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The Effect of the Trend Toward Religious Schools on Public Schools

By CLARENCE PETERS

Before investigating the topic before us, it may be well for us to inquire into the reason why some churches maintain their own schools. The reason is not that they do not appreciate the public school or the advantages which these tax-supported schools have brought to the people of America.

Churches maintain full-time religious schools at considerable expense because they recognize the *unitary* nature of education. They are convinced that it is pedagogically unsound to exclude religious instruction from the child's schooling and to relegate it to after-school hours or Sunday morning. In their view a child cannot receive a complete education in a school from which religion has been excluded. They believe that to keep religion out of the child's schooling is to give him the impression that religion is unimportant and not one of the basic values in his education. The general lack of interest among Americans in the Church is due in no small measure to the fact that churches have relinquished their obligation to provide adequate, daily religious instruction and to the silence which the public school has been forced to observe with respect to religion.¹

Lutherans cannot divorce the sacred from the secular in education. As they see it, religion, or the fear and love of God, supplies the only adequate motivation for the development of talents and the dedication of one's life to the service of God and man. Thus religion undergirds the whole of life. The Christian faith centers the child's life in God and in Christ and gives religious motivation to the individual's thinking and behavior in all phases of life.

Excellent as are the public schools in many respects, they cannot give this motivation. For some of us, then, there seems to be no alternative but to establish our own schools, since we

¹ I am here not saying that religion should or should not be taught in the public schools, but refer only to the results of the silence with respect to religion in the public schools.

desire for our children an education that is God-centered, Christ-centered, and Bible centered. Christian parents willingly pay taxes for the support of the public schools and make financial sacrifices for the maintenance of their own schools, because they know they are responsible to God for the transmission of the Christian faith to their children and for training them in the fear of God, or holy and righteous living. God's Word again and again gives this instruction to parents: "These words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children." Deut. 6:6-7. "The father to the children shall make known Thy truth." Is. 38:19. "Train up a child in the way he should go." Prov. 22:6. "Ye fathers . . . bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Eph. 6:4. God's instruction to children to obey, honor, hearken unto, despise not, be subject to, and others, involve the responsibility of the parents who are to see to it that the children are thus instructed. They are in conscience bound to select for their children what in their judgment is the best type of school.

It has sometimes been asserted that non-public schools are un-American, but this assertion is contrary to the history of religion and education in the United States. The early schools were religious schools. As the public school system developed, most of the denominations closed their schools with the understanding that religion and the Bible would not be barred from these tax-supported schools. The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has maintained its own elementary schools since it was founded in 1847, because of the unitary concept of education which is basic in the Lutheran philosophy of education. Meanwhile the process of removing God from instruction has gone forward in our public school system. The absence of religious instruction has caused a breakdown in morals and ethics, and this has caused many Protestants seriously to doubt whether a system of education which leaves out God is adequate. Some groups have maintained a system of religious schools for many years, while others have but recently established such schools, or are planning to do so.

A glance at statistics reveals that there has been an increase in the number of schools and in the enrollment of these schools during the past decade.

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STATISTICS OF RELIGIOUS ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS
IN THE UNITED STATES

| <i>Religious Schools</i> | Enrollment 1937 | Enrollment 1947 |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Roman Catholic _____ | 2,086,071 pupils | 2,830,065 pupils ² (8,165 schools) |
| Lutheran _____ | 74,951 pupils (1,195 schools) | 105,965 pupils ³ (1,600 schools) |
| Seventh-Day Adventist _____ | ? | 26,619 pupils ⁴ (898 schools) |
| Reformed persuasion _____ | 13,747 pupils (85 schools) | 21,175 pupils ⁵ (120 schools) |
| Mennonite _____ | 125 pupils (4 schools) | 2,106 pupils ⁶ (35 schools) |
| Baptist (Los Angeles area) _____ | 85 pupils (1 school) (for 1946) | 250 pupils ⁷ (3 schools) 1948: 513 pupils (6 schools) |

It is apparent from these statistics that during the last ten years there has been an increase in religious schools and in attendance at these schools.

² The information was gathered by Rev. James E. Hoflich, Superintendent of Schools of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, Mo., 3810 Lindell Blvd, St. Louis 8, Mo.

³ The figures for Lutheran schools include elementary schools only. The information is gathered from the *Statistical Yearbook, 1947, of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, St. Louis 18, Mo.* Edited by Rev. Armin Schroeder. The figures represent the enrollment in the schools of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Wisconsin Synod, Slovak Synod, Norwegian Synod, Negro schools, Finnish National Church, U. S., American Lutheran Church. Information concerning the A. L. C. schools was furnished by Mr. D. A. Vetter, 57 E. Main St., Columbus 15, Ohio.

⁴ The figures for the Seventh-Day Adventists were obtained from their Washington, D. C., office by the Public Relations Department, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, for the office of the Board for Parish Education, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, St. Louis, Mo. These figures are for the United States and Canada.

⁵ The information concerning the enrollment of the schools of Reformed persuasion is furnished by Mr. Mark Fakkema, Educational Director of the National Association of Christian Schools, 542 S. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill. Three boarding schools of secondary level are not included.

⁶ The Mennonite Board of Education, Mr. C. F. Yake, chairman, Christian Day School Council, Scottsdale, Pa., was unable to supply information on the exact enrollment. The figures quoted are those of Mr. Mark Fakkema in a paper on "Survey of Private Schools in the United States."

⁷ Information concerning the Baptist Schools in the Los Angeles area was given by Mr. C. Rowan Lunsford, 354 S. Spring St., Los Angeles 13, Calif.

The *Statistical Circular* of the Federal Security Agency, No. 241, May, 1948, states: "Enrollments and the number of teachers in private and parochial elementary and secondary schools are increasing more rapidly than in public schools. Between 1939—40 and 1945—46 private school enrollments increased 8.2 per cent, while during the same period public school enrollments decreased 8.4 per cent."

We are now ready to deal objectively with the topic "The Effect of the Trend Toward Religious Schools on Public Schools." Or to state it in another way: "The effect of the growth of religious schools on public schools." We shall first consider certain objections which some make against religious schools. Then we shall consider possible disadvantages, and finally advantages or benefits.

OBJECTIONS RAISED AGAINST RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS AND A REPLY

1. There are those who believe religious schools will interfere with, and even prevent, the attainment of the democratic ideal. In the opinion of these people all the youth of the nation should attend the one great educational institution of the State that they may learn to live together democratically. They view the growth of religious schools with apprehension. A group of progressive educators has expressed the fear that if non-public schools "should become so numerous or so permanent as to constitute an institutionalized rival to the common public schools," they will be "a threat to the democratic process."⁸ This criticism is predicated on the assumption that only the public schools are qualified to teach and to train for the democratic way of life. We believe that religiously motivated schools, which teach loyalty to our form of government and to the democratic ideal, are at least as well qualified for the task as are the schools which have no strictly religious motivation. People who are taught to know the true God, who are taught to know and to love and to obey His Word, who are taught to love and to respect their fellow men and to be helpful to them, who are taught to respect and to obey their government, are not the people who will be a threat to the democratic way of life. (Romans 13.)

⁸ John S. Brubacher and Others, *The Public Schools and Spiritual Values*, pp. 6, 16.

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Furthermore, it should be remembered that the strength of a nation does not necessarily lie in uniformity of school attendance, but the strength of a democratic nation is in the inculcation of the truths of God which are basic for the ideals of democratic living. Such instruction is a vital force in the lives of the pupils. Once this is understood, it is clear that the determining factor in preparing for democratic living is not to be found in school attendance, but in instructional and curricular content. This is decidedly strengthened when it is based on Christianity, from which stems democratic living. Diversity in a democracy is one of its strong characteristics. There must be uniformity in fundamentals, and only if these fundamentals are absent, can the charge be raised that schools are failing to attain the democratic ideal. And these fundamental principles are contained in the revealed religion of God.

When religion is taught only in the church and not in the school and the home, it can hardly be expected that the child will have an integrated and properly balanced view of religion in its life. Rather, the child is very apt to relegate religion to a spot on Sunday morning and may not regard religion as the dominating and motivating power of its life. Religion is thus divorced from the school day and the daily studies. This is one way of creating a split personality, and home, school, and church may become entirely separate areas for the child and may be unrelated to each other in its thinking.

2. Closely associated with this objection is a second one to the effect that religious schools will create class-consciousness. If this is the result of religious schools, there should be some evidence of it in religious schools that have been in existence for fifty or seventy-five years. We have been unable to find any evidence that the elementary schools of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod have created class-consciousness. There is no psychological or sociological principle that requires people of all types and races to associate on intimate terms such as the school provides in order to get rid of their prejudices and live together in democratic unity. Many Lutheran congregations are cosmopolitan in character, the schools likewise. These adults and children of various nationalities get along well together because the Christian faith begets a community that transcends all boundaries of race or class, even as the Apostle says: "Ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal.

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3:28). The motivation for community spirit and life is oriented in a common faith in a common God, and that is much stronger than the appeal solely on moral and utilitarian grounds. We might observe also that religious schools "isolate" pupils only temporarily. Most of the graduates will attend the public high schools and there mingle with pupils of every nationality and religious faith represented. I do not know a single instance in which graduates of Lutheran schools have proved to be un-co-operative or clannish. On the other hand, scores of testimonials commending the faithfulness and good behavior of our graduates could be collected from high school administrators and teachers.

3. A somewhat more general objection is that the religious school movement, if it continues to grow, will undermine the public school system. Those who raise this objection perhaps believe that as religious schools multiply, the public school will lose its privileged position and will have to struggle to survive. This objection has weight only on the assumption that sooner or later the churches will demand and receive tax moneys, in which case indeed the public school might be weakened. Lutherans, generally speaking, do not favor the use of tax moneys for the support of the instructional program of religious schools.⁹ As matters stand today, the Roman Catholic Church has been in a position to build a vast system of parochial schools, yet fifty per cent of Roman Catholic children are in the public school. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is one hundred years old, yet only thirty per cent of its children are in the religious school. If the day should come when all the churches of America would have schools of their own, there would still be seventy or eighty million people, or half of the population of the United States, whose children would attend the public school. Moreover, the majority of graduates from religious schools would attend the public high school.

4. A fourth objection is that religious schools cannot adequately prepare the children for American citizenship. The facts disprove this. I can speak at least for the Lutheran schools. Thousands of Americans are graduates of Lutheran

⁹ Cf. *Proceedings of the Saginaw Convention, June, 1944, pp.132 to 134.*

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schools, and on the whole they rate high as American citizens. Incidence of crime among them is very low. Children who attend Christian schools are taught to respect and to obey their superiors, parents, teachers, the government, to order their lives according to the Ten Commandments, to develop their talents and to devote them to the service of God and man. They are given the strongest possible motivation for good citizenship. (Rom. 13:1-4.)

POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES

Having shown that the objections that have been raised against religious schools are untenable, I shall frankly state that the multiplication of such schools may create problems. First, the opening of a religious school in a given district may make it difficult for the local school authorities to appraise the facilities that will be required for the public school in the same district. Secondly, there may be a loss of revenue to small schools where State funds supply a considerable share of the moneys needed for school maintenance. The situation may be particularly acute where the appropriation of funds is based on an average daily attendance at the public school. Thirdly, it may be necessary in some cases to retain small public schools in localities where small religious schools provide duplicate facilities; e. g.: a community of one hundred children in which there are small Protestant and Roman Catholic religious schools and a small public school. There may be other difficulties, but they are not too serious, and in all likelihood none of them will be insurmountable, even as the ones listed are not.

BENEFITS TO THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FROM THE GROWTH OF THE RELIGIOUS SCHOOL MOVEMENT

I shall now mention some of the benefits which will result to the public schools from the growth of the religious school movement.

1. Parallel school systems are a safeguard against monopoly and corruption in education. We know that whatever advantages monopoly may have, it also has some bad and even dangerous features. This is true also of monopoly in education. American educators have been critical of rigid and formal systems of education, such as that of France. They

consider diversity in our American public school system one of its merits. All things being equal, diversity makes for strength and progress. It may also forestall developments of an unsound or dangerous nature. One or more systems of non-public schools, operating side by side with the public school, may safeguard the schools of the country from being carried in the direction of Communism or some other subversive movement.¹⁰ The danger of totalitarianism in one form or another is not nearly as great in a country like ours, where monopoly in education is frowned upon. It is a well-known fact that a nation's thinking and future are shaped by the schools. A monopolistic system could bring about a change from one form of government to another in a single generation.

2. Religious schools contribute to a higher community morality, and this is certainly of benefit to the public schools. Although the government wields the sword and ultimately appeals to force, yet it depends on the consent and the good will of the people to maintain order and peace. Apart from religious faith, people may obey the laws because reason dictates that a man promotes his own happiness and that of others by submitting to the restraints of the law. The catalog of crime, however, shows that those whose religious training is neglected may have very little respect for the law. On the other hand, children attending Christian schools have the principles of the Moral Law inscribed in their hearts. They are trained not only to refrain from murder and robbery and other sins prohibited by the divine Law, but also to practice love, kindness, justice, compassion, and other virtues commanded in the Law. The motivation given in a Lutheran school is the fear and love of God. The pupils are taught that Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Mary's Son, gave His life and shed His blood to redeem them and all sinful mankind and that they ought to live their lives in gratitude to their Savior. Children who receive religious instruction and training will help to maintain the high moral standard which acts as a restraint on the wicked members of society. Public school leaders have stated that our teachers have a distinct advantage over public school teachers in that they can give the children

¹⁰ *Communism and Education*, prepared and released by Committee on un-American Activities, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D. C.

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a strong religious motivation for moral behavior, whereas the public school teacher may appeal only to reason and conscience. Any fair American citizen will speak with favor of religious schools which help to maintain the moral standard of a community.

3. Religious schools and public schools are mutually helpful in maintaining a high scholastic standard. Cases are on record where public school superintendents have pointed to certain Lutheran schools as examples to the teachers in their districts. The religious schools have thus stimulated public school teachers to set high goals for themselves. On the other hand, religious schools have benefited immeasurably by the immense amount of experimental and research work done in the framework of the public school. Thus the religious and private schools have prompted public school leaders to serious self-criticism, and the public schools have prompted teachers in religious schools to work toward the achievement of the same high standards envisioned by public school leaders.

This fact is pointedly set forth by Alvin W. Johnson and Frank H. Yost in their recent book *Separation of Church and State*:

One of the great values of private schools lies in their differences. State institutions must necessarily be of a somewhat similar pattern. In order to maintain our present standing and, above all, to develop, we must have both individuals and institutions that have the courage of their convictions and that dare to be different. This has been true of the private schools. From these schools have come many of the leaders in educational reform and many of our greatest statesmen. It can hardly be said that these institutions have been a detriment; rather they have been an asset.

It may well be summed up in the words of P. P. Claxton, former United States commissioner of education:

"We believe in the public school system. It is the salvation of our democracy; but the private schools and colleges have been the salvation of the public schools. These private institutions have their place in our educational system. They prevent it from becoming autocratic and arbitrary, and encourage its growth along new lines.

"Some have contended that our public educational system must set the standards for the moral, social, and mental development and training of our youth. That, of course, is the Spartan theory of education. That theory has been combated by our American courts. The laws pertaining to education and school rules and regulations must be observed, but the school, whether it be public or private, is not the sole factor in the development of the child's character. It is simply an aid, though a valuable one,

to be sure, to the desired end. The parents are the responsible factors, and they delegate this primary responsibility to no one; only when they fail, may the state interfere.

"The American courts have at all times protected and perpetuated the right which guarantees to everyone the freedom to worship or not to worship God in the manner he desires, so long as he does not imperil the public safety and morals. The Nebraska German language case and the Oregon school case both sustain this position."¹¹

4. Religious schools have been a benefit to the public schools in the matter of providing facilities and also relief from overcrowding. Despite the widespread and erroneous view to the contrary, religious schools are engaged in general education just as the public schools are. They frequently use the same textbooks, they maintain similar standards, they are subject to a degree of supervision, and yet they give thousands of American children a general education at no cost to the public. They certainly serve the public welfare. As a matter of fact, these schools greatly lighten the burden of taxation. Opponents of Christian schools ought to appreciate the fact that religious elementary schools and high schools, supported by the Christians through freewill offerings, are contributing to the general welfare and morality of the nation. Because of the existence of these schools the overcrowded conditions in the public schools are less acute than they might be.

In conclusion, Lutherans and others maintain their own schools because they want their children to get a complete education, that is, an education that gives the children religious motivation for moral behavior. After devoting much study to this matter, religious educators cannot see any threat to our public school system in the religious school movement. While the multiplication of Christian elementary schools and high schools may create a number of difficulties, none of these will be insurmountable. On the other hand, the existence of one or more parallel school systems alongside the public school system has thus far been beneficial to the public school, and there is no reason to believe that the increase in the number of religious schools will alter this relationship of mutual helpfulness. Objections to a system of religious schools are, it seems to me, based on misapprehensions or speculations and

¹¹ Alvin W. Johnson and Frank H. Yost, *Separation of Church and State*, p. 140.

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not on actual facts. In the United States, parents have a legal right to enroll their children in the school of their choice. As good Americans we rid ourselves of the fear that the religious school movement will harm our great public school system.

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NOTE: This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Weekday Religious Education Section of the International Council of Religious Education at the Deshler-Wallick Hotel, Columbus, Ohio, Feb. 9, 1949, at the invitation of the Weekday Section.

Another paper on the same topic was delivered at this meeting by Mr. C. W. Manwiller, chairman of the Department of Research and Curriculum, Pittsburgh, Pa., Public Schools.

His position was that the religious school

- 1) has a tendency to divide public education as to purpose and content;
- 2) will weaken democracy;
- 3) will have a tendency to stereotype public education;
- 4) will run into a direct conflict with the cultural program of the public schools;
- 5) will weaken the philosophy of the child's education;
- 6) will jeopardize academic freedom in the classroom;
- 7) will emasculate the current program of the public school;
- 8) will emphasize sectarianism.

He desired religion to be taught in the public schools, "but personal faith must be inculcated by the churches. We need the help of the churches."

Most of those in attendance teach in the weekday schools of the churches affiliated with the International Council. By a show of hands approximately 70% of those in attendance were former public school teachers.

The convention registration was approximately 1,400. The Week-day Section was attended by approximately 70 to 80 people. Seventeen sections were in session simultaneously.

The group was much interested in this topic, and many were sympathetic to the work which we are doing in our schools. They showed deep concern about permitting children to grow up without religious instruction.

One woman, an ordained Methodist minister, in a private conversation voiced deep appreciation of the fact that her early schooling had been in a Lutheran school.

In a meeting of the International Council, attended by representatives of the various sections, the opinion was adopted that "religion is seriously weakened if it is not intimately related to general education." The Council opposes the complete secularization of the public schools.

The Council accepted the report of one of the sections that to open many Protestant parochial schools would create too many problems to justify this effort, and then, unfortunately, approved the opinion that the operation of Protestant parochial schools on a universal or even widely adopted scale would be a serious threat to public education and to our democracy. In this last statement they, in my opinion, go too far and become guilty of making a statement which cannot be justified and which is not in agreement with historical fact.

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