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Should Government Run Churches ... or Schools?

by Scott McPherson

What if government ran our churches? Imagine the spectacle.

If the government were in charge of religion, there would be just one for everyone. No more competition between differing sects and denominations.

No longer would there be diverse and numerous places of worship flourishing all over our cities and countryside. No more black churches or white churches, or multicultural churches; small churches; rich or poor churches; churches in your neighborhood; liberal and fundamentalist churches. Such choices would be replaced by one big drab church attended by everyone.

There would be compulsory-attendance laws for church. Imagine: a citizenry that was properly instilled with a solid moral foundation and the basic seeds of goodwill. Naturally, the government would decide what constituted proper religious teaching.

Everyone would be taxed to pay for churches. Atheists would still have to go to church.

Certain allowances would be made for those who wanted something other than the government religion. Those who could afford it would send their kids to private churches or hold Bible classes at home, provided they were of sufficient quality to satisfy government regulators.

Of course, churches run by the government would operate like post offices and DMVs, so parishioners would begin scheming to avoid them. Churches would be constantly demanding more money from taxpayers for upgrades and repairs. Pastors would be rude and blame parents for kids' lack of proper scriptural understanding. Unions representing church-related vocations would harangue legislators to expand religious "services" for the public. Churches would be overcrowded; most kids would vow at the age of 18 never to set foot in church again.

Luckily, America has escaped the dreary and inevitable consequences of a government-run religion by erecting and maintaining a solid constitutional wall between church and state. The result is a society where religion has flourished, and there is literally a church for everyone.

Sadly, most people don't seem to connect the dots where education is concerned, for these catastrophes that we avoid by keeping government out of religion are instead haunting us in the classroom.

In America today, education is one great big political battleground. Important questions are determined in a one-size-fits-all manner imposed by the government monopoly, creating a zero-sum game where no problem can be settled to the satisfaction of everyone. The stultifying combination of political bickering and bureaucratic inefficiencies sets education apart from diverse and effectual fields not hindered by government management.

Which is precisely why we ought to remove government from the equation, just as our ancestors did with religion.

In fact, the best thing Americans could do for education — indeed for the children of America — is to release this important area of our lives from the shackles of government command and control. The public-school leviathan should be dismantled. Government at all levels should cease building, funding, and staffing schools. All educational planning, from textbooks to nationwide testing programs, should be terminated. Government should be thrown out of the education business completely.

But without government, how would children be educated? Education, like cars, computers, shoes, food, books, magazines, clothes, and houses, should be a product of the marketplace. Individual American families would take responsibility for finding the best education for their children, just as they currently feed, clothe, and house them without the aid of the state.

Naturally, the question of standards will arise. Government education isn't perfect, its defenders will say, but at least it has standards that students must meet. Besides the obvious sophistry in that position, who is to say there will be no standards in free-market education? The government doesn't set standards in the computer industry, which is well known for its innovation, flexibility, and steadily falling prices. Shoppers pick from a wide array of options — Apple, MacIntosh, Microsoft, Linux; and they buy cheap, expensive, or somewhere in between. Standards are set by those best positioned to judge — consumers.

And the poor? In America anyone can walk through the doors of any church on any street in any city, donate as much or as little as he wants, and benefit from what is offered. No one asks if you can afford to pay for the sermon. And if you don't like that particular church, you can take up a pew elsewhere.

Such is the choice we face today: Do we continue to run our failing schools by bureaucratic mandate, or do we embrace the quality and diversity of the free market and the voluntary charity of a free society? It's time our schools were run like our churches. Our ancestors separated church and state, and everyone benefited. It's time for us to build on what they accomplished and separate school and state.

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