

SHOULD YOU PAY TAXES

TO SUPPORT
RELIGIOUS
SCHOOLS?



AMERICANS UNITED FOR SEPARATION
OF CHURCH AND STATE

518 C Street, N.E.

Washington, D.C. 20002

phone: (202)466-3234 Fax: (202)466-2587

e-mail: americansunited@au.org

website: www.au.org

Who should make the decision about how much money you contribute to religious groups – you or the government? Most Americans would have no trouble answering that question. All of us want the right to freely make our own choices about religion. Yet an increasingly influential coalition of religious and political leaders is working to undercut that right by requiring taxpayer support for religious schools. The fate of church-state separation hangs in the balance.

Legislative measures that would divert millions of dollars from the public treasury into religious schools are being considered in the U.S. Congress. In many state legislatures across the country, bills have been introduced to fund private sectarian education. Some provide for tuition vouchers. Other measures push for tax credits, textbook and transportation subsidies or other forms of assistance.

Ironically, this drive comes at a time when our public schools are more financially hard pressed than ever. Nine out of ten of our nation's children attend public schools, yet some politicians are asking the American people to accept inadequate funding for public schools while they enact new, expensive programs for private religious schools. What's going on?

A powerful alliance of political and sectarian interests has set its sights on tax subsidies for religious schools. Religious Right activists and lobbyists for the Roman Catholic hierarchy are pressing their demands on both the state and national level.

Religious Right leaders have made their position clear. For example, wealthy TV preacher Pat Robertson regularly attacks America's public education system, calls for tax aid for private religious schools and insists that "the Constitution says nothing about the separation of church and state!"

Observed Robertson, "They say vouchers would spell the end of public schools in America. To which we say, so what?" The Christian Coalition, a political group founded by Robertson, aggressively lobbies on behalf of tax aid to religion.

TV preacher Jerry Falwell also bashes public schools. He claims the public school system is "damned" and promotes private Christian schools. "I hope to live to see the day," he once said, "when, as in the early days of our country, there won't be any public schools. The churches

will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be!"

The Religious Right has influential allies on this issue. The Roman Catholic bishops have sought government support for their parochial schools for many years. Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia once told a Falwell-sponsored magazine, "If we can get [a religious school voucher plan] through in one state then that's the foot in the door. That's what I want. I want to see it passed in one state and let it go through the courts to remove that notion of separation of church and state."

Many short-sighted politicians have responded favorably to this religious school aid crusade. The movement has powerful friends in Congress and many state legislatures. Even the U.S. Supreme Court, once a faithful defender of the "wall of separation between church and state," has let down its guard in several instances.

It's time for Americans who believe in strong public schools and church-state separation to speak out. Consider the following points.

How Religious Schools Operate

Private elementary and secondary schools are usually religious in character. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, eighty-four percent of all private school students attend religiously affiliated schools. Nearly half of private school students attend Roman Catholic schools. Most of the rest attend schools operated by fewer than a dozen other faiths. (In recent years, fundamentalist Christian academies have opened in significant numbers.)

These religious schools do not operate like public schools. They saturate their entire educational program with the sectarian doctrines of the sponsoring religious



groups. Children may be refused admission on grounds of religion, gender, academic ability or family income. Church membership and theological viewpoint are important factors in hiring, with administrators and faculty members often selected (or rejected) on the basis of religion. Some religious schools have fired teachers for getting a divorce, for marrying outside the faith or even for expressing opinions on public issues that contradict denominational dogma.

At religious schools, worship services are held frequently, and both believers and non-believers are often required to attend. History, literature and other courses

“When a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it so that its professors are obliged to call for help of the civil power, 'tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.”

—Benjamin Franklin

are taught from a sectarian viewpoint. Fundamentalist religious dogma is sometimes offered in science classes instead of accepted scientific concepts. Some schools teach that their faith is the only true one, and other religions are disparaged as “false.”

Religious authorities are free to make these decisions without regard to public opinion, and such practices are perfectly legal. Indeed, churches that operate private schools are exercising the constitutional right of religious liberty. These denominations see their schools as a vital part of their teaching ministry, as much a part of their evangelism program as worship services.

The schools’ religious character, however, also demonstrates why Americans should not be required to finance them. Giving public funds to sectarian schools is the same thing as forcing taxpayers to place their hard-earned money in the collection plate.

Americans generously support a wide variety of religious institutions and schools and do so voluntarily.

Our houses of worship are among the best attended in the world.

But religious school aid programs would require all Americans to contribute to the churches and other houses of worship that operate private schools, whether they believe in the religion taught there or not. Because taxpayers have no say in the operation of those schools, “taxation without representation” would result.

In addition, tax aid for sectarian schools would subsidize the segregation of schoolchildren along religious lines. A diverse society such as ours can hardly afford to do that.

Ninety percent of our nation’s schoolchildren depend on the public schools for an education. Only 10 percent of America’s students are enrolled in private schools. Scarce public resources should be designated for public purposes, not private ones.

And keep in mind, religious schools are certain to face government controls if they accept public funding. Many religious leaders recognize this fact of political life and have refused to join in the demand for tax support of their schools.

Perhaps most importantly, any form of taxation for religion would violate the principles the United States was founded on. Consider some history.

The Fight For Religious Freedom

America was colonized in part by families seeking religious freedom. These refugees fled the nations of Europe where church and state were united and dissenters faced ostracism, jail or death. Unfortunately, many of these same refugees set up similarly oppressive arrangements on these shores, giving their own religion favored treatment and punishing anyone who disagreed.

From the early days of our nation, misguided religious groups sought to compel all citizens to contribute their tax dollars to sectarian education. Fortunately, courageous leaders in both the religious and political communities stood up and said, “No!”

In 18th-century Virginia, for example, Enlightenment thinkers like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson joined forces with religious dissenters to free fellow citizens from the bondage of state-established religion. Through their efforts, a bill requiring taxpayers to support “teachers of the Christian religion” was defeated. Instead, the Virginia legislature in 1786 passed Jefferson’s Bill for Establishing

Religious Freedom.

Five years later, following Virginia’s example, the first Congress proposed adding to the U.S. Constitution a Bill of Rights. This set of amendments included provisions for religious freedom and church-state separation. The American people through the First Amendment declared that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....”

For many years the U.S. Supreme Court barred most forms of tax aid to religious schools. By the late 1980s, however, the high court began allowing some kinds of “indirect” aid. In a troubling decision in 2002, five justices voted to uphold a program in Cleveland, Ohio, that gave tax funding to religious schools through vouchers. As a result, voucher advocates are now pressing for the enactment of similar programs all over the country.

The People Speak:

Referenda On Vouchers and Other Tax Aid To Religious and Private Schools

STATE	YEAR	AGAINST	FOR
New York	1967	72%	28%
Michigan	1970	57%	43%
Nebraska	1970	57%	43%
Oregon	1972	61%	39%
Idaho	1972	57%	43%
Maryland	1972	55%	45%
Maryland	1974	57%	43%
Washington	1975	61%	39%
Missouri	1976	60%	40%
Alaska	1976	54%	46%
Michigan	1978	74%	26%
District of Columbia	1981	89%	11%
California	1982	61%	39%
Massachusetts	1982	62%	38%
Massachusetts	1986	70%	30%
Utah	1988	70%	30%
Oregon	1990	67%	33%
Colorado	1992	67%	33%
California	1993	70%	30%
Washington	1996	65%	35%
Michigan	2000	69%	31%
California	2000	71%	29%

It should be noted, however, that the Supreme Court did not rule that states must adopt voucher programs – only that they may do so under certain conditions. This decision has shifted the voucher battle from the courtrooms to the legislatures and Congress.

As legislators debate the issue, it’s important to remember that the American people remain strongly opposed to religious school aid schemes. In 22 referenda since 1967, voters have resoundingly rejected ballot proposals designed to direct tax aid to parochial and other private schools. (See chart.) Referenda in California and Michigan in 2000 rejected vouchers by a two-to-one margin. Exit polls showed that voters from every racial, religious, political and socio-economic group cast ballots against vouchers in both states.

Keep Church And State Separate

For many Americans, President John F. Kennedy summed up the religious school aid issue well when he said, “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute...where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference.”

But citizens should not assume that our rights are secure. In light of the Supreme Court’s voucher ruling, religious school aid advocates are lobbying Congress and the state legislatures for programs that divert public funds to private religious purposes.

In short, our legacy of religious liberty is in danger. The nation’s vital public school system is being placed in jeopardy at the same time. If these vital features of American life are to be preserved, all Americans must come to their defense.

Should taxpayers finance religious schools? To maintain meaningful religious liberty in America, the answer must be, “No!”

If you would like to learn more about this issue, please contact Americans United for Separation of Church and State at our national headquarters in Washington, D.C. We have a wide range of books, fact sheets and other literature about church-state separation. We welcome your comments and your support. (See back panel for our mailing address, phone and fax numbers, as well as our e-mail and World Wide Web addresses.)

