PS for 7/5//90

Parents Strike Back Against New Age

Finally, parents are starting to have some success in their efforts to eliminate New Age religious practices from the public school classroom. A strong policy prohibiting the use of these techniques in public schools was passed in June by the Mountain Brook Board of Education in Birmingham, Alabama.

The policy specifically prohibits the following four practices. First is Progressive Relaxation, defined as the "serial relaxation of the major muscles of the body." This type of relaxation is brough about by a narrator's directions and involves a process of first tensing and then relaxing major muscle groups in a prescribed order.

The second prohibited practice is Guided Imagery. This involves "the use of images communicated to the listener by narration while he or she is in a deeply relaxed state, hypnotic state, or altered state of consciousness."

Third, the policy prohibits the classroom technique of Deep Breathing. The policy notes that this is sometimes used as a classroom exercise to accompany imagery, as, for example, "visualizing tension going out and relaxation going in."

The fourth prohibited practice is Meditation. This is defined as "any activity which involves repeated exposures to any sensory stimuli, including words, or sounds, for the purpose of inducing a relaxed or altered mental state."

Why in the world would any school board think it necessary to adopt such a policy? It never would occur to most people that schools might be teaching hypnosis or imagery instead of reading, writing, and 'rithmetic.

Obviously, there must have been a reason for such a detailed policy to be suddenly adopted. And, indeed, the board's statement conceded that these practices "have occasionally been taught or recommended" in the schools.

These practices are objectionable because they "may be interpreted as religious activities and should therefore be subject to Board policies which prohibit the practice of religion in the school." One need only to refer to current New Age literature to document that statement. According to the new policy, "student in the Mountain Brook Schools should not be requested, encouraged, or invited to

participate in techniques such as progressive relaxation, guided meditation, deep breathing, meditation, or any similar or related activity."

The Mountain Brook School Board policy is believed to be a "first" in proscribing New Age practices. It was adopted on June 10 as a result of parental complaints that such practices had been used in the curriculum called Pumsey, one of the psychological and self-esteem programs which have become so trendy in the classroom.

Pumsey is only one of many curricula which incorporates New Age techniques. Another is DUSO, which arouse so much concern in New Mexico that the State Senate passed a resolution demanding that "mind-altering psychological techniques be entirely eliminated in New Mexico's public schools."

The four-age Mountain Brook policy is entitled "Teaching About Religion," and the first part puts in constitutional perspective the whole subject of religion in the public schools. Public schools may teach "about" religion to "inform" the student, but may not try to get the student to "conform," or subject him to "indoctrination," or press for "acceptance" of any religion.

This policy is noteworthy for its friendliness to parental rights. It states that "this school system wishes to remain sensitive to the concerns and suggestions of parents regarding religious issues… since parents have the primary responsibility for directing the education of their children consistent with their religious convictions."

The policy adds, "the Board of Education believes that parents should be kept informed on the content of elementary counseling programs and 7th, 8th, and 9th grade health programs."

In many parts of the country, parents have found schools very hostile to parents' First Amendment objections to the use of New Age practices. Some schools have forced such practices on school children despite parental objections, usually before parents are even informed.

Much of the current hostility to this type of arrogance could be eliminated if public schools would adopt the Mountain Brook policy, particularly the passage that reads: "It is the Board's policy that no student shall be required or persuaded to participate in any activity that the student (or his or her parent or guardian) perceives to be in conflict with her or her moral, ethical, or religious beliefs."