

# On Secular Education

R.L. DABNEY

Edited for the modern reader  
by Douglas Wilson

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The education of children for God is the most important business done on earth. It is the one business for which the earth exists. To it all politics, all war, all literature, all money-making, ought to be subordinated; and every parent especially ought to feel, every hour of the day, that, next to making his own calling and election sure, this is the end for which he is kept alive by God—this is his task on earth.

R.L. Dabney



## Editor's Foreword

Some years ago I was introduced to the writing of R.L. Dabney. In his "secular" writing I was struck by what can only be called his prophetic insight. Although he was embroiled in the controversies of the last century, it is very clear that he understood the fundamental principles involved. Because he was a principled thinker, he was able to see where America was headed. The years have proven him right on many things.

Because of the value of his insights, I thought it would be profitable to present some of his work to the modern Christian public. This booklet will prove especially helpful to those Christians who are involved in education, whether in private schools, or home schools. I have taken the liberty of editing this essay for the modern reader, and I trust that I have done so without taking liberties with the meaning of it.

Some may find Dabney's polemic against Catholic education distasteful, and may wonder why I retained it. There are two reasons. The first is that the question of Catholic education is so wound up with his argument, that it would not be possible to remove it without doing considerable violence to the essay. The second reason is that I believe Roman Catholicism today is a greater threat than when Dabney wrote these words, and there is therefore no need to remove his warnings. Those who are struck by his insight on the nature of "secular education" should perhaps consider that his position on the threat of Catholicism has some weight.

This is not to say that I agree with everything in the essay. For example, I am not quite as optimistic as he appears to be concerning "natural law" as the basis of civil government. Nevertheless, the insights he puts forth are well worth our study, particularly when we consider the time he wrote. We stand in the midst of the ruins of a once proud public educational

system, and many Christians *still* do not see what Dabney saw in the last century. I trust that God will use his thoughts once again, and I pray that, among Christians, he will receive a better hearing than he did the first time.

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## On Secular Education

Who should control education, and what is a proper education? The two questions are interdependent.

In history, two answers have been proposed to the first question—the State, and the Church. In Europe, liberalism has insisted on the State, and seeks to secularize education. Through this it means to wrest education from the control of Catholicism. Liberals see clearly that under Catholic control there will be no true freedom in education. But, as they also insist on secularizing the State, their idea of a free education is of one devoid of religion. They separate mental from spiritual culture. Thus they conclude that education must be godless in order to be free.

The Catholic Church has herself to blame for this—she claims that she alone is Christian. Independent minds reply, “Well, then Christianity is evil.” If Catholic education were the only Christian education possible, freemen would have to reject Christian education. Consider: If individual judgment is sin; if the teacher is a real priest; if his teaching is infallible; if the real end of culture is to enslave the soul to a priesthood with a foreign head; if that head is absolutely superior to secular authorities, education based on these tenets will bring about civil slavery. It is not strange that men seeking civil liberty spurn it.

The mistake lies in confusing church education with *Christian* education. Let the Scripture be heard: “The kingdom of God is within you.” It consists, not in a greedy hierarchy, but in the rule of truth. The clergy are not to be lords over God’s people, but only “ministers by whom we believe.”

The church has no penalties other than spiritual penalties. It touches no man’s civil rights. Its only other function is to teach, and its teaching only binds so far as the layman’s own conscience responds to the Word of God as it is declared.

Now it is the church's duty to instruct parents how God would have them rear their children, and enforce the duty by spiritual sanctions; but there its official power ends. It does not usurp *the doing* of the important task it instructs the parents to do.

As a Christian private man, the minister lends to other parents his knowledge and example to help them in their work. But all this constitutes no danger either to spiritual or religious liberty.

So it would be good for the modern liberal to pause and ask whether he secures anything by this transfer of educational responsibility from the Church to the State? Does he point to the results of Catholic teaching? There we do see a spurious and shallow scholarship, along with an enslaved and morbid conscience, which dares not even wish to break its fetters. There is also the insatiable greed of the hierarchy for influence and money. The picture is sufficiently repulsive.

But are only Catholic churchmen grasping? Are not all humans depraved? Isn't it essentially the same in all men? Then why are we surprised when churchmen act in a similar way to other men, when subjected to the same temptations? The modern liberal should be the last man to overlook this truth; he is already skeptical of all professions of spiritual principles in clergymen. He is already prone to ascribe secular motives. He should therefore be consistent, and expect the demagogue to show a misguided ambition exactly like the priests. What is the churchman but a ghostly demagogue? The demagogue is but the priest at the altar of Money.

Does not the liberal pervert that other educating agency, the press, just as violently as the Jesuit does the school? If he comes to control the State, and the State assumes responsibility for education, there is therefore a great risk that the education of youth will be perverted to serve an ideological faction. This will