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Carper, James C. and Hunt, Thomas C. (2007). ***The Dissenting Tradition in American Education.*** **NY: Peter Lang.**

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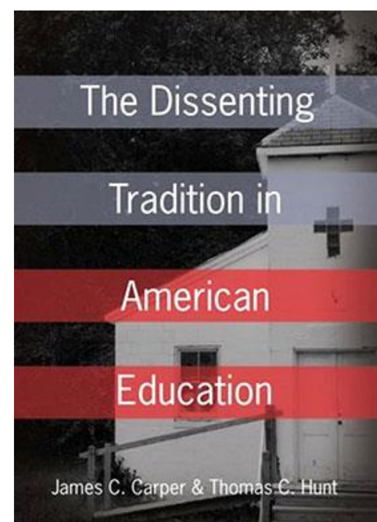
Throughout the history of the United States, a country founded on the principle of individual liberty and freedom, there has been continuous tension between individual rights and the needs and rights of the larger community. As I scan page one of the morning newspaper, I read the headline "Rising Public Health Risk Seen as More Parents Reject Vaccines" and I read the quote "I refuse to sacrifice my child to the greater good" (NY *Times*, March 21, 2008, p. 1). This parent goes on to say "I cannot deny that my child can put someone else at risk" (p. 19). The parents in this article believe that vaccinations for standard childhood diseases have the potential for complications and choose to exempt their children—despite overwhelming scientific evidence that these beliefs are, for the most part, scientifically unfounded. Do these parents have the right to put the general population in jeopardy because of their beliefs?



On a more abstract but equally important level, one could segue to the "health" of the state, in this case, democracy in the United States and the principles upon which it was founded and continues to hold dear. What are the requirements for "vaccinating" future citizens in the values of our system of government? Where do the rights of individuals leave off and the rights of the broader community of citizens begin?

In a pluralistic, democratic society such as the United States, how does one balance the rights of the individual *vis a vis* the state when it comes to the education of its children? focuses on parents' rights to completely control the education of their children. The idea of the community having needs and rights that are equally legitimate and appropriate is not considered a viable position.

Since the U.S. Constitution does not mention education, it has been generally accepted that education is a power reserved to the states under the Tenth Amendment. Public interest in education hearkens back to the

Massachusetts Education Act of 1647. While this law is commonly known as the "Old Deluder Satan Act," given the religious nature of the colony's settlers, it did establish the precedent for state control of education. It mandated that "all Massachusetts towns with more than fifty households 'appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read'…" (New Hampshire Historical Society).

The Founders believed in the necessity of an educated populace to further the new American democracy. One of the few successes of the government under the Articles of Confederation was the Land Ordinance of 1785 that required land to be set aside for schools in the territories as they were settled. Benjamin Franklin called for a national university although the Congress refused to authorize such expenditures. Part of Franklin's concern appears to be over the influx of German speaking immigrants into Pennsylvania and his fears about their lack of assimilation into the larger American society (*National Review*, 2007). In referencing the purpose of public schools, the authors of *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* acknowledge as much by citing Mead, a defender of public schools stating ". . .the public school, the conserver of democracy, brings the divergent elements of American society together (Carper and Hunt, 2007, p. 58). Thus, Carper and Hunt understand that the state has an abiding interest in the education of its future citizens.

However, despite this acknowledgment, in *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education*, James Carper and Thomas Hunt take the position that the government, should have little to no input in educational matters beyond requiring that parents provide for some sort of education for their children. They hearken back to an earlier time when schools were established in localities by private groups, a time in Colonial America when several colonies had established churches that oversaw the education of the children and parents were free to choose among them or to home school their children. To these authors, this conglomeration of private schools that drilled the religious moral values of the community was destroyed when Horace Mann's common school morphed into *the* established church in America. Carper and Hunt make this case by citing Warren Nord's belief that "Public schools became the cultural factories of Americanization, transforming material of foreign culture into good American Citizens" (p. 77).

The common school or free public school, the authors maintain, was not originally a huge problem as the majority of American citizens were Protestant and the schools were awash in this "generalized" Protestantism with daily prayer and Bible reading standard features of the school day. Sunday school, or similar religious education of that time, would be enough to inculcate the specific details of any particular branch of Christianity chosen by the parents for the family's affiliation. And, of course, in those days, education was not compulsory. Later, as public schooling continued to expand both in terms of the number of required years of attendance and the population served, problems with a curriculum that can serve everyone's needs naturally arose. The authors argue that it is the attempt by the public schools to design a curriculum that will be acceptable to all that causes dissenters to rise up and call for alternate forms of education that will be acceptable to their beliefs.

The amount of regulation the state might have for these educational options ranges along a continuum but it is clear that the solution that goal these authors are striving towards is the disestablishment of public schools in America (p. 272). They support this as a necessary step for several reasons summarized in their last chapter, "Final Thoughts," as the lessons from the dissenters highlighted in the book are recapitulated. First both Roman Catholic's in the late 1800s and evangelical Christians in the 20th century believe that education cannot be value free. Second, deeply held beliefs should never be compromised. Third, the state is often not willing to compromise with parents on alternative educational plans. Fourth, when the state does accept alternative plans, the economic cost to parents is often quite high, and the authors believe that this amounts to double taxation. For all these reasons, they assert, a viable solution could be the complete separation of schools from state regulation. It is necessary to go back through the

arguments to understand how the authors reach both these conclusions and the praise they heap on the dissenters who defend them.

The book is generally divided into two halves with the first five chapters focusing on Catholic dissenters and the next four honing in on evangelical Christian dissenters. The last chapter summarizes the main ideas as stated above. Rather than concentrate on the specific chapters or the names of the dissenters profiled, I will examine the arguments the book is making as they seem more pertinent to the issue at hand—the rights of individuals versus the demands of the state.

Historically, the problems begin to surface as demographic changes in the expanding United States occurred, particularly with large scale Catholic immigration in the late 1800's. The first half of this volume focuses on the impact this immigration had on the general curriculum of public schools. From the point of view of Catholic dissenters, the exact problem is the generalized Protestant overtones of the public schools (see chapters 2-5). From the daily readings that used the King James rather than the Douay version of the Bible to the specific issues of authority and faith, the Catholic Church had problems with the public school curriculum. The solutions to these problems follow two trajectories: one would remove religion from education—in other words, the complete separation of church and state in the public school curriculum. The other would establish a parallel school structure for Catholics where the curriculum would be in accordance with Catholic theology. Each of these plans had its attendant problem.

In terms of a parallel parochial school system, the problems were mainly financial. Schools are expensive to erect, staff and maintain. Parents already pay taxes for public schools and, with limited exceptions (the Lemon test), the U.S Constitution bars the expenditure of tax dollars on religious institutions. For the Catholics dissenters profiled, the duty of parents must be, according to the Catholic leadership from the Pope down, to pay whatever necessary to place their children in Catholic schools—even at the threat of the parents' own salvation! When reading these chapters it frequently seems that there is a political as well as a religious battle for the hearts and minds of parents and their children. Powerful clergy exhorting, and in some cases threatening parents, about their duty which not only will keep the expensive, new parochial school classrooms full but also ensure full church pews as these students mature, marry and start their own families. It was hard for me, as reader, to understand how the educational issues were separated from the financial and political considerations of the Catholic clergy lobbying for parochial schools. That was especially true as some of the dissenters under discussion were also arguing for German traditions and language in their new parochial schools when the state was trying to mandate English language curriculum.

The other concern, the separation of religion from the school curriculum, or the teaching of what Catholics descried as false or incorrect doctrine, is a more complex issue and links to the sections of the book dealing with evangelical Christianity. Again there are multiple sides to this problem. First, the complete separation of religion from the school curriculum yields what these believers see as secular humanism. They do not even accept deistic approaches to morality and they descry any concept of natural law that would leave God as the source of all moral behavior out of the picture. No morality, they maintain, can exist without Christian theology and, therefore, to leave religion out of the curriculum (prayer in school and Bible reading being only the tip of the iceberg) means that children cannot be properly educated in public schools. There is no such thing as value free education. For example, the authors discuss a Southern Baptist convention in 2006 where delegates called on "Southern Baptists to exert a 'godly influence' on public schools" (p. 272).

This encompasses more than just teaching about religion in school. Many of us who teach history, literature, art history or music know it is impossible to teach without explanations of religious beliefs in these subjects. Several Christian groups believe in a doctrine of supercessionism, that theirs is the one true religion which surpasses all others. Thus, teaching about religious beliefs without reinforcing the correct belief, in other words, teaching moral relativism of any sort, is an

anathema. In following this argument throughout the book, I kept recalling a session at an Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) annual meeting in 1994 where a speaker discussing prayer in school explained that any prayer that would be acceptable to everyone should be acceptable to no one—it would violate their specific understanding of God.

Thus, we are caught in a conundrum. If we remove Christian theology or specific denominational theology from the curriculum, we are left with some form of deism or humanism which is antithetical to the believers. This of course permeates not only literature, history, and the arts but also, and most pointedly, science curricula. Since it is now legally established that the First Amendment prohibits the generalized Protestantism that originally permeated the schools with daily nondenominational prayer and Bible reading the problem is what the dissenters regard as value free education—an impossibility to their belief structure. As the discussion of the Southern Baptist quoted above continues, the authors state:

> Nevertheless, a movement clearly is afoot in the largest Protestant denomination, particularly among neo-Calvinists, to forsake attempts to reform public education by, for example, checking the 'homosexual agenda' or countering Darwinism in science classrooms, and to opt for an exit from the government school system. (p. 272)

For these parents, the mission of public schools to create curricula that teach tolerance and understanding, is not acceptable as it conflicts with their value systems.

Further, there is the purpose of education. While most Americans would concur on the face of it that the goals of the common school—the forging of a tolerant, active and participating citizenry—are good and important, many of the dissenters in this book see the main purpose of education as ensuring salvation. From this viewpoint the goal of schooling is to create loyal Christians who will be assured of life in the hereafter and the mundane concerns of forging an American citizenry in a democratic society are not the major concern of these believers.

Thus, the book builds a case not only for separation of church and state in the realm of education but also for the disestablishment of public schools under the aegis of a higher law—God's law and absolute parental right to control the education of their children. After all the authors argue, God, not the state, gives children to their parents. God, as evidenced in their beliefs, controls where they go to school, when they go to school and what they are taught. That means that among the dissenters in this book are those who believe the state has no right to interfere by imposing ANY regulation as to curriculum, teacher qualifications, hours/days/years of attendance, etc. Carper and Hunt argue that tax dollars would be better spent by removing the entire public school system and replacing it with a completely decentralized system where parents would be responsible for their children's education. Tax dollars they would have paid for that education would, instead, remain in the hands of parents who would use these monies to pay for the education that they value for their children.

Where would this leave us in terms of the stated goals of the common school and the beliefs that there are benefits to using the public schools to inculcate values of a pluralistic, democratic society that might balance the concerns of these parents? After all, in the original plan for common schools, the authors make the case that there was always a belief that religious and/or cultural education would take place during non-school hours. In other words, common schools were never meant to replace the morals and traditions established by parents in their families and localities. It was always assumed that children would continue their religious and moral instruction outside of school hours.

The problem is that many parents do not appear to follow through with this outside instruction and this, according to the dissenters has led to a society with significant social problems including

substance abuse, high divorce rates, violence, disrespect, pre-marital sexual relations, etc. Christian schools are supposed to be the solution despite that fact that research reveals for example that “Divorce rates among conservative Christians were significantly higher than for other faith groups, and much higher than Atheists and Agnostics experience” (http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm). Thus the “panacea” that religious education is supposed to provide, may not be the cure its advocates propose.

There is still the larger question of the needs of the society *vis a vis* the parents that forms the basis of this critique. As I watch the evening news I am bombarded with genocide in Darfur, ethnic tensions in the Balkans, battles between the Shia’ and the Sunni, ethnic violence in Kenya, etc. I wonder how the U.S. with its diverse population will continue to enjoy peace and prosperity if we allow our public schools with their mission of tolerance, respect and common core values to wither away only to be replaced with sectarian education. If I return to my original analogy, how do we vaccinate our future citizens into our values as a democratic, pluralistic society? Where do the rights of parents leave off and the rights of the state in a civilized society begin?

I respectfully choose to disagree with these authors and the dissenters this book so admires. I believe the rights of parents should be limited by the goals of the common school and a free, high quality education for all children in the United States—that is what it will take to keep our society from fragmenting into the types of political crises that sectarianism has led to around the world. That should be our greatest fear. I do believe that we can encourage parents to step up and educate their children in the moral and cultural values of their heritage without disestablishing public schools and their purposes. I believe this is a dangerous book because the mission it preaches is a separatism that I believe is antithetical to future peace and prosperity in these United States.

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