

PUBLIC SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS AND CHRISTIAN VALUES

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March 28, 1987

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This paper is a summary of an extremely troubling book which was published last year by Dr. Paul Vitz, Professor of Psychology at New York University: *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in our Children's Textbooks* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant, 1986).

In this book, Vitz reports the results of a government-funded survey of the way religion and traditional values are represented in 90 widely used reading and social studies textbooks in United States schools.

The report employed methods which had been previously established in educational circles for evaluating, for example, racial bias in textbooks, and is therefore a straightforward, factual survey as free as possible from any personal biases of the author. Moreover, Dr. Vitz's scoring of the textbooks was checked by an independent testing agency, the Educational Product Information Exchange (or EPIE--an educational research organization with no connection to any politically conservative or religious organizations).

Dr. Vitz summarized his findings as follows:

Religion, traditional family values, and conservative political and economic positions have been reliably excluded from children's textbooks (p.1).

PART I: SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTBOOKS

A. Introduction

Vitz studied social studies books for grades 1 to 6 from the following publishers:

- 1) American Book (now D.C. Heath)
- 2) Allyn and Bacon (formerly Follett)
- 3) Holt, Rinehart and Winston
- 4) Laidlaw
- 5) Macmillan
- 6) McGraw-Hill
- 7) Riverside (formerly Rand McNally)
- 8) Scott Foresman
- 9) Silver Burdett
- 10) Steck-Vaughn (formerly Scholastic)

Because this list includes all the texts adopted by California and Texas (the 2 states whose adoption lists have the widest influence on textbook selection in other states), as well as the most commonly used texts from 15 other states, Vitz has taken a sample that is widely representative of at least 70% of the nation's schools (see pp. 6-8).

The purpose of social studies:

Why is social studies important? Because it is here that the child learns what society is all about, and particularly (in grades 1 to 5), the child learns what America is all about. Beginning with family life in the lower grades, then expanding to community activities, jobs, buying and selling, and finally various regions and groups in society, social studies classes give students their ideas of what our country is all about, and how people live and work together in our society. (In grade 6, this is generally expanded to include a survey of world history and cultures as well.)

B. Religious Values: Social Studies, Grades 1 to 6

One remarkable conclusion is this:

0 out of 60 textbooks (approximately 15,000 pages) have even 1 word referring to any religious activity in contemporary American life. None of these texts have even 1 mention of people who go to church or synagogue, who worship or pray or have any religious influence on their lives or on society.

(However, there are a few references to prayer in the distant past such as the pilgrims praying at Thanksgiving, and there are occasional pictures (but without any words of explanation) with a religious theme, such as Jewish people lighting candles, a family praying at Thanksgiving (1 picture in 1 second grade text), etc.)

Vitz notes that in 60 textbooks from these 10 publishers, all of them intending to introduce the child to American society as it exists today, there is not one reference in word or image to today's Protestant religious world. The entire section of our society represented by "born again" Christians, by Billy Graham, or the Moral Majority, or Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, etc. is entirely ignored. There is nothing in either word or picture that suggests the existence of that aspect of society.

However, when the books do refer to other societies or cultures, there is somewhat more attention given to religion. For instance, native American Indian religion receives sympathetic treatment (with discussions of an Indian rain dance and prayer, or an Indian prayer to Mother Earth.

It is common to treat Thanksgiving without explaining to whom the Pilgrims gave thanks (p. 19). For example, the grade 2 text by Riverside has 31 pages on the Pilgrims, but it describes them entirely without reference to religion.

(Vitz reports that 1 mother in an upper middle-class New York City suburb complained to the principal when her first grade son was told by his teacher that at Thanksgiving the Pilgrims gave

thanks to the Indians! The mother told the principal that it was simply a historical fact that Thanksgiving was a time when the Pilgrims gave thanks to God, but the principal replied that the mother's position "was just opinion and not documented fact," and therefore the school could not teach it. The principal said that "they could only teach what was contained in the history books" (p.19, Vitz report of private correspondence.)

In fifth and sixth grade children are introduced first to American history, then to world history and culture.

In the 10 texts dealing with American history,

0 of 10 have any reference to Jewish religious practice in the U.S. (synagogue worship, beliefs, etc.)

0 of 10 have any references to Catholicism or Catholic influence in the U.S. after the early Catholic explorers and the colonial period (there is no mention, for example, of the large Catholic school system as a significant expression of American's search for religious freedom)

0 of 10 mention the major religious events in American history such as the Great Awakening in the 1740's, the great revivals of the 1830's and 40's, the liberal/conservative Protestant split in the 1920's and 30's, or the born-again movement in the 1960's and 70's.

Typical of the superficial treatment of religion even in earlier periods is the grade 5 Silver Burdett definition of the Pilgrims:

"A pilgrim is one who travels for religious reasons."

Thus, although there are some discussions of religious events in the distant past, Vitz suggests that the authors of these textbooks have "a deep-seated fear of any form of active contemporary Christianity, especially serious, committed Protestantism" (p.16).

With regard to sixth grade treatment of world history and culture, there is again an apparent anti-Christian and even anti-Jewish bias. There is "much more coverage of Islam than Judaism," even though the early history of the Jews is very important for Western civilization.

4 of the 10 books give not 1 word to the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Others give very little treatment.

For example, Silver Burdett has:

36 lines of text on the life of Jesus
104 lines on the life of Mohammad.

Most of the texts have no mention or very little mention of the Reformation, especially the

religious reasons for the Reformation.

C. Family Values: Social Studies: Grades 1 to 4

These 40 textbooks introduce the child not only to American culture but also to social groups and roles in the family, the neighborhood, and the community. There is an almost complete eradication of the idea of a traditional family (husband, wife, children) as desirable or even ordinary. The books all place emphasis on many different types of families, "all implicitly equally legitimate," according to Vitz.

Thus, a family is usually defined quite vaguely as "a group of people" or "the people you live with" (Silver Burdett, grade 1, p.18).

Quite significant is what is missing from these 40 textbooks for grades 1 to 4:

0 of 40 books mentioned marriage as the foundation of the family

0 of 40 even mentioned the words "marriage," "husband," "wife," "homemaker," "housewife"

1 of 40 mentions the word "wedding" (1 book mentions a neighbor's wedding in Spain)

0 of 40 features a homemaker as a role model

0 of 40 portray a contemporary American family with a husband working and earning a living, and a mother caring for her children

0 of 40 mention the occupation of mother or housewife as an important job, as one having integrity, or as providing fulfillment and satisfaction

By contrast, there are "countless references" (p.38) to women working outside the home in various occupations.

Vitz concludes,

"It is clear that marriage is not seen as having any relevance, much less a central one, to the definition of family. Educators may constantly bemoan teenage pregnancy and the frequency of illegitimate children, but their own textbooks begin fostering the notion of a family without marriage in grades 1 to 4" (p.38).

D. Political Emphasis: Social Studies Grades 1 to 4

Dr. Vitz's study listed all the people in American society since World War II who were selected by these 40 textbooks as political role models, usually designated in a separate section as "famous people" or "someone you should know." In order to be included in this category the person had to be given a

picture and a paragraph or page of special treatment separate from the history under discussion at the time.

Vitz found 23 persons designated in this special way as role models from the political world since World War II. (Some of the 23 were featured in more than 1 book.) Of those 23 political role models in the modern era,

0 of 23 were Republican males

1 of 23 was a conservative Republican (Clare Booth Luce - an ambassador under President Eisenhower).

The people who were selected for special emphasis included Eleanor Roosevelt (3 times), Martin Luther King, Jr. (3 times), Ella Grasso (Democratic Governor of Connecticut), Rachel Carson (ecology Movement, 2 times), Thomas Bradley (Democratic Mayor of Los Angeles, 2 times), etc. [the entire list is on p. 40]. Now these are certainly significant people in current American history, and there is nothing wrong with including any one of them as part of a representative sample of people from different perspectives. But when almost all the people featured as role models are from the liberal end of the political spectrum, then a clearly biased picture is given to our children Vitz comments on Social Studies textbooks: "It is hard even to find any Republican role models" (p.39), and adds,

A reader would think there are no male Republicans in the country, much less any active conservatives, male or female, of any political stripe during the last 20 years (p.41).

Regarding the presentation of political issues, Vitz says that the treatment of recent American history in these social studies books focuses on 3 issues:

- (1) Minority Rights
- (2) Feminism
- (3) Environmental Issues

Vitz says that "in every case, the pro position is presented as positive; the opposition is never given any serious treatment" (p.41).

Moreover, he notes that "there are no conservative positions identified or supported in any way in any of these books" (p.41). For example,

0 of 40 the books mention the anti-ERA movement

0 of the 40 books mention the pro-life movement

0 of the 40 books mention the conservative revolt against high taxes and big government.

With regard to the feminist political emphasis, Vitz comments, "All 40 books have a unisex emphasis. Not one of these books presents in any form a sympathetic portrayal of traditional sex role models for the contemporary United States" (p.42). By contrast, there are frequent pictures of women as auto mechanics, construction workers, firefighters, police officers, a mayor, or a judge. On the other

hand, there are several pictures of men in non-physically demanding jobs such as telephone operator or laboratory researcher.

Again, one might not object to any one of these individual pictures, but the overall impression given to students at a very young age is certainly unrepresentative of American society even today (where perhaps 1% - 2% of firefighters, construction workers, and auto mechanics are women).

Moreover, when these portrayals are contrasted with the absence of positive portrayals of the roles of mother and homemaker for women, and the absence of leadership roles or (to a child) "heroic" and exciting roles (such as firefighter) for men, the overall impression left on students is that young girls should aspire to leadership roles and to physically demanding and heroic jobs, but that young boys should rather aspire to passive, non-heroic, non-leadership careers -- for that is the way society works, according to the pictures and words in these textbooks.

E. Economic Values: Social Studies, Grades 1 to 4

Vitz's study also measured the emphasis on economic values such as saving money, working hard, and going into business for oneself.

In the social studies books for grades 1 to 4, where basic ideas of jobs and the workplace were introduced to children,

0 of the 40 texts mentioned the importance of saving money or having a savings account

0 of the 40 texts mentioned the idea that people can start a business and work hard for success

0 of the 40 books, in discussing family budgets, mentioned any money given to charity or to others in need, or to a church

0 of the 40 mentioned that many people work hard for rewards other than money - such as a mother who works for the benefit of her family, or volunteer workers who work for hospitals, churches, etc.

Vitz concludes that both in the area of earning money and in the area of working for rewards other than money, the books are quite biased:

"These books completely fail to portray one of the central parts of the American dream and the American reality: That of becoming financially successful by going into business for oneself" (p.44).

On the other hand, the emphasis was clearly on personal fulfillment and self-achievement through jobs that paid wages:

"By implication the message is clear that if you work and aren't paid money you - and what you

do - don't really count" (p.44).

Moreover, when Vitz looked beyond the people selected as political "role models" for children (see above) to people who were chosen as role models from other fields such as sports, the arts, and science,

0 out of the dozens of role models from all fields was a person (either man or woman) who was successful in business.

In summary of this section, the books seemed to have a pro- materialism bias but an anti-business bias.

F. High School History Texts

Vitz has a separate section (pp. 45-60) dealing with American history texts used at the high school level, but I have not summarized it in detail here. He finds the same anti-religious bias, and especially a bias against conservative Protestantism in the modern age, to be characteristic of these texts as well.

PART II: READING TEXTBOOKS

A. Introduction

In a separate section of his study, Vitz examined reading texts (what are commonly called "basal readers") for grades 3 and 6. These 2 grades were chosen because grade 3 is the first level at which longer and more substantial stories and short articles are given. Grade 6 was selected because it is the highest grade-level reader that is commonly used. The materials for grades 4 and 5 are very similar to that used for grades 3 and 6.

The readers used were from 11 publishers, covering 100% of the readers adopted in California and Texas, and large percentages of the readers covered in many other states, giving an estimate of between 70 and 80 percent of the basal readers used in public schools in the U.S.

The publishers whose readers were examined were as follows:

Publisher: Book Titles and Grade Level

- (1) Allyn and Bacon: *Handstands* (grade 3) *Standing Strong* (6)
- (2) Economy (Keytexts) *Turnstyles* (3) *Forerunners* (6)
- (3) Ginn *Ten Times Round* (3) *Golden Voyages* (6)
- (4) Harcourt Brace Jovanovich *Ring Around the World* (3) *Flights of Color* (6)
- (5) Heath *Catching Glimpses* (3) *Making Choices* (6)
- (6) Holt, Rinehart and Winston *Never Give Up* (3) *Riders on the Earth* (6)
- (7) Houghton Mifflin *Spinners* (3) *Beacons* (6)
- (8) Laidlaw *Whispering Ghosts* (3) *Voyages* (6)
- (9) Lippincott *Zooming Ahead* (3) *Flying High* (6)

(10) Macmillan *Full Circle* (3) *Catch the Wind* (6)

(11) Scott, Foresman *Golden Secrets* (3) *Star Light* (6)

The study scored only the stories and articles in these books, not shorter items such as riddles, crossword puzzles, short poems, etc. In these 22 readers there were 670 stories and articles representing 9,000 to 10,000 pages of text.

Quite aside from specific values taught, Vitz also expressed concern about the uniformly low literary quality of these stories (even allowing for the grade level involved). "The great majority of these stories are also uniform, unobtrusive, sentimental, and filled with easy vocabulary and simplified expression. That is, the majority of these pieces are to literature what muzak is to music, or what fast food is to real food" (p. 65).

B. Religious Values: Basal Readers, Grades 3 and 6

Vitz concludes,

"To all intents and purposes, religion is excluded from these basal readers" (p.65).

To be more specific, here are some of Vitz's tallies:

0 of 670 stories and articles have the major content or central motivation derived from Jewish or Christian religion (by contrast, there are several stories giving favorable treatment to native American Indian religious views)

0 of 670 stories mentioned typical active Protestantism (though there are a few positive mentions of non-Protestant or "minority" religions such as Jewish, Mennonite, or Catholic)

0 of 670 stories mention even once the name Jesus.

Vitz notes the contrast between the treatment of Christianity and the treatment of other religions. For example, the sixth grade text published by Houghton Mifflin (Beacons) does mention God or religious ideas in 8 stories or articles (a higher average than most books) but there is nothing on Judaism or conservative Protestantism. In this same book, a story about pioneer life describes Christmas as a warm time for special foods, and a time for "thought and thanksgiving."

By contrast, non-Christian religious ideas are frequent:

6 of 670 stories have Greek or Roman religions as an important part of the story

6 of 670 stories feature ancient Egyptian, Polynesian or other non-Christian religion

13 of 670 stories feature magic or the doing of magic

many of the 670 stories have magic as "central to the plot and the story resolution".

C. Patriotism in Basal Readers

Only 5 of the 670 stories had any patriotic theme (that is, a story about a person who is heroic because of love for country). However, even in these 5 stories, 4 of the 5 stories are at least as much "feministic" in theme as they are patriotic:

3 of the stories discuss a woman who dressed as a man and rode a horse to warn American farmers that British soldiers were coming.

1 other story discusses a black girl who brings food to George Washington.

Stories about Patrick Henry, Nathan Hale, Paul Revere, and countless patriotic Americans since, material from which many heart-stirring stories have been written, are simply missing from all of these books. Moreover,

0 of 670 stories have any patriotic theme after the year 1780, thus excluding the idea of sacrificial or heroic service for one's country as relevant in any way to the modern world.

D. Views on Business

0 of 670 stories have an immigrant who works hard and is thrifty and succeeds in a business or a profession

Only 2 of 670 stories feature a business theme as a major emphasis (1 talks about a black woman who becomes a banker in the 19th century and the other talks about a black teenager who fixes up a house and rents it out).

Moreover, the same materialistic emphasis seen in social studies texts was coupled with this neglect of the value of thrift and hard work, so that:

0 of 670 stories portray helping others, caring for others, or charitable work as valuable and meaningful in itself.

Rather, Vitz concludes, "Over and over the emphasis is on individual success" -- they are stories tailored for the "me generation," with emphasis on self-centered personal fulfillment.

E. Feminist Themes in Reading Texts

Vitz says, "By far the most noticeable ideological position in the readers is a feminist one" (p.73).

This strong feminist emphasis can be seen through a number of statistical measurements:

0 of 670 stories clearly support motherhood for women in modern society (there are a few stories moderately favorable to motherhood but they are always set in the past or in certain ethnic

settings)

0 of 670 stories show any woman or girl with a positive relationship to a baby, or even to a young child (or even with a doll!)

Only 1 out of 670 stories (an O. Henry story in Lippencott's grade 6 reader) is focused on a traditional form of male/female romantic love.

Vitz comments, "Though great literature from Tristan and Isolde to Shakespeare to Jane Austen to Louisa May Alcott, is filled with romance and the desire to marry, one finds very little of that in these texts" (p.73).

There are however, many role reversal "romances" -- stories of a princess who slays a dragon, for example, and agrees to marry a prince only if she can continue to slay dragons and fix drawbridges in her kingdom. Vitz notes, that "stories set in the past and featuring sex role reversal are very common" (p.74).

Moreover,

"stories showing competition, especially physical competition between girls and boys, almost always have the girl winning" (p.75).

For example, there are stories about the new kid on the block who wins at "king of the hill" and other games but turns out to be a girl. Or a story of a girl who hits two home runs and is the hero of the team, beating out the boy who had stolen her bat because he wanted to be on the team. In one story (Laidlaw, grade 3) the well-known boy detective "Encyclopedia Brown" is not a boy but a girl (in this text's version).

Another example is a dogsled race between a boy and a girl, in which the girl turns back and rescues the boy from danger, but still beats him to the finish line. Many other examples could be given of what can be called the "Wonder Woman and the Wimp" theme so common in these readers. But:

0 of 670 stories have a man saving or even attempting to save a woman from danger.

0 of 670 stories represent traditional concepts of womanhood.

By contrast,

About 130 of the 670 stories (or 20%) have a feminist emphasis, and in half of those (about 65) the feminist emphasis is especially strong.

Therefore, Vitz notes,

"Countless parents wanting clear male role models for their sons will not find them in these books" (p.75).

On the other hand,

"Clear attacks on traditional sex roles, especially traditional concepts of manhood, are common" (p.76).

PART III: CONCLUSION: WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

I do not think anyone will question the fact that what is taught in school has a strong formative influence on children's values and goals. Particularly in the elementary years, the textbook a child uses is his primary source of information about the entire world outside his own circle of family and community experience.

But all through these formative years, an entire generation of American children is growing up with an idea of American culture and society in which religious convictions (especially conservative Protestant ones), traditional family values, traditional male/female roles, and conservative political and economic positions play no significant part.

Of course, the child may still see these values represented in his or her own home life and community, and that is good. But it still would be hard for the child to escape the conclusion that his or her own experience is "abnormal" or "unusual" -- for it is clearly not representative of what is approved by those intelligent people who write textbooks and who certainly know what the whole world is about.

What then will happen? At best, the child will tend to feel embarrassed and defensive about his own "unusual" religious beliefs and traditional family structure. At worst, many children will grow up with a very positive disposition toward accepting the liberal political perspective and the anti-Christian religious and moral perspectives taught by these textbooks.

Personally, I am particularly troubled by the situation with children's basal readers. I well remember in elementary school how my imagination was developed and my ideas of what is noble and right conduct were significantly advanced through reading stories of heroism or biographies of famous people. I'm quite certain that many of the personal traits I now think to be admirable and try to imitate (hard work, standing up for what is right, courage in the face of hostile opposition, fairness and justice in personal dealings, care for others, etc.) were stimulated and developed through the things I read in elementary school. I can remember how I would frequently sit at my desk in elementary school and picture myself as growing up to be like one or another of the characters in the stories I read.

Reading has that powerful effect on our goals and desires. It strongly influences what we think is right and noble and desirable to be imitated.

So I am deeply concerned, because I think that we are turning out a generation of American children whose school reading has predisposed them to think that conservative Protestant religion has had no significant role in the important experiences of people in the past or the present, but who are fascinated with the possibility of the use of magic or the possible good influence of other ancient non-Christian religions in people's lives.

These students will also be very unlikely to be willing to sacrifice or act heroically for the sake of their country. They will be predisposed to emphasize self-centered personal fulfillment as the most important thing in life, but will have little likelihood of seeing the importance of hard work over time,

or thrift, or the great opportunity of starting a business and succeeding. And their views of appropriate roles for men and women, both in career choices and in family relationships, will be strongly disposed to a reversal of "traditional" (and, I think, Biblical) patterns for male/female relationships and for the structure of the family.

Is it not our responsibility as parents to see that our children are educated in other values than these, values which much more closely represent the values of Scripture? There are excellent Christian textbooks published for reading and social studies, and used in tens of thousands of Christian schools across the United States. As Christian parents, should we not see to it that these are the textbooks from which our children learn their values for living in this world?

"I doubt whether we are sufficiently attentive to the importance of elementary textbooks" (C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, first sentence).