

Newsweek

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RELIGION

To the Highest Court



Mrs. Vashti McCollum

A religion-in-the-schools trial, held last week in the Champaign, Ill., County Circuit Court, will probably make history. The plaintiff was Mrs. Vashti McCollum, 32, pert, wide-eyed wife of a University of Illinois professor, demanding that the Champaign School Board discontinue a five-year program of religious instruction (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish) in school buildings, on the ground that the constitutional separation of church and state is jeopardized.

Mrs. McCollum charged that her 10-year-old son, James Terry McCollum (called a problem child by his teacher), had been ridiculed by classmates for his failure to attend weekly classes in religion. A "rationalist" who approved testimony classifying God and biblical lore with the Santa Claus myth, she insisted: "I want my children's minds unfettered and open to scientific proof." Jimmy commented: "As far as I'm concerned, there just isn't any God."

Mrs. McCollum's father, Arthur G. Cromwell, professed atheist of Rochester, N. Y., testifying for the plaintiff, defined religious worship as "a chronic disease of the imagination contracted in childhood" (NEWSWEEK, July 2).

In a wordy wind-up McCollum counsel charged "religious fascism"—a pressure program to get more children into religion. Defendants, supported by lawyers of religious organizations, declared: "The Constitution . . . stems from God . . . does not protect atheists against the results of being atheists."

The three judges promised a decision late in November. Both sides have promised to appeal an adverse decision, even to the Supreme Court.

September 12, 1945: p. 20

Atheist Testifies in Test Of Religion in Schools Boy and Teachers Also on Stand In Illinois Trial



Mrs. McCollum and James Terry

By FLETCHER WILSON

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URBANA, Ill., Sept. 12.—Atheism took the witness stand yesterday in Champaign County Circuit Court, where Mrs. Vashti McCollum has brought a test suit against religious education in the Champaign public schools.

Mrs. McCollum, 32-year-old wife of a professor of horticulture at the University of Illinois, charges in her petition that her son James Terry McCollum, 10, had been embarrassed when he was forced to sit on a bench in a corridor while his classmates remained in the schoolroom for religious instruction, which she refused to let him attend, and

Atheist Testifies

that the other children made faces at him as they passed him in the hall.

Her suit argues that religious teaching in the schools violates both the State and Federal Constitutions and, even though attendance is voluntary, is contrary to the traditional American doctrine of separation of church and state. Both she and the Champaign school board have agreed to carry the case to the U. S. Supreme Court.

Grandfather Testifies

Arthur G. Cromwell, father of Mrs. McCollum, on taking the stand yesterday, "affirmed" that he would tell the truth and said that he is a member of the Rochester (N. Y.) Society of Free Thinkers.

After defense objection to his not taking the usual oath had been overruled by the court, Cromwell was asked by Landon L. Chapman, attorney for Mrs. McCollum, if his society considers the bible account "entirely superstitious." He added that the Bible story of the flood is regarded as a violation of natural law; the resurrection a physical impossibility and the prophets as "no such things."

"What are your doctrines with reference to God?" Chapman asked.

"We deny the existence of God."

His Views

Abe R. Peterson of Chicago, one of the defense attorneys, cross-examined by quoting from a pamphlet written by Cromwell.

"You also hold," Peterson said that: "Religion worship is a chronic disease of the imagination contracted in childhood."

"I do," answered Cromwell.

Again quoting:

"The Bible contains so much that is bad, so little that is good, and little or nothing that is true that it seems impossible that anyone who has read and studied it would recommend it as fit for our youth to read, much less as a moral inspiration. You believe that?"

"I certainly do."

"I take it," Peterson said, "that you believe all ministers are unscrupulous."

"I wouldn't say that," Cromwell replied.

"You don't believe in God unless he makes his personal appearance to you?"

"Absolutely correct. We take the position that we have no evidence of God."

"Then you are an atheist?"

"I praise God that I am."

"You raised your family to be atheists, didn't you?"

"I permitted my children to go to Sunday school and choose whatever creed appealed to them."

Atheist Testifies Boy Takes Stand

James Terry followed his grandfather to the witness stand after amusing himself in the courtroom most of the day by collecting news photographers' used flash bulbs. Under questioning, the 10-year-old swung the witness chair restlessly from side to side but was calm and confident in his answers.

He said that he did not like sitting outside the classroom on one occasion and in a music room on others while the rest of the children were having their religious lesson.

"Were you interested in this class in religious education?" Chapman asked.

"Yes," the boy replied.

"Did you want to take it?"

"Yes."

He said that he had taken the course part of the fourth grade year, but after that his mother refused permission.

"Do you like to study arithmetic and spelling?" Chapman inquired.

"No, not very much."

"Do you like religious education better?"

"Yeh, a lot better."

Cross-examination of the boy was deferred until today, when his mother will follow him on the stand.

The trial before a special three-judge court had resumed yesterday morning, in a half-filled courtroom. Mrs. F. A. Jorgensen, a religion teacher, testified that the Champaign classes are conducted from the fourth through the ninth grades, 30 minutes a week in the grade schools and 50 minutes in the junior high school.

Mrs. Jorgensen was catechized by Chapman as to what she taught and what she believed.

She said that she taught that the world was created by God.

"When?"

"In the beginning."

"Do you ever mention hell?"

"No, I have not."

She declared that she assumes that Jesus is within hearing distance of prayer.

Chapman asked for a story illustrating faith. The witness answered that her stories were long. Judge Frank B. Leonard suggested a short one and Mrs. Jorgensen sketched the holding back of the Red Sea by Moses as the children of Israel were fleeing Egypt.

Franklin asked her if she had any Mohammedan children in the classes.

She said, "No."

Mrs. Ruth Campbell, a sixth grade teacher, declared that the religious classes at the Col. Wolfe School are held in a room otherwise used for music.

Atheist Testifies

The Rev. Clarence J. Higgins, pastor of the Holy Cross Catholic Church, testified that Catholic instruction is given separately to Catholic children in three schools by him and his assistant as part of the Champaign Council of Religious Education plan.

Wanda Bash, 13, who, with her parents, has entered the case as an intervenor, was called by Chapman as his witness. A serious, sweet, blond bobby-soxer, with an honor society pin on, she said that she had taken the religious education for four years, enjoys it and is helped by it in getting along with other people.

The Rev. A. Ray Cartlidge, minister of the First Presbyterian Church and a leader in the religious education movement, described the setup of the religious courses. He said that an overall council includes representatives of the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish faiths. Separate committees then supervise the work of the individual groups.

The minister said that the classes were initiated at a time when juvenile delinquency had become a problem. He expressed opinion that the classes had improved this situation and also had contributed to religious co-operation and racial tolerance.

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