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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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Religion and Public Education

(Tenth in series, Contemporary Issues in Religion and Morality)

Romans 12:6-8 NRSV

In order to understand a situation it might be helpful to consider how it came to be. This may be especially true concerning the relationship between religion and public education. History, I think, is a marvelous educator itself. To understand why Christians in the past championed public education might increase the value we place upon it today. The historic support of the Christian religion for public education is strong. As a matter of fact, if it was not for the church there would have been no public education at the beginning at all. Here is how it started.

In late 18th century England there was a vast underclass of poor people who had moved to the cities to work in the factories. Much the same situation developed in the United States in the 19th century. Children often labored along with their parents. The work schedule was six days a week. The pay was subsistence. There were no child labor laws to save the children from their drudgery or unions to protect the parents from over work and under pay.

Sunday was the one day these people had off. The children would blow off steam wandering around British towns breaking windows and robbing homes while upscale citizens went to church. Surviving miserable conditions at work and knowing little else, these street urchins learned to be pickpockets and thieves at an early age. (Drury) Any true Christian heart would have broken at their plight and it was a man of the church who came to their rescue.

In 1780, in Gloucester, England, newspaper publisher and devout member of the Church of England, Robert Raikes started the first public school in order to teach poor children to read and write as well as to give them instruction in the Bible and Christian faith. He opened the school on Sunday because it was the only day poor children in Gloucester were not working. In this way the beginning of public education was also the beginning of Sunday School. Raikes believed that if poor children could at least learn to read and write and be taught at least the rudiments of Christianity they might stand a chance of lifting themselves out of poverty. Raikes paid the first teacher himself. She soon quit but he hired others. Since he was a publisher he printed large sheets with the Ten Commandments and other scripture verses on them so the children could use them

for the dual purpose of learning Christian values as well as reading and writing. These broadsheets served as the first Sunday School curriculum. (Drury)

Before Raikes' Sunday School in the 1780's there was no free education in Europe or America. Until that time education was considered to be a responsibility of the family rather than of the community. Well-to-do families who could afford to pay for it sent their children to private schools or hired a private tutor. But for the children of working class families who needed to work six days a week in order to help keep food on the family table, there was neither enough money nor time available for them to go to school. Not until Raikes' Sunday School was basic literacy in conjunction with Christian Education available for free to anyone who would come.

Once newspapers got a hold of the story, the idea spread to other cities. By 1785 Baptist William Fox organized a nationwide society to promote the Sunday School throughout Great Britain. He observed that it was embarrassing that Christians would show so much concern for the heathen of other lands but ignore the poor in their own country. The idea quickly caught on and Christians all across England began starting Sunday Schools for the poor. By 1811 there were more than 400,000 children in these Sunday Schools in England. Twenty years later there were a million. (Drury)

The idea took form in the United States shortly after the Revolutionary War in the 1790's when a group of Philadelphia Quakers founded their "First Day Society" and began to teach "the offspring of indigent parents" every Sunday. From that "First Day" school grew an entire common school system for children of the poor which was supported by Catholic, Universalist, and Protestant alike as an interdenominational pluralistic approach to educating the poor. Eventually the idea of Sunday School for religious education purposes only would gravitate toward Protestantism in particular, but originally, as in England, American Sunday Schools included secular as well as religious education, and here they were interdenominational. (Drury)

For the first fifty years of the new nation religiously sponsored Sunday Schools were about the only opportunity poor children had to receive the basic educational components of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Before then there were people such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, and George Washington who believed that education should be under the control of the government, available to everyone, and free from religious biases, but due, perhaps, to other urgent issues facing the new nation their ideas never gained much traction. It was in the 1840's that the idea of the Common School, first seen on a small early scale in Philadelphia, came to maturity and spread throughout the country. It was promoted by what were known as Common School Reformers such as Horace Mann of Massachusetts and Henry Bernard of Connecticut. Mann put to press the Common School Journal which brought the issue to a wide audience. It was argued that common schooling could create good citizens, unite society, and prevent crime and poverty. As a result of the efforts of the Common School Reformers government sponsored public education was available throughout the land by the end of the 19th century. By 1918 all states had passed laws requiring children to attend at least elementary school. On the other hand, the Catholic Church was opposed to

common schooling believing that it was leading Catholics into assimilation with the majority protestant culture. In 1925 the Supreme Court ruled that states could not compel children to attend the public schools if there were religiously sponsored equivalent alternatives. (Thattai)

The point of sharing this history is to show how free public education was a Christian concern from the beginning. It was a matter of justice for the poor expressed through the ideal of equal educational opportunity for all children, both secular and religious, no matter what the income level of the parents. And it may not be hard to see how Sunday Schools would eventually prove inadequate to the educational requirements of a growing and increasingly religiously diversified nation. Critical as it was to public education at the beginning, the one day a week religiously sponsored Sunday Schools would give way to the five days a week government sponsored secular common schools. And what parents would be pleased to have their children indoctrinated with a religious point of view with which the parents disagreed in order for their children to learn to read and write and add and subtract. If all children were to have the equal opportunity of a good basic education, religious bias of any kind, including religious practice of any kind, would need to be removed from the public school curriculum.

The issue came to a head in 1962 with the Supreme Court ruling in *Engle V. Vitale* that there could be no recitation of prayers in public schools and in 1963 in *Abington School District v. Schemp* that there could be no required reading of Bible passages. In accordance with the same equal opportunity values, the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that there could be no racial segregation in public schools. Over the last one hundred years the Federal Government and Supreme Court have intervened dozens of times with laws and decisions to bring uniformity and national standards, one of the latest being the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Over the past half century many private Christian Schools have been founded and the home school movement has grown. Some religious organizations have always preferred this route, including Roman Catholics and Lutherans, but now others do as well. There are today about four million students attending religious schools, approximately one in twelve. On first thought we might consider this to be simply a return to the historic method of combining religious and secular education at the same place and at the same time. But the recently formed Christian Schools of today are not much different from other private schools of the past, excellent for those whose parents care enough and can afford to send their children to them, but not much value to the children of unconcerned or poor parents. It seems to me that the greater lesson to take from the history of public education is that unless a basically equal education is available free of charge to all students and therefore tax funded by the public and required by law to meet important standards, some children would in fact be left behind, and that would always be a weight upon a Christian conscience.

In 1999 First Church began the School Readiness pre school program in some underutilized Christian education rooms of the church basement. For twelve years now,

through reasonable rental fees and cooperative sharing of space, we have as a congregation provided a preschool education for children of low income families who otherwise would not have had the opportunity. Research continues to show that if a child begins public education behind other children that child which starts behind tends to stay behind. Thanks to First Church and in conjunction with the state of Connecticut and the YMCA providing financial aid on a sliding fee scale, twenty nine pre-school children in East Hartford now begin their public education on the same learning level with their more affluent peers each year. In this way, First Church is firmly in the tradition of the historic Christian cause of equal educational opportunity for all. Unfortunately, these same children who come here to pre-school do not also come here or go anywhere else for Sunday School. Not all parents value religious education as they do education in general.

And despite efforts such as ours through our pre-school, we know that the Christian ideal of an equal educational opportunity for all has not yet been met. There is still much work to be done. And if the quality of each is to be high, then history and present circumstances suggest that secular education must have a strong public option and religious education must be private. If we regret the loss of prayer and Bible reading in public schools then we must see to it that our children receive such spiritual nurture and so much more through attendance in strong private Sunday Schools. It is our responsibility as Christian churches and parents to provide Christian Education, and no one else's. As has been said, the mind is a terrible thing to waste, and we might add, so is the soul. Suffer the little children to come unto me, Jesus said, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God. May the church never let them down in any way.

Drury, Keith. "Short History of the Sunday School." *Drurywriting*. 30 March, 2010. Web. 22 November, 2011.

Thattai, Deeptha. "A History of Public Education in the United States." *Servantfree*. 2001-11. Web. 22 November, 2011.