

# Don't Make Public Schools a State Church

By Thomas C. Hunt and James C. Carper (first published in the October 2007 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor*)

Americans would revolt if the government forced them to join a state-established church. They guard too fiercely their liberty of conscience, guaranteed by the First Amendment.

Yet when some parents choose not to submit their children to the government-operated school system—whose curriculum and culture embody beliefs and values with which they disagree—they still must pay taxes to support the system. Even then, they often face opposition.

We contend that the conduct of schooling in the United States should be determined by the rights of conscience of parents, in accord with the democratic nature of our society and our confessional pluralism. Parents who choose not to send their children to public schools should not be subject to harassment. Nor should they be forced to support the state system as well as their preferred educational arrangement.

Contrary to popular belief, the US has never had one universally accepted system of public education. American history is full of dissenters who acted on conscience—and faced opposition for it.

In the mid-19th century, Americans created what was then called the “common school.” Allegedly free of the evils of sectarian educational institutions, the common school, supported by mandatory taxation, was touted as the bastion of republicanism, guarantor of liberty, and avenue of equal opportunity for all Americans. Advocates claimed it would abolish crime and poverty, and establish morality of a universal scale.

As was the case with prior government-established ecclesiastical institutions in Europe and early America, for example, Congregationalism, in Connecticut and Anglicanism in Virginia, the “inclusive” common school was not common at all. Like its predecessors, it bred dissent.

The leading educational dissenters in the 19th century were Roman Catholics. Their religious conscience clashed with the “nonsectarianism” of the common school, which in reality was a form of Unitarian pan-Protestantism. At considerable sacrifice, and despite their poverty, Catholics established their own schools and were confronted by opposition that sometimes turned violent.

As the 19th century progressed, others, most notably German Lutherans, joined Catholics in their conscience-based dissent from state-sanctioned educational orthodoxy. As had been the case with the established churches, those advocating the state system of education attempted to quell the “uprising” by regulating the dissenting schools.

In the 1960s, new groups joined the ranks of dissenters. A minority of evangelical Protestants were outraged by Supreme Court declarations that state-sanctioned prayer and devotional Bible reading violated the “no establishment” clause of the First Amendment. They felt discouraged by what they perceived as the establishment of secularism as the de facto religion of government-sponsored education. Consequently, they created Christian day schools to educate their children according to the dictates of conscience. Like Catholic and Lutheran dissenters, these schools, and some of their leaders, were harried at times by the state.

Most recently, a small but rapidly growing number of parents, a majority of whom are conservative Christians, have chosen to educate their children at home. Holding to the proposition that parents have the primary right to direct the education of their offspring, a right affirmed by the Supreme Court several times since the landmark *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* decision of 1925, they are the most radical dissenters yet. Like earlier dissenters, most home-schooling families believe the public school system transmits an orthodoxy alien to their belief system. As a matter of conscience, they feel bound to provide an education congruent with their worldview. And like other dissenters from earlier state churches and the current functional equivalent, the public school system, these parents have had to pay taxes to support government-privileged institutions as well as the costs of the education they prefer, been occasionally harassed, and sometimes hauled into court.

Any government establishment, ecclesiastical or educational, breeds dissent. Unfortunately, dissenters have often been subjected to legal prosecution, unjust financial burdens, and sometimes outright persecution.

Such actions have often been justified as necessary for the “common good,” while the “unorthodox” have been demonized as “divisive or, in the case of 19th-century Catholic schools, “un-American.” Today, home-schoolers are sometimes accused of being “selfish” or “undemocratic.”

For those wanting a secular education for their children, as it currently exists in public schools, that is their choice and their right. Parents desiring a different kind of education should not have to pay twice as the price of liberty of conscience.

The role of government in a democracy should be to see that the public is educated, not to mandate, directly or indirectly through financial policies, one particular form of education. When the (Continued—State Church)

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government privileges a specific set of propositions of knowledge and dispositions of value and belief, it has established the educational equivalent of a state church. Such an arrangement is just as incompatible with liberty of conscience, as were the established churches of America's early history.~~

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