

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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Separation of Religion and the State Under Threat: Betsy DeVos and God's Plan for Schools

The American Congress and the American Supreme Court, have historically led the world on the 'enlightenment' principle of freedom of religion and separation of Church and State. The earliest European settlers to the New World were refugees from the extraordinary bloodletting of the religious wars of the Old World. They believed that they were protected from religious extremists, blasphemy laws, the 'divine rights' of kings and priests and taxpayer funding of religion by the First Amendment of their American Constitution and a strong Supreme Court.

At Federation in 1901, Australia followed America with Section 116 of their Constitution, based upon the American First Amendment.

These basic rights which have for so long protected us from the kind of religious bloodletting and civil strife which we are currently witnessing in the Middle East, are now under threat. The election of Donald Trump could well open the Pandora's box of religious strife which we thought our ancestors had closed.

Australia lost its protection when the High Court read Section 116 down and out of the Australian Constitution in the DOGS case in 1981. And we now separate our children into myriads of religious schools.

But now the American position is also under threat from the new Christian conservative right. Their representative in key positions of power. They call themselves Christians but they leave aside the teachings of Christ on the proper relationship between followers of Christ and the State (Matthew 22 verse 21) and dream of a Republic subject to 'biblical laws' – whatever they decide these to be.

And the President elect's choice of the Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos is their champion. Consider the following excerpts from a report in the New York Times by Katherine Stewart on December 13, 2016:

By KATHERINE STEWART DEC. 13, 2016

BOSTON — At the rightmost edge of the Christian conservative movement, there are those who dream of turning the United States into a Christian republic subject to “biblical laws.” In the unlikely figure of [Donald J. Trump](#), they hope to have found their greatest champion yet. He wasn’t “our preferred candidate,” the Christian nationalist [David Barton said](#) in June, but he could be “God’s candidate.”

Consider the president-elect’s first move on public education. Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of [Liberty University](#), the largest Christian university in the nation, says that he was Mr. Trump’s first pick for secretary of education. Liberty University teaches [creationism](#) alongside evolution.

When Mr. Falwell [declined](#), President-elect Trump offered the cabinet position to Betsy DeVos. In most news coverage, Ms. DeVos is depicted as a member of the Republican donor class and a leading [advocate of school vouchers](#) programs.

That is true enough, but it doesn’t begin to describe the broader conservative agenda she’s been associated with.

Betsy DeVos stands at the intersection of two [family fortunes](#) that helped to build the Christian right. In 1983, her father, Edgar Prince, who made his money in the auto parts business, [contributed](#) to the creation of the Family Research Council, which the Southern Poverty Law Center identifies as [extremist](#) because of its anti-L.G.B.T. language.

Her father-in-law, Richard DeVos Sr., the co-founder of [Amway](#), a company built on “multilevel marketing” or what [critics call](#) pyramid selling, has been [funding groups and causes](#) on the economic and religious right since the 1970s.

Ms. DeVos is a chip off the old block. At a 2001 gathering of conservative Christian philanthropists, she singled out education reform as a way to “advance God’s kingdom.” [In an interview](#), she and her husband, Richard DeVos Jr., said that school choice would lead to “greater kingdom gain.”

And so the family tradition continues, funding the religious right through a network of [family foundations](#) — among others, the couple’s own, as well as the Edgar and Elsa Prince Foundation, on whose board Ms. DeVos has served along with her brother, [Erik Prince](#), founder of the military contractor Blackwater. According to Conservative Transparency, a liberal watchdog that tracks donor funding through tax filings, these organizations have funded conservative groups including: the Alliance Defending Freedom, the [legal juggernaut](#) of the religious right; the Colorado-based Christian ministry [Focus on the Family](#); and the [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#).

[Katherine Stewart](#) is the author of “The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/opinion/betsy-devos-and-gods-plan-for-schools.html? r=1>

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