

America Started with Educational Freedom

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

One of the reasons why the United States of America got off to such a great start is because we had total educational freedom. When the Constitution was written, there was already by then a great variety of teaching institutions. The Dames Schools were colonial preschools in which children were taught the three R's in preparation for going on to an academy. The academy was a private school run by an educational entrepreneur. It prepared students for higher learning or a trade or profession. They were considered the most appropriate educational institution for a free people. Their responsibility was to the parents who put their children in the academy.

Home tutoring was also very common in those days. There was no such thing as "compulsory school attendance." Parents were free to provide their children with any form of education which met their needs. Children were taught to read and write in the Dames Schools, which were keenly aware that Biblical literacy was an absolute necessity in a society based on the teachings of the Bible.

In New England, laws had been passed requiring parents to educate their children. This spurred the creation of Common Schools throughout the region. Towns hired teachers to run such schools. Their main function was to prepare the students for future studies in the colleges. They were owned and operated by the local folks who usually paid the schoolmasters with commodities rather than money.

The beauty of this high degree of freedom was that education was practical, its foundation based on reality. Whatever was taught was intended to improve the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes of the students. The community's basic purpose in education was to pass on to the future generation the knowledge, wisdom, religion and morals of the previous generation. There was no such thing as religious neutrality. The United States was a Christian nation and all agreed that children should be inculcated in the tenets of Christianity. And anyone who went into the education profession knew its spiritual purposes.

But then the question arises: why did Americans give up educational freedom so early in their history when its benefits were so obvious? Believe it or not, it had nothing to do with economics or poor teaching. Literacy was very high and education was available to everyone. There were even excellent charity schools that provided education for the children of the poor. There was no need for the government to get involved in education.

But in Boston, the government did get involved in establishing the Boston Latin School, an elite school to prepare students for Harvard. It was funded by the city even though the parents of the students could easily have paid its costs. But the liberals in Boston were already looking to government to establish an elite institution separated from the church.

What happened to create this state of mind? It was the rise of the Unitarian heresy at Harvard among the descendants of the Puritans. Intellectual pride became the spearhead of religious liberalism.

The Unitarians no longer believed in the Trinity or in the divinity of Christ. If Christ was divine it was in the sense that we are all divine. But while Christ was considered a great teacher, he was not considered to be the source of salvation. The Unitarians also rejected Calvin's view of man as being innately depraved who needed to be saved by Jesus Christ. The Unitarians believed that man was basically good, and that all he needed was a good secular education to achieve moral perfectibility.

And so the Boston Unitarians launched a strong campaign to create government primary schools in which Calvinist teachings would be eliminated. They were successful because they learned how to influence the press, control the legislature, and get what they wanted.

As the public school movement grew, the orthodox were in a dilemma as to whether or not to support it. In 1849, the orthodox General Association of Massachusetts decided in favor of support with this very important stipulation. They wrote:

If after a full and faithful experiment, it should at last be seen that fidelity to the religious interests of our children forbids a further patronage of the system, we can unite with the Evangelical Christians in the establishment of private schools, in which more full doctrinal religious instruction may be possible.

There is no question that the "full and faithful experiment" has been a colossal failure, and that millions of Christian children have been spiritually harmed. While many parents have taken their children out of the public schools, and hundreds if not thousands of church schools have been founded, the vast majority of Christian parents still put their children in these anti-Christian public schools. In other words, we have still to learn the lessons of history.