

THE FORUM

Elmer J. Thiessen*

Is The Religious Alternative School Useful In The Public School System? (A Reply to Ralph Miller)

In a recent essay, Professor Miller outlines several important arguments against the formation of religious alternative schools within the context of public education.¹ I wish to critically evaluate these arguments and then deal with one major consideration which would suggest that religious alternative schools are indeed useful in the public school system.

Professor Miller argues first of all, that given the variety of religions in our society, the attempt to accommodate these with alternative schools will lead to an uncontrollable and harmful segmentation of the public school system. But surely there are natural controls that will limit such proliferation. Only a limited number of parents will send their children to alternative schools, and, as soon as there are a sufficient number of these schools to accommodate such children, schools will stop growing in size and number. Further, it is surely possible for the government to develop certain guidelines concerning the proliferation of schools to take into account such very legitimate considerations as financial constraints, for example.

The above-mentioned controls would seem to be operative in Newfoundland which has had a long history of Church-State co-operation in education, and where the entire system of public education is presently divided along denominational lines. Smaller denominational groups have had to co-operate and have formed "Integrated School Districts" representing the following denominations and nearly 60% of the population: Anglican, Moravian, Presbyterian, Salvation Army and United Church of Canada. Catholic and Pentecostal Committees govern the other two major kinds of schools in the province.²

Although I am not entirely in agreement with this approach to Church - State co-operation in education, since it does not, for example, do justice to the "non-religious" public, it does illustrate that we may be unnecessarily worried about excessive segmentation of the public school system given the acceptance of the principle of religious alternative schools.

It is argued, secondly, that alternative schools, because they demand special commitment on the part of parents, result in "a self-selected population". Parents of such schools are "precisely the ones who are vital to the support of a strong public school system." The growth of alternative schools is therefore seen to deprive the public school of the needed support and commitment from parents who are especially concerned about a education.

*Dr. Thiessen is a philosophy instructor at Medicine Hat College and is Vice-President of the Medicine Hat Christian School Society which has launched a private Christian School in Medicine Hat this past year after a prolonged but fruitless attempt to develop an alternative school under the umbrella of the Medicine Hat School Board.

The basic problem with this argument is that it assumes that if there were no alternative schools, parents who would be sending their children to these schools, would instead direct their commitment and energies to the public school system. There are several considerations that make this assumption problematic. We have seen in the last few decades a growth in the size of school districts and schools, resulting in an increasing sense of alienation between parents and administrative structure of schools. It is precisely because parents feel they have little or no input in the public school system that they are looking to alternative schools where they are more directly in control of the education of their children.

Given the predominantly religious nature of the concerns of parents wanting to send their children to alternative schools, it is further doubtful that the public schools could, in fact, respond to their primary concerns. Thus, again, the increasing frustration felt by parents who would like to provide input to public schools but are simply unable to because of a basic incompatibility of values.

It should finally be noted that these alternative schools are still part of the public school system and thus the commitment and energies of these parents are not lost to the public system. Instead, I would suggest "alternative public schools" are the only way to regain the commitment of parents whose input has, for various reasons, been lost with the present system of public education.

Professor Miller's major argument against religious alternative schools is that they undermine the principle of equality of education which is seen as a central objective of a tax-supported system of public education. Because alternative schools receive added support from the societies which founded them, they become "select schools enjoying advantages".

It would probably be unwise to attack the principle of equality which is so central to our democratically oriented society and which I am basically in sympathy with. But we do at least need to recognize that the ideal of "equality" is not universally accepted, even by those who believe in democracy. There is further a confusion as to what we mean by equality when applied to education: Professor Miller himself equivocates between "equivalent educational programs" whatever that might mean, "equality of achievement for all pupils" - an impossible goal, and "equivalence of educational effort" - which is surely unfair for those needing special attention or for the more gifted students.

Our tax-supported system does not and should not support equality of education in any of the above senses. We have universities for a select few, programs or even entire public schools for brighter students, special programs for the disadvantaged, all of which use up a disproportionate amount of educational taxes. And this is as it should be.

We also need to be reminded that our public schools simply are not all equal. In any city there are obvious differences between schools located in the less prosperous neighbourhoods and those in the wealthier suburbs. Professor Miller concedes that fund-raising goes on in virtually all of our public schools and the differences between rich and poor will again result in differences in funds raised and consequently, differences in educational opportunity. Do we really want to eliminate such differences?

In the above-mentioned situations, as well as in the case of alternative schools, it needs to be stressed that it is not the tax-supported system itself that is being tapped in order to offer special advantages to certain schools. It is donations over and above taxes that are used to

provide special advantages. Is there anything inherently wrong in this? Do not many parents provide, at their own expense, extra educational opportunities for their children in the way of music lessons, etc.? Is this wrong? And, is this any different from an educational society providing extra educational opportunities for children of parents who are prepared to pay for the extra costs involved?

For the unconvinced radical egalitarian, it needs to be pointed out finally that there is surely nothing which prohibits limiting the additional support which can be provided for alternative schools by contractual specifications. Professor Miller gives no *practical* reason against this arrangement, except that it would be controversial. I agree that the argument concerning equality of education is controversial, and thus it might be better not to appeal to the "doctrine" of equality at all in trying to resolve the dispute concerning alternative schools.

There is another "doctrinal argument" which Professor Miller chooses to ignore, but which, in my opinion, is central to the debate concerning alternative schools. Although it might appear to be a truism, it is an important truism — the primary reason for religious alternative schools is religion. Many parents of various religious persuasions are simply not content to relegate religious education to the home or to the church. As was so well illustrated in the important 1978 Alberta provincial court case, *Regina v. Wiebe*, parents are becoming increasingly convinced that our public schools are not religiously neutral, as is generally maintained.³ Indeed, many would argue that it is impossible for education to be religiously neutral. Many Christian parents would further argue that religious education cannot be separated from "secular" education. It is for this reason that they want to send their children to alternative schools in which the entire curriculum will reflect their religious faith.

These convictions concerning the relation of education and religion need to be taken seriously, since they relate further to the question of religious freedom. If the above convictions are true, it follows that a monolithic system of public education will necessarily violate the principle of religious freedom. If all education is necessarily coloured by certain religious or irreligious pre-suppositions, then we simply will not be able to accommodate the diversity of religious beliefs in our society within a uniform system of public education. There is a need, therefore, to initiate some significant changes in the public school system so as to accommodate this diversity and thus protect the principle of religious freedom. I suggest alternative schools within the public school system are the answer.

Here it should be noted that I am also opposed to the remnants of Christian education that still remain in our system of public education. Prayers and religious exercises, although they might pacify many Christian parents, are an affront to those of other religious or irreligious persuasions. Religious freedom is a two-edged sword which cuts both ways. If it is objectionable to impose a secular curriculum on Christians, it is equally objectionable to impose Christian practices and beliefs on students of other religious or irreligious backgrounds.

While advocating a system of alternative schools, one of which should be secular or "non-religious", I want it to be clearly understood that I still favour a system of public education. I consider the "flight" from public schools and the proliferation of *independent* alternative schools to be ultimately harmful to our society. There are some obvious benefits to a government administered system of education which ensures that each child will get a good education. All I am suggesting is that we need a variety of schools within an all-encompassing system of public education which can do justice to both the unity and

diversity required in education if we wish to protect both the principle of good education for all and the principle of religious freedom.

It might be objected that the very notion of "alternative public schools" is contradictory. Here we need to make a distinction which Professor Miller fails to make, between two meanings of "public school". Professor Miller uses the term "public school" to refer to "common schools". But, "public schools" can also be taken to mean schools which are accessible to and supported by the public citizenry. The public consists of a wide variety of people from different races and religions. It includes Protestant Christians, Roman Catholic Christians, Hindus and humanists, all of whom are taxpayers. The notion of a Protestant Christian public school is no more contradictory than the notion of a humanistic public school, each of which would cater to a unique segment of the public.

A pluralistic public school system is not only logically consistent, but is a moral requirement for a society which believes in religious freedom. The great 19th century liberal, John Stuart Mill, certainly would have thought so. The question before us today is, can our system of public education make the necessary adjustments so as to preserve the benefits of a public education and also do justice to the principle of religious freedom which is a cornerstone of our democratic society?

Notes

¹ Ralph Miller, "Is the Religious Alternative School Useful in the Public School System?" *The Journal of Educational Thought*, Vol. 16, No. 2, August 1982, pp. 113-115.

² See a booklet prepared by the Denominational Education Committees of Newfoundland entitled *The School Board*, St. John's, Newfoundland, 1976. See also an important article by Audrey S. Brent, "The Right to Religious Education and the Constitutional Status of Denominational Schools", *Saskatchewan Law Review*, 1975-76, Vol. 40, pp. 239-267.

³ I have reviewed this case and its educational implications in an essay entitled "Religious Freedom and Educational Pluralism" found in *Family Choice in Schooling: Issues and Dilemmas*, edited by Michael E. Manley - Casimir, Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1982, pp. 57-69.