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The Organized Conspiracy Against the Public School, 1924.

"THE ORGANIZED CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE PUBLIC SCHOOL."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING

APRIL 13, 1924, CLEVELAND.



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
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By the organized conspiracy against the public school I mean a concerted attempt now being made throughout this land to introduce the teaching of Protestant Christianity into our public school. The vast intolerance which swept over this land during the last six years has now reached and centered itself upon the public school--the last citadel and stronghold of American democracy.

Since the war Protestant Anglo-Saxonism has gone on a rampage. The war stirred the slumbering embers of tribalism in the hearts of all the peoples of the world, victor and victim alike; and in no period of the world's history has decadent nationalism and racial chauvinism been as rampant, as aggressive, as ruthless as it is today.

The movement began in this land with an attempt to restrict immigration; to restrict immigration, not as an economic expedient, not as an effort to protect the American workingman against an invasion of cheap labor from abroad,--if that were the only reason for it, then the immigration bill would have been restrictive and not selective,--but the attempt was made to select immigrants and to select them not on the basis of qualification, of mental, moral and physical endowments, not on the basis of fitness, but on the basis of some pseudo-scientific, vague and indefinable racial antecedent.

I read this morning that the House passed by an overwhelming majority the Johnson immigration bill, which restricts immigration to two per cent. on the basis of the census of 1890. Now, you may wonder why the legislators of our land had to go back to a census thirty-four years old when there was a census of 1920 available. If they sought to restrict immigration they may have done so merely by saying that immigration shall hereafter be restricted to one per cent., say, of the 1920 census, or two per cent. of the 1920 census; but they select the year 1890 as the basis. And why? Because in 1890 the immigration from southern Europe, from eastern Europe--the Jewish immigration--was relatively small, while the immigration from northwestern Europe was relatively large. So Protestant Anglo-Saxonism has again triumphed!

The second evidence of this aggressive policy was the attempt made to introduce numerous clausus in our universities, to restrict the enrolment of Jewish students to a certain percentage of the total collegiate enrolment. A certain suave, cultured and highly refined individual at the head of a venerable and perhaps the most representative university in our land, projected this idea, novel to America, but rather old-fashioned in Europe.

And this proposal was expressly made not in behalf of Protestant Anglo-Saxonism, but for the sake of the Jew. No man is as philanthropic as the anti-Semite. The anti-Semite is always ready to do something for the Jew.

except to do the one thing which the Jew asks of him, namely, to let him alone.

And then came the klan movement, which was Protestant Anglo-Saxonism at its logical worst--the hooded menace which drew its inspiration from the fallacy of racial and religious superiority. And then came the movement to outlaw the parochial schools, and in Oregon the people voted to compel parents to send their children to the public school, thereby outlawing the private school and the parochial school. This movement was fathered by the klan, and was carried in a popular election; which makes one feel that democracy, after all, is not a safeguard against tyranny or against black-guardism in government. Fortunately, the Supreme Court of the United States has declared this law, so passed by the citizenry of Oregon, unconstitutional.

One need not indorse the parochial school; one may prefer that all American children attend one common public school; but one may also remember that this is, or was, a free country, that our constitution safeguards the liberty of each citizen, and that provided a child receives an education which is commensurate with the standards of education set up by the state, the parent has the privilege to supplement that education in whatever way he deems wise or necessary.

And now, as the climax to this movement, comes the attempt to introduce the teaching of religion into the public schools. This thing has been long in coming.

The strategy was clever, but not altogether unnoted. For some years back efforts have been made to compel the reading of the Bible in the public school, and most people wondered why non-Protestant elements in the communities, and Jews, were so strenuously opposed to the reading of the Bible in the public school. What possible harm can there be in the reading of ten or fifteen verses daily, without interpretation, in the class room of the public school?

But we knew that this attempt was only the entering wedge into a movement which was bound to come sooner or later--a movement to Protestantize the public school system of America. We knew that there was practically no religious view in the reading, without interpretation, and without explanation, and without application, of ten or fifteen verses of text; we knew that that would not develop the moral strength in our youth, and we knew that the protagonists of this were not interested in the moral development of American youth through this formal reading of text. We knew that it was part--perhaps an unconscious part, but part, nevertheless, of a desire to impose a religious tone, a doctrinal, creedal, Protestant tone on our American public schools.

And now comes the open, avowed effort. In connection with it, of course, there is still that characteristic bit of hypocrisy. No child, of course, will be compelled to take religious instruction; the consent of the parent will be required, it is maintained. And non-

Protestant children will have the privilege of non-attendance at these classes, or of attending classes of their own denomination. An effort will be made to keep the secular education separate and distinct from the religious education. It will all be done nicely, without interference, without invading the religious convictions of other peoples; and it is not so much religion which will be taught, doctrine or creed, but ethics and morality. L

Now, I maintain that it is only a very naive person, one who does not know the Jesuitry of denominational groups, that will be persuaded that this movement is aimed at the teaching of ethics and morality in our public schools. One who knows the history of these movements knows full well that the real purpose of this propaganda is to make the public school an adjunct of the churches of this country. These precautions which are now being taken and which are promised, will be forgotten as soon as this movement is fairly well launched. What is now voluntary will, in the course of time, become compulsory, and another battle for the preservation of our essential American freedom--liberty--will be lost. ✓ ✓ ✓

The avowed reason for this movement to introduce the teaching of religion in the public school is that this generation is utterly Godless, that this generation of young men and women is going to perdition, that it is utterly, utterly bad, and that only the teaching in the public schools can save the youth of America from the dire

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sinister consequences which are sure to follow.

Now, in the first place, I am not at all convinced that this pessimistic view of the condition, the moral quality of this generation, is the true one. I do not know that this generation is morally more lax than the generation which preceded it, and I am not at all convinced that the child who is a graduate of the parochial school, for example, whose religious and secular education are at one, is any more moral or better than the child who is a graduate of the public school; and I am not at all convinced that the child who is a graduate of schools of European countries where religious instruction is compulsory, is a better man than the American boy who is a graduate of the public school.

But assuming that the position is true; assuming that this is a Godless generation, and that its only salvation lies in the teaching of religion, the question still remains: Why should religion be taught in the public schools? Ah, there are no other agencies which can, which ought justly to assume this responsibility. Millions of dollars have been expended by churches upon their Sabbath schools. Why have these Sabbath schools failed to do their duty? And if they have failed, why should the public school now be saddled with their failure? If the churches have failed to build up proper normal schools for the training of religious teachers, if they have failed to build up the physical facilities, if they have failed to establish a morale, so that the child would be attracted to the church,

why should the public school, with its already heavily burdened program, be required to make good where the church has failed? If one day a week of religious instruction is insufficient--and it undoubtedly is insufficient--why must time be taken from the public school curriculum for that instruction?

The child may be taught religion on Sunday, morning and afternoon; he may be taught religion Saturday morning and afternoon; he may be taught religion after school hours any day of the week. There are thousands of Jewish children, here and elsewhere, who receive daily instruction in Hebrew and the religion of his people after school hours daily. Why cannot the churches copy this program instead of injecting religion into the public school curriculum, with all its attendant dangers which are involved?

I recall making this statement to some representatives of the churches in this city: I argued with them that their contention is true, that more time is required for religious instruction, but that their corollary that religious instruction must be given during school hours does not of necessity follow; that they could teach religion on Saturday, and that they could teach religion in the afternoon of any week day; but they were not convinced at all, because they knew exactly what they had in mind. They wanted the public school, its discipline, its control, its administrative facilities to back up their program, which they themselves had failed to make effective.

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We Jews have the same problem. It is not as if we have solved the problem of the education of our children. There are in the city of Cleveland, according to the last report of our survey, thousands of Jewish children who receive no religious education at all. But then we do not turn to the public school and say we have failed, you assume the responsibility for it. We turn about to our community and say, "Fellow Jews, we are confronted with a serious problem; there are hundreds and thousands of our children who are growing up with the knowledge of God and the love of their people. Let us save them for God and for Israel." And we at once set about to build new schools; we increase our facilities, train more teachers, and solve our problem in and among ourselves. And we maintain that the churches, if they are sincere in wanting a religious influence exerted, and not necessarily a denominational influence exerted, to adopt the same program.

When the schools of East Cleveland carried out the coup d'etat, and, without consulting anyone, introduced classes in religion in the public schools, I wrote to the chairman of the Board of Education in the name of the rabbis and the leaders of Jewish education in Cleveland, in the following letter, which is a summary of our position. I want to read you the letter, because it may very well be that Cleveland will be the battleground in America for this religion in the public school movement. For the Jews of Cleveland will not permit this thing to carry if they can

help it.

"The undersigned desire to register a protest against the introduction and the continuance of religious education during school hours in the public and high schools of East Cleveland. We believe that this innovation is contrary to the spirit and purpose of the American school system, and is fraught with danger to our democratic institution. We sympathize, of course, with any earnest endeavor to extend religious education to the youth of America through the medium of week day instruction. Some of us are actively engaged in this work.

"The need of bringing religious influence to bear more directly and effectively upon the lives of the rising generation is very urgent, and is fully grasped by us all, but we respectfully submit that your particular plan by which this is to be achieved is not a desirable one. A plan which requires that an hour of week day instruction be taken from public school time, and that the instruction be given within the school premises involves very important problems touching the policy of the public school and the relation between secular and religious education.

"These problems are not satisfactorily solved by your plan. We believe that religious instruction should be given after school hours, or on Saturdays or Sundays, in other than school buildings. Such arrangements would not project any of the above mentioned difficulties, and would not necessitate an adjustment of the school

curriculum. We are very apprehensive of the tendency which inevitably develops when time for religious instruction is taken from the school schedule, and when such instruction is given within school buildings, namely, the tendency to bring public and religious education into an essential relationship. We note that such a tendency is already manifest among the week day religious schools which were available by Professor Irving L. Shaver, whose report is published in the Religious Educational Journal of April, 1922.

"The Children (and this is very interesting) of nearly 40% of religious schools reported are already receiving credits for religious education in the public schools. In nearly 85% of the cases there is some form of supervision of public school officials over the work of religious schools. In the majority of instances the public school keeps a record of the attendance at the religious school, and takes cognizance of the pupil's conduct and of his work there.

"This seems to be the logical development of the movement which aims to establish religious education during school hours, and such a development we believe is distinctly harmful to the best interests of American democracy. It is well nigh impossible to teach religion except on more or less denominational or dogmatic lines. The particular interpretation of the Bible which may, for example, prove acceptable to the Protestant, may not be acceptable to the Catholic or to the Jew. Even among the

Protestants themselves there is no unanimity of opinion, and the fundamentalist would resent the modernist's interpretation.

"Again, it is well nigh impossible under your present plan to avoid the introduction of religious lines of distinction into the class room (and this is very important). Children would soon come to be classified according to the particular kind of religious instruction which they receive in the school; that is, instead of being classified as American children attending public schools, they will soon come to be classified as Catholic children, or Protestant children, or Jewish children. Such an accentuation of religious differences within the school cannot but prove harmful to the best interests of school unity and school morale. Evidence of unpleasant reactions among children in some of the schools of East Cleveland have already come to our attention."

Think of what it would mean in practice!

The public school has been the great melting pot of American life; the public school has been the great leveler; the public school has hitherto been the great unifying force in American life. There boys and girls met and were given the same instruction in the same class room, by the same teacher. No lines of distinction were drawn, no religious or racial discriminations were introduced. And now, in the name of religion, children in each public school and in each class room will be segregated and grouped on racial and

religious grounds. One child will attend a class marked Protestant; and another child will attend a class marked Catholic; and another child will attend a class marked Jewish; and another child will attend a class marked Christian Science, and the school will become the theologic battleground. ✓

I mention Christian Science quite deliberately. Last Sunday I read a full page advertisement in the New York Herald, written by one of the leaders in Christian Science, in which this lady says, "The holy Bible must be taught in the public schools of America and spiritually interpreted, that is, interpreted according to the doctrines and the key of Christian Science," and so on.

Now, I believe that every creed and denomination has the privilege of reserving for itself its particular interpretation of the Bible, and of teaching children, the children of those respective denominations, their particular interpretation of the Bible or of religion; but why the public schools of America should be dragooned into service to teach their religious particularisms, I fail to understand.

Religion should never be taught in the public schools of America; should never be taught within the school buildings, unless it be after school hours. If the churches feel as a last resort that they cannot get children to attend religious school on Sunday or Saturday, or after school hours during the week, and that they must ✓

have an hour a week from the school program, then a compromise may be worked out, whether on a certain given day, whether on a Monday, or a Tuesday, or a Wednesday, an hour or two hours be set aside, that children may leave the precincts of the school and go to churches, synagogues or temples to receive their religious instructions, but that no essential contact of administration, of control, be established between secular and religious education.

And you might think that I am stressing the point too much; you might think that I am anticipating trouble which in reality will never come to be. Let me tell you, men and women, that I know exactly whereof I speak. I know where religious bigotry leads, once given a chance to assert itself. When the immigration restriction bill was introduced a few years ago, and the quota idea was projected, I said then that this is the beginning of a movement to exclude Catholics and Jews from America; and people doubted my word. And now we have come to the census of 1890, and I suppose within a year or two a bill will be introduced in Congress to restrict immigration to the census of 1840 or 1820. Or perhaps to 1776! Who knows?

Eternal vigilance is the price we have to pay for our liberties; and we must be on our guard, and desperately fight this movement. Strange, is it not, that we Jews, who gave the Bible to the world, should oppose the reading of that same Bible in the public school. Is it not strange that we, who gave religion to mankind, who taught

Christians Christianity, should be opposed to the teaching of religion in the public schools? But we do it not because we are opposed to religion or the Bible, and not because we are not aware that a secular education is insufficient for the ideal life of a man or a woman; we know that no education is complete unless it is informed and inspired with a deep and abiding faith, unless it has God as the central motif; we know that no man will be able to endure the trials and the temptations of life merely by the knowledge and the instruction which he may have received in school, or high school. We know that a strong religious belief is essential for the disciplining of human life, and we know that no book of man can exercise that discipline and that control, and give that inspiration to man as the Bible can.

But we also know that instruction is in the hands of men and women, of human beings who have their likes and dislikes, their prejudices and their antipathies, and their own particular views of things, and that these prejudices and these subtle temperamental or traditional peculiarities are very difficult to be, and cannot be, controlled nor regulated; they are constantly being injected into education.

The Bible cannot be taught unless it is taught from a particular point of view, and it is this denominational form of religious instruction--for that is what it amounts to--that the Jew is opposed to. Let us

build religious schools; let us train religious teachers; let us, above all, make parents feel that religious instruction is not the prerogative of the church, that it can be relegated to one or two or three hours a week to an individual in the school; that religious instruction is as much the concern and the responsibility of the home. If your child is to be influenced morally, if he ^{or she} is to be developed into a fine type of man or woman, a real mellowing, refining and inspiriting influence must come from the home, from you. And parents cannot relegate that God-appointed task which is theirs to the church or the school, or anyone else, but they must prayerfully and humbly, and in the spirit of consecration, assume the responsibility.

If the children of this generation be Godless, it is because their parents are Godless; if the children of this generation grow up with a passion for pleasure and for excitements, and the stimulating and exhilarating, coarse pleasures of life, it is simply because they are following, quite naturally and inevitably, in the footsteps of their parents, keeping them their example; it is because their parents are pleasure-hunting, seeking daily excitement and stimulation through the coarser enjoyments of life, having failed to build up a spiritual life of cultural value, having failed to build up a home where the child may imbibe charm and grace and beauty and the kindlinesses of the humanities.

It is altogether an mistaken notion that if

the school would tomorrow introduce religious instruction for sixty minutes on a Wednesday every week, that your entire religious problem, that the entire problem of upbringing of the youth of America would be at once solved. The thing is a much more difficult problem, and the way is a much more difficult way of solving it. The home must become the sanctuary of the moral life; the portals of the home must open, so that God and all the things that are of God--truth and beauty and culture and refinement, may enter into it.

The father and mother must become the religious teachers of the child. The religious school can help, the religious school can give additional religious inspiration, can train the child, but the real training, the daily, hourly training, the thing that counts most, must be in the home.

Let us remember that when the hue and cry is raised that we must introduce the teaching of religion in the public schools to save the youth of America.

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