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March 6, 1987

87-32

N-BJC

Federal Judge Bans
'Secular Humanist' Texts

By Stan Haste

WASHINGTON (BP)--A federal judge has banned 37 American history, social studies and home economics textbooks from Alabama schools on grounds they teach the religion of "secular humanism" in violation of the First Amendment.

In a 111-page opinion issued March 4, Judge W.B. Hand of the U.S. District Court for Southern Alabama sided with more than 600 plaintiffs in Mobile, Ala. -- including parents and schoolteachers -- who claimed the challenged books ignore Christianity and other faiths while teaching anti-Christian, humanistic values. The decision, which is expected to be challenged in the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, applies only to Alabama schools.

The bitterly contested case, which divided the religious community of Mobile to the point that some plaintiffs and defendants belonged to the same congregations, dates to the 1982 challenge of an Alabama law that mandated the observance of silent prayer in the state's public schools. Ishmael Jaffree, a self-described agnostic and parent of two children enrolled in Mobile schools, challenged the silent prayer statute as an unconstitutional establishment of religion.

Judge Hand ruled against Jaffree in January 1983 in a celebrated opinion that included the assertion the First Amendment does not apply to the states and that Alabama could, if it chose, establish a state religion. On appeal, however, the 11th Circuit reversed Hand's decision. In June 1985, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the reversal.

In his March 4 opinion banning the challenged textbooks, Hand said he had reserved the right in the earlier decision to reopen the record to determine if secular humanism was being taught in Alabama schools in the event higher courts did not sustain his ruling in the Jaffree case.

Saying he had been "overwhelmed by the volume" of testimony proving the presence of secular humanism in the textbooks during the second trial -- conducted over a 12-day period last October -- Hand cited the lasting influence of a number of humanist educators over the last half century. Primary among these, he wrote, was the noted humanist John Dewey.

Hand said he agreed with the assessments of some "expert" witnesses during the trial that the general condition of American public education is "abominable" and that primary and secondary schools are in a "mess."

He described the textbooks banned in his ruling as "deplorable," particularly American history volumes that "discriminate against the very concept of religion, and theistic religions in particular, by omissions so serious that a student learning history from them would not be apprised of relevant facts about America's history."

The banished series of social studies texts, he said, "relegates religion to other cultures, other times and other places," while the challenged home economics books advocate "humanistic psychology."

Hand ruled that taken together, the books amounted to an unconstitutional establishment of secular humanism as the approved religion of the state and a denial of the free exercise rights of parents who claimed their own religious values were denigrated or ignored.

"Secular humanism is religion for First Amendment purposes because it makes statements based on faith-assumptions," he ruled, adding: "A statement that there is no transcendent or supernatural reality is a religious statement."

Secular humanism is a religion, he wrote further, because it has texts considered sacred -- the much-publicized Humanist Manifestos I and II and the Secular Humanist Declaration. It maintains an institutional structure in the form of such organizations as the American Humanist Association, the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism and the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, and through such publications as Free Inquiry, The Humanist and Progressive World.

"The most important belief of this religion is its denial of the transcendent and/or supernatural: there is no God, no creator, no divinity," Hand concluded.

He also criticized textbook publishers, saying they "are more concerned with their pocket book than anything else."

As for the parents who brought the challenge, Hand said their case did not "represent an attempt of narrow-minded or fanatical pro-religionists to force a public school system to teach only those opinions and facts they find digestible." Furthermore, theirs was not "an attempt by anyone to censor materials deemed undesirable, improper or immoral," he wrote. What the parents sought instead, he concluded, was "objective education, not partisan indoctrination."

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Church Closes Doors,
Continues Ministry

F - (CO)
(La.)
By Gary W. Griffith

Baptist Press
3/6/87

SHREVEPORT, La. (BP)—Members of Cherokee Park Baptist sang "Blessed Be the Tie" and closed their doors for the last time this winter but by thoughtful planning, their ministry continues.

The Shreveport, La., church entered Project for Assistance to Churches in Transition (PACT) last July, reported Pastor James Sermons. The program is a Southern Baptist Home Mission Board plan for assisting churches facing transitional communities.

After six months of work and legal counsel, a church committee presented a dissolution plan to the 20 members who still attended the church, Sermons said.

Through the committee's plan, the church will continue to minister to many people for years to come, he added.

After the sale of church property and payment of all debts and expenses, church assets will be given to Northwest Louisiana Baptist Association.

Although not a legal obligation, the church asked that \$270,000 be used to build a worship/activities center at Camp Bethany in Bethany. The church requested the center be named, "Cherokee Park Activities Center."

From the remaining funds, Cherokee Park asked that 24 percent go to help sponsor Mid-City Baptist Church in Shreveport to aid its ministry in the Cherokee Park area; 24 percent be given to the Louisiana Baptist Children's Home in Monroe; 12 percent be given to the state Cooperative Program; and remaining funds to go to the Northwest Louisiana Baptist Association Mission Development Fund to help maintain missions in northern Shreveport. All church equipment, furniture and supplies will be donated to mission causes or sold with proceeds to go to the association.

Trinity Heights Baptist Church in Shreveport will receive the Cherokee Park records, issue membership letters, assume the homebound ministry and attempt to reach church members for individual membership.

Explaining reasons for dissolution, Sermons said, in the early 1970s an integration line was redrawn in northwestern Shreveport, forcing all area high school students to attend an all-black school in another district.

Cherokee Park had averaged about 250 to 300 people in attendance in the 1960s, "but when that change came they began to move out," Sermons said. "If taken the wrong way, it would sound as if it were a racial problem or prejudice. It really wasn't. There are very few people who want to send their children where they are in a great minority whether they be black or white."

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The Cherokee Park community now is 80 percent black, he said: "Of the whites left in the community, 90 percent are the older retired people with no children ... the church cannot grow without children." He added the majority of church members are past age 60.

The church tried to encourage membership of blacks, Sermons continued: "Blacks have come and been made welcome. We visited them, but they all told us the same thing: 'We sure did feel welcome and we appreciated that, but it was so quiet.'

"I don't blame them for not wanting to change their worship, and I don't blame our congregation for not wanting to change theirs."

Sermons also said church location was a factor. "This is a very isolated community which is surrounded by industrial businesses, a river and an airport. You have to cross some kind of body of water or expanded industrial, downtown area to get to other residential areas. That limited our outreach."

Sermons said he feels the church followed "the best avenue of stewardship of God's resources" through the dissolution decision.

Church members saw the need for a worship center at Camp Bethany as "a way to live continually on," Sermons noted. "The church has always been interested in youth and youth activities, so its an expanded ministry that's much greater than what we have ever done here."

The church also wanted to provide funds for ministry to the Cherokee Park community through the Mid-City Baptist Church, a mission sponsored by Summer Grove Baptist Church in Shreveport and the first black Southern Baptist mission in the northwest part of the state, said Sermons. "They have been reaching black people we couldn't," he related.

With the dissolution, Sermons ends a four-year pastorate at Cherokee Park, but he is not saddened by the church's decision: "I'm excited about it. This is pioneer work. Only about 3 percent (of the churches who work through PACT) come up with the decision we made."

Most often churches focus on themselves instead of looking out to see what they can accomplish through dissolution, Sermons said: "Then when there is nothing left, they have to yield to the association or some other church help. We were determined not to do that."

Sermons isn't concerned about the loss of this pastorate. "The possibility of going somewhere at age 63 was not too promising. But that hasn't bothered me. ... The Lord has never let me down — never will."

Because of the planning and action Cherokee Park has taken, Sermons said: "We will be able to do so much more in the closing of the church than we ever did otherwise. We're not closing a single avenue of ministry. ... Everything we have been doing is being covered even in a better way than what we have been able to do with our small congregation."

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(Griffith is newswriter for the Baptist Message, newsjournal of the Louisiana Baptist Convention.)

Education Secretary Backs
Modified Voucher Proposal

By Kathy Palen

Baptist Press
3/6/87

WASHINGTON (BP)—Acknowledging congressional opposition to his original education voucher proposal, Secretary of Education William J. Bennett appeared before a Senate subcommittee to urge consideration of a new "limited voucher" plan.

The use of "Compensatory Education Certificates" (CECs) is an option called for by the Reagan Administration's proposal for reauthorization of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981, which is due for congressional action. Through the two chapters of that statute, the federal government provides funds to meet special educational needs of economically and educationally disadvantaged children and to improve the overall quality of elementary and secondary education.

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In November 1985, Bennett introduced a voucher proposal that would have allowed parents of disadvantaged children to obtain vouchers that could be "spent" at the public or private school of the parents' choosing for special compensatory services, general tuition or a combination of the two. Under current Chapter 1 guidelines, federal funds go to public schools providing compensatory services for eligible children.

Bennett told the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities the new proposal would allow state and local education agencies to decide whether to use CECs, emphasizing the certificates "would not be available to parents on demand."

The secretary said the modified vouchers could be redeemed for compensatory services only, not for general tuition.

In addition to increasing parental choice by allowing parents who receive CECs to determine at which school they would redeem the certificates, the new proposal also would "remedy discrepancies in assistance to disadvantaged private school children caused by the Supreme Court's Felton decision," Bennett said.

In that decision, the Supreme Court held unconstitutional New York City's program of sending public school employees into private schools to provide specialized services under Chapter 1. Since the decision was handed down in 1985, Bennett repeatedly has vowed to find a way around it.

Bennett testified the number of private schoolchildren participating in Chapter 1 has declined by about 20 percent since the Felton decision and the cost of serving those students has increased significantly.

"Our proposal would help restore services to private school children by enabling school districts to issue Compensatory Education Certificates and by requiring state education agencies to step in and correct deficiencies in local districts that do not provide effective and equitable services to private school children," Bennett said.

When questioned as to the constitutionality of using federal funds to purchase services from private -- including church-related -- schools, Bennett said there would be no entanglement problem since private schoolteachers, not public schoolteachers, would be providing the services within the private schools.

Although addressing the constraints imposed by the Felton decision, another reauthorization bill -- sponsored by Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., -- does not include any provision for vouchers. Pell, who chairs the education subcommittee, said he intends for his proposed legislation to "serve as the vehicle for reauthorization."

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U.S. Infant Mortality Rate Worst
Among Top 20 Industrial Nations

By Tim Fields

Baptist Press
3/6/87

WASHINGTON (BP)--A national study on infant mortality rates shows that the United States has slipped to last place among 20 industrialized nations, including almost every Western European country, Japan, Canada and Hong Kong.

According to the study by the Children's Defense Fund, a pro-children's advocacy organization, almost 11 children out of every 1,000 born in the United States die before their first birthday.

While Japan has improved its infant mortality rate from 51 out of every 1,000 births in the period of 1950-55 to only six by 1980-1985, the United States has lowered its rate in the same time period from 28 to 11. Other countries with lower rates than the United States include the United Kingdom, 10; Canada, 9; France, 9; and Sweden, 7.

Figures on the United States show that nine of the 10 states with the highest infant mortality rate were located in the South: South Carolina, 14.7; Mississippi, 14.4; Alabama, 12.9; Georgia, 12.9; North Carolina, 12.4; Virginia, 12.1; Louisiana, 12.1; and Tennessee, 11.8. Other southern states with high rates include Kentucky, 11.5; Arkansas, 10.9; Florida, 10.8; Oklahoma, 10.8; and Texas, 10.5.

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Furthermore, black infants are almost twice as likely to die as white infants. The report puts the status of black infants in stark terms: "A black infant born within five miles of the White House in our nation's capital is more likely to die in the first year of life than an infant born in Third World countries like Trinidad and Tobago or Costa Rica."

Robert Parham, director of hunger concerns for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, pointed out these figures indicate America's children are not high enough on the nation's agenda for anti-poverty and healthcare programs.

"The infant mortality rate is linked to low birth weight which often stems from malnutrition," Parham said. "Low birth weight, in turn, contributes to a host of problems, including mental retardation, blindness, hearing impairments and learning disabilities. If we invest an ounce of prevention in the next generation of Americans, it will yield us a pound of cure down the line."

In addition to reducing human and financial cost, Parham noted Christian morality calls for care of the weakest members of society -- children and poor women. "Christian charity and citizenship must work in harness to help solve low birth weight problems and further lower the nation's infant mortality rate," he concluded.

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Missionary Escapes Injury
During Robbery In Uganda

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Baptist Press
3/6/87

KAMPALA, Uganda (BP)--Southern Baptist missionary Sharon Pumpelly narrowly escaped a bullet wound in mid-February when she and her husband, Larry, were robbed inside their home.

The Pumpellys were saying a late-evening goodbye to visiting neighbors at the security gate to the fence around their home when five robbers approached and forced them back inside the house. The robbers took Pumpelly's watch and all of the electronic equipment in the house.

The one shot fired during the robbery ricocheted off the floor and whizzed by Mrs. Pumpelly, smashing the sliding glass door directly behind her, according to John Faulkner, the Foreign Mission Board's associate director for mission work in eastern Africa.

The next night the Pumpellys slept in their hallway during a gun battle behind their house. They believe police set up a trap to catch the robbers but ran into a skirmish with a group rebellious to government forces, Faulkner said. To their knowledge, no suspect was apprehended.

Pumpelly lost a new van, his briefcase and a watch in front of their home in January when three robbers approached him with guns. Pumpelly also has been involved in a third robbery in Uganda since he and his family arrived there more than four years ago.

Pumpelly, a student worker in Kampala, is from Newark, Ohio. His wife is from Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. They have two children.

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CORRECTION: In 3/4/87 article titled "Easter Sunday Will Bring New Life To Church Destroyed By Tornado," in eighth graf, please change First Baptist Church of Hathaway to First Baptist Church of Halfway.

Thanks,
Baptist Press