The Norwegian School Controversy: Unfinished Business

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It is one of the curiosities of American Lutheranism that there are almost no parochial grade schools to be found among Norwegian Lutherans. That qualifies as a curiosity because Norwegian Lutherans in this country made a big investment in secondary and higher parochial education. St. Olaf's, Luther College, and Augsburg Seminary are only the most well-known schools founded by Norwegian Lutherans. You could add a fairly long list of high schools, acadamies, colleges and seminaries which were also started by Norwegian Lutherans. It is peculiar that these people, who generally put a high value on parochial education, never really established parochial schools on the elementary level.

The story behind this curiosity is the story of the Common School Controversy. The controversy ran during the second half of the 19th century when Norwegian Lutherans debated whether they should establish full-time parochial schools to teach all subjects, or send their children to public schools and provide for their religious education with part-time church schools. One side in the debate said that full-time parochial schools were necessary to the work of the church and without them the church would inevitably suffer. The other side believed that the Lutheran church could get along without these schools and claimed that all citizens should support public education not only with tax dollars, but also by sending their children to public schools.

Strictly speaking, this was a controversy of the Norwegian Synod. But it was not restricted to that group alone. It would be a mistake to generalize and say that all Norwegian Lutherans were caught up in the school controversy, but it would be equally wrong to restrict the issue

only to the Norwegian Synod. Much of the debate on the issue was carried in Norwegian-American newspapers such as Scandinaven and Emigranten which circulated to a general Norwegian audience. That kind of publicity and also the very nature of the question made it a matter of general interest which went beyond synod boundaries.

The formal controversy in the Norwegian Synod ran from 1866-1880. It was one of three controversies which came up in rapid succession, the School Controversy falling immediately after the Slavery Controversy and before the Election Controversy. The general question at issue, however, was alive before and after the 1866-1880 time slot. Two events interrupted debate of the school question: the Civil War and the Election Controversy. Those two breaks divide the debate into three convenient periods: the pre-Civil War debate, the formal controversy (1866-1880), and the post-Election debate. The fact that the school question was not forgotten in spite of two major interruptions is clear enough proof that this was no trifling thing in the Norwegian community.

One of the particularly striking features of the controversy is that it was never formally settled. That little piece of history stands out, because the common practice among Norwegian Lutherans has been very uniform. Throughout the years, full-time parochial schools have always been virtually unknown among them. You would expect something different. You would expect that where an issue remains unsettled so that opinions are still divided, practice would also remain divided. That's what makes this controversy so unusual. There was never an agreement on the school issue, but there has always been almost complete agreement in practice. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever attached any significance to the fact that the controversy remained unresolved. I think the most significant thing about the Common School Controversy is that it was

never settled. It suggests two things: 1) There were cogent reasons why the controversy could not be settled in the early days. 2) Because there was never a settlement in spite of the fact that the issue itself never really died, it is fair to say that the controversy amounted to a decision by default against full-time parochial grade schools.

Pre-Civil War Debate

Norwegian immigration to this country started in earnest about 1840. The majority of the immigrants settled in a four state area comprised of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and northern Illinois. (My study deals only with this area, though I have no reason to believe that attitudes were different in other areas.) The attitudes these people brought with them had a lot to do with the start of the controversy.

Generally there were two reasons why Norwegians came to America. One was to improve their social status and make more money. The other was to find religious freedom. Of the two, making more money was the most important. As always there were exceptions, but they were just that--exceptions. Both American and Norwegian writers are quite agreed that the move to America was primarily an economic decision.

This certainly played a part in the school controversy. When full-time parochial schools were proposed, it obviously meant an added burden to the congregational treasury. For people who had hopes of becoming wealthier and now were perhaps having more financial trouble than expected, added expenses were the last thing they wanted. It wasn't necessarily the school itself that they were against, just the idea of paying for it. In Norway the school system was basically parochial. The Lutheran church was the state church, and the state ran its schools through the church.

Living within a parish made you a nominal member of the local church and entitled you to go to the church school. Naturally the church ran its schools not just as an arm of the state, but also to further its own interests.[1] Clearly, the idea of parochial schools was not foreign to Norwegian settlers. The idea of paying for them, however, was another matter. Throughout the controversy, finances remained one of the very biggest obstacles to parochial grade schools.

Even though religious freedom was not the number one reason for immigrating to Ammerica, it was still a reason for some people. What is interesting is the idea of religious freedom which they had. Those who left Norway for religious reasons generally were not leaving one religion to join or start another. The state church in Norway was the Lutheran church, and in America most Norwegians remained Lutheran. There was no mass conversion to a different denomination. The religious freedom which the immigrants were after was freedom from what they considered the domineering ways of the church in Norway. They were looking for a church that would not exert so much influence on their lives.

This too played a part in the school controversy. When proposals to start full-time parochial schools were broached in congregational meetings, it raised suspicions. Those who remembered the church schools in Norway feared that this was just the first step in starting a new church hierarchy, which in their minds would inevitably turn out like the one they had just left. What was more, the promise of free public education without church influence was one of the things that lured some Norwegians to America in the first place. During the winter of 1837-38, Ole Rynning sent his True Account of America back to Norway. He gave this description of

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[1]Walter Beck, Lutheran Elementary Schools in the United States (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), pp.136-137.

American education:

> Public education is, indeed, within the reach of all...The American realizes very well what an advantage the educated man has over the ignorant, and he spares nothing in the instruction and education of his children.[2]

That may have been an overly glowing description, especially for the time it was written, but it planted an idea in the minds of some emigrants which was hard to shake. Some people even felt that public schools could serve them better than parochial school systems.[3]

The almost unavoidable impression you get of the Norwegian immigrant is that he was preoccupied with the idea of freedom. A strong sense of independence seems to be part of the image which Norwegians had of themselves. It is not uncommon for Norwegian writers to describe their people as free spirits. The move to America would only have reinforced that self-image. Moving in itself was a bold excercise of personal freedom. By coming to America, the immigrant not only changed his place of residence, he also changed his citizenship. He became part of a country which billed itself "the land of the free." Preoccupation with freedom had an important effect on Norwegian-American thinking. Largely because of what they had seen in Norway, the immigrants in America continued to think of the church as something that threatened their freedom. This supposed threat was not always raised as an argument against parochial grade schools, but in the minds of many people it probably had just as much effect as any other argument.

Beside the attitudes which they brought with them, Norwegians also

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[2]Taken from a set of notes titled "The Common School Controversy," which was prepared by Rev. Paul Hasvold for the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa.

[3]Walter Beck, op. cit., p. 141.

picked up some American attitudes rather quickly. When it came to education, many people adopted the American philosophy that going to public school was part of the American way of life, and doing anything else was somehow un-American or at least not in the best interest of the country. This argument, which was continually raised by Norwegians who favored the common school, was not an invention of the immigrants. It was part of American thinking:

> The concept of education as the bulwark of republican institutions had come to be almost universally accepted during the early decades of the (19th) century.....(some argued) that some degree of equality was essential in a republic. Alexander J. Craig, prominent among the early schoolmen of Wisconsin, observed that in the common schools the children of the rich and poor, the cultivated and the ignorant, sat down together to learn the same lessons.[4]

Another American argument which probably had some influence on Norwegian thinking, was that churches should do their part to promote education in the common schools. The help which some people thought the churches should provide was to come from the pastors. Since the pastor was often one of the most educated people in a town, he was a logical choice when you were looking for someone to supervise school affairs. One criticism of parochial schools was that:

> Their establishment withdraws the clergy from their proper positions as Directors or Visitors of the common schools; thus abandoning the latter to the risk of improper influences which their presence might restrain.[5]

There was another argument which didn't involve the pastors but leveled a similar criticism against parochial schools. Some common school sup-

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[4]Lloyd Jorgenson, The Founding of Public Education in Wisconsin (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1956), p. 113. Quoted from "Wisconsin Journal of Education," 1:212 Sept. 1856.

[5]Ibid., p. 122. Quoted from "Wisconsin Journal of Education," 1:217 Sept. 1856, reprinted from "Pennsylvania School Journal," April 1856.

porters claimed that private schools hurt public schools by taking away the best students.[6] Either way, the impression was given that churches with full-time parochial schools were not doing their part to promote education in the common schools.

American attitudes were particularly influential on Norwegian immigrants because the immigrants had a strong desire to become American. They wanted their children to learn English and to think of America as home. Their motive for wanting to Americanize instead of segregating themselves in their own Norwegian communities, was partly patriotic and partly economic. The immigrants really did want to be good Americans. They felt a strong need to show their American neighbors that they were for America, and supporting the common school was one way of doing it. At the same time, there was also some self-interest involved. The immigrants knew that the more they were considered American by the Yankees, the better their chances were for getting good jobs and increased business connections. Learning English was especially important for this, and many people considered the common school the best place to learn English. Both patriotism and economics were powerful reasons for Norwegians to adopt American attitudes on education. More than a few took the approach: If the Yankees are for the common school, so am I.

The fact that the common school did not provide for the religious education of the children was not that much of a problem for many people. In Norway, parents were accustomed to teaching their children the basics of reading and the Christian religion at home before the children started school,[7] and so the idea of parents having to supplement their child's

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[6]Lloyd Jorgenson, op. cit., pp. 188-189

[7]Walter Beck, op. cit., p. 137.

education at home was not all that foreign. If the church provided a part-time school for religious instruction, so much the better. It would be very unfair to say that everyone who favored the common schools was compromising religion for something else. Many parents, especially in the early days, saw no contradiction between the public school and the Lutheran church. With that conviction, they felt free to vote "No" when parochial grade schools were proposed.

Of course not everyone agreed. Up to this point, all the attitudes that have been discussed have been pro-common school. But this was a controversy. Quite obviously there was an opposing view. A significant number of Norwegian-Americans were neither suspicious of the Lutheran church nor were they overly concerned with American ideas on education. They considered parochial schools important for both the Lutheran church and Norwegian-American culture.

Not all immigrants came to America ready and willing to be Americanized. Some of them saw the United States as a great economic opportunity and planned to stay a few years, get rich, and then return to Norway to live as gentlemen.[8] Anyone with those intentions was very likely to be in favor of parochial schools. The common schools stressed English. Parents who were living as aliens in America were interested in a school that would help their children keep their Norwegian in practice for the day when they would go back to Norway. Where the common school taught American history and sang the praises of America as the greatest country on earth, alien parents favored the idea of a Norwegian parochial school that would teach Norwegian history and culture along with American history.

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[8]Frank Nelson, "The School Controversy," Norwegian American Studies, vol. 26, (1974), p. 206.

Still, the alien immigrant was the minority. Most were naturalized citizens, and they had a much deeper interest in the school controversy.

One charge that was sometimes leveled against common schools by those who favored parochial education was that the common schools were simply bad schools. They were supposedly filled with inept teachers and vicious children so that there was little learning and even less discipline. This argument was really irrelevant. It was just as commonly leveled against parochial schools as it was against public, and as for the inept teachers, in many cases it was true on both sides. Teachers were a scarce commodity at the time, and good teachers even more so. There were bad schools on both sides. But the available alternatives were not much better. All in all, though some people tried, no one scored any points by calling the other side bad guys.

Much more serious was the claim that public schools were derogatory to foreigners and made immigrant children feel ashamed of their background. Instruction in the common schools was decidedly pro-America, sometimes even to the point of being against other nationalities. In some cases American public schools drove a wedge between immigrant parents and their children by leading the children to regard their parents as old-fashioned and backwards. The old country was something to be forgotten.[9] Understandably, this did not sit well with parents. Children tend to reject parents and the lessons of the past readily enough. They don't need to be pushed to it. Even the immigrants who were most interested in Americanizing their children would not have taken kindly to that kind of instruction. Norwegians did not Americanize out of a sense

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[9]Walter Beck, Lutheran Elementary Schools in the United States (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), pp. 153-154.

of shame for their heritage. They were proud of their background. They wanted to be part of the New World without forgetting the ways of the Old. Public school teachers who were guilty of bad mouthing the immigrants' heritage were a strong argument for parochial schools.

An issue closely related to preserving a sense of pride in Norwegian culture, was the matter of keeping the Norwegian language alive among the children. Current thinking at the time said that if the children attend public school they will know English well, but little if any Norwegian. In parochial school, on the other hand, they could be taught both English and Norwegian. What made this such an issue was that the choice affected how church services would be conducted. Choosing the common school was considered a commitment to give up the Norwegian language in the church services. For some people that was the deciding argument in favor of parochial schools.

The discussion which the language issue raised was serious business. The older folks who had lived a lifetime with nothing but Norwegian services, couldn't imagine the English language in their Lutheran church. Even though they may have known better, they liked to think that Norwegian was God's native tongue and they weren't about to give it up in their services. Today, among the students of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, there are still a few stray copies of classroom notes taken by the students who studied under Prof. August Pieper. These notes record some of the professor's remarks on a similar controversy in the Wisconsin Synod over the use of German and English in the church. It seems to have been one of the professor's favorite topics of conversation. On one occasion he is reported to have told his student's (auf Deutsch natürlich): "Boys, you don't want to study German. But do you also know that there are different degrees of glory (sc. in heaven)....They have corners up in heaven

for some of you that won't study German--dark corners, so I won't have to look at you." One of the professor's disparaging remarks about English, not entirely tongue in cheek, reflects the serious concern which was thought to be connected with language. Speaking of the Englishman, Pieper said: "The English language is full of 'do's' and thus he also wants to do something for his salvation and that's why he couldn't accept Luther." The language controversy among the Norwegians was every bit as lively and colorful.

Language was one argument that could not be used fairly in favor of the common school. If Norwegian was going to be taught on the elementary level, parochial schools would have to do it--the common school was committed to English. That did not mean, however, that the common school was the only place to really learn English. Thinking people realized that the children would learn English regardless of which type of school they attended. Some years later, Rasmus Anderson, one of the fiercest defenders of the common school, was honest enough to admit "that the great problem with which the foreign-born citizens had to wrestle was not how their children were to learn English, but how to get them to learn their mother tongue."[10] If preserving the Norwegian language was important to you, so were parochial schools. (In years to come, Anderson and his allies would push to introduce Norwegian in the public schools. A law was passed which allowed one hour of foreign language instruction per day. Even so, offering Norwegian remained a plus on the side of parochial schools.) Of course not everyone agreed that Norwegian was necessary, and that kept the fight alive.

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[10] Rasmus Anderson, Life Story of Rasmus B. Anderson (Madison: 1915), p. 599.

In principle, a decision on the school question was never reached during the years before the Civil War. But the words "in principle" are important. In a country where there are laws governing the education of children, indecision is not one of the available choices when it comes to deciding where your child should go to school. You have to do something. He must attend somewhere. The almost unanimous solution among Norwegians was to send their children to the common school, and to provide for religious education in a part-time church school. In towns where Norwegians were the majority this arrangement often worked out very well for them. They saw to it that the common school was manned by "teachers of their own blood and religious persuasion,"[11] and in that way the public school which they supported with their tax dollars was made to meet their own ideals. But this was not always a happy arrangement for non-church members. In towns where there was a Norwegian majority, public schools sometimes closed for lack of students when the part-time parochial school was in session. That made for sharp public criticism of all parochial schools. At Rock Prairie, Wisconsin, for example, in 1840 the parochial school ran longer than the common school.[12]

The two school system was not a real solution to the controversy. What happened in the towns where Norwegians were the majority showed that the question was still undecided. By sending the children to common school they were saying they wanted the economic advantages of public education, but by manipulating the common school to meet their ideals they were saying they really did want the parochial style of education.

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[11] Walter Beck, op. cit., p. 142.

[12] Theodore Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America (Northfield: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1940), p. 244.

More than that, as the public school system became more unified and standardized, church members would not be able to continue to control the schools as they now were. A definite answer was still needed. But then the Civil War and the Slavery Controversy interrupted, and people had to live for a time with unfinished business.

The Formal Controversy (1866-1880)

When discussion of the school question started up again after the war, the issues remained the same. What was different was that now certain personalities became prominent in the debate.

Debate of the school question turned into a formal controversy of the Norwegian Synod in 1866 at the synod convention in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. At this convention a committee of three men from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, presented a report which advised starting parochial schools to teach all subjects. The men who made up the committee were: Rev. Nils Brandt, Prof. F. A. Schmidt and Laur. Larsen. In their report they advised that:

> the future existence of our congregations, as far as men can judge, can well be said to depend more upon such schools than upon anything else. May God give us grace to acknowledge this and to act accordingly.[13]

Along with this report was a series of 27 statements outlining the synod's program for establishing full-time parochial schools. These statements became know as the Manitowoc Declarations (see Appendix). The program which the declarations suggested had basically two objectives: 1) Set up a system of parochial schools similar to the systems in the German Lutheran synods. 2) Where that is not possible, see that Lutheran teachers

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[13]S. C. Ylvisaker (ed.), Grace for Grace (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1943), p. 78.

are hired for the public schools.

The course of action which the Manitowoc Declarations suggested was the position which the pastors of the Norwegian Synod took and which they actively tried to promote. In some ways that was one strike against it. The suspicion many Norwegians had toward the church in general also applied to the pastors personally. There were a couple reasons for this. Part of it went back to Norway. People were very aware that there was a class distinction between the clergy and the laity, with the laymen being on the low end. Knud Langeland, a harsh critic of the clergy, recorded a memory from his childhood in Norway:

> I grew up in a place where I had opportunity to see the young sons of the Pastor, the District Judge, the Captain and the Merchant educated under a tutor and undoubtedly it was the sight of these well-dressed, carefree, jolly boys, who had nothing else to do than to play and to gather knowledge, which first caused the agonizing question to thrust itself, like sharp steel, into my young heart, "What have I done, and what have these done, that there should be so great a difference between us?" And when they mocked me for my tattered clothes and laughingly pointed their fingers at me and cried, "Look at him," then, bowed under a heavy load, I walked with nose toward the ground. I was offended; I cried and swore.[14]

Another thing which caused the laymen of the Norwegian Synod to distrust the clergy was their education. Pastors who were educated here in America attended school at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. There was a strong anti-Missouri sentiment in the Norwegian Synod, and it tended to carry over to the pastors who were educated in St. Louis. Some people probably saw the proposal to establish parochial schools as evidence that the pastors were tending to fit into the Missouri Synod mold, and opposed the schools for that reason. In large measure the Norwegian Synod School Controversy was a controversy between clergy and laity. Naturally there

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[14]Nelson and Eugene Fevold, The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian-Americans (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), vol. I, p. 9.

were some laymen who sided with the pastors, but it was by no means the rule. The support of the clergy for parochial schools was enough to, at best, raise the suspicions of many in the laity. For some it was even an argument against church schools.

The Manitowoc Declarations were also open to criticism for trying to introduce denominational religion in the public school. Statement number 18 of the declarations advised that in towns where a parochial school could not be started, members of the synod ought to work to get as much influence as possible in the choice of teachers for the public school. The statement did not actually say that they should work to put Norwegian-Lutheran teachers in the school, but everyone read it that way and with good reason. Statement 18 only put down in writing what had already been going on in various communities. In the towns where Norwegians had control of the public school, they did see to it that Norwegian-Lutheran teachers were hired.

It was not the idea of religion in the public school that was a problem. It was denominational religion that people were against. Public education was to some degree religious (though Norwegian Synod pastors often labeled it "religionless). John McMynn, a prominent Wisconsin educator, told a convention of the Wisconsin State Teachers' Association that a teacher's job was in large measure a Christianizing one. He said:

> There is enough of common Christian ground in the Bible for all sects to meet on and cultivate the spirit of Christian truth... without impaling themselves on sectarian points.[15]

Today the idea of religion in public schools is fought against. Things were different in the late 1800's. It was not horribly scandalous for Lars Lillegard to write an article encouraging Norwegian teachers and

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[15]Lloyd Jorgenson, op. cit. p. 119. Taken from "Wisconsin Journal of Education," 9:80 May, 1865.

superintendents of public schools to use the Bible as a means of Christian witness. Most people would not have been disturbed by his statement that: "It testifies of a pitiful 'lukewarmness' in our Christian witnessing that the Bible is so seldom used...(in public schools under Norwegian control)."[16] If he had changed the word "Christian" to "Lutheran" or "Bible" to "catechism," however, it would have been quite a different story.

In view of what had happened in towns where Norwegians were responsible for the management of the public school, it was hard to deny that statement 18 was pushing public education of a Lutheran color. That put the clergy and the Manitowoc Declarations in a bad position. If there is anything Americans are against, it's using public schools to promote private religious views. That made statement 18 an issue. John A. Johnson, a prominent opponent of the synod on the school matter, said in one of his letters that his purpose in supporting public education was "to make good intelligent citizens without any regard to religions, sects or denominations, the object being secular and moral, not denominational education."[17] Statement 18 was the reason Johnson was careful to distinguish "moral" and "denominational." He wanted to make it clear that he was not in the Norwegian Synod camp. His plans for the public school were different. Statement 18 of the Manitowoc Declarations won few friends for the synod program.

For all of the opposition the pastors got in their attempts to start full-time parochial schools--some of it undeserved--in some sense it could be said that they were their own worst enemy. The synod program

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[16] Lars Lillegard, "The Bible in the Schools," date and publication unknown, translated by Alma Haugom Hetzel.

[17] Taken from a letter written by John A. Johnson Gisholt to Rasmus Anderson, Madison, Wisconsin, April 9, 1868.

was not so overwhelmingly opposed that there was no hope of success. Even if they were reluctant to admit it, people showed that they were interested in parochial schools. The simple fact that the controversy did not die a sudden death is proof of that. But for all of the pleading, preaching, and other verbal support which the pastors gave the issue, something was missing. The pastors for the most part were unwilling to serve as teachers in the parochial schools. In his study of Lutheran elementary schools, Walter Beck maintains that:

> This circumstance (the lack of clergy willing to actually teach in parochial schools) was without question the basic cause why the full-time parochial school did not come to flourish among Scandinavians as it did among the Germans and why those that were established were usually short-lived and soon developed into part-time summer-schools taught by...men and women who devoted their entire time to conducting such schools in various places during the course of the year.[18]

Three names became particularly prominent among the proponents of the common school. The were: Rasmus B. Anderson, Knud Langeland, and John A. Johnson Gisholt. These men did not have the welfare of the Lutheran church in mind when they opposed the synod school program. Even though they may have at times used church arguments, their purpose was secular. They were "seeking to blend two cultures, American and Norwegian, with no apologies for either."[19] There is something wrong about mentioning their names as part of a controversy in the Norwegian Synod. These were not good churchmen. They were so far out on the fringes of the synod that later on Anderson and Johnson became Unitarians. Still, because their views were widely publicized in Norwegian-American newspapers such as

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[18]Walter Beck, Lutheran Elementary Schools in the United States (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), pp. 140-141.

[19]Arlow Andersen, The Norwegian Americans (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 136.

Scandinaven and Emigranten (Langeland was editor of Scandinaven), they influenced many people in the synod and for that reason played a role in the controversy.

Anderson, Langeland and Johnson were something of a trio. The School Controversy was not the first time they took up common cause. Just prior to the school debate, the three had opposed the synod position in the Slavery Controversy.[20]

Probably the best way to show what type of influence they tried to exert would be with a few selected quotations. By far the most famous words in the controversy were penned by Rasmus Anderson. On the upper right hand corner of all his stationery he had printed the following motto:

> Whosoever directly or indirectly opposes the American common school is an enemy of education, of liberty, of progress. Opposition to the American common school is treason to our country.[21]

Chances are this brief dictum of his, which was widely published, did more to engrain the idea that parochial schools are un-American, than any other single thing.

Anderson's dislike of the Lutheran church comes out in a couple quotations. He said:

> If the Lutheran church cannot exist alongside of the public school then let the Lutheran church perish, and I will say "peace be with its ashes."[22]

The high-principled Prof. Anderson was not above an occasional slur either. Langeland at least was honest enough to admit the shortcomings of the

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[20]Frank Nelson, "The School Controversy," Norwegian-American Studies, vol. 26, (1974), p. 214.

[21]Rasmus Anderson, Life Story of Rasmus B. Anderson (Madison: 1915), p. 598.

[22]Rasmus Anderson, loc. cit.

common schools. Anderson generally could find fault only with parochial schools. On one occasion he referred to the few full-time church schools that were started as "these 'sideshows' of schools which the Synod has established."[23]

There were a number of things that contributed to Anderson's general dislike for the Lutheran church. During his schooling he was suspended from Luther College and didn't receive his diploma until some years later. Also, a congregational controversy resulted in his leaving the congregation, which made him rather bitter. It would be unfair to say that he became involved in the controversy just because he was looking for trouble. But he did seem to enjoy a good fight. In his autobiography he said:

> The Norwegians in America have not been above criticism, and it has often seemed to me that in the absence of other critics, it was my duty to step into the breach.[24]

All of this helps to explain his avid involvement in the controversy.

The tactics used by Rasmus Anderson and company to influence people were sometimes less than noble. Anderson knew that many Norwegians had a fear of a new clergy hierarchy developing in this country. He played on that fear by equating parochial schools with "priest domination." He advised this reaction to people who were being asked to send their children to parochial schools:

> If they come to you and ask you to join the Norwegian church school, flee from them as you would flee from priest domination.[25]

Langeland's main argument against the parochial school was that it was evidence of Missouri Synod influence on the pastors of the Norwegian

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[23]Frank Nelson, op. cit., p. 215.

[24]Rasmus Anderson, op. cit., p. 288.

[25]Frank Nelson, loc. cit.

Synod. You might say he argued that the push for parochial schools was un-Norwegian. Langeland "contrasted the 'free, patriotic Scandinavian' spirit with the 'German-Missouri strait jacket, tyrrany and hierarchical domineering.'"[26]

The trio of Anderson, Langeland and Johnson were quite successful in making the synod plan go awry. On a trip to Decorah, Iowa (where one of the few full-time schools was established) in October of 1879, Lars Lillegard recorded this analysis of the school matter:

> ...(I) became acquainted with congregational schools. My fears as to the efficiency of such schools were confirmed. Their stability and effectiveness depend on certain conditions, the most important among which are able teachers and an intelligent congregation willing to make the necessary sacrifices. Such are scarce, however, and therefore the public schools will remain the leaders in secular education.[27]

A year later the Election Controversy broke out and the school debate was brushed aside. But it was neither solved nor dead. Lillegard's judgment that it was an "intelligent congregation" that supported parochial schools is just one evidence that interested people were still to be found. But for the time, people went on living with unfinished business.

The Post-Election Debate

The main event during the 1880's was the Election Controversy. After it was settled, the school question came up again. The issues remained largely the same, although the pastors were not campaigning for the parochial schools as actively as they had. During the 1890's until the Jubilee

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[26]Taken from a set of notes titled "The Common School Controversy," which was prepared by Rev. Paul Hasvold for the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa.

[27]Geraldine Lillegard (ed.), Lars O. Lillegard--His Diaries and Lineage, printed in Niles, Michigan, December, 1982, p. 70.

Synod of 1903, the school issue was on almost every convention agenda of the Norwegian Synod. The Jubilee Synod set aside a $2000 fund to help congregations start schools. In 1917 the synodical merger killed the school movement except among the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.[28]

What is interesting about this phase of the debate is that after two major interruptions, and with the pastors playing a smaller role than ever, the greatest concrete progress toward establishing schools was made. It was one thing to put a set of guidelines on paper, but $2000 was beginning to talk business. What was more, by 1890 or so enough time had passed so that people could look back and evaluate the effect on the church of not having parochial schools. In 1896 an article appeared in the "Lutheran Church Review" which made the following observation:

> It has been found that a well-organized common-school system is a powerful factor in leading the young away from the Lutheran Church. The better the organization, the more powerful is that certain silent influence which destroys any distinction between believers and unbelievers.
>
> To counteract such influence and retain the young for the Church, parochial schools, proper, are organized...[29]

In spite of all this, the status quo was maintained: the common school plus a part-time church school was the rule of the day.

Around 1890, Wisconsin's Bennett Law brought the issue of parochial schools to the attention of everyone, both inside and outside the church. This law which was of major importance for the German Lutheran churches, was not that for the Norwegians. Norwegians had little stake in the issue because they had so few full-time schools. The provisions of the law would have had little effect on the part-time church schools. The law

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[28]S. C. Ylvisaker (ed.), Grace for Grace (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1943), pp. 79-81.

[29]Walter Beck, op. cit., pp. 158-159. Quoted from "Parochial Schools" by H. S. Hillboe, Lutheran Church Review, vol. XV, (1896), p. 67f.

was considered obnoxious primarily because it required that children attend a school in the same school district in which they lived. This was considered a slap at the parochial schools, which it in fact was. Other provisions which demanded greater use of English as the language of instruction were also considered tyrannical. It seems that Norwegians did their part to help abolish the law, but this was not really an indication of interest in church schools. The law could be opposed on purely secular grounds. Even Rasmus Anderson opposed the Bennett Law.

Probably the most telling comment that has ever been made on the whole Norwegian school issue was made in 1927 at the Lime Creek Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. A spokesman for the Bethany Lutheran College Association said:

> Once we are convinced that the school is a necessity, we will also discover that we can afford it. We can do a lot of things that we think are absolutely impossible once they have become a matter of life or death to us.[30]

Aside from pointing out the large role which money played in the controversy, this comment shows how it was possible for parochial schools to be constantly shoved to the side even though the issue never really died--they weren't considered necessary. Perhaps they were desirable; perhaps they were not. But at any rate they were not necessary. With that attitude, conflicting opinions can live together for a long time. One side could say "Yea," the other side could say "Nay." But as long as they were agreed that the issue doesn't really matter, they could all be satisfied to live with unfinished business.

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[30]Theodore Aaberg, A City Set on a Hill (Mankato: Board of Publications, Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1968), p. 91.

Conclusions

Unfinished business is the story of the Norwegian school controversy. It would be easy to overlook what is not there, but it would be a mistake. I think the most significant thing about the Common School Controversy is that it was never settled. For one thing, it was uncharacteristic. The Norwegian Synod was not in the habit of leaving things unfinished. Both the Slavery and Election Controversies were settled--why not the School Controversy? It wasn't that they were looking for a solution that would make everyone happy. The decisions that were rendered on slavery and election were by no means satisfactory to everyone. But the school issue remained the controversy without a solution. It remained that because it was considered unnecessary.

Some people have simply labeled the common school supporters wrong. I don't agree. I think there were cogent reasons why the controversy could not be settled in the early days. The teacher shortage was a real problem. It was hard to find teachers for parochial schools. This was not such a problem among the Germans. There were more of them. There were more people who were able to teach in the German parochial schools. In addition, the German Lutheran pastors were willing to serve as teachers while the Norwegian pastors were not.

In the early days, members of the church needed to consider what effect a parochial school would have on the rest of the town. The fact that a parochial school could put the public school out of business for lack of students was something that you couldn't just shrug off. It is a great credit to these Lutheran immigrants that they were concerned about these issues. They could easily have looked out for their own welfare and left the rest of the community to fend for itself.

Still more important was the deep-seated conviction on the part of immigrant parents that they needed to send their children to the American public schools in order to prove their allegiance to America to the Yankees. (This is really how the idea got started that parochial schools were un-American. People didn't mean to say that the school was in itself subverting the country. That came later. The original thought was that Americans might misconstrue the parochial school as a lack of allegiance on the part of the immigrant.) The fact that Germans were not generally concerned with this is irrelevant. Norwegians were concerned. It would be wrong to say that support for the common rather than the parochial school is evidence of a lower level of spirituality among Norwegian Lutherans. In many cases the only thing it was evidence of was a sincere desire to be good citizens in a new country. For many it was not a question of right or wrong, it was a matter of obligation. Proving allegiance is always a matter of the highest priority for new immigrants. For many Norwegians, attending the common school was a matter of allegiance. For them to have acted against their consciences would have in fact been disloyal. There were cogent reasons why the school controversy took place and why it could not be settled in the early days.

But times changed. With the founding of schools like Luther College it would have been easy to supply well qualified teachers for Norwegian parochial schools. As the decades passed, the complexion of the Norwegian community changed. There were fewer immigrants and more American-born citizens. The need to prove allegiance was not as great. The fear of a church hierarchy was not as great. There was time to evaluate the effect of not having parochial schools. Still, the staus quo remained.

Because there was never a settlement in spite of the fact that the issue itself never really died, I think it is fair to say that the con-

troversy amounted to a decision by default against full-time parochial schools. The course which the controversy followed is an indication of that. The debate did not pursue the simple question: Should we send our children to public or parochial school? Throughout the controversy, opposition to parochial schools always came as a response to positive plans and proposals _in favor of_ parochial schools. That set off the arguing which would then run and run and run until finally some new issue got in the way and the school question was set aside. Later the same course would be retraced, but always with the same result: no decision; status quo. In the end, the parochial school lost the race because it was never finished.

Appendix

The Manitowoc Declarations*

1. For Christians it must be regarded as natural to employ only Christian schools for their instruction.

2. In this country it must, therefore, as a rule be regarded as desirable for Christians to establish such parochial schools as can give instruction in subjects comparable to those taught in the so-called "common schools" so that these not be patronized.

3. It is our duty as citizens to support these common schools even if we do not entrust our children to them.

4. These non-religious public schools give their best service to those elements in our population which are not Christian and do not crave a Christian education.

5. The fact that religion is not taught in these schools is a necessary result of the religious freedom which it is our good fortune to enjoy under our national system of government; but it is also a melancholy testimony to the apostasy of our time and to the division of the church due to the activity of the sects.

6. Consideration of the cost to support parochial schools should not keep parents from doing what is best for the well-being of the child and which would deliver it from secularization.

7. We give our fellow-citizens the very best example when we support the public schools with all our powers but do not use them because of religious reasons.

8. We work with the best methods to promote unity and concord among the people when we provide our children with the best Christian education.

11. We wish to become acquainted with American school ways and adopt the best of them for our schools.

12. We must all strive to keep away from our schools the insincere spirit of our times; and if our common schools are a nursery for this spirit, we have all the more reason not to make use of them.

13. All the above statements apply even when our common schools are all that they should be; but they receive so much more meaning because the conditions in the public schools are for the most part quite otherwise, in that they partly have incompetent teachers, partly employ women for teachers; some teachers openly display unbelief or grave immorality; discipline is weak in many schools; in others

there are some depraved children and at any rate of a different faith from ours.

14. The public schools take the best time and make the work of the religious schools difficult, as also the work and calling of the parochial teachers.

15. It must be possible for us to establish parochial schools of such a character that we shall not need to patronize the American common schools, as other Christians have done, including groups who speak foreign languages.

16. It will be easier for us to provide teachers for full-time parochial schools than for the kind that we now generally have.

17. Christian young men having the necessary gifts ought to be willing for God's sake to offer themselves with joy to the profession of a Christian school teacher, and congregations in the same way ought to assist them in procuring the proper training therefor.

18. Where such an arrangement as the one recommended above cannot be made or cannot be achieved at an early date, the members of our congregations must seek to acquire as great an influence as possible in the management of the district schools, particularly in the appointment of teachers and in determining the time of its sessions.

19. Where this is not possible, and where the district school is so directed that it is frankly dangerous for the children's faith or morality, it is then the duty of Christian parents to keep their children away from it and to work that much harder for the development of parochial schools.

20. Wherever no other arrangement seems practicable, it must be regarded as sufficient for the preparation in English to send the children to the public schools after confirmation, though not earlier.

22. Where it is possible, the congregations ought to build their own schoolhouses for their own schools.

24. Children can well learn two languages but should not, as now, begin to learn both at one time. The natural order is to have them learn to read the mother tongue, Norwegian, fluently before beginning to learn English.

25. Christian zeal for the fulfillment of the holy duty which we have to provide our children with a Christian education ought to be awakened by sermons, exhortations, discussions, meetings, by the pastors' studious care and painstaking preparation for confirmation, etc.

27. A satisfactory union between the district school and the parochial school can under existing laws hardly occur anywhere.

*There were 27 statements in all. This list is a composite of the lists found in the notes prepared by Rev. Paul Hasvold and in Walter Beck's study of Lutheran elementary schools.

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