

Eliminating Christianity from School Textbooks

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Some school boards, in reaction against creationist court cases, have started rejecting biology textbooks if they don't say **enough** about evolution. In other words, educators realise that the omission of a subject in itself teaches something. It conveys the message that the subject is not important, or relevant, or worthy of serious study.

There is another textbook dilemma, however, that has gone virtually unnoticed by the major media. It, too, is a case of teaching by omission. It is the complete silence of public school textbooks on the subjects of religion and traditional family values.

Proving such a wide-ranging statement would seem to be a difficult task. Fortunately, someone has done it for us. Professor Paul Vitz of New York University has carried out a careful, scholarly study of the textbooks most widely used in schools throughout the country. His conclusion? Virtually all of them exhibit a strong bias against traditional religion and morals.

Professor Vitz examined social studies textbooks from Grades 1-6, selecting all texts adopted by the states of California, Texas, Georgia, and Florida. This came to ten series of books, accounting for an estimated 70 to 75 percent of texts used in the country. Since other states often look to California and Texas for guidance in selecting their own texts, the books exam-

ined are likely to be representative of the nation as a whole.

Social studies texts at the elementary level are designed to introduce students to present-day American society and, to some extent, to its history. These books begin with the family and school setting, expand to the neighbourhood and surrounding community, and finally touch on different regions of the country and the world.

What do these most widely-used text-books in the United States teach young children about their society? Professor Vitz was interested in how the textbooks reflected traditional religious and family values. In his study, he distinguished between **textual** references to religion and traditional values, and **images** or pictures, such as a picture with a church in it. He also distinguished between references to **direct** religious activities, such as praying or going to church, and references to **indirect** religious activities, such as including a pastor among the leaders in a community.

A Genuine Silent Majority

The first notable finding to emerge from Professor Vitz's study was that **none** of the books widely used in American public schools has a single **text** reference to a direct religious activity occurring in contemporary American life. The closest examples he found were one

reference to the Amish, who are certainly not representative of American religious believers, and one reference to a church in a Spanish urban ghetto, reading: "Religion is important for people in El Barrio. Churches have places for dances and sports events." In other words, religion is treated as a cultural phenomenon only, with no mention of spiritual beliefs or activities.

The textbooks contain only slightly more numerous **images** showing religious activities in a contemporary American setting. These include a photograph of a family praying at Thanksgiving dinner and a Catholic priest at a sick bed. Considering all six grade levels, there are 11 images of direct religious activity distributed over 60 books and over approximately 15,000 pages. Pretty bare.

What about indirect religious references? These, too, are few and far between, most of them things like the references to God in the Pledge of Allegiance and the song "America the Beautiful", which includes the line, "God shed his grace on thee." Indirect religious images include a church noted on a local map, a boy in a bed with a crucifix on the wall behind him, and a photo of a wedding party with a cross in the background.

When these same books cover other societies, however, religion gets a much greater emphasis. Many of the books treat American

Indian religions quite sympathetically. One book describes a Hopi rain dance and prayer. Another notes a Pueblo Indian story about prayer and about how the Earth Mother created corn for them. Accounts of Mexico and other countries sometimes include references to religion as well. These occasional acknowledgements of religious life in other societies create the impression that religion is foreign and exotic, or a quaint Old World tradition.

Even when religion is at the centre of American holidays and festivities, it is muffled in silence. Mardi Gras, one book says, "is the end of winter celebration." Thanksgiving is likewise usually described in completely secular terms. The Pilgrims, we learn from one text, "are people who make long trips." Nowhere in relating the story of the first Thanksgiving is it explained to **whom** the Pilgrims were giving thanks. In one text that denotes thirty pages to the Pilgrims, no reference is made to their religious motivation for coming to the New World.

Where Oh Where Has Christianity Gone?

School children are introduced to American history in Grade 5. Of the ten series of books studied by Professor Vitz, not one notes the importance of religion in American history. There is not one reference in any of these books to such religious events as the Great Awakening of the 1740's, the great urban revivals of the 1870-1890 period, the Holiness and Pentecostal movements around 1880-1910, the liberal and conservative Protestant split in the early twentieth century, or the "Born-Again" movement of the 1960's and 70's. In fact the whole topic of religion is ignored.

In Grade 6, children are introduced to world history, going back to the ancient Egyptians. Four of the ten books in the study make no mention at all of Jesus' life or teaching. In those that do, several give more coverage to Mohammed's life than to Jesus'. For instance, in one text the life of Jesus gets 36 lines, while the life of Mohammed gets 104 lines. In another, Mohammed, the rise of Islam, and Islamic culture get an 11-page section, plus other

scattered coverage. The rise of Christianity receives only a few lines on one page. The problem is not that great religious figures are totally avoided: only Jesus is.

Crucial religious events like the Reformation are likewise studiously ignored. Or, if mentioned, the fundamental basis of the conflict - i.e. religious differences - is omitted. Likewise, important religious leaders such as Joan of Arc are covered in an entirely secular manner, without any mention of religion.

How Fares the Family?

The second part of Professor Vitz's survey examines the treatment of the family and traditional family values in social studies textbooks (Since Grade 5 and 6 address history and culture, this study included only the books for Grades 1-4); books purporting to give the child an understanding of U.S. society.

The most striking finding that emerges is that textbook authors are very skittish about giving any explicit definition of the family. One text says, "A family is a group of people." Enlightening, or what? The teacher's edition of the same book says a family is a group of people "who identify themselves as family members."

Why are these books so shy about setting down a normative definition of the family? The emphasis throughout the books is that there are many types of family - all equally legitimate. Not one stands up for the traditional definition of a family as a normative structure based on monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

Getting down to specifics, there is not one reference to marriage as the foundation of the family. Indeed, the words "marriage" or "wedding" do not even occur, not once, in any of the books. Neither do the words "husband" or "wife". Not one of the many families described in these books features a homemaker - that is, features a wife and mother as a model. Neither do the words "housewife" or "homemaker" ever occur. Yet there are countless references to mothers and other women working outside the home in occupations such as medicine, law, transportation, and politics.

But Can They Read?

In the final part of his study, Professor Vitz examined the most commonly-used basal readers, the books used to teach children how to read. The stories and articles in readers are an important source of values, ideas, and information for young students.

The conclusion of his study is that for all intents and purposes religion is excluded from these basal readers. There is not one story or article in all these books with a theme related directly to Biblical religion - a story, say, in which a character's central motivation is based on Christian belief.

Christianity is sometimes mentioned in the background of an article. Interestingly, however, in all these cases the references are to Catholicism or the black church - that is, to "minority religions". Protestantism is omitted entirely. A biography of the Mayo brothers (who established the Mayo Clinic), mentions that an order of Catholic nuns helped set up the Mayos' first hospital, St. Mary's. A story of the Alamo mentions that it is a mission church in Texas, refers to Our Lady of Guadeloupe, and has a young boy's mother pray for the safety of her husband during the battle (he dies anyway). A story about Harriet Tubman helping slaves escape via the underground railway mentions her prayer and two ministers, one a Quaker, as important in the escape. Two stories mention that the major character prays at a time of extreme danger, but do not tell to whom.

Stories about Jewish people sometimes mention Hanukkah and the Passover, though the religious meaning of these festivities is not explained. They could be strictly secular ethnic holidays as far as the text is concerned. Bible stories - even popular ones such as David and Goliath - never appear in these books.

In contrast, certain non-traditional religions receive relatively frequent mention. The Greek and Roman religions are part of six stories. Two stories that are not particularly religious in content are attributed to Buddha. American Indian religion is also featured positively in five stories and one article, often with a minor spiritual or occult emphasis.

One 55-page story features a white American girl on a ranch in California who seeks to find her "Indian Heart". The girl makes several animal fetishes and seeks ways to commune with animal spirits. Another story, called "Medicine Bag", features an Indian medicine bag passed on from father to son.

In summary, most of these basal readers contain only very minor references, or none at all, to God or Christianity. Only two or three contain modest references to Christianity, and even these make no mention of modern representative Protestantism. Our own children attending public schools can now raise the same complaints blacks and other minorities once did: we are invisible in the textbooks.

Denying Our Heritage

If Christian themes are absent from virtually all basal readers in use in the American public school system,

the question naturally arises, what is in these readers? Briefly, the most common ideological slant is a feminist one. There is hardly a story that celebrates marriage or motherhood as a positive and enriching way of life (except a few that feature ethnic mothers). No story shows any woman or girl with a positive relationship to a baby or a young child. No picture shows a girl with a baby or doll.

What is common are role-reversal stories, in which a heroine rescues a boy or competes with a boy and wins. Girls are almost invariably set in traditionally "boy" roles: slaying a dragon, helping out an incompetent boy, driving longhorn cattle. Biographical stories concern either women who were explicitly feminist, such as Elizabeth Blackwell, a leader of the women's movement, or are stories of female success in traditionally male occupations. For example, there are many stories of the female pilots Amelia Earhart and Harriet Quimby, but no men-

tion of Charles Lindbergh or any other male aviation pioneer.

In short, these basal readers, like the social studies texts, are written so as to present a systematic denial of the history and heritage of a very large segment of the American people: if you are white, hold to a Protestant form of Christianity, and live by the traditional (that is, biblical family ethic), your beliefs and way of life are not represented in the textbooks your own children are nurtured on in the public school classrooms of this country.

Don't Christian children have a right, like any other children, to pick up their school textbooks and see a positive portrayal of their own heritage? We, too, have been a powerful force in shaping our culture. We, too, pay taxes to support the public school system. It's time for Christianity to cry out, "Discrimination!"

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CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLIES INTERNATIONAL, P.O. BOX 888, COFFS HARBOUR N.S.W. 2450, AUSTRALIA