

The Changing Scene and the Unchanging Word

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"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever."—Isa. 40:8.

What Is Wrong with "Teacher-Oath" Bills?



Dr. Machen

ACORRESPONDENT has asked for an explanation of my position, which I have expressed in letters published in daily newspapers, regarding the laws requiring teachers to take oaths of various kinds pledging their loyalty to the civil government. The matter is of such importance that I have thought it might be well to place my answer before all the readers of THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN.

Right at the start I desire to say plainly that these "teacher-oath" bills seem to me to strike straight against the roots of civil and religious liberty, and that they ought to be opposed with might and main.

They are of various forms, with varying degrees of oppressiveness. In Ohio, the law (as quoted in "Oaths of Loyalty for Teachers" by Henry R. Linville, published by American Federation of Teachers) requires teachers even in private schools and church schools to swear that they "will teach, by precept and example, respect for the flag, reverence for law and order and undivided allegiance to the government of one country, the United States of America." If such a law were passed in Pennsylvania, then I, who am Professor of New Testament in Westminster Theological Seminary, would be required to establish a course or a part of a course on American government.

You may say that that is preposterous. Well, it is preposterous, but just that is what the law says. By its positive requirement it plainly seeks to interfere with the curriculum of teachers in private schools and colleges and universities, telling them what they are to teach.

But all of these laws are wrong in principle; and principle is vastly more

important than practice, because from principle future practice comes.

What is the wrong principle that underlies these laws? That question can be answered very simply. It is the principle that teachers are government officials and as government officials must take an oath of office under the state.

I know that many of these laws apply only to teachers in public schools; and it may well be argued that teachers in public schools, whether we like it or not, are state officials, and must be treated as such.

But the trouble is that some of these laws apply to private schools as well as to state schools, and the purpose of those who advocate them seems very clearly to be to make all of them apply to private schools.

When that is done, private teachers become state officials, and like other state officials must take an "oath of office."

Well, just let us look at what is involved in that. Let us just take a humble example—the example of the writer of this column.

I am a teacher in a theological seminary. I am there because I am a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. I derive my authority to teach from the Word of God. I have promised to teach what the Bible tells me to teach.

But then, if Pennsylvania passes one of these "teacher-oath" bills, some state official lays his hand on my shoulder and says to me: "Are you a teacher in Westminster Theological Seminary? Well, have you taken your oath before the state authorities? Have you the certificate that you have taken your oath? Have you, in other words, in your possession your state license as a teacher? Otherwise you, or those instrumental in employing you, are subject to fine and imprisonment. You cannot teach what the Bible contains until you satisfy the state requirements and obtain a state license."

Yes, my friends, that is exactly what these laws mean. They mean the establishment of a system of state li-

censing for teachers. The abominable "Lusk laws," which were passed in the State of New York some twelve years ago and then were repealed through the efforts of Governor Alfred E. Smith, established such a system even in form. They placed even private tutors under state supervision and control. But these "teacher-oath" bills establish the same system in principle.

Is the work of teaching what the Bible contains a *right* which I possess as a citizen of a free country, or is it a *privilege* which I may obtain if I can show some state official that I am worthy to receive a license at his hands? That is the question which is involved in these "teacher-oath" bills. A more momentous question it would be difficult to conceive.

If that question is answered as the advocates of these bills would have it answered, if there is thus established the principle that teachers even in private schools and church schools are state officials, then the distinction is blotted out between the activities of the state and the other activities of the citizens. In other words, the principle of the totalitarian state is established with a vengeance. That is exactly what Hitler has done in Germany. It is opposed to the very roots of American liberty.

The strange thing is that these "teacher-oath" bills are advocated as though they were in the interests of the Constitution of the United States and in the interests of patriotism. They purport to be directed against communists who insult the American flag.

But who are the persons who most deeply insult the American flag? I will tell you who they are. They are the persons who seek to inculcate a love of the American flag by force. Those persons are insulting the flag much more seriously than it is being insulted by any communist in Union Square. They are trampling upon those great principles of liberty for which the American flag formerly stood and for which we ought to pray that it may continue to stand.