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ABSTRACT

As the controversy over religion in the classroom increases, the presence of religious influences and foundations in history has become almost non-existent in textbooks, and classic literature is dropped in favor of reading texts that are "dumbed down" by readability formulas, that avoid anything that might offend influential interest groups, and that strive too hard to be cheerful, patriotic, multiethnic, nonsexist, and noncontroversial. Expressing dismay about the blandness of recent textbooks, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) issued a report that reflected its concern that religious principles were not taught as fundamental to world history. In 1987, the California Board of Education changed its social studies curriculum to include more facts in textbooks religion in history and called for a return of the classics in secondary literature classes. (DJC)

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RELIGION IN OUR TEXTBOOKS

BY

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Religion in Our Textbooks
By Franklin Parker

Textbook criticism has mounted, often from fundamentalist extremists but also increasingly from objective investigators and religious and education groups. In censoring a reading series in Hawkins County, Tennessee, Federal District Judge Thomas G. Hull said of textbook publishers, "They've almost whitewashed religion out of the schools. They've done it to try to satisfy everybody. They would write anything as long as they could sell it." (1) Other observers agree that textbook publishers, wanting to sell textbooks and fearful of offending critics, have been intimidated to remove religion from textbooks.

"The removal of religion as a subject of study," wrote a rabbi and a Lutheran minister, "has dismayed many responsible educators, parents, and mainstream religious leaders." The public schools, they insist, "have the right to teach about religion but not to teach which religious beliefs are correct." (2)

One textbook's coverage of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights activities was criticized for not mentioning that he was a Baptist minister. A sixth grade social studies book was criticized for not mentioning God in discussing Joan of Arc.

Reasons textbooks have been watered down in religious, academic, and science content were given by New York Times education writer Fred M. Hechinger: as college enrollments grew and textbook markets expanded, growing two-year colleges wanted simpler textbooks like those written for high schools. As conglomerates bought up textbook houses, editors, more market oriented than scholarly, sought increased profits from a mass audience. As knowledge expanded, particularly in the sciences, publishers left everything in, including questionable material. Textbooks thus became larger, more expensive, lightly edited, and often poorly written. (3)

Those faulting history and other textbooks for ignoring religion include Secretary of Education William J. Bennett; Professors Diane Ravitch and Paul Vitz; People for the American Way, a liberal lobbying group opposed to censorship; Americans United for Separation of Church and State; the American Federation of Teachers (AFT); and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). ASCD's incisive

July 1, 1987, report called for an end to "the curricular silence on religion," a silence which has permeated schools since the U. S. Supreme Court banned officially sanctioned public school prayer a quarter century ago. The ASCD report deplored "bland" textbooks and the school "benign neglect" of ways religion has shaped American and world history. Public schools must get over the mistaken notion "that matters of religion are simply too hot to handle." (4)

The ACSD report said, "The quest for religious freedom that fueled the establishment of this nation receives scant textbook treatment." It added that the books "have even less to say about the profound part religious belief has played in...U.S. history," from the nineteenth century abolitionist and temperance movements to the twentieth century civil rights movement. "An elementary student can come away from a textbook account of the Crusades [believing] that these wars to win the Holy Land for Christendom were little more than exotic shopping expeditions." Nor, it added, are the religious roots explained of the Iran and Iraq war or disturbances in Lebanon and in Northern Ireland.

Textbooks, the report charged, "contain few, if any, references to Christmas and Easter, or even to Thanksgiving, St. Patrick's Day or Columbus Day, to say nothing of Jewish holidays or those of other

religions." It quoted U.S. Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark's opinion in a 1963 school prayer case, "One's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion." He added, "The Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities."

Art classes, the ASCD report said, should pay attention to the impact of Christianity on Michelangelo; world history courses should cover the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the Crusades, the Reformation, and the treatment of Jews and Muslims in the Spanish Inquisition; literature students should read not only the Bible but also passages from the Koran, the Gita, the Talmud, and other sacred writings. (5)

Five world history textbooks were faulted in a July 29, 1987, report as "bland, incomplete, lacking drama, and more interested in skills than in presenting ideas." The report said, "The basic ideas of Judaism and Christianity, which inform every debate over right and wrong and the place of the individual in society, are all but ignored." said AFT President Albert Shanker, "We are talking about understanding our ideals, about knowing our past--the unfortunate and the evil as well as the good. That is not indoctrination; that is education in the best sense of the word." The AFT issued 1987 guidelines for teaching democratic values in the nation's

schools, guidelines endorsed by 150 politicians, educators, and other prominent citizens. (6)

New York University psychologist Paul Vitz's 1986 study also found that textbooks neglected religion and distorted family life by not stressing marriage and full-time parenting as the norm. He found little on patriotism; a neglect of business, labor, and altruism; and noted that prominent contemporary political figures mentioned were almost exclusively "liberal." (7) This exclusion from textbooks of much of the American experience helps explain recent censorship by Tennessee and Alabama federal district judges who agreed with fundamentalists that textbooks and school curricula are biased against religious convictions.

Education historian Diane Ravitch was deeply disturbed by readers used in most U.S. public schools. She objected to their over-abundant myth and fantasy and was concerned about neglect of classic literature. Late nineteenth century educators and publishers saw their purpose as transmitting the best literature in the English language to young readers. Modern textbooks, written to satisfy complex readability and vocabulary formulas, do not use such classic authors as Nathaniel Hawthorne because his language does not fit such formulas. Today's reader, she said, is "dumbed down" by readability formulas and is "blandened down" to remove

anything that might offend interest groups in big states. Today's readers strive too much to be cheerful, patriotic, multiethnic, nonsexist, and noncontroversial. "In this saccharine world, no one suffers unjustly, no one is evil, no one is poor or unemployed, women and minorities are depicted as leaders and achievers in every field." She criticized this unrealistic image of society and praised nineteenth century McGuffey readers for including such classic writers as Hawthorne, Shakespeare, and Tennyson. Poetry, she noted,

accounted for 30 percent of...19th century readers. Today it is less than 3 percent...The golden age of the school readers faded in the 1920s, with the introduction of standardized testing. Emphasis shifted from oral reading to silent reading, from teaching appreciation of literature to instructing children in the mechanics of reading [for] speed and efficiency, for timed tests, to answer true-false questions, or to fill in blanks or circle the correct answer.

In the modern utilitarian era, she said, classics were dropped in favor of informational material and so-called realistic stories of boys and girls, as in the "Dick and Jane" readers. Some good teachers, Ravitch said, rebel against such basal readers and spend their own money for the best literature of the present and past. "Unless we expose children to the best

literature," she said, we will lose them to television. She praised the California Reading Initiative under State Superintendent of Education William Honig as an ambitious effort to bring "real books" back to the classroom. (8)

The California Board of Education on July 10, 1987, unanimously required that history textbooks include more facts on religion. The new requirement, part of a broad strategy to revamp the California history and social science curriculum, calls for greater emphasis on "major religions and ethnical traditions" and the "role of religion in the founding of this country." School Superintendent Honig called the strategy a "landmark" that confronts "head-on the erosion and dilution of the study of history." California's large textbook market sways the entire publishing industry and has national implications. Noting that textbook publishers have deliberately avoided controversial topics, a California educator held that "history without controversial issues isn't good history." He noted that the new California plan asks publishers to take on such controversial themes as the history of slavery, world human rights, patriotism, and dissent in communist countries. (9)

Pressure from scholars, educators, fundamentalists, and others has convinced publishers that textbooks weak in religion, classics, and social

studies and science content can be improved. Publishers seem ready to change, pushed by new content standards set by California and other states and by professional organizations. The good news is that religious content and good literature are being restored to American textbooks.

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