

Excerpt from *Against: What Does the White Evangelical Want?*
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Against

What Does the White Evangelical Want?

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FOREWORD BY
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Contents

Foreword by Clayton Crockett | ix

Introduction | 1

1 Against Future: Apocalypticism and Climate Collapse | 15

2 Against Knowledge: Racist Origins of Alternative Education | 41

3 Against Sexuality: Sadomasochism in Purity Culture | 74

4 Against Reality: The Persecution Complex, Media, and Propaganda | 103

5 Against Society: Populism, Fascism, and Hierarchies of Contempt | 127

Epilogue: Don't You See We Are Short on Time? | 160

Acknowledgements | 163

Author Photo | 165

Bibliography | 167

2

Against Knowledge

Racist Origins of Alternative Education

“I would like to ask you to turn away from your PhD degree . . .
and for a moment consider the B.A. Degree given to those who are
Born Again by the Holy Ghost.”

—FROM A LETTER TO THOMAS ALTIZER

Alternative Histories

Like four in ten Americans, I grew up assuming humankind began within the last ten thousand years in current form.¹ My seventh-grade history textbook told me this. It began with the book of Genesis and blended seamlessly into Sumerian and Babylonian history. In the textbook, I learned of how tribes dispersed across the earth after the Tower of Babel, where languages were confused. It read, “We need guidance because the *dispersion of mankind, the scattering of people over earth*, complicates the study of world history. So many people in so many places cannot all be studied at the same time. By focusing on God’s plan, we see how history leads to Jesus Christ. God first chose a special nation out of which Christ would come.”² One of the sites to which people dispersed, Ur, was the Sumerian city from which Abraham emigrated. At the bottom of the page was a timeline stretching from 2300 to 1700 BCE denoting the origin of Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations, Abraham’s departure, and Hammurabi’s Babylon. The chronology was drawn from James Ussher, who calculated the world’s beginning at October 23, 4004 BCE. I learned Hebrew slaves built the great

1. See Swift, “In U.S., Belief in Creationist View of Humans at New Low,” and Hill, “National Study of Religion & Human Origins,” 1.

2. Combee, *History of the World in Christian Perspective*, 8.

AGAINST

pyramids nearly a millennium after the archaeological record suggests the complex at Giza was built. I didn't learn that Sumerian cuneiform predated the timeframe for the biblical flood, which went strangely unnoticed by cultures with record-keeping abilities, but I learned that global floods were mentioned in other ancient texts. I distinctly recall feeling enthralled at the immersive conjunction of material studied in Sunday school with world history class. It lent a sense of reality to the fantasy, as if the Genesis chronology should be read literally as any other history.

My school was a private Christian institution. Together, Abeka Books (from which I draw above), Accelerated Christian Education (ACE), and Bob Jones University Press print the lion's share of textbooks used in Protestant private schools and homeschools. I wouldn't have been immune to such information had I attended a public school. Nearly a sixth of public high school biology teachers endorse or lend credibility to creationism and/or intelligent design.³ As a project director for the National Center for Science Education, Stephanie Keep warned of the problem's scope: "There are about 3 million students taking high school biology in this country in any given year. So we can conclude that somewhere in the neighborhood of half a million students will be presented with a favorable view of creationism/[intelligent design] this year in their high school biology classes alone."⁴ In *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987), the Supreme Court ruled creationism was a religious belief, so teachers couldn't be forced by the state to teach it, yet many get away with teaching creationism every day. Why is there an appetite for such clairvoyant misinformation?

The textbook above results from multigenerational trends already in motion during the nineteenth century. An alternative history is a denial or disavowal. The ego both knows and denies, and denial is facilitated by a fetishized object (a self-proclaimed authority, a spurious argument, secret evidence ignored by scientists, etc). The creationist knows her argument falls flat, which is why she expends so much energy to claim the contrary. Additionally, repetition generally signals unconscious enjoyment of a pattern, especially when that pattern proves itself in error. Conscious justifications for maintaining a pattern are retrojected. What's primary is the enjoyment of a failing behavioral pattern. In the case of alternative

3. Berkman, Pacheco, and Plutzer, "Evolution and Creationism in America's Classrooms."

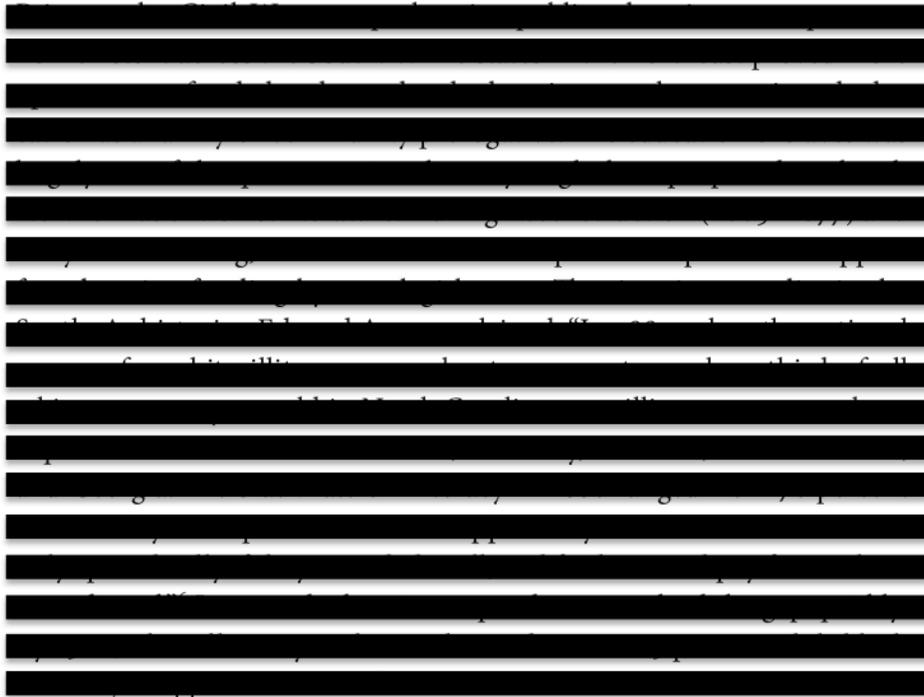
4. Keep, "Still Fighting for Evolution in Schools."

AGAINST KNOWLEDGE

histories, the repetition is one of racial animosity perpetually blending into self-deception.

If we desire to uncover the origins of alternative science, gratuitously inept education policy, attacks on the university and expertise, education reform exacerbating inequality, infusion of folk theology, or the rise of the private and home school—as well as the more obvious skepticism toward biology and climate science—we must examine the racial animosity underwriting self-deception. Put another way, if we want to understand why only a fifth of Americans hold a naturalistic view of evolutionary origins, it helps to contemplate why only four in ten are willing to identify slavery as the cause for the Civil War.⁵ We must examine the white supremacist history that began its critique of the “government school” in the post-Reconstruction era and rebirthed itself as a Religious Right after schools integrated.

Antebellum to Integration



5. Heimlich, “What Caused the Civil War?”
6. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 418.
7. Ibid.

AGAINST

The Rise of the Alternatives (to the Integrated Government School)

A seventh grader using Bob Jones University Press curricula would read, “Bible-believing Christians cannot accept any evolutionary interpretation. Dinosaurs and humans were definitely on the earth at the same time and may have even lived side by side within the past few thousand years.”⁴⁰ On the topic of dragons, the child would read “is it possible that a fire-breathing animal really existed? Today some scientists are saying yes.”⁴¹ In eleventh grade the student would read, “A few slave holders were undeniably cruel . . . The majority of slave holders treated their slaves well.”⁴² A twelfth grader studying American government according to Abeka would read, “Ignoring 3,500 years of Judeo-Christian civilization, religion, morality, and law, the Burger Court held that an unborn child was not a living person but rather the ‘property’ of the mother (much like slaves were considered property in the 1857 case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*).”⁴³ If studying economics according to Abeka, she’d learn, “Global environmentalists have said and written enough to leave no doubt that their goal is to destroy the prosperous economies of the world’s richest nations.”⁴⁴ As mentioned above, BJU Press, ACE, and Abeka produce the lion’s share of curricula for private Christian and home schools. Their counter-histories are audacious yet mainstream. Remember that four Americans in ten reject evolution altogether. As we also saw, only four in ten Americans acknowledge slavery was the primary cause of the Civil War (slightly less than half believe the cause was states’ rights). Of course the overlap is not absolute, but I’d expect the Venn diagram would be fairly close to a single circle. Rejection of widely-accepted evidence is integral to the white evangelical’s sense of embattlement.

They see a fight everywhere. To give ground on one point is to signal to the enemy—everyone else—that more ground will give way. In the mid-twentieth century, the cause of religious freedom became a metonym. Religious freedom seemed innocuous, but as a metonym it substituted for more embarrassing impulses. Between the 1940s and 1960s, education became a battleground of interconnected fronts: segregation, capitalism, evolution,

40. BJU Press, *Life Science*, 134.

41. BJU Press, *Life Science*, 133.

42. BJU Press, *United States History for Christian Schools*, 219.

43. Bowen and Ashbaugh, *American Government in Christian Perspective*, 19.

44. Kirk, *Economics*, 253.

AGAINST KNOWLEDGE

and sex education.⁴⁵ Historian Darren Dochuk suggested the anxiety tapped into the belief that people rationally choose salvation, thus, “Christian parents shuddered at the prospect of communists brainwashing their children before they were able to make decisions for Christ.”⁴⁶ Even UNESCO was criticized as a Leftist ploy, and officials in Los Angeles came under such pressure that they banned its educational material. In California, Proposition 3 (1952) delivered tax-exempt status to religiously-affiliated schools. In 1958 the ACLU-sponsored Proposition 16 (aiming to revoke tax-exempt status) failed to match the support mustered by the coalition Protestants United Against Taxing Schools. The effort was led by the education activist and pastor Bob Wells and Rolf McPherson, the latter being the son of leading anti-evolutionist and Angelus Temple megachurch pastor Aimee Semple McPherson. The National Association of Christian Schools (NACS) was founded by the National Association of Evangelicals in 1947 and served 228 schools by 1965. In the headlines of the NACS magazine *Christian Teacher*, its director Mark Fakkema saw a “modern revolutionary war” in the classroom to “combat subversive tendencies.”⁴⁷

As early activists in the burgeoning Christian education movement, Wells and Fakkema led the way in rhetorical maneuvering. In Orange County, Wells’s Christian school Heritage High advertised:

[Public] schools no longer WANT to turn out INDIVIDUALS. Instead, they seem intent on molding children into socialist “Group-concept” patterns [and] a “peaches and cream” world in which everyone passes and no one fails. . . . A “never-never land” in which the bright students are held back, so that slower students won’t be embarrassed, feel discouraged or “left-behind.”⁴⁸

Fakkema delivered similar sentiments:

The battle of this generation is not against child indoctrination. All real education of children implies indoctrination of some sort. This all-important question is: who shall indoctrinate—the parents or the subversively slanted education of “planners”? This

45. Dochuk explains the rise of metonymic causes standing in for others, writing, “The fear of losing white racial privilege was certainly one critical concern for southern evangelicals, but in their rhetoric, at least, it was trumped by a fear of losing religious freedom.” Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, 104.

46. *Ibid.*, 202.

47. *Ibid.*, 204–5.

48. Wells, as quoted in *ibid.*, 206.

AGAINST

is the battle at the educational front today. The parent-controlled school system clearly occupies the Scriptural position.⁴⁹

By the 1960s, Tim LaHaye (later of *Left Behind* fame) began his activism against Darwinism in the classroom in southern California. He linked it to any number of interchangeable evils and warned, “destructive systems such as communism, fascism, racism, and animalistic amorality have been conceived and nurtured in an educational milieu emphasizing the evolutionary doctrines of struggle and survival.”⁵⁰ Notice the conflation of far Right and Left positions; many conservatives today still believe fascism is a Left-wing ideology. In that same decade, Wells led the fight against sex education, especially material on gay and lesbian relationships. Anything beyond the scope of Protestant family values and matrimony was taboo. Wells delivered sermons with titles such as “Is Sex Training Sin Training?” while his church’s annual evoked education as a metonym for many other issues:

WE BELIEVE: In the Book, the Blood, and the Blessed Hope; In a strong Bible teaching-Bible preaching emphasis; That soul-winning evangelism and training in discipleship are the primary responsibilities of the church; In providing for the total and balanced education of our children as a vital part of the church program; In basic, old-fashioned Americanism and free enterprise system; In an uncompromising stand against Modernism, Socialism, Communism and every form of “One Worldism”!⁵¹

Soon after, Anaheim reporter John Steinbacher wrote *The Child Seducers*, a book claiming sex education was a back door by which communists would drive students away from patriotism. The context was the Red Scare and *Brown v. Board*, but the rhetoric was about protecting the child. The child might learn they were an ape, or prone to sexual desire, or not naturally a capitalist! The figure of the child, whose innocence was robbed by progressivism run amuck, oscillated across multiple interest groups such that, by the time of *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the figure of the child served as the organizing cause of a conservative-theocratic coalition. The protection of the child was the metonymic pretext for alternative models for resegregation.

49. Fakkema, as quoted in *ibid.*, 205.

50. LaHaye, as quoted in *ibid.*, 301.

51. Wells, as quoted in *ibid.*, 167.

AGAINST KNOWLEDGE

The Private School and Abortion

Southern private school enrollment surged as lawsuits filed in the 1940s began concluding with the desegregation of graduate and professional schools. The graduate level alone triggered the first wave of panic. As we saw, between 1950 and 1965 southern private school enrollment soared while southern legislatures enacted hundreds of pieces of legislation to postpone integration. The overwhelming whiteness led to a legal battle over the new term “segregation academy.”⁵² The story of the Religious Right is misunderstood as a battle against reproductive choice bringing religious conservatives into alliance with neoliberals.

As religion historian Randall Balmer has shown, the foundations of the Religious Right in position to abortion is purely a myth. Heritage Foundation co-founder Paul Weyrich once admitted the idea to take up abortion actually came late in the seventies when Religious Right activists needed a cause with more long-term viability than segregation and tax credits. Weyrich said abortion was suggested by an unknown voice on some conference call in an unknown year. It was a flippant gimmick fueled by careless misogyny, not concern for the fetus.⁵³ The abortion myth covered for segregationist desire,

52 According to the Southern Education Foundation, “What was once the South’s 11 percent share of the nation’s private school enrollment had reached 24 percent in 1980. The eleven Southern states of the old Confederacy enrolled between 675,000 and 750,000 white students in the early 1980s, and it is estimated that 65 to 75 percent of these students attended schools in which 90 percent or more of the student body was white.” Suits, “Race and Ethnicity in a New Era of Public Funding of Private Schools.”

53. I wish to credit Randall Balmer for providing insight into the role of private school tax exemptions (rather than abortion) in the rise of the Religious Right. In his book, Balmer discusses the “abortion myth” of foundation by telling of a conference he attended in 1990 with the old leaders of the Religious Right. In one session Paul Weyrich reminded the attendees that the Christian leaders came together not over *Roe* but over the tax exemption battle with Bob Jones University. Surprised and yet finding the story intuitively true, Balmer followed up with Weyrich and various other early Religious Right leaders, all of which eventually confirmed Weyrich’s claim. Weyrich reported that the turn to abortion actually began during a conference call searching for new causes to rally around, and an unidentified voice on the conference call suggested abortion (which to that point had been considered too controversial with so many Christian conservatives and Republicans taking pro-choice stances). Weyrich had been attempting and failing to organize Rightwing activism around supporting prayer in schools, opposing the Equal Rights Amendment, and opposing abortion for years, and Balmer cites Weyrich as defeatedly conceding, “I was trying to get those people interested in those issues and I utterly failed . . . What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter’s intervention against the Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation.” Note that this tax exemption issue actually began under Nixon, just as

AGAINST

which means that—counterintuitive though it may seem—the discussion of abortion belongs here in a chapter on education more than it belongs in my chapter on sexuality and gender. The master signifier “pro-life” was clearly a metonym, just as “religious freedom” was a metonym, for segregation. We see this in the battle of tax exemptions.

Bob Jones University had been a stalwart of Christian conservatism for a half-century by the time it came under fire as a segregated university, which threatened its tax-exempt status. A series of events linked the integration of public schools to legal status of Christian universities. After *Brown v. Board*, states were given leniency in their integration timelines. As Mississippi integrated in 1969–1970 after the end of the dual system,⁵⁴ a group of parents in Holmes County watched as white students fled the public schools to three new private academies. Within two years of integration, zero white students remained in the county’s schools. The group of parents sued to deny three of these K–12 schools tax-exempt status, arguing segregated academies weren’t charitable. The resulting case *Green v. Connally*⁵⁵ continued a domino effect running from *Brown v. Board* to the Reaganite Religious Right.

In 1971, the Supreme Court affirmed a district court’s recent decision on *Green v. Connally* and said the Internal Revenue code shouldn’t lend charitable status to segregated private schools. The Court was also upholding a position the IRS already announced in a two-page ruling that launched conservatives into revolt.⁵⁶ The IRS sent its first inquiry to Bob Jones University in 1970, at which point the school denied entry to African

the election of Reagan did not result in overturning *Roe*. The actual causes of problems and the results of power didn’t seem to matter even for the first leaders of the Religious Right, for the only real desire all along was power. For more reading, see chapter 1 of Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come*. Or see a brief version of this argument online in Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right.”

54. One way states resisted integration was to allow school choice so that black students could theoretically transfer to white schools, though in practice the pervasive white supremacist terror kept schools segregated. In 1969, the Supreme Court ordered the termination of the dual school system.

55. The case went by several names between its initial filing and the final Supreme Court affirmation. For the sake of clarity, I use the most familiar name *Green v. Connally*, which was settled by the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia in *Green v. Connally*, 330 F. Supp. 1150.

56. The two-page IRS ruling triggering the great revolt of the Christian Right began with this guidance: “A private school that does not have a racially nondiscriminatory policy as to students does not qualify for exemption.” Rev. Rul. 71-447, 1971-2 C.B. 230.

AGAINST KNOWLEDGE

Americans. The changing legal landscape forced the university through a series of stalling tactics, such as admitting a black employee to a short-lived stint as a part-time student. It experimented with admitting black students who were married and enforced rules against interracial dating until the year 2000. The university lost its tax exemption in January 1976. The moment was a flashpoint for conservative Christians, but segregation was no longer a viable long-term cause. Another issue was needed.

In the rise of the Religious Right, *Green v. Connally* was the motive while *Roe v. Wade* was the cover. In the 1972 and 1976 elections, Democrats were slightly more pro-life than Republicans, a fact which ceased to be true in all elections but one after 1980.⁵⁷ Early Christian opposition to abortion was Catholic, not Protestant. Even the ultra-conservative Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) adopted a resolution in 1971 supporting abortion access in some cases.⁵⁸ Just after the *Roe* decision, Texas pastor and former SBC president W. A. Criswell told *Christianity Today* it wasn't up to him: "I have always felt that it was only after a child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person, and it has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed."⁵⁹ It would be a mistake to say, as many too simply claim, that Baptists were pro-choice and then turned pro-life, but there was a significant ideological shift at the decade's end.⁶⁰ The SBC's shift mirrored the broader conservative about-face on church-state separation over the course of a few

57. The exception was 1988. See Carmines and Woods, "The Role of Party Activists in the Evolution of the Abortion Issue," 366.

58. The resolution called for "high view of the sanctity of human life, including fetal life" while remaining supportive of abortion in cases of fetal abnormalities, assault, or incest. The resolution clearly resists taking a hard line either way, and while it does not treat abortion as an issue without moral import, neither does it frame the fetus as a full human. See Southern Baptist Convention, "Resolution on Abortion."

59. Criswell, as quoted in *Christianity Today*, "Abortion Decision," 43.

60. I want to be very clear on this point, because the data we have even on SBC views on abortion is incomplete at best. The shift in resolutions is easy to measure, and survey data picks up in the 1980s, but the views of the average layperson are difficult to measure with incomplete data. Moreover, I'm using the SBC as a particular example primarily because they most closely reflect the mode white evangelicalism took in the 1980s. The type of white evangelicalism I'm exploring in this book did not quite exist in its contemporary political form yet in the 1970s, so I use the SBC as a proxy. And just as surely as there was a dramatic shift against support for abortion among the budding Religious Right, there was surely also a large segment of Baptists who already opposed the resolutions their denomination offered in support. Let us not make the mistake of overstating our case.

AGAINST

interesting years. Baptists are particularly interesting here as a group that traditionally supported the separation of church and state.

The Baptist Joint Committee for Public Affairs supported the Supreme Court's ruling against prayer time in schools in *McCollum v. Board of Education* (1948).⁶¹ The SBC passed resolutions against public funds for religious schools over and over again between the end of World War II and *Roe*. It fully supported the establishment clause until something changed. The fundamentalist wing grabbed power in the late seventies. It's actually due to the fundamentalist takeover and purge of moderates that we have the data to document the shift, especially after Richard Land took charge of the Christian Life Commission (CLC, now the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission) in 1988. The CLC began using questionnaires on the topics of public funding for religious schools, an amendment for school prayer, and abortion. There was a dramatic increase in support for tax credits for religious schools during the 1980s. The SBC's six resolutions offering qualified support for at least some abortion rights stretched from 1971 to 1979, at which point they stopped entirely.⁶² There is so much history we could explore for further context in this decade, but one way to think of it is an opposition between two camps. One believed the conservative church was best served by a strict separation of church and state, while theocrats who won the fight believed theological interests were best served by rooting those interests in the law.⁶³

Opinions on abortion were fairly quiet between 1973 and 1978 and shifted dramatically in the decade's final two years. The SBC elected its first adamantly anti-choice president, Adrian Rogers, in 1979 and adopted an anti-choice resolution the following year. In concert with Francis Schaeffer, whose warnings of "secular humanism" would soon gain wide audience, the Heritage Foundation co-founder Paul Weyrich helped galvanize

61. James Wood, Jr. (director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Public Affairs, 1972–80) even used the first amendment to argue in favor of abortion rights. He argued the government should not get into the business of legislating religious views. He even testified against the Hyde Amendment in court. It's safe to say that Richard Land's activism was a direct contest to Wood's concept of the church-state relationship.

62. For much of the analysis in this paragraph, I am indebted to Lewis, "Abortion Politics and the Decline of the Separation of Church and State."

63. When Richard Land took over his position, he argued that legislating against abortion was not that same as legislating in favor of a particular religion. Instead, he argued the law often corresponds to the same ethical ideals promoted by religion precisely because law is rooted in the same moral tradition as its people's faith. This was a political theology—law or theology, there was no difference.

AGAINST KNOWLEDGE

a Protestant coalition around abortion. Many early evangelical activists joined the cause. Tim LaHaye launched Californians for Biblical Morality. Robert Grant founded American Christian Cause, which published “moral report cards” spread in churches prior to elections. College ministry Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright joined forces with the Heritage Foundation. Along with Schaeffer, the future Surgeon General C. Everett Koop produced the anti-choice film series *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Liberty University founder Jerry Falwell published the newspaper *Moral Majority Report*.⁶⁴ Falwell’s Moral Majority was the base from which the anti-choice Religious Right grew, but in 1978 his focus was the child in the school rather than the womb. Christians, he warned, must be politically aware of government forces which “affect the vitality and very existence of our churches and Christian schools.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, this was the same year in which Falwell proclaimed his opposition to reproductive choice. His coalition vehemently opposed the Equal Rights Amendment as well, since Falwell believed equality between men and women would destroy the traditional family.

The pro-life moniker worked. In 1978, an Iowa incumbent Democratic Senator who was overwhelmingly projected to win reelection lost to a Republican running as pro-life. Two years later, the Moral Majority proved successful at defeating Carter and installing Reagan on the same issue. The Johnson Amendment was nearly three decades old by this point, but this rule ostensibly prohibiting non-profits from endorsing candidates couldn’t keep up. The Right chose to forget how tax exemptions were revoked under Nixon, a Republican. By the time Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed launched the Christian Coalition in 1989, everyone took for granted they had always felt great concern for the fetus. Evangelicals shrouded themselves in pro-life rhetoric, and the Christian Right was born—white evangelicalism was born. It was born shrouded in the abortion myth as the white child in the school was rhetorically eclipsed by the child in the womb.

Bob Jones University’s tax exemption case reached the Supreme Court during the Reagan administration. With only one dissenter, the Supreme Court finally settled the matter and ruled against the school in May 1983. Segregation was no longer an option for a tax-exempt school. In a perverse twist, the sole dissenter, William Rehnquist, was rewarded when Reagan

64. See Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, 384–85, and Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right.”

65. Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, 385.

AGAINST

promoted him to Chief Justice. However, damage was done and the threat was clear enough to conservatives. Today, white students overrepresent in private school enrollment in forty-three states. Researchers Sean Reardon and John Yun found “the strongest predictor of white private enrollment is the proportion of black students in the area.”⁶⁶ In the domain of education, white flight and alternative knowledge remain inseparable.

The Homeschool

[REDACTED]

66. Suits, “Race and Ethnicity in a New Era of Public Funding of Private Schools,” 36.