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Between a Righteous Citizenship and the Unfaith of the Family: The History of Released Time Religious Education in the United States

By

Remalian M. Cocar

Doctor of Philosophy

History

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Abstract

Between a Righteous Citizenship and the Unfaith of the Family: The History of Released-Time Religious Education in the United States

By Remalian M. Cocar

This dissertation seeks to understand an important program of religious instruction called released time education. During their school day, public school students with parental permission took religious classes. This happened as they were released from the care of the public school for one hour. Released time began in Gary, Indiana in 1913. By the 1940s, it was estimated that over two million students in the United States participated in released time education.

The main force behind released time education was a group of Mainline Protestants who were concerned with the prospects of young people receiving religious beliefs from Sunday School, their parents, or public schools. This study uncovers the commitment to released time education that most Mainline Protestants had well into the early 1950s. Although by the early 1960s Mainline Protestants would change course and drop their support for any type of religion within the public schools, they remained ardent and steadfast supporters of released-time education well into the mid-1950s. Catholics also joined in the program. In many cities, they provided a separate class for Catholic students. This was one of the first times in American history where Protestants and Catholics cooperated together.

The opposition to released time coalesced in the 1940s and resulted in two major Supreme Court cases. Major groups that opposed released time were the American Civil Liberties Union, the Baptist Joint Committee, and Jewish-American groups. In *McCollum v. Illinois* (1948), the Supreme Court ruled that released time was unconstitutional. But, in *Zorach v. Clauson* (1952), the Supreme Court reversed itself claiming that the earlier *McCollum* decision only meant that released time education could not take place in public school buildings. This project tries to make sense of these seemingly contradictory decisions. A large part of the sea change both in Protestant sentiment and in the Supreme Court decisions seemed to have been caused by anti-Catholicism. These decisions were also part of a larger shift in First Amendment jurisprudence that would lead to the elimination of school prayer by 1962, in *Engel v. Vitale*.

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