues involving religion conservative values, and morality.

These issues, by their very nature are areas of legal entanglement causing our public school administrators, teachers, and governing boards to restrict rights and privileges constitutionally afforded to its religious students. It appears that the philosophy to err on the side of government has superseded a philosophy that would err on the side of children’ rights! It would be plausible to consider, in a modern society, the three issues raised in the First Amendment could be resolved without Supreme Court intervention. However, that appears not to be the case. Why does this topic linger as one of the most controversial issue facing our schools and our religious students in this new century? Personal ideology and diversity of culture are forcing ideas, traditions, and redefined Truth as national agendas play out in our schools and classrooms.

Our Nation is so focused on political correctness, not wanting to offend anyone, and not wanting to be seen as “religious”, that schools have been unable to say ‘no’ to the invading concept of separation of church and state. This is more out of a social reform outlook than an educational reform outlook. History is being rewritten by those who claim America is not a nation of religious convictions and that the concept of “under God” is supported by a small minority of students believing their founding father’s ideology. Even though a religiously neutral government is still highly disputed by historical document, educators are allowing a corrupted position of the religious history of America to be taught in their classrooms. They do so because they are afraid to reject the concept of separation of church and state which would label public schools as religious agents and unduly entangled them with religion. We may be facing a new form of racism, one camouflaged with a faulting premise of non-religious entanglement. The proponents for a separated church and state platform are rewriting history through exculpatory and compensatory means. Our religious history may offend some people

some of the time but it cannot be whitewashed so as to present our founding fathers as the ‘bad guys’ and everyone else who opposes our religious liberties as heroes of post-modern education.. For history to be accurate it must include not just the good but also the bad and the unfavorable. America’s history cannot be corrupted so as to allow a public relations spin for some people, some part of our heritage, or for some aspect of our country or national cause.

“Let it be written; Let it be Done!” is one of the most famous lines from the movie, “Ten Commandments”. The authoritative-voice of the Pharaoh spoke his legal position and it was to be written down so those that read and heard his words would know the exact meaning and purpose for his statement. Personal names could, over time, be omitted from the document but the words that gave meaning and purpose for the document remained and maintained the authority of the Pharaoh who ordered them written. This is the power of authority and its lasting impact on the cultural and the people it is to govern.

While all children have heard of George Washington’s cherry tree exploits, they are aware that it is a story not based on fact. The “noble conjectures” being told in support of separation of church and state do not come with a disclaimer. Therefore, this questionable cause may anger a generation of students and their parents against fellow students and their parents. Schools should not be turned into some biased social reform institution whose mission is to build a religiously neutral culture. Not every student wishes to pray or read their Bible or religious books. Not every student wants to write a historical paper on our Christian forefathers or our Jewish-Anglo-Saxon connection. Not every child wishes to present research papers on Moses, or Jacob, or even Jesus of Nazareth. But, there are those who do and they must not be adversely impacted by their desire. Our African American children, Native American children, nor our European, Asian, or Middle Eastern children must not become the victims of a minority rush to remove all aspects of religious principles from students’ lives.

An offshoot of the separation of church and state is the concept of right and wrong. The belief by Americans in the concept of “under God” must not parish from our school classrooms and hallways. This simple phrase laid the foundation for our national holidays which came from a foundation of our national past. Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and the 4th of July along with Martin Luther King, President’s Day, Memorial Day, and Labor Day must not pass from our children’s heritage nor should their meanings and purposes for existing. Separation of church and state means that we are no longer striving for a fully integrated Nation. It means we are moving towards an attempt to segregate and point out what makes us different, not what makes us the same.

Americans continually express their concerns for the concept of separation of church and state in their acceptance of their support for a religious position. Children who want to read books written by women and handicapped authors must equally understand and appreciate the contributions of Native Americans, African Americans, European Americans and Christian American authors. Their religious positions that founded this nation on governmental equal access for all must not be lost from our history books. If we cannot agree to focus on the true history of America’s religious past, it will be to the detriment of America’s heritage and America’s future.

History is not the only subject being revised and slanted in our public schools. The same thing is occurring in Literature. Anthologies are rightly weighted with the “correct proportions” of female and minority writers. This is appropriate only if equal accesses to religious writers are made a part of that same curriculum.

The United States still honors the freedom and democracy upon which it was founded. These ideals are foreign to most other countries. Students should first learn of their own country's complete heritage and then study countries outside of Western Civilization. This must include the religious foundations of that past. Students who study other countries should then be required to do an honest comparison and a contrasting of their history, current governments, rights afforded to its citizens, taxation, standards of living and rights and wrongs committed by that country during its history. It would lead students to the conclusion and the reasons why we should be proud of this country and of the freedoms that we take for granted.

The media has had much to do with the religious boycott viewpoint presented in our public schools. Anyone who is controversial and speaks against our religious past can get a few minutes on the local news. And if that person is also dynamic and charismatic, he or she will also be appearing on talk shows and network news shows. There is usually no opposing viewpoint, so the inference is – since the 'News' reports facts, what he or she is saying must be a fact. And the speaker will usually add that those who do not see things as he/she does are intolerant, fundamental, and evil – and a religiously confused America concedes.

It is surprising how current this conference is to the real happenings in this free and liberated society. As our world moves to a more "global awareness" we find nations becoming more restricting in areas of religious tolerance. In addition, religious freedom has come more to the forefront of education than it was when this author was educated. Education is falling into the trap that there must be, "...equilibrium between competing values so no one is seriously compromised while at school."

Students can study artists and leaders based on talent but not on religion or the lack thereof. While educators do want to ensure that we are being inclusive, many disprove this by being exclusive of all religious assignments and research. As educators, we would not restrict women authors who promote a position that is against the mainstream values expressed in America today. It is the basis of what we consider equal rights for all. However, Separation of Church and State is moving us away from public school cohesion toward a separation that restricts the rights of our public school children in the areas of their religious beliefs and expressions. Are we viewing a philosophy that will restrict children's behavior based on their value system, religious principles, and their desire to learn more than what has been deemed politically correct by a small vestige of our population?

Can America's public schools continue in these restriction and raise a populous that truly understands the concepts of; "One Nation Under God"; "all men are created equal"; "give me liberty or give me death"; "the land of the free and the home of the brave"; and....."this nation shall not perish from the earth".

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