



## Who Will Protect My Right NOT to Pay for Your Child’s Religious Education?

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When I was a kid back in middle school, I had a crush on this girl, let’s call her Patty.

She wasn’t the most popular or beautiful girl in class, but I kinda’ liked her.

Of course, she had no idea I was alive.

Or so I thought, until one day she walked straight up to my desk and started rubbing my hair.

I was shocked at first, but then I just closed my eyes and went with it.

I remember the soft caress of her fingers in my mop of curls. She seemed to massage every inch of my scalp. Then she asked, “Where are they?”

“Where are what?” I asked.

“Your horns,” she said. “I want to see your horns.”

“What?” I said. “I don’t have any horns.”

“Of course you do,” she said. “My pastor said all you Jews have horns but you hide them in your hair. I want to see them.”

I had never even heard that bit of anti-Semitism before Patty. But I knew when I was being ridiculed.

The laughter. The embarrassment. I think I asked to go to the bathroom and stayed until the class was over.

Why bring up such childhood trauma?

It has bearing on a case before the US Supreme Court this week – *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*.

Three women are suing the state of Montana for refusing to pay for their kids to attend religious schools through a defunct voucher program.

Backing the effort are far right figures and groups like The Cato Institute, The Council for American Private Education, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, former Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker and the Center for Education Reform – all of which have filed Amici Curiae briefs arguing that prohibiting religious schools from getting public money is somehow a violation of the First Amendment.

If successful, the case would open the door to publicly-funded private religious education across the country – not to mention siphoning much-needed money away from the public schools.

It's bad enough that kids learn prejudicial lies from the pulpit and parochial schools. It's worse if the victims of such prejudice have to pay for their tormentors to be thus indoctrinated.

In the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom of 1779*, Thomas Jefferson wrote “to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical . . .”

I agree. That is sinful and tyrannical. Especially if those abhorrent beliefs lead to actions detrimental to the health and well-being of those being forced to pay for just such ignorance to be renewed in yet another generation.

The incident with Patty wasn't the first or last time I suffered through religious persecution. I went to public school but the worst torment usually came from kids who had a year or two of parochial education.

For example, I can't tell you how many times classmates asked me why I killed Jesus.

Now I'm a middle school teacher, myself.

I do my best to foster understanding and acceptance of all peoples no matter their race, gender, orientation or creed.

That doesn't mean I squash religious discussion or opinions, either.

Kids are allowed to think and say what they choose. If they want to pray or express a religious belief, that's fine so long as they don't hurt others.

Though radical right ideologues decry the loss of religion in public schools, all that really means is that the adults don't get to express their theologies. The kids have never been thus encumbered.

Even so, religious ignorance is never far away.

Every year before I teach “The Diary of Anne Frank” I go over the history of the Holocaust.

At least one student always raises his or her hand and asks if Hitler was Jewish.

I patiently explain that he wasn't, but they insist that he must have been. After all, Father Such-And-Such said it, so it must be true.

And this is the kind of nonsense that is often taught as fact at parochial schools.

Private religious institutions are infamous for revisionist history and denying climate science. What's less well-known is how they often try to normalize racist attitudes.

The American Christian Education (ACE) organization provides fundamentalist school curriculum to thousands of religious schools throughout the country. Included in this curriculum is the A Beka Book and Bob Jones University Press textbooks. A Beka publishers, in particular, reported that about 9,000 schools nationwide purchase their textbooks.

In their pages you'll find glowing descriptions of the Ku Klux Klan, how the massacre of Native Americans saved many souls, African slaves had really good lives, homosexuals are no better than rapists and child molesters, and progressive attempts at equal rights such as Brown vs. Board of Education were illegal and misguided. You know – all the greatest Donald Trump campaign hits!

Today these claims are uncritically being taught to children at schools receiving school vouchers. We're using public money to increase the racism and prejudice in the next generation.

In any sane country, a case like *Espinoza* would be about stopping such nonsense! But the plaintiffs and their billionaire backers actually want to **EXPAND IT!**

The goal is to destroy facts and promote ignorance. That requires the destruction of public schools.

Kyle Olson said as much in a 2018 op-ed for National School Choice Week – a bit of propaganda he helped create in 2011 through his lobbying firm, the Education Action Group. In fact, he credited Jesus, himself, with anti-public school venom.

Olson wrote:

“I would like to think that, yes, Jesus would destroy the public education temple and save the children from despair and a hopeless future.”

These are the folks complaining that public tax dollars aren't being allowed to fund parochial schools everywhere and where they are allowed to bankroll such schools they aren't being allowed to do so enough.

Technically, the First Amendment doesn't allow the government to support religious schools.

But the *Espinoza* crowd think that laundering the money through Tax Credit Scholarships somehow makes it all okay. A business or rich donor hands money to families to send their kids to private schools. Except that money makes a stop at a “scholarship” organization first, and the donors get to deduct their contributions from their taxes. Blogger Peter Greene tells us to think of it like this:

“I’m the state, and you owe me \$100. I am not allowed to gamble, but if you give that \$100 to my bookie instead, I’ll consider us square.”

It’s a shell game that pretends spending tax money before it gets deposited in the government’s account frees our public servants from following the rules.

I don’t care where it’s been, that’s my money as good as if you took it from my wallet because it’s money owed to me and every other taxpayer. That money is owed to the public good, not some ideologue’s Sunday school project, and its absence means I have to pay more to fund things we all need like police, firefighters, public transportation, and public schools.

They’re right about one thing. This is an issue of religious freedom, but it’s not about their freedom. It’s about *MY* freedom not to support their beliefs.

I say – let them believe what they will. It’s their choice, and they have the right to subject their children to it if they want.

But leave me out of it.

Don’t expect me to foot the bill.

I’m rightly compelled to pay for public education because it benefits everyone. It creates an educated populace capable of keeping the lights on. It creates people who know enough about the world that they can make knowledgeable decisions and vote for good leaders.

But parochial schools are exclusionary by design. Spreading their ignorance does not benefit society. It hurts it.

We talk a lot about the First Amendment, but we seem to forget what it actually says:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;”

That should be our guiding principle – religious freedom.

Let people practice their faiths however they see fit.

But respect my freedom from religion as much as I respect your freedom of it.