

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT AND AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION:
1980-2005

by Fritz Detwiler*

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, two local school districts in Michigan were unveiling their educational restructuring plans when a group of local residents objected to the changes. On a hot July evening, the opponents detailed their objections at the local YMCA. The meeting was unusual because the spokesperson announced at the beginning of the meeting that the presenters would be heard without interruption and that when they had finished the meeting would end without any questions or comments from those gathered to hear them. The charges ranged from the promotion of secular humanism to the destruction of the authority of the family over their school-aged children. The consultants hired by the districts to develop the educational reforms and train teachers had never encountered such opposition before even though they had been involved in the educational leadership issues for years.

After the meeting, at which I was present, I gathered as much material as I could from the tables at the back of the room and I began to inquire about the presenters' backgrounds. Over the next few days I discovered that the criticisms leveled by the local presenters were taken from materials that had been circulated nation-wide by groups with various names. This investigation proved to be my entry into the Christian Right's agenda for public education.

In the course of my research I discovered that, outside the field of political science, scholars little had paid little attention to the movement. My interest differed from that of the political scientists. I was interested in the Christian Right as a coherent social movement and in its theological foundations. My research led me to the conclusion that the Christian Right has a coherent structure and that it is grounded in a particular set of theological assumptions. In this paper I argue that those assumptions become evident in an analysis of Christian Right criticisms of contemporary public education.

RELIGION AND PUBLIC EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

The religion clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution provide both the foundation and the source of potential conflict for the inclusion of religion in the public schools. School administrators, staff, and faculty are governed by the "establishment clause". This prohibits them from

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using their positions to promote their own religious beliefs or to promote religious belief and practice in general. Students, on the other hand, are governed by the “free exercise” clause, which holds that no government institution, public schools included, may prohibit students from expressing their own religious beliefs in an appropriate manner. Problems arise when these two principles come into conflict, overlap, or are misinterpreted or misapplied by school personnel, students, or parents. The most common problems center on such issues as school prayer, religious holidays, student religious practices, released time programs, teaching about religion in a classroom setting, Pledge of Allegiance and religious expression, religious clubs, the religious rights of teachers, distribution of religious literature, and graduation ceremonies. More recently, school vouchers and the posting of the Ten Commandments have become contested issues. The number of issues listed here suggests the complexity of the problem. The First Amendment Center in Arlington, Virginia, provides a detailed discussion of these issues and resources for religion and public school conflicts.¹

The amount of litigation over religious issues in the public schools has increased dramatically since 1990. This is a result, in part, of a growing awareness among parents of children matriculating in the public schools of the religious freedoms of their children. It is also partially attributable to school officials who err in their application of existing legal precedents when confronted by a parental, student, or employee challenge. The surge in litigation in recent years is also partially attributable to the emergence of a number of organizations who offer legal assistance to parents who feel their children’s rights have been violated. Three types of these legal organizations exist. The first type, represented by such groups as the American Center for Law and Justice,² the Rutherford Institute,³ and the Alliance Defense Fund⁴ support increased integration of religion in public education in the form of additional rights for students and curricular inclusion of creationism (or Intelligent Design) and Bible classes.⁵ The second type, represented by such groups as

¹. See The First Amendment Center’s Religious Liberty web site at www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/Index.aspx.

². See the American Center for Law and Justice web site at www.aclj.org/.

³. See the Rutherford Institute website at www.rutherford.org/.

⁴. See the Alliance Defense Fund website at www.alliancedefensefund.org/main/welcome.aspx.

⁵. For a more complete list legal organizations of this type see the Alliance Defense Fund website at www.alliancedefensefund.org/about/Allies/Legal.aspx.

People for the American Way⁶ and Americans United for Separation of Church and State⁷ seek to preserve the current legal principles and precedents and limit erosion of the “Wall of Separation” between church and state. In the middle stands the American Civil Liberties Union which is ready to intervene when they believe the fundamental freedoms of either side has been violated.⁸

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The historical antecedents to the contemporary Christian Right date to the decades surrounding the beginning of the twentieth century. The most well known event is the Scopes Trial in which a part-time biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, with the encouragement of a number of leading townspeople challenged Tennessee law by teaching evolution in his classes. Scopes was found guilty and fined. The trial received a considerable amount of attention by the print media and radio broadcasters. Much of the commentary was highly critical of the prosecuting attorney William Jennings Bryan and his testimony in the trial. The trial was historically significant for a number of reasons. First, it highlighted the most important religion-education legal issue of the time -- evolution. Second, because of the negative publicity the press directed against Fundamentalists, it marked the beginning of a steady decline in public influence among early conservative Christian political activists. From the middle of the third decade of the twentieth century until the 1960s, conservative Christians were practically absent from mainstream American culture and national politics. While a few legal issues related to religion and education did reach the Supreme Court, this period was relatively free of legal actions. The most significant cases of this period were *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) which considered the issue of using public school dollars to subsidize transportation for Parochial school children; two cases dealing with release-time programs (*McCullum v. Board of Education*, 1948 and *Zorach v. Clauson*, 1952); and two cases dealing with the Jehovah’s Witnesses objection to the Pledge of Allegiance (*Minersville School District v. Gobitis*, 1940 and *West Virginia v. Barnette*, 1943). Regionalism explains one of the reasons why there were so few cases. Particularly in the South at the local and state level, people seeking a very visible presence of religion in the public schools found relief in the form of existing legislation that, among other issues, mandated the exclusion of evolution from public school curricula. Outside the South, the

⁶. See the People for the American Way website at www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/.

⁷. See the Americans United for Separation of Church and State website at www.au.org/site/PageServer.

⁸. See the American Civil Liberties web pages on religious liberty at www.aclu.org/ReligiousLiberty/ReligiousLibertylist.cfm?c=139.

religion in the schools was less frequently an issue of legal contention because of the religious diversity of these regions and the lower degree of influence among religious conservatives in the public arena.

Beginning in the 1960s, several cases that reached the Supreme Court touched deep religious nerves in the larger population. The first case, *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) focused on a prayer composed by the New York State Regents which was to be used in the opening exercises in the New York public schools. The Court ruled that the prayer violated the “establishment clause” of the Constitution of the United States and, therefore, was unconstitutional.⁹ The following year, the Court took two cases under review, *Abington v. Schempp* and *Murray v. Curlett* that concerned Bible reading in the public schools. On rulings on these two cases handed down the same day, the Court held that school-mandated Bible reading was unconstitutional on the same grounds as *Engel v. Vitale*. These three rulings provoked a conservative backlash. To conservative Christians the rulings were clear evidence of the rising tide of secular humanism in both the public schools and the culture at large. School prayer became a deep symbol¹⁰ of the culture wars for the Christian Right.

While issues related to religion and public education tended to be the most contested ground for conservative Christians, another case unrelated to public education was instrumental in bringing conservative Protestants and Catholics together into a common cause. In the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling in which the Court overturned a Texas law that classified abortions as illegal became the defining issue of the Christian Right in the 1970s and, in many respects, continues to be the deepest symbol for the contemporary movement. This coalition also found common cause in the issue of school funding as it became more of an issue among conservative Christians, particularly in the South, during the Civil Rights Movement and after the Court ordered desegregation of public schools. In response to desegregation orders, many communities in the South established all-white Christian schools with the intended purpose of circumventing desegregation. At the same time, white community and state leaders began to reduce funding to the public schools.

While conservative Christian reaction to the bible reading, school prayer, and abortion Supreme Court decisions was a mobilizing and coalizing factor among Christian conservatives, the contemporary Christian Right as a socio-political movement traces its roots to the late 1970s and Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign. Republican campaign strategists understood that the

⁹ George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon, Jr., and Charles T. Wellborn, *Religion in America*, 2d. ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), 79–80.

¹⁰ According to Edward Farley, “deep symbols” are “Words of power, that is, deep and enduring symbols that shape the values of a society and guide the life of faith, morality, and action, are subject to powerful forces of discreditation and even disenchantment. See Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996), 1.

key to Reagan's election was the southern states and that the key to the southern states was to politicize and mobilize conservative evangelical Christians. Jerry Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, was one of the most significant early converts. Falwell suffered considerable criticism from other Southern fundamentalists for his decision to become politically active. Much of that criticism centered on the fundamentalist dispensational belief that we are living in the final times before Jesus Christ would return to earth and reassert God's control of human affairs. Until that time, which was entirely in the hands of God, Christians should prepare for the second coming and refrain from attempting to change existing society. In the late 1970s, Falwell dismissed the criticism and established the Moral Majority. This was a major step in the process of politicizing conservative Christians throughout the United States. Moral Majority co-founder Tim LaHaye became the head of the California chapter.¹¹ Prior to his political involvement LaHaye and his wife Beverly were popular among fundamentalist Baptist because of their marriage counseling books.¹² They, therefore, were influential in expanding the Moral Majority.

James Dobson was another early ally of the Reagan campaign. Dobson was well known for his "Focus on the Family" radio broadcasts. Belonging to the Church of the Nazarene at the time, Dobson's supported opened up a new constituency for the Reagan campaign. In subsequent years, Dobson founded the Family Research Council as the political arm of Focus on the Family. He later publicly distanced himself and Focus on the Family from the Family Research Council in order to protect the tax-exempt status of Focus on the Family.

Pat Robertson was a third figure that becomes politically prominent during the Reagan campaign. Robertson founded the Christian Coalition and brought another constituency into the Reagan camp -- American Pentecostals. Robertson, however, proved to be a political liability to the Republican establishment because of his own political aspirations. In 1988, for example, Robertson sought the Republican nomination for the Presidency against the party's favored candidate George Herbert Walker Bush.

Reagan's campaign appointed Tim LaHaye as a liaison to the evangelical Christian churches and religious leaders. The campaign focused particularly those who had been active in the abortion, school prayer issues, and opposition to school desegregation. This strategy proved successful. Reagan was elected with the considerable support he received from conservative

¹¹. See Pam Chamberlain and Jane Hardisty, "Reproducing Patriarchy: Reproductive Rights Under Siege," *PublicEye.Org*, www.PublicEye.org at www.publiceye.org/magazine/v14n1/ReproPatriarch-05.html.

¹². In 1979, Beverly LaHaye founded Concerned Women for America, the leading Christian Right women's organization. In the 1990s, Tim LaHaye became famous for his series of books about the end times.

Christians. The conservative Christian leaders that Reagan had mobilized looked forward to the Reagan presidency believing that Reagan would advance their social agenda. After the election, Reagan appointed a number of conservative Christians to bureaucratic positions in his administration. Perhaps the most significant appointment for the later culture wars over public education was Gary Bauer who Reagan named Undersecretary for Education. Bauer eventually headed Robertson's Christian Right think-tank, the Family Research Council. Even though Christian Right activists like Gary Bauer were not successful in advancing the movement's political agenda very far within the Reagan administration, their appointment to such positions provided them with both insight about public school issues and an understanding of the implications of federal education policies.

The Reagan presidency ended up being a disappointment to many Christian Right leaders. As a result of Reagan's failure and, to some degree, unwillingness to push the movement's political goals, these Christian Right leaders decided to change their focus from national to local and state politics.¹³ They saw school board elections as an important entry point at the local level for two reasons. First, they thought that successful campaigns would give them power over educational issues, curricula, and policies. Second, successful candidates could then leverage their positions to run for higher offices in subsequent years. In combination with Right to Life organizational successes in the Republican Party at the state level, Christian Right leaders began to advance political candidates for state legislatures. This last strategy paid great dividends in the Christian Right gaining control of the Republican Party in many states and in electing candidates to Congress who supported their political and social agenda. By the 2004 Presidential Election, the leaders of both the House of Representatives and the Senate were active supporters of the Christian Right social agenda.¹⁴

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT DEFINED

Commentators often use the term "Religious Right" to describe the movement we are discussing. They further use the term "Fundamentalist" to describe the movement's constituency. Both these terms are inadequate. On the one hand,

¹³. For a fuller discussion of this strategy, see Fritz Detwiler, "Standing," in *Standing on the Premises of God: The Christian Right's Fight to Redefine America's Public Schools* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 54–56.

¹⁴. As of the middle of 2005, two of the most important Christian Right members of the Senate, William Frist of Tennessee and Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania have distanced themselves from the core Christian Right issues of stem-cell research and integration of intelligent design into science curriculum. Their actions seem to be reflective of their future political aspirations and their recognition of the danger those issues hold for politicians seeking support from the political middle in the United States. Both Frist and Santorum have been criticized by their decisions by Christian Right organizations.

“Religious Right” is too general a term. Although we might find a small number of Jews aligned with the movement, the vast majority of followers are Christian and, as we shall see below, the movement is grounded in a particularly Christian worldview. The term “Fundamentalist” is inadequate because Fundamentalists comprise only one segment of the movement’s leaders and activists. Further, even though the term “Fundamentalist” can be applied to the earlier incarnations of the Christian Right during the first half of the twentieth century, its use to describe the current movement often glosses over significant differences within conservative evangelical Christianity, and within the Christian Right . These differences among the movement’s constituencies are key to understanding the Christian Right’s leadership because the leaders come from at least six different religious traditions. Further, the distinguishing characteristic that grounds the movement’s presuppositions, worldview, and strategies are drawn from conservative Calvinist sources, not Fundamentalism. The closest the movement comes to American Fundamentalism is its conception of “truth” and its assertion that the Bible is the source for our categories of understanding the world. What gives the Christian Right its distinctive character is its combination of a specific political theology reflected in the writings of Rousas John Rushdoony , a theology of culture developed and articulated by Francis Schaeffer, and a presuppositional strategy that is unique to Dutch Calvinism. More specifically, the lines of thought move from Hermann Dooyeweerd, to Abraham Kuyper, to Cornelius vanTil and finally to van Til’s students Rousas John Rushdoony and Francis Schaeffer who studied under him at Westminster Theological Seminary. It is the combination of Rushdoony’s political theology and Francis Schaeffer’s theology of culture that grounds the movement’s theology. Neither the political theology articulated by Rushdoony or Schaeffer’s theology of culture is individually sufficient to define the contemporary Christian Right.¹⁵ To be clear, there are many aspects of Rushdoony’s thought that are rejected by Christian Right leaders and from which they intentionally distance themselves. The claim here is that only one particular aspect of Rushdoony’s writings illustrate and discuss at length a political theology that is expressed by many Christian Right leaders.

THEOLOGY OF THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

Three sets of assumptions ground Christian Right criticisms of contemporary American public education. The first of these is the movement’s conception of the source and nature of “Truth”. The second set of assumptions centers on the

¹⁵. For discussion of this legacy, see Detwiler, “Standing on the Premises of God,” 101–11.

nature and purpose of three divinely ordained institutions -- the church, the state, and the home. It is this aspect of Rushdoony's thought that is reflected in the political theology of the Christian Right. The third set holds that Western civilization has gradually lost its divine anchor and fallen victim to increasing secularism.

The assumption about the source and nature of truth is the starting point of the movement's metaphysics and epistemology. "Truth", with a capital "T", is given to humanity by God through God's revealed word in the Bible. This divinely revealed Truth is absolute in two senses. First, it is complete and final. Biblical Truth provides Christians with both the substance and categories of Truth. That is, no other truth claims are prior to the Bible and all other truth claims are subject to Biblical verification. If non-biblical truth claims are inconsistent with Biblical Truth, Christians must dismiss or reject them. Second, Biblical Truth is not subject to historical or cultural forces. Contemporary Christians can discern the "original intent" of the biblical writers and, through them, the structure of God's creation and God's plan for humanity for the present time and for future generations.

This conception of Truth is key to Francis Schaeffer's theology of culture. Schaeffer argues that the most important recent historical break with Biblical Truth appeared in the form of the Enlightenment. The corrosive ingredient of the Enlightenment was its emphasis on human rationality and its claim that through reason alone, humanity could discover truth. This development posed a serious threat to Biblical Truth. The Enlightenment's impact on social, political, economic, and educational structures threatened to overwhelm Christian civilization.¹⁶ Most importantly for this study, Enlightenment rationality came to dominate Western education and its triumph overwhelmed the earlier Christian foundation upon which America's public schools had been founded. It was up to Christian parents to take back control of America's schools and restore them to their proper Christian foundation. The resulting Christian Right battles over public education from the period of 1990 to the present embody the movement's efforts to reclaim America's schools for this end.

The second and third sets of assumptions of the Christian Right are rooted specifically in Dutch Calvinist sources. The movement's political theology holds that God has divided human social and political life into a series of dominions or spheres, each with its own authoritative institutions. When functioning properly, these institutions bring humanity into conformity with God's intended order. Humanity suffers when God's ordained order is not instituted in human social and political life. Disruption of this order can arise

¹⁶ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1991), 108, 123.

from either willful human disobedience or from confusion of responsibilities and functions among the divinely ordained institutions.¹⁷

The church is the first of these institutions. Its sphere of authority extends only to leaders and members of the Christian community and not directly to the society at large. Its internal structure is hierarchical with the minister at the head, the elders in the middle, and the congregation at the bottom. The minister's responsibility is discerning Biblical Truth and interpreting it for the congregation. The responsibility of the elders is to watch over the congregation and to lead them into conformity with God's divine order through instruction, encouragement, and, when necessary, sanctions. The responsibility of the congregants is to order their lives in a manner consistent with the minister's discernment and interpretation and the elder's leadership, advice, and admonitions. This view of the divinely ordained institution of the church specifically rejects theocracy since church's sphere of dominion does not extend to the state.

The state is the second of these institutions. Consistent with the teachings of John Calvin, the sphere of the state's sovereignty is limited to two functions: insuring domestic order so that true Christians can live their lives without interference and protecting its citizens from external threats. Whenever the state extends its sovereignty beyond these two responsibilities it is in violation of God's will and it is the responsibility of Christian citizens to elect Christian magistrates and for those magistrates to bring the state back into its divinely ordained sphere of sovereignty. The leaders and magistrates who control the state and implement its power should be Christians in good standing with the church because, within the church, they receive instruction from the minister and elders of God's divine purpose and will and through their public offices are able to direct and limit the power of the state.

The third institution is that of the family and, mirroring the institutions of the church and the state it has a patriarchal hierarchy with the father at the top, the mother in the middle, and the children at the bottom. The chief responsibility of the father is to insure that his behavior and that of his family is consistent with God's will as discerned and interpreted by the minister and, under the minister's direction, the elders. Further, all responsibilities not specifically delegated to either the church or state become part of the family's sphere-sovereignty. Therefore, education is the responsibility of the family not the church or state. The education ideal is upheld when Christian parents home school their children so that they can control what their children learn. When that is not possible, Christian schools are the first alternative. Lacking either the funds necessary to educate their children in Christian schools or the absence of any Christian schools in their area, Christian parents have no choice but to

¹⁷. For a full treatment of the Calvinist sources of sphere-sovereignty and God's divinely ordained intuitions see Peter Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1998).

place their children in public schools. However, when placing them in public schools, Christian parents have the final responsibility to insure that the curriculum taught in the public schools is, at best, completely consistent with Biblical Truth and, at worst, not in conflict with Biblical Truth. When school activities and/or curricula are in conflict with Biblical Truth, Christian parents must bring their influence to bear on the school system and attempt to change the offending activities or lessons.

The third set of assumptions that ground the Christian Right's criticism of contemporary public education in the United States derives from a theology of culture which sees the history of Western civilization as a battleground between a God-centered worldview and a human-centered worldview. At pivotal times during the course of Western history, culture faced a crossroad which forced it to choose between these two alternatives. The choice was critical to the course of Western civilization. Since the God-centered worldview is grounded in the Bible, Christians alone could understand and execute God's plan for humanity. Only the Bible gives the absolute standard for human behavior and human society. Further, only by choosing the God-centered worldview could humanity realize its full potential since human dignity was conferred by God not derived from non-Christian human sources or values..

However, at some of these critical junctures, society chose the human-centered worldview over the Biblical-centered one. The result was an increase in human pride, a dependence on human reason, and a resulting deterioration of culture. Since the human-centered worldview rested on a flawed concept of humanity, their efforts were doomed to failure. The error of this perspective was rooted in a rejection of the Fall and consequent human disobedience of God. Because they reject the biblical foundation of humanity and society, humans are left without any of the resources they need to correct the culture and to solve human problems.

In each of the critical crossroads in Western history, when society rejected the Biblical-centered worldview, a faithful remnant continued to hold on to it. Contemporary Christian Right theorists see themselves and the movement as the latest incarnation of that faithful remnant. They believe that nothing less than the future of Western civilization rests on their shoulders since they alone have the proper perspective and resources to overcome human problems. Through structuring the society along the lines of the divinely ordained institutions, culture can move toward its repair.

Presuppositional

The theological foundations of the Christian Right offer a specific strategy for attaining their goals of bringing American society and its institutions more in line with the movement's worldview. The movement's leaders derive this strategy from the same theological sources that provide their political theology and their theology of culture. As discussed above, the Christian Right "presuppositional" strategy holds that all humans ground their worldview in one of two sets of assumptions or presuppositions about the

nature of reality -- the God-centered worldview and the human-centered worldview. These sets of assumptions are mutually exclusive.

The problem with contemporary American culture and its system of public schools is that the supporters of the status quo simply do not understand the weakness of the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological assumptions upon which their institutions and way of life rest. Because of this blindness, they do not see the implications and future consequences of the paths they have chosen. This makes them vulnerable and dangerous. Christian Right presuppositionalists argue that if the larger society did grasp the assumptions of their worldview, they would see their insufficiency and reject them.

Taking this analysis to heart, presuppositionalism focuses on the current problems facing the society and argues back to its root cause using its two-fold analysis. Because most non-Christians will not accept biblical analysis, the presuppositional method starts by analyzing the problems using the assumptions of the human-centered worldview. This means that Christian cultural critics need to understand the human-centered worldview at its deepest level in order to identify the precise points at which it is vulnerable and fails. The next presuppositional step is to intentionally create a crisis of confidence among the larger culture by exploiting its vulnerabilities so that the insufficiencies of the larger culture's worldview will come to light and crumble under the weight of Christian Right challenges. Because reaching this crisis point is critical to the success of the Christian Right, movement leaders and activists should not be afraid of using any means possible to push people to the breaking point. Once this crisis of confidence reaches the critical breaking point and since there is only one alternative, people who now find themselves metaphysically, ontologically, and epistemologically adrift will turn to the Christian Right for an anchor and guidance. The ultimate goal of this method is to create a Christian cultural consensus in which the human-centered control over the society and its institutions is defeated and replaced with God-centered Christians who can then bring the society back into line with God's will and sovereignty. This presuppositionalism, as employed by the Christian Right, first appeared as a strategy in the Right to Life movement and, more specifically, Randall Terry and Operation Rescue.¹⁸

Public schools became a particular presuppositional target because Christian Right analysis led them to conclude that American education was not neutral in the battle for cultural control. >From the perspective of the Christian Right, America's public education system was acting as an intentional agent in advancing the human-centered worldview. This meant that not only were Christian children who attended public schools being bombarded with a

¹⁸. For example, Operation Rescue's founder and contemporary leader, Randall Terry, publicly acknowledges his indebtedness to Francis Schaeffer's *A Christian Manifesto* in which he develops his presuppositional strategy. See Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1981).

worldview that was anti-Christians, the society at the same time was producing future generations who would be unaware of the fundamental flaws in the human-centered approach and lead the country, and the world, further down the road to destruction.

As directed toward public education, presuppositionalism is behind much of the Christian Right's criticisms of America's public schools. The purpose of the criticism is to push the general public at "pressure points"¹⁹ in order to erode public confidence in the nation's schools. By continually chipping away at the American educational system, the Christian Right hopes that the general public will become receptive to alternatives such as public funding of Christian schools, curricular changes that are grounded in a Christian worldview perspective, and be more sympathetic to the inclusion of religion and religious activities in the public schools. Given its assumption that education is a function of parents rather than the state, it is logical to assume that at least some within the movement would not be opposed to a total collapse of the present-day system of public education in the United States.

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT CONSTITUENCY AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

In its earliest years, organizationally the Christian Right consisted mainly of Fundamentalist Christians who operated locally or at the state level fairly independently. The distinguishing mark of Fundamentalism is the belief that true Christianity is grounded in right belief or right faith. These beliefs were originally detailed in a series of books called *The Fundamentals* which were published during the second decade of the twentieth century. Although biblical literalism was not listed in the *The Fundamentals* as they were first published, it soon was added and it became one of the characteristic beliefs of Fundamentalism. Fundamentalists continued to be the core constituency of the Christian Right until the movement's rebirth in the late 1970s and 1980s when a basic shift in the movement occurred. This shift redefined the Christian Right along the Calvinist lines described above. From this shift the present-day organizational structure emerged. Together, these changes transformed the movement into a coherent social movement.

As discussed above, the 1980 Reagan Presidential campaign sought to broaden its Southern power base by reaching out to a number of new constituencies. The most important of these were Pentecostal/charismatic Christians, Christians from Holiness denominations, confessional or Reformed

¹⁹. The term is used by Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer uses the term to describe a points at which people realize the inadequacy of their worldview and begin to question it. See Francis A. Schaeffer, *Manifesto*. The Right to Life movement uses pictures of unborn fetuses when they picket places in which people are counseled to have an abortion of where they can get one. The pictures are designed to provoke a moral crisis in those seeking an abortion or information regarding abortions.

Christians, and born-again evangelicals. These became the groups from which the contemporary Christian Right draws its core adherents. This is not to say that all adherents to those traditions align with the Christian Right. Even within these denominational families, the majority of Christians do not identify with the Christian Right for a number of reasons.²⁰ Among these reasons are differences in theology, social policy, and levels of political engagement within and between these constituencies. Catholics have worked in tandem with Protestant Christian Right leaders because of their mutual interest in the areas of school funding and abortion. Although some Catholics have risen to prominence in the movement (e.g., Pat Buchanan, who was a key Reagan operative, and Phyllis Schlafly who heads the Eagle Forum), Catholic doctrine and natural law theology tend to distance Catholic leaders from the Dutch Calvinist assumptions of the movement. Another part of the Christian Right constituency comes from mainline Protestant denominations and also in much smaller numbers from Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. The dependence on Dutch Calvinist theologies that brings coherence to the movement emerges by default since none of the other core Protestant constituencies have well-developed political theologies or theologies of culture.

Membership in the Christian Right is not formal and so any attempt to gauge the numerical strength of the movement is highly problematic. The task of enumeration is made more difficult because people identify with the movement at different levels and different ways. At the most committed level are those who are “group members”²¹ of a Christian Right organization such as American Family Association, the Center for Reclaiming America, the Christian Coalition, the Moral Majority Coalition, Citizens for Excellence in Education, Concerned Women for America, the Eagle Forum, the Family Research Council, the Liberty Alliance, and the National Association of Christian Educators. At a second level of association within the Christian Right are “group supporters”, those who generally support the agenda and goals of Christian Right organizations but are not members. “Issue agenda supporters” constitute the third level of association. As the label suggests, these are people who agree with Christian Right positions on a number of issues but are not committed to the movement’s agenda and goals as a whole. At each of the three successive levels numerical strength of the Christian Right increases substantially. Thus, while the core membership of Christian Right groups may be rather limited, the number of people who agree with them on at least some issues is substantial.

²⁰. This is also true of evangelical Christians. Jimmy Carter’s support among Southern evangelical Christians and Sojourner’s Jim Wallis are two recent examples of socially liberal evangelical Christians.

²¹. I take this classification from Melissa M. Deckman, *School Board Battles: The Christian Right in Local Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 36–37.

The movement's identity is further complicated by the denominational diversity of its followers. Individual Christian Right organizations appeal to specific elements within the larger politically conservative base. Pentecostal/Charismatic, for example, are more likely drawn to Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. Fundamentalists would naturally associate with Jerry Falwell and his Liberty Alliance and Moral Majority Coalition or Donald Wildmon's²² American Family Association. Holiness Christians, born-again evangelicals, and members of mainstream denominations tend toward James Dobson's Focus on the Family and, by extension, the Family Research Council. Catholics might be drawn to Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, and Reformed Christians to D. James Kennedy's Center for Reclaiming America. In other words, people who identify themselves at any of the three levels of association may belong to a number of different organizations depending, in part, on their denominational identity.

The organizational structure Christian Right as a social movement operates at three loosely connected levels. At the top is the movement's elite. This elite conducts its work within think tanks and strategic planning groups such as the Family Research Council, the Coalition on Revival, and the Alliance Defense Fund.²³ In those organizations the leaders develop the movement's theoretical structure and frame policy statements and issue agendas. It is at this level that the movement's assumptions are most clearly explicit. While these various think tanks and groups operate independently, the elite has attempted to coordinate its efforts across institutional lines. The most visible effort is the Coalition on Revival (COR).²⁴ The previously mentioned Alliance Defense Fund also attempts to coordinate legal action on a national level in order to minimize the overlap on specific cases. To accomplish this goal Christian Right legal organizations file cases that seem to focus clearly on a constitutional issue that the movement wants to advance. The purpose of these cases is twofold. On the one hand they hope to win the case. On the other hand if they lose the case they can use the reasoning of the court's decisions to reframe their arguments in later cases in order to overcome those objections. Also at the elite level of the Christian Right are a number of training institutes, universities, and graduate schools which frame their mission and curricula within the movement's theoretical presuppositions. These include Focus on the Family Institute (Colorado Springs, Co.)²⁵, Liberty University

²². Wildmon is a United Methodist but his discourse reveals strong Fundamentalist tendencies.

²³. For a more detailed discussion of this level of the movement, see Detwiler, "Standing on the Premises of God," 135–39.

²⁴. For a description of the Coalition on Revival see "Coalition on Revival: Building Civilization on the Principles of the Bible" at: www.angelfire.com/ca4/cor/.

²⁵. See the Focus on the Family Institute website at: www.focusinstitute.org/.

(Lynchburg, Va.)²⁶, Regent University (Virginia Beach, Va.),²⁷ and Knox Theological Seminary (Fort Lauderdale, Fl.). Through these educational initiatives the movement's leaders intend to train the next generation of Christian Right elite.

The movement's knowledge workers and their special purpose groups²⁸ occupy the second level of the Christian Right. These are the most visible leaders and organizations since their function is to disseminate the movement's theoretical structure and issue agendas to the general public. These special purpose groups function to interpret the movement's theoretical foundation to their grass root constituencies by defining issues in ways that reflect their theological assumptions but framing those issues in ways that do not make the assumptions explicit. In their materials, such leaders and their organizations often employ two levels of discourse. The first frames the issues within the symbolic discourse of their core constituencies. The second level uses mainstream secular language in advancing their positions to those outside the movement. This second level of discourse functions to cloak the movement's religious foundations by appealing to the values and presuppositions of a liberal democracy. The first level of discourse typically appears in the materials the groups disseminate to those who fit into the "members" and "group supporters" categories described above. The second level of discourse typically appears when knowledge workers of the special purpose groups are interviewed in the electronic and print media or file legal briefs or advance legislation.

As noted above these special purpose groups also appeal to different constituencies within the Christian Right, thus enabling them to focus their discourse within a variety of religious frameworks. James Dobson and Focus on the Family appeals to a wide spectrum of people who identify with the Holiness tradition and with the larger Methodist/Pietist family from which the Holiness movement arose. Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition also appeal to a broad range of Americans who associate with the Pentecostal movement and the various religious traditions out of which Pentecostalism arose. Jerry Falwell and the Liberty Alliance appeal to Fundamentalists. D. James Kennedy and Reclaiming America speak to those Americans who would feel most comfortable within the Reformed/Calvinist tradition. Two organizations also appeal specifically to women. Concerned Women for American, founded by Beverly LaHaye, has its roots in the Fundamentalist tradition. Phyllis Schlafly and the Eagle Forum are more geared to conservative Catholics and those highly active in the Pro-Life Movement.

²⁶. See the Liberty University website at: www.liberty.edu/.

²⁷. See the Regent University website at: www.regent.edu/.

²⁸. For a description of special purpose groups, see Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 101, 130.

Other special purpose groups focus on specific issues. Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association initially spoke to media issues such as movies and television programming. Robert Simonds and Citizens for Excellence in Education targets educational issues. Henry Morris and the Institute for Creation Research develops challenges to evolution and promotes “intelligent design.” David Barton of Wallbuilders and Rus Walton of the Plymouth Rock Foundation advance arguments for the religious and biblical foundation of the American nation.²⁹ A number of special purpose groups concentrate on legal and legislative agendas. These include the Family Research Council, initially formed by James Dobson, Pat Robertson’s American Center for Law and Justice, the Alliance Defense Fund, John Whitehead’s Rutherford Institute and, from a Catholic natural law perspective, Tom Monahan’s Ave Maria University School of Law.

At the third level of the Christian Right movement’s organizational structure are the special purpose groups’ grass root members and issue supporters. These people operate at the local level and bring pressure to bear on school boards and educational administrators as well as other local officials such as librarians and civil administrators. Using the materials provided by the special purpose groups, these “grass rooters” raise questions about school curricula, religious activities in the schools, books purchased for the local library, and religion in the public square. They also support candidates for public office who support Christian Right issues and agendas. Given the diverse constituencies of the Christian Right, these grass rooters may identify with different special purpose groups and, therefore, are not always aware of each other’s work. When challenges do arise, however, many grass rooters often use similar language even though they may be coming from different constituent bases. This is because the issues they advance are interpreted for them by the knowledge workers who operate out of a similar set of theological presuppositions.³⁰

CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

When I began to research educational issues in the early 1990s, the major topics of concern for the Christian Right were Outcome-based Education, sex education, evolution, and school prayer. By 2005, Outcome-based Education

²⁹. Rus Walton died in 1999 but his materials still serve as the Plymouth Rock Foundation’s chief resources.

³⁰. I experienced this first hand during the mid-1990s when I traveled throughout the nation speaking about Christian Right educational challenges to school administrators, teachers, and parents. The wording used by Christian Right grass rooters was remarkably similar from Kalispell, Montana, to Stone Mountain, Georgia, and from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to Yakima, Washington.

challenges disappeared while the other issues remained, joined by issues such as Bible curriculum into the public schools, religious clubs in schools, observance of holidays, and the religious rights of students and teachers. In the following analysis I will use one of the contemporary issues to illustrate each of the Christian Right presuppositions about the nature of truth, the divinely ordained institutions, and the faithful remnant seeking to return Western civilization, and more specifically the American nation, to its proper Christian foundations.

The Nature of Truth. Christian Right presuppositions about the nature of truth ground the movement's efforts to integrate creationism and its more recent incarnation Intelligent Design theory into the nation's public school science curricula. Truth, from their perspective, is determined by the degree to which truth-claims agree with, or are not inconsistent with, biblical information and categories of classification that are derived from the revealed word. The Bible, therefore, is the measure of truth and any truth-claim, scientific or otherwise, that is in tension or conflicts with the Christian Right reading of the Bible is false. From this biblical perspective, humanity is understood as the product of a special act of creation by God, separate and distinct from the divine creation of the natural world. Thus, evolution, which argues a continuity in creation, violates conservative Christian anthropology.

Christian Right efforts to promote creationism in the public schools have not met with much success either in the courts or in the mind of the larger public. In the first case to adjudicate the inclusion of creationism in public schools curriculum, the Supreme Court in *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968) reviewed an Arkansas law that prohibited public school teachers from teaching "the theory or doctrine that mankind ascended or descended from a lower order of animals." The Court ruled in favor of Susan Epperson, a high school biology teacher who had challenged the law on the basis of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. The Court held that since the law was based on theological convictions that derived from Christian Fundamentalism, it was unconstitutional. In the majority opinion, Justice Abe Fortus wrote: "Arkansas did not seek to excise from the curricula or its schools and universities all discussion of the origin of man. The law's effort was confined to an attempt to blot out a particular theory because of its supposed conflict with the Biblical account, literally read."³¹

Through the *Epperson* case, Christian Right strategists realized that teaching creationism instead of evolution could not pass constitutional muster. As a result, they shifted their approach to "Scientific Creationism" and advanced the "fairness" argument. "Scientific Creationism" emphasized the point that evolution was "only a theory" and because it was only a theory,

³¹ Jr. Hudson, David L., *Evolution & Creation* (The First Amendment Center, 2005), www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=evolution_creation.

“fairness” required a balanced treatment of evolution by including other competing theories.

The “fairness” argument appeals to the larger culture’s sense of the values of a liberal democracy. The argument reflects the Christian Right belief that the general public does not understand the presuppositions of its stances. The fairness claim assumes a general lack of understanding among the general public about the specific meaning of the term “theory” within the empirical method of contemporary science. According to that method and the principle of falsifiability within that method, in order for a proposition or theory to be considered “scientific,” it must admit the possibility of the theory being false. Any theory that does not contain within it the possibility of it being false is not scientific. Christian Right promoters argue that the proof of Scientific Creationism is in the Bible. Since the Bible is self-validating, the position does not permit any basis upon which to test the falsifiability of the claim. The Christian Right claim that both evolution and Scientific Creationism are just “theories” rests on either a lack of understanding of the scientific method among the general public or a confusion about the method itself.

To overcome the Court’s objection in *Epperson*, legislatures in Arkansas and Louisiana passed laws requiring teachers to give equal time to evolution and creationism. In *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education* (1982), the Supreme Court rejected the “balanced treatment” approach. In a 7-2 ruling, the Court held that the “preeminent purpose of the Louisiana Legislature was clearly to advance the religious viewpoint that a supernatural being created humankind.” In the majority opinion, the Court added, “the purpose of the Creationism Act was to restructure the science curriculum to conform with a particular religious viewpoint.”³²

The Court further noted that the “balanced treatment” approach of teaching competing theories was valid if the purpose was to strengthen the science curriculum rather than to advance a religious viewpoint. The challenged faced by the Christian Right was to develop such a competing theory. They constructed such a theory in “Intelligent Design” (ID). Intelligent Design holds that the sheer complexity of life on Earth could not have occurred through random processes such as natural selection. According to Francis Beckwith, ID supporters have “presented an array of sophisticated and empirically grounded arguments supporting the notion that intelligent agency may do a better job of accounting for certain aspects of the natural world, or the natural world as a whole, than non-agent explanations, such as natural selection or scientific laws working on the unguided interaction of matter.”³³ Ultimately the only explanation for such complexity, they argue, lies in an intelligent designer. To explain this complexity requires the existence of an intentional processes attributed to an intelligent designer. According to its advocates:

³². Hudson, *Evolution & Creation*.

³³. Cited in Hudson, *Evolution & Creation*.

Intelligent Design is simply the science of design detection -- how to recognize patterns arranged by an intelligent cause for a purpose. Design detection is used in a number of scientific fields, including anthropology, forensic sciences that seek to explain the cause of events such as a death or fire, cryptanalysis and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). An inference that certain biological information may be the product of an intelligent cause can be tested or evaluated in the same manner as scientists daily test for design in other sciences.³⁴

The presupposition upon which this argument rests goes beyond the test for design. It assumes that design is present in the creation, that it is intentional, and that it can be traced to a non-human and non-natural force . The challenge to the courts is whether the fact that God is not named as the non-human force behind creation, frees the argument from theological presuppositions.³⁵

Christian Right challenges to evolution frequently emphasize the gaps in evolutionary theory, especially the “missing link” that connects humans with other primates. At least one Christian Right website also claims that evolution rests on Aldus Huxley’s efforts to free Western civilization from restrictive sexual mores. This illustrates the movement’s view that Western civilization reflects human-centered values and is, therefore, at war with their God-centered worldview. The same site lists a number of hoaxes offered by evolutionary scientists and challenges the probability of evolutionary theory accounting for the complexity of the natural world. A side bar on the same site seeks to support biblical claims as scientific by citing a passage from the prophet Isaiah (Is. 40:22) that demonstrates that Isaiah knew the world was round before the discoveries of Columbus or the Greek astronomer Ptolemy.³⁶ This last claim is intended to demonstrate the Bible’s superiority in scientific issues.

Encouraged by the success of conservatives in the 2004 elections, proponents of Intelligent Design have initiated legislation in thirteen states. Through this legislation, Christian Right elected officials intended to promote a critical examination of evolution in their states’ public school classrooms by suggesting other alternative explanations of human origins.³⁷ Two state boards

³⁴. See the Intelligent Design Network website at www.intelligentdesignnetwork.org/.

³⁵. At the time of this writing, this issue was before the courts in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*. The case is scheduled for trial in late September, 2005.

³⁶. See the Reclaiming America website at www.reclaimamerica.org/PAGES/fastfacts/CreationEvolution.pdf.

³⁷. See Lisa Anderson, “Debate Over Evolution Simmers in Red and Blue States,” *Northeast Missouri Daily Journal*, 22 May 2005 at www.djournal.com/pages/story.asp?ID=193741&pub=1&div=News.

of education have promoted Intelligent Design as a scientific alternative to evolution. In Ohio in 2002, Intelligent Design proponents urged the state board of education to permit public school teachers to present design theory along with evolution in high school science classes.³⁸ The board issued its policy in October of that year stating that teachers would be required to teach students about the controversy surrounding evolution but left to the local school districts the issue of whether to teach alternatives theories in addition to evolution.³⁹ In May, 2005, the Kansas state board of education held hearings on whether Intelligent Design should be added to the state science curriculum. The newly elected majority on the board supported the inclusion. A like-minded majority attempted the same initiative in 1999 but lost their majority in the next election.⁴⁰ In both Ohio and Kansas the debate brought the supporters of Intelligent Design into conflict with the scientific educational establishments in the states. In another case that drew national attention, a school board in Cobb County, Georgia, recently put disclaimers in three biology textbooks stating: “This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully and critically considered.”⁴¹ As a result of subsequent legal action by the American Civil Liberties Union, the board later reversed its position and removed the stickers. Christian Right activists will continue to challenge evolution because it is the most obvious scientific area that challenges the biblical categories of knowledge and the movement’s anthropology.

Divinely Ordained Institutions. The Christian Right’s conception of society and its institutions grounds their challenges to two issues related to public education. The first issue is parental control of the local school districts. The second is sex-education. Both issues reflect the Christian Right’s view of the family as a divinely ordained institution and their conception of the sphere sovereignty of those institutions.

The issue of parental control of the local school districts became an important point of controversy in 1979 just prior to the Reagan administration when education was elevated to the status of a cabinet position with the

³⁸. See LaTonya Taylor, “Intelligent Design Battle Moves to Ohio,” *Christianity Today*, 9 September 2002 at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/010/10.22.html.

³⁹. See Mark Hartwig, “‘Teaching the Controversy’ Wins in Ohio,” *Citizen Link*, 23 October 2002 at www.family.org/cforum/feature/a0022829.cfm.

⁴⁰. See “Evolving in Kansas,” *Boston Globe*, 28 May 2005 at www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/editorials/articles/2005/05/28/evolving_in_kansas/.

⁴¹. “Trial Underway in GA Over Evolution Disclaimer,” *Associated Press*, 9 November 2004 at www.aclj.org/news/Read.aspx?ID=829.

formation of the Department of Education.⁴² Christian Right political activists who had been a major source of support for Reagan in the 1980 Presidential Election hoped that the new President would abolish the department. But Reagan did not and under his administration the newly formed department continued to assert Federal power over the nation's educational agenda. When a government committee charged with evaluating the current state of America's public schools published its report, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983, Christian Right critics of public education were disappointed with the committee's analysis and policy recommendations. The report identified none of the issues about which they were most concerned. However, to their delight, in a news conference scheduled to review the report's findings, President Reagan ignored the commission's recommendations. Instead he called for "the passage of tuition tax credits, vouchers, educational savings accounts, voluntary school prayer, and the abolishment of the Department of Education."⁴³ Encouraged by Reagan's remarks, Christian Right activists seized on the report and used it as evidence that America's public school system needed fundamental reform. When Reagan appointed William Bennett as his second Secretary of Education, Bennett used his position to promote a return to traditional Western values as the new foundation of public education.⁴⁴

Movement leaders also used *A Nation at Risk* to argue that state and federal intervention in public education had failed and that control of public education ought to be given back to local school districts. Since parents have the primary responsibility of educating and nurturing their children, according to Christian Right presuppositions, parents could then gain control of the local schools through running for school boards and pressuring teachers and school administrators for changes in school policy and curricula.

The second issue that illustrates the Christian Right concept of divinely ordained social institutions is sex-education. It is also one of the most enduring issues for the Christian Right. Both Concerned Women for America and the Eagle Forum see this as one of the most important issue for their organizations. According to Christian Right presuppositions, the only proper setting for sexual activity is between a husband and wife within the institution of the family. Further, because parents have primary responsibility for educating and nurturing their children, schools should not teach sex-education. But since schools do teach sex-education, the only form which should be taught is

⁴². For a fuller discussion of the history of the Department of Education see D. T. Stallings, "A Brief History of the United States Department of Education: 1979–2002" (Durham, N.C., 2002) at the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy website www.pubpol.duke.edu/centers/child/briefs.html.

⁴³. Ronald Reagan, "Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents," vol. 9, no. 17 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records of Administration, 1983), 593.

⁴⁴. Stallings, "Brief History."

“abstinence-only”. That is, students should only be taught to abstain from any sexual activity until they are married. The only additional information about sex that should be presented to the student’s centers on the dangers of pre-marital sexual activity such those associated with STDs and the risk of pregnancy. Since students are susceptible to acting without thinking, any other information about safe sex or about alternative sexual orientations is tantamount to promoting pre-marital sexual activity and homosexuality. Both pre-marital and homosexual behaviors violate the foundations of the divinely ordained family and, by encouraging them, the schools further contribute to the moral decline of American society and Western civilization.

On this basis Christian Right activists reject “abstinence-based” sex education in school curricula because, even though it promotes sexual chastity before marriage, it includes information about safe sex and alternative lifestyles. While Christian Right organizations continue to promote abstinence-only sex education classes, abstinence-based programs dominate contemporary sex-education curricula in the nation’s public schools. Once again, by returning policy decisions to local school boards, Christian Right leaders hope that they can influence school administrators and teachers and bring sex-education curricula into conformity with their vision of society’s divinely ordained institutions.

One case that illustrates the substance of the controversy over sex-education began in 2004 in the Montgomery County, Maryland, schools. After three years of study a planning committee of twenty-seven parents, teachers, students, religious leaders, and other community representatives presented their recommendations to the superintendent and the county school board. The goals of the recommendations were to promote responsible decision-making on sexual issues by the students and to promote toleration for alternative sexual orientations. The major changes in the curriculum were to permit eighth grade teachers to present information on homosexuality and to show a seven-minute video to tenth grade students that included visual instruction on how to use a condom.⁴⁵ In November, 2004, the Montgomery County Board of Education received the recommendations and with the cooperation of the superintendent began the process of implementing it into the district’s curriculum. Three junior high schools and three high schools were chosen for a pilot program. The curriculum was to then be evaluated in June at the end of the school year and, if deemed appropriate, to be implemented district-wide for the next school year.

Almost immediately an organization that opposed the recommendations arose. Concerned Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum (CRC), joined by a

⁴⁵ Lori Aratani and Daniel de Vise, “Montgomery Blindsided Over Sex-Ed,” *Washington Post*, 1907 May 2005, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/06/AR2005050601648.html.

Virginia-based group called Parents and Friends of Ex-gays,⁴⁶ sought legal redress in Federal Court through a restraining order that would prevent the district from moving forward on the plan. U.S. District Judge Alexander Williams Jr. granted relief and the district was enjoined from moving forward on the curriculum. A CRC member said that they did not expect to prevail in court and that the decision went "beyond the wildest dreams" of the group.⁴⁷ The CRC website called the ruling "the most significant curriculum decision ever rendered."⁴⁸ After the ruling, the school board and representatives of CRC agreed to cooperate and to try and work out an agreement acceptable to both sides.

According to their website, the CRC noted that "Clearly, homosexuality is part of the culture we live in. Teaching respect for persons with same-sex attraction is appropriate and right." The group argued, however, that the curriculum went beyond teaching tolerance "by demanding affirmation of a homosexual orientation and behavior, and in fact violated the value systems of many families." The CRC's suggestions for the revised curriculum include inviting ex-gays in to speak to the students about alternative life-styles and excluding negative comments about religious groups who oppose homosexuality. The group further urged that the revised materials include "the serious medical consequences if risky sexual behaviors are introduced in the curriculum..." Parents and Friends of Ex-gays (PFOX) provides such information of the dangers of premarital sex on their website. PFOX also argues that the curriculum proposed by the original committee engaged in proselytizing by presenting religious groups that affirm homosexuality in a favorable light while excluding materials from groups that believe that homosexuality violates God's divine law. PFOX further claims that such the curriculum thereby violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

As of September, 2005, the case had not been resolved. What this case illustrates is that, even in liberal or moderate community like Montgomery County, there are those who can effectively oppose the cultural majority by seeking to have their view their religious viewpoint expressed and included in school curricula. Such is the nature of a democratic society. While not explicitly identified, the religious basis of their objections reflect the Christian Right view of the limits and responsibilities of the divinely ordained institutions of the state and family.

⁴⁶. See the Parents and Friends of Ex-gays' webstie at www.pfox.com/.

⁴⁷. Karen MacPherson, "Conservatives Win Skirmish on Sex-Ed Program in Maryland," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 1916 May 2005, Www.post-gazette.com/pg/pp/05136/505193.stm.

⁴⁸. See the Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum website at www.mcpscurriculum.com/.

Christian Civilization. The issue of the current decline in moral values in American society provides the Christian Right with the basis on which to argue for a return of America to a Christian civilization. Two topics, school prayer and Bible curricula in the public schools, express these Christian Right concerns and exemplify the movement's theology of culture. According to their Bible-centered worldview, secular humanism and its attending moral relativism have led to the gradual decline in Western civilization and can account for the demise of the Christian basis of the American nation.⁴⁹ Christian Right leaders point to two 1962-63 Supreme Court decisions on prayer and Bible reading. In the first of those decisions, *Engle v. Vitale* (1962), the Court was asked to rule on a New York state policy that required schools to begin the day by reciting a prayer composed by the New York State Board of Regents. Although the prayer was non-sectarian, the Court found that the state had no constitutional right to compose, let alone require the recitation, or a prayer. The constitutionality of the prayer rested solely on the government's violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and not on any person being offended by the prayer. The second case, *Abington Township v. Schempp* (1963), included another case brought to the Court which the Court decided to collapse into the *Schempp* case, *Murray v. Curlett*. Both cases deal with the issues of prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. The *Schempp* case arose out of a Pennsylvania law that required the reading of ten verses from the Bible at the start of each school day. In some districts, teachers also led the students in the Lord's Prayer.⁵⁰ The petitioner in the *Schempp* case argued that these practices violated his family's religious beliefs. The Court sided with *Schempp* and held that the practices were unconstitutional on the basis argued by the petitioner. The *Murray* case differed slightly in that the petitioner was an atheist. She challenged the law not on the basis of religious freedom but on the basis that prayer in itself was not efficacious in bringing about the results intended by its supporters. The Court collapsed the *Murray* case into the *Schempp* case and decided in favor of the petitioner but not on the grounds she sought.

According to Christian Right leaders, the Supreme Court decisions were just the final secular humanist nail in the coffin of Christian public education in America. They argue that the original intent of the founders of public education in America was to promote Christian values and to emphasize

⁴⁹. For a complete presentation of this argument, see Francis A Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Weschester, Il.: Crossway Books, 1976).

⁵⁰. This was the case in the Shamokin Area School District in which the author was a student during the time in which the practices were observed.

the Christian foundation of the nation.⁵¹ According to their line of analysis, schools began to fall away from this foundation through the leadership of Horace Mann, a Unitarian minister and leader of the public education movement in the nineteenth century. Although Mann was a Christian and believed that the public schools ought to promote Christian values, he is criticized for his liberal Unitarian beliefs and his tolerance of religious diversity.

The strongest Christian Right criticism for the decline in Western culture, however, is reserved for Enlightenment thinkers who substituted nature's religion for revealed religion by emphasizing the power of human reason over Biblical Truth. The main figure in the surrender of public education to Enlightenment's principles is identified as John Dewey. Dewey believed that the schools should promote "religion." But he distanced himself from Mann and others who held that schools should promote the Christian religion. For Dewey, public schools had the responsibility to advance "democratic religion," that is, the principles of enlightened democracy -- with reason rather than revelation at its core. According to his Christian Right critics, Dewey's intent was to use the public schools to indoctrinate future generation in Enlightenment ideology and, thereby, transform them into secular humanists.⁵²

Because America's public schools rest on such anti-Christian principles they must undergo a thorough transformation if the Christian foundations of the society are ever to be recovered. Schools, they observe, are tremendously powerful transmitters of cultural values. In the hands of secular humanist teachers and school administrators, the schools are one of the most important institutions in continuing the long decline of Christian values and Western civilization.

Through school prayer, Christians Right activists aim to reintroduce American public education to its Christian foundation. From the Christian Right perspective, Christian youths who witness their faith by praying in school are representatives of the faithful remnant that has endured throughout the history of Western civilization. In recent years the Christian Right has seen their efforts blunted as courts ruled against their efforts to institutionalize prayer in the public schools. In *Wallace v. Jaffree* (1985), the Supreme Court ruled that an Alabama "moment of silence" law was unconstitutional because the purpose of the law was to introduce prayer into the schools. The Court also

⁵¹. For an example of this argument see David Barton, *Revisionism: How to Identify It In Your Children's Textbooks* (Wallbuilders, 2005), www.wallbuilders.com/resources/search/detail.php?ResourceID=64.

⁵². For a detailed analysis of this argument see Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education*, reprinted from 1963 (Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1972).

held that a truly secular moment of silence would be constitutional but that to be so it would need to have clearly secular purpose.

In 1992, the Supreme Court addressed the issue of graduation prayers in *Lee v. Weisman*. The case involved a practice in the Providence, R.I., schools of opening and closing middle school graduation ceremonies with prayer offered by invited clergymen. The schools argued that since the graduation ceremonies were voluntary, those who objected to the practice could excuse themselves from the ceremony. The Court held that the practice violated the Establishment Clause irrespective of whether or not the exercises were voluntary. The Court focused on the fact that the schools invited the clergy to offer the prayers and that this constituted endorsement of religion. The ruling also noted that the “opt-out” provisions offered by the school constituted an unfair burden on children who objected to the presence of the prayer.

In 2000, the Court heard another case which involved the practice of invoking prayers before high school football games. The practice was common throughout the South. In *Santa Fe v. Doe*, the defendants argued that because the prayer was offered by students, the prayer was a private expression of religion and therefore governed by the Free Exercise Clause rather than the Establishment Clause. In their ruling, the Court held that such prayers were unconstitutional on the basis of the Establishment Clause because they were offered in a public forum at the request of school officials.

In a subsequent case, *Adler v. Duval* (2001), the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals was asked to clarify the *Santa Fe v. Doe* ruling by the Supreme Court. The issue at hand was whether students were permitted to engage in religious speech, including prayers, if the school used neutral criteria in selecting a student in a truly open forum. The lower court ruled that students who were selected by the school according to neutral criteria could engage in religious speech on the basis of free expression if the school district did not require prior review of the comments. If the district did require prior review and had the right to modify the comments, then the school had responsibility for the speech and, if permitted, such speech would violate the Establishment Clause.⁵³

Given these legal limitations, a number of Christian Right special purpose groups provide students with guidelines on prayer at school during school hours.⁵⁴ The purpose behind the publication of these guidelines is to

⁵³. The information on the court cases cited comes from the First Amendment Center. See Charles Haynes, “School Prayer Overview” (First Amendment Center, 2005), www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=school_prayer.

⁵⁴. For an example of such guidelines see Jennifer A. Marshall, *10 Ways to Pray in School* (Washington, D.C.: Family Research Council, 2005), www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=IFo1K1&v=PRINT.

encourage Christian students to use every opportunity legally afforded them to bring Christianity into the public schools. Should school districts or teachers violate legal precedent by illegally restricting Christian students' free exercise of religion, these Christian Right legal organizations provide free legal services. Violations that do occur are highlighted on Christian Right special purpose group web sites where they are interpreted as anti-Christian and examples of persecution of Christian school children by school officials.

While promoting the visibility of the Christian faith in public schools through prayer is one side of the movement's theology of culture, another part of the agenda is to integrate the historical claim of the Christian foundation of American culture into school curricula. They approach this in two ways. The first involves a debate that arose during the 1990s over the development of new standards for teaching American and world history. Led by Lynne Cheney, the former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Christian Right activists sought to insure that the Christian roots of the American nation were emphasized in the teaching of American history in the public schools. Convinced that America's schools were dominated by secular humanism and moral relativism, movement activists challenged the standards developed by a commission that included a number of eminent historians. They argued that a feminist and multicultural agenda dominated the commission and they feared that the new standards, if left unchallenged, would continue the American nation on a course that would lead to its demise. Christian Right leaders urged that new standards be adopted that emphasized the positive contribution of Western Civilization and America's founding figures and the Judeo-Christian values that led them to create the new nation.

The second way in which the Christian Right activists hope to convince school students of the Christian foundation of Western civilization and the American nation is through curricula designed to use the Bible as the focus of literature and history courses. The North Carolina based National Council on Bible Curriculum In Public Schools publishes a curriculum that studies the Bible as "a foundation document of society."⁵⁵ The curriculum description begins with the statement that the King James version of the Bible is used as the basis of the lessons "because of its historical use as the legal and educational foundation of America"⁵⁶ and not because it is a religious text. Underlying the lesson content is the theological belief that the Old Testament is "history" rather than a theological explanation of the formation of the Jewish people. In the New Testament sections a similar assumption grounds the materials. The Gospels, for example, are taken as historical fact. This means that students are taught as historical fact Jesus' virgin birth, his resurrection,

⁵⁵. The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools web page at www.bibleinschools.net/sdm.asp.

⁵⁶. See the curriculum description at www.bibleinschools.net/pdf/CurrTOB904.pdf.

and his appearance to Thomas after he had ascended into heaven. Departing from the Bible as the focus of study, Unit 17 emphasizes the Christian foundation of the American nation and the Christian roots of American education. Other resources for parents and teachers who want their children to learn that America is a Christian nation are provided by Wallbuilders and the Plymouth Rock Foundation. Another organization, the Christian Educators Association International lists encouraging “Christian Educators in Public and Private Education” to “Proclaim God’s word as the source of wisdom and knowledge... Preserve our Judeo-Christian heritage and values through education... (and to) Provide a forum on educational issues with a Christian world view”⁵⁷ as its mission. The phrase “Christian world view” has particular meaning in the language of the Christian Right. It refers to the movement’s theological presuppositions about Truth, divinely ordained institutions of society, and the history and nature of Western civilization.

Conclusion

Most of the grass root constituency of the various Christian Right special purpose groups are not aware of the movement’s underlying presuppositions. At the grass root level, then, the movement may not appear to have coherence. It generally appears as the voices of concerned parents and citizens who object to particular programs, curricular decisions, and school policies. Since, the special purpose groups provide followers with two types of discourse, the criticisms at the local level may not even suggest any connection to religious presuppositions. Yet, these presuppositions of the nature of truth, the divinely ordained institutions of society, and the demise of Western civilization at the hand of secularism do bring coherence to the movement at the levels of the cultural elite and knowledge workers. In so doing, they combine to level on-going and continuous challenges to America’s system of public education. Given the presuppositional strategy of the movement, it appears that the ultimate goal of the Christian Right is not the improvement of the nation’s public schools. Rather, it is pushing for a continuous decline in public confidence until American demand a new system that places Christian worldview education on an equal or higher level than the secular public schools.

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⁵⁷. See the Christian Educators Association International website at www.ceai.org/.

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