

“To the Advantage of Infidelity,” or How Not to Deal With Religion in America’s Public Schools

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The role of religion in public education continues to spark spirited public debate. This article argues that if religion is viewed functionally, then the state school system is permeated with religion. This raises important questions with regard to free exercise of religion, parental rights, and the role of the state in education. Short of getting the government out of the business of operating schools that inevitably transmit particular belief systems, universal parental choice in education and released-time religion classes are the best ways to deal with first-order questions that provoke different religious answers.

IN RECENT years, educators have shown a new concern about the place of religion, character development, and spirituality in public schools. This is not surprising, for juvenile violence, cheating, and teenage pregnancy are issues of considerable concern to parents and politicians as well as educators. We approach this important topic from an evangelical Christian perspective, fully aware that our views on the place of religion in our government school system are likely to prompt dissent from some fellow Christians, as well as from many public school officials and patrons.

In part, the current concern with religion in public schools reminds us of the terms *foxhole religion* and *deathbed conversion*. Society is in trouble, and perhaps God may be the answer to our troubles. It hardly needs saying, however, that the god we end up talking about in such circumstances may have

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little resemblance to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipped by Jews and Christians. The reason is clear: When individuals or even whole societies want to use God to solve their problems, the god they end up worshipping is not the God of the Bible but an idol of human creation. The God of biblical religion deserves worship and obedience for his own sake and refuses to be used by his worshipers.

If we try to use God to further our own petty schemes—even such important schemes as maintaining a safe and flourishing society—we end up worshipping an *idol*, which is another term for a false god. To put the matter another way, we might say that the worship of God is full of meaning but has no purpose beyond itself. Catholic theologian Romano Guardini (1935) nicely expresses this thought when he writes that the liturgical worship of the Catholic church entails learning how “to waste time for the sake of God”—wanting to be in God’s presence just because he is God and because the most appropriate human response to God is worship and adoration (p. 183). Parenthetically, we might add that we live in such a busy age that many of us do not even know how to waste time for each other’s sake—with friends, children, parents, spouses—how to be with people close to us simply because being with them is good in itself. We are not being facetious when we ask whether educators—not to mention legislators and business leaders—really want students to learn more about wasting time. Religion can sometimes be more than a little subversive of dominant cultural values, including our pervasive utilitarianism and busyness.

Another complicating factor in knowing how to deal with religion in public education is the fact that in some respects biblical religion is strongly anti-religious. The ancient Hebrew prophets were not exactly tolerant—in the modern, liberal, multicultural sense of the term—of religions other than their own.¹ Consider the biting sarcasm in the first verses of Isaiah 46, where the writer portrays the frantic efforts of the Babylonians to rescue their idols from the advancing Persian army—loading them onto weary beasts of burden. Not only will their gods fail to save their worshipers, taunts Isaiah, but such gods will not even be able to save themselves! More urbane, “civilized” people of antiquity could not understand the ancient Jews (just as the later Romans could not understand the exclusivity of the religious claims of Christians). Their totalistic claims were rude and uncivilized—what today many would call intolerant.

Today, evangelical Christians and traditional Catholics constitute a problem for liberal education, for they refuse to see the Gospel as just one religious truth among many. They see the claim that Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) as true for all people, not just for Christians. By contrast, liberalism has privatized religion. Believe whatever you want, and *we* (a

good word to watch closely, for it usually reveals the deeper unacknowledged assumptions of the writer, assumptions that nicely separate the sheep from the goats!) will tolerate your religion, says the liberal, for after all, religion is basically subjective and personal, a matter of private feelings rather than truth. Yet there remains a limit to liberal tolerance: Believe whatever you want so long as you do not insist that your religious beliefs are any better or truer than anyone else's. Those who relativize religion can afford to be very tolerant indeed—precisely because when religion is seen as private, personal, and subjective, it is culturally marginalized. Practice your religion at home and at church, but remember it has no place in the public square. Stay in your private religious ghetto, sit in the back of the bus, and behave yourself, and everything will be just fine. And, in any case, why would civilized people want to fight over the truth claims of religion—over one's personal beliefs and values? That's about as rational as seriously disputing the merits of different flavors of ice cream!

The problem of the place of religion in public education is further complicated by the fact that up until roughly the 17th century, Christians were interested in God and in what faith in God entailed but not much in Christianity or in religion. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962) writes, the Middle Ages may have been a very religious period, "but no one, so far as I have been able to ascertain, ever wrote a book specifically on religion" (p. 33). Indeed, many cultures historically had no word that was the equivalent of our modern term *religion*, and the plural *religions* is even less common (p. 23). In the West, however, beginning in the 17th century, there can be seen a shift from man's personal sense of the holy, of God, to what Smith refers to as "the observable product or historical deposit of its outworking" (p. 39).

What do Wilfred Cantwell Smith's observations mean for public education? Well, one thing they may help us educators understand is that many Christian parents may be less interested in their children learning about religion, even the Christian religion, than about their learning to love and serve God and neighbor. The situation may be similar to what we find in the teaching of ethics: There is very little evidence that taking a course in ethics makes people morally better people—at least in terms of their actions. Learning to live better lives entails developing one's character, and this requires relationships with other people who can serve as mentors and role models. Moral and spiritual growth for the Christian is not achieved mainly by studying about religion but rather by living as a member of the Body of Christ—that is, the church. Children learn ethics and religion by being part of a Christian family and a Christian community. This is not to say that the academic study of religion and ethics has no value for the Christian student. But unless such study is

preceded by character formation within the Christian family and community, its value will be very limited indeed.

Furthermore, secular liberals typically fail to see the religious dimensions of their own world views, world views for which they want to claim exclusive validity when it comes to the public domain. Adopting a *functional* view of religion—as sociologists, anthropologists, theologians, and cultural historians often do—sheds new light on this issue. Religion, from a functional perspective, is that dimension of culture that deals with the big questions—who are we, what is the meaning and purpose of life, and how should we live. It deals with questions of depth, transcendence, and ultimate meaning. The key question for Biblical theologians is not, Is there a god? but rather, Which god do you serve? Tillich (1951) writes that "whatever concerns man ultimately becomes god for him" (p. 211). He claims that "idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy" (p. 13) and maintains that "secular things, events, and realms can become matters of ultimate concern" (p. 221). An example of this is what he refers to as the "contemporary [1950] idolatry of religious nationalism" (p. 13). From a functional perspective, secular beliefs, values, and worldviews can be just as religious as can those that are supernatural.

Rather than being exemplary in its tolerance of competing worldviews, liberalism, in effect, claims it is the true religion, the only religion appropriate for our common, public, political life. Its focus on the autonomous self, on reason in the service of passion, and on the centrality of individual interest means that liberalism becomes a *de facto* competitor of other religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But, as we shall see below, it is a competitor that wants the field to itself; it wants a monopoly on the public life of peoples and of nations, including education (Johnson, 1995; Nord, 1995).

Liberalism has been able to get away with this power play by claiming that it is basically nonreligious, nonmetaphysical, neutral, and uniquely rational. It deals not with the many varying conceptions of the good society and the good life but with appropriate political procedures and processes for achieving public justice. The state is like a traffic cop who keeps automobiles from crashing into each other at busy intersections. That is the cop's job, but it is not his or her job to tell the occupants of these vehicles whether they should vacation at the beach, in the mountains, or in the city, or even if they should vacation at all. That is their private, personal decision to make.

But there is a problem with this way of understanding our situation, for liberalism is not nearly as neutral as it appears. It is not at all obvious that the good and the right can be so neatly separated, and, even as John Rawls (1993) admits in his more recent work, the state ought not favor one comprehensive

doctrine, including traditional liberalism, over others. "Justice as fairness," he argues, "does not seek to cultivate the distinctive virtues and values of the liberalisms of autonomy and individuality, or indeed of any other comprehensive doctrine" (p. 200). Rawls continues to believe that what he calls *political liberalism* can be accepted by people holding a wide spectrum of secular and religious worldviews—without sacrificing what is essential to their own traditions. Because there is an "overlapping consensus" with regard to basic constitutional essentials, government is able to function effectively in a pluralistic society such as ours (pp. 39-40, 150-154).

Whether Rawls is right about such an overlapping consensus is debatable, but the fact that he does not seem to appreciate the many ways in which government favors particular comprehensive doctrines over others in public education troubles us deeply. Our view is that public education as it now exists is not compatible with Rawls's understanding of political liberalism. If education dealt with nothing but the justice requirements of a politically liberal society, he might be right. But, clearly, that it not the case, nor will it ever be the case. Rawls seems not to understand that all education—from kindergarten to Ph.D.—rests on the views of particular comprehensive doctrines about the nature of the good life and the good society. What one chooses to study and how one chooses to study are far from neutral issues (Bates, 1993; Neuhaus, 1993; Nord, 1995). Should schools focus on worldly success by stressing math, science, political science, and economics, or should they focus on helping children learn to be more contemplative; more in touch with God and nature; more open to prayer, meditation, and learning how to live gently on the earth? Questions like these—as well as countless others—simply cannot be answered without reference to particular comprehensive doctrines, that is, without depending on one or another vision of the good life, whether of a secular religious sort or of a supernatural religious sort.² Even if education were simply the transmission of information, one would still have to make decisions about what information to transmit. But, of course, education is much more. It is the way a community initiates its children and young people into the community's vision of the good life. This is why almost all traditional societies simply took it for granted that education would include moral and religious instruction.

Within the framework of understanding we here propose—and specifically by adopting a functional definition of *religion*—it is easier to understand that at virtually no time in the past century and a half has America's government public school system—which Sidney Mead (1963), the renowned historian of American religion, aptly called our *established church*—been fair to all or even most children when it comes to the teaching of spirituality or religion. Historical evidence suggests that much of Horace

Mann's passionate interest in the common school was driven by his fear of Roman Catholics, with their foreign and papist ways, and by his desire to make sure that students were taught correct—what Mann referred to as *nonsectarian*—religion and morality. Initially, orthodox Protestants resisted Mann's vision of the common school, but eventually their fear of Catholicism led them, reluctantly in many cases, to lend their support to the common school movement and to overlook the fact that Mann disliked Calvinism and the various "unenlightened" expressions of belief born out of the Second Great Awakening just as much as Roman Catholicism. They also failed to see that Catholicism was theologically closer to traditional Protestantism than it was to Horace Mann's Unitarianism (Glenn, 1988; McCarthy, Skillen, & Harper, 1982).³

For all of the 19th century and well into our own century, Roman Catholics were at a decided disadvantage in the majority of public schools, as were also atheists, humanists, and various other religious and secular minorities. As Catholic Bishop John Hughes repeatedly pointed out in the 1840s, reading the Bible without comment and engaging in moral education without reference to religious doctrine may have seemed nonsectarian to Horace Mann, but such practices were decidedly sectarian in the eyes of most Roman Catholics as well as many Reformed and Lutheran Protestants (Kaestle, 1983). And, when these "dissenters" founded their own schools based on their own religious beliefs, public school partisans often claimed that such schools were undemocratic and divisive. Hostility to these schools sometimes led to efforts to suppress them. During the last quarter of the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th century, several states attempted to either regulate private religious schools into conformity with the public school model, force children to attend a public school for at least part of the school year, or simply abolish private schools (Randall, 1994; Ross, 1994).

The late 1800s and early 1900s also witnessed a gradual decline of Protestant influence in American public life, and after World War II, Protestant domination of public education was rather quickly displaced by a thoroughly secular education. The controversial U.S. Supreme Court decisions in 1962 and 1963 with regard to state-sponsored prayer and Bible reading merely culminated a long process of secularization of public education (Carper, 1998). Proponents of such education considered such secular education religiously neutral, but they were mistaken, for secular answers to life's big questions typically compete with and undermine traditional religious answers. Indeed, if one adopts a functional definition of religion and asks how ultimate commitments and worldview convictions actually operate in people's lives, it is fair to say that government public schools today are saturated with religion, but it is of a secular and humanistic variety.

We can almost hear the minds of some educators clicking shut at this point, but this understanding of secular humanism is well grounded. Indeed, the claim that secular humanism is religious was not made in the first instance by Catholic and Protestant fundamentalist critics but rather by secular humanists themselves. John Dewey (1934), for example, refers to "faith in the method of intelligence" (p. 86). The very last sentences of *A Common Faith* (1934) are these: "Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant" (p. 87). (Although mistaken about such a faith having always been implicitly "the common faith of mankind," Dewey's comment about making his faith explicit and militant was prophetic.) Elsewhere, Dewey (1908/1929) speaks of education, with its noble goal of democratizing and Americanizing students, as "an infinitely significant religious work" (p. 514). Dewey wants no competition for his humanistic religion, and he argues that those who see religion "as a natural expression of human experience" should oppose those religious institutions "which still bear the dogmatic and the feudal stamp (and which do not?) till they are in accord with these [i.e., his own religious] ideas" (p. 516). It would be wrong to introduce traditional religion into education, according to Dewey, for it "can be taught only by segregating pupils and turning them over at special hours to separate representatives of rival faiths" (p. 514)! In other words, the state should privilege the humanistic religion of John Dewey and exclude all others. This was basically the same situation as that introduced by Horace Mann 75 years earlier, except that the state was now supposed to establish not nonsectarian Protestantism but a form of scientific humanism and a religion of democracy.

Here, and in many other texts, Dewey makes crystal clear that he is deifying the state, democracy, and social unity. Enlightened educators "who believe in religion as a natural expression of human experience" will, according to Dewey (1908/1929), make it their business

to prevent all public educational agencies from being employed in ways which inevitably impede the recognition of the spiritual import of science and of democracy, and hence of that type or religion which will be the fine flower of the modern spirit's achievement. (p. 516)

Only scholars with theological and metaphysical blinders over their eyes can read passages like these without realizing that Dewey favors an establishment religion for America's public schools, a religion sponsored by the state, a state that will see to it that there are no competitors, at least not in public education. It is a religion that focuses on human beings, especially human

intelligence, and presupposes a naturalistic understanding of reality. It is thus clearly a direct competitor with traditional theistic religions.

It would be a mistake to think that in the last decades of the 20th century we had finally achieved religious neutrality in our government public schools. Any fair reading of most sex education, values clarification, home economics, and even many science texts, makes abundantly clear that government schools continue to indoctrinate in religion, at least if we accept a functional definition of religion (Nord, 1995). That this fact has been largely ignored by the education establishment, by the media, by our courts, and by most political liberals testifies not to the paucity of evidence but to the closed-mindedness of those who do not really want the dominant humanism of public education to have to compete with Christianity and other traditional religions.

Repeatedly, government school students are taught that life is about self-fulfillment and satisfying one's personal desires, a view that directly competes with and undermines the traditional biblical view that human beings ought above all else to love God and neighbor. They are taught that value claims, including moral claims, are relative and subjective rather than objective and absolute. Freedom is viewed as an absence of restraints rather than what results from obeying God (or, for example, for Plato, conforming one's life to the good, the beautiful, and the true). Education ought to cultivate autonomy in students according to liberal establishment educators, a view that directly competes with the biblical focus on heteronomy (living under the authority of God). In biology texts, the point is seldom clearly made that there is a huge difference between embracing a naturalistic method for doing science and promulgating a metaphysical worldview that sees all of life in materialistic and atheistic terms. Indeed, rather than stating that students are being taught these humanistic doctrines, it would be more accurate to say that they are being indoctrinated in them, for in virtually no cases are they given reasons why these beliefs should be embraced nor are they presented with reasonable alternatives (Baer, 1982, 1977; Glenn, 1987; Johnson, 1993, 1995; Nord, 1995; Vitz, 1977).

Such indoctrination was particularly prominent in values clarification and in most of the home economics texts examined by various scholars in the 1980s. For instance, the authors of these materials do not discuss arguments for and against moral relativism or egoistic hedonism. These and alternative positions are not even named. Rather it is simply assumed that values are private matters of personal opinion and choice and that life is about satisfying one's individual desires (Strike, 1987). Indeed, an author like Sidney Simon (1975), rather than presenting reasoned responses to those who objected to values clarification, typically either ignored their criticisms or condemned

the critics. Here, for instance, is his response to a balanced, even generous, critique of his work that appeared in *Phi Delta Kappan* during the heyday of values clarification:

If John Stewart had been less petulant and cranky, I might be willing to listen to him, but as it is, I don't trust him. I don't think he is really concerned with making this life better for teachers and children.

His real interest seems to be with dazzling his academic, ivory tower peer group. I find that a useless recreation and reactive rather than directive. It is like the kid in the neighborhood who can't play baseball and so stands two streets away mumbling deprecations out of earshot at the kids who are having a marvelous, joyful funfilled ball game.

On the other hand, perhaps he is envious about the many ways we in the values clarification movement have been useful to thousands of teachers. Our popularity makes some stuffy people rage for our jugular veins. More likely it is simply his propensity for splitting hairs. Well, while he mouths his philosophical pretensions, I will continue to devote my own energies to inventing more and more creative ways for people to look at their lives and for making this world better for kids who have to go to school. (p. 688)

We quote this response at length because it nicely represents the anti-intellectualism that has been part and parcel of values clarification, home economic textbooks, decision-making and self-esteem curricula, and other materials that deal with human relations, values, and related issues. In general, the authors and proponents of such materials have simply ignored criticism of their work, and when they have responded to critics, their replies typically have been remarkably unsophisticated from an ethical and philosophical standpoint.

Many educators have tried to repudiate the charge that public school curricula teach secular religion by claiming that secular humanism is not a particular church or organization or even a single coherent body of doctrine in the sense that Christianity or Judaism is, and thus the use of the term *religion* to talk about secular humanism is inappropriate. But this objection does not succeed. If a public school teacher, for example a teacher who belongs to no particular church or religious organization, tells his or her students that life is about learning to love God and that God can be known through believing that Jesus is the Messiah, that is more than enough for our courts to require that teacher to cease and desist. One does not have to endorse a particular church or present Christian doctrine in any thorough and systematic manner to catch the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union and eventually the courts. Why then should it be any less serious an infraction of the First Amendment to deify democracy; to teach students that life is about satisfying one's own

desires; to teach them that the individual, rather than God, is the focal point of existence; or dogmatically to assert that the universe is purposeless? To be sure, *secular humanism* is not a single religion or organization, but the term is meaningful in that it nicely identifies a range of values and beliefs that deal with who we are as human beings, the meaning and purpose of life, and how we ought to live. If establishment educators would spend less time ridiculing protesting parents and their claims about secular humanism and more time trying to understand their concerns, they would better serve the public in a pluralistic society.

It is also worth noting that secular humanists openly spoke of themselves as religious as long as most Americans still took it for granted that public schools had the responsibility to teach religion and morality. But when the Supreme Court, during the post-World War II period, began to push theistic religion and various elements of Christian morality out of government public schools, humanists began to drop the descriptor *religious* when referring to themselves. Humanist writers never explained just why they made this change, a change nicely seen in the evolution of *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (Kurtz, 1973), but one does not exactly need to be a rocket scientist to understand that making this change made it possible for them to teach their essentially religious doctrines in government public schools without fear of censure from the courts.⁴

To repeat our earlier point, if one takes a functional view of religion, then it is apparent that there already is a great deal of spirituality and religion in government public schools and that it is an intolerant sort of religion that brooks no competitors. We are fully aware that state and federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have refused to adopt a functional definition of religion in cases dealing with religious establishment in education, and it is our view that this is one of the major reasons why the Court's rulings on religion and education are largely unprincipled and incoherent. The Court's stand is remarkable when one remembers that *Torcaso v. Watkins* (1961) held Maryland's requirement that public office holders declare belief in the existence of God unconstitutional. In reversing the Maryland Court of Appeal's decision, the justices distinguished between "those religions based on a belief in the existence of God as against those religions founded on different beliefs," and appended a footnote that reads: "Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism, and others" (p. 495). Also in *United States v. Seeger* (1965) and *Welsh v. United States* (1970), two Supreme Court cases that deal with conscientious objection to military service, the Court adopted what was essentially a functional definition of religion. In *Seeger*, the Court refers to a "sincere and meaningful belief

which occupies in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that filled by God of those admittedly qualifying for the exemption [to military service]" as coming "within the statutory definition" (p. 176). In Seeger, the issue was specifically whether the petitioner believed in a Supreme Being, as was required by the statutory law, but in *Welsh*, the petitioner did not believe in the realm of the supernatural at all. In both cases, however, the refusal to kill was not just a casual personal choice but rather was the result of a conscience encumbered by deep and consistent beliefs about the nature of human beings and moral obligation. In effect, the Court recognized that to act against such belief would be to violate one's personal integrity at a very deep level and that liberal societies should not so violate conscience unless there is a compelling state interest for doing so.⁵

We fully recognize that our courts face an incredibly difficult conundrum in the issue of religion and education. On one hand, they believe—with good reason—that government should not use its power and resources to foster particular religious beliefs or to hinder the free exercise of religion among public school students.⁶ On the other hand, they do not want to do anything to undermine the basic institution of the public school, an institution with a long history and much loyalty from American citizens. But the only way the courts can achieve both of these goals is to operate with two different definitions of religion, one for religious establishment cases and one for free exercise cases. The courts simply are not willing to face the fact that such a procedure leads to a clear *reductio ad absurdum*, namely that traditional theists may not encourage public school students to believe in God and in traditional religious doctrines, but, on the other hand, atheists and secular humanists may teach their particular beliefs about human nature, about the purpose and meaning of life, and about how we ought to live, in spite of the fact that these are beliefs that directly compete with and undermine traditional religious teaching (Johnson, 1995). This is **CONFUSION** in capital letters. How can any serious person, when the issue is presented in this manner, claim that the framers had anything even remotely like this in mind when they wrote the Constitution?

If the above reasoning is sound, then it would appear that the most just way to deal with religion in government public schools would be to get the state totally out of the business of actually operating schools. As we have already argued, in the broad, functional sense of the term *religious*, all education is inescapably religious. Every coherent curriculum rests on certain foundational beliefs about human nature, what the good life is like, how we ought to live, and so forth, and there simply is no neutral way to deal with these questions, and this is true whether we think of neutrality among different religions or neutrality between the religious and the secular. Clearly, neither the

Unitarian/Protestant, "nonsectarian" religion of Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann nor John Dewey's religion of democracy and scientific humanism was religiously neutral (Healey, 1962; Michaelsen, 1970). And exactly the same is true of the religious pronouncements of values clarification, home economics textbooks, and other parts of the curriculum of public schools today. Furthermore, there are no good reasons to believe that secular reason is epistemologically privileged over religious reason nor that secular comprehensive doctrines (what we might accurately call *secular religions*) are obviously more reasonable than supernatural religions. Postmodernists have gotten it right when they question the hegemonic claims of Enlightenment rationalism, but they have not seemed eager to apply their insights to the issue of religion and public education.

Because it is hugely unlikely that government will get out of the business of operating schools and limit its efforts to guaranteeing the equitable funding of and access to education, educators should work for the more attainable goal of universal school choice: The state should make sure that all parents have the economic means to send their children to schools that are consonant with the parents' deepest moral, religious, and philosophical commitments. Such choice is clearly enunciated in the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*. Stephen Arons (1983) nicely sums up our current situation when he writes that "we have created a system of school finance that provides free choice for the rich and compulsory socialization for everyone else" (p. 212). The rich can always afford real estate in neighborhoods with good schools or else they can send their children to independent, nongovernment schools. The poor are stuck with what they have, with a system that in all too many cases is horribly failing their children. It should be no surprise to anyone that grassroots inner-city Blacks and Hispanics are today among the strongest supporters of school choice.

A universal choice plan could be instituted in such a way that it would not only respect freedom of religion and conscience but also would enhance distributive justice. This could be achieved by pegging the value of school vouchers inversely to family income levels, thus for the first time enabling the poor in America to compete effectively for first-rate education for their children. Any acceptable voucher plan would also take into account the state's compelling educational interest that every child learn to read and write, develop some proficiency in math and science, and achieve basic competence in civics and American history, for without these they will never become economically and/or civically competent. The state also has a compelling interest in seeing that choice schools do not unjustly discriminate on the basis of race or ethnic background. Given the inescapably religious nature of all education, however, the state should be required to bear the burden of proof if it

wishes to intervene further in the curricula and other affairs of independent choice schools. Except for these issues of compelling state interest, it should be just as cautious about meddling in the affairs of independent choice schools as it would be in interfering in the internal operations of churches, synagogues, and mosques.

A comprehensive plan that enables all parents, regardless of economic means, to choose the kind of education they wish for their children is the best overall policy alternative for public education. But even if universal school choice becomes available for all citizens, it will still be important to try to find fair and effective ways to deal with religion/spirituality within our present education system of government-operated schools, for these will almost certainly be with us for many years to come. Two proposals we find unacceptable. The first, what might be called the *cafeteria* approach, is for schools to expose students to a variety of religious and ethical views and then encourage them to choose for themselves what most appeals to them. But this approach fails for at least two reasons. First, most students are not nearly mature enough to make intelligent decisions about such deep matters, matters that will have a profound effect on their lives far into the future. Second, teachers are not sufficiently competent and do not have enough time to teach about different religions and moral viewpoints in a fair and comprehensive manner. Just take the case of Buddhism. Those who know a little about Buddhism think they know a great deal. When they learn more, they realize that they know almost nothing (Baer & Carper, 1998/1999).

A second suggested approach for dealing with religion within our present school system is to teach about religion and to do so in an objective manner. But this approach also fails. Time does not permit teaching about various religions in anything but the most superficial manner, and who is to decide what *objective* means? Take but a single issue: Is it objective to teach the Bible as literature rather than as scripture, as our courts have indicated they would find acceptable? We think not. For most Christians, the Bible clearly is not well described as literature; it is *scripture* or *Word of God*, and these terms carry with them all kinds of theological baggage that nonbelievers find unacceptable. Furthermore, who would do this objective teaching in government schools? Will it be a Christian fundamentalist, a graduate of Moody Bible Institute, who believes the Bible is inerrant and that salvation is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ? Or will it be a Harvard Divinity School postmodernist who considers much of the Bible oppressive to gays and women and who believes that we must essentially rewrite the Bible for our own age? How could we possibly resolve issues like these without endless controversy and without in the end permitting one powerful minority or

another to impose its worldview on everyone else (Baer & Carper, 1998/1999)?

Within present educational structures, the only approach that will even remotely satisfy requirements of justice would be something like the old released-time model for religious instruction, which was introduced as a progressive reform in Gary, Indiana, in 1914. Such an arrangement permits priests, pastors, rabbis, and others to instruct students in small groups in the religious and moral beliefs of their parents. A released-time model honestly accepts the fact that we are a religiously diverse society and that trying to teach religion/spirituality (or even about religion/spirituality) to all students in common classes will inevitably lead to distortion and indoctrination (Baer & Carper, 1998/1999).

Consider just one dimension of the one-size-fits-all approach: Presenting students with bits and snippets from various religious traditions inevitably carries with it relativistic overtones. We would never think of teaching science by presenting students with a mix of conventional science, astrology, Lysenko, and phrenology and then encouraging them to make up their own minds. We want our children taught true science, and most thoughtful parents also want them taught true morality and true religion. When they are well established in the truth, then many parents probably would find it agreeable that their children learn about other religious and moral traditions. But for the most part, we believe this is best left to the college years (Baer & Carper, 1998/1999).

A good deal of unnecessary controversy could be avoided if sex education, human relations, decision making, moral instruction, and other controversial subjects having to do with who we are and how we should live were removed from the general school curriculum and included within the released-time component. Take the case of moral instruction. For adherents of biblical religions, faith in God and morality are intimately related. I John 4:20 reads: "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." And I John 3:17 asks: "But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" Christians, in other words, cannot legitimately separate their relationship with God from their relationship with their neighbors. Or, take another problem: Most secular philosophical approaches to morality focus on correctly enunciating specific principles of justice and spelling out clearly the meaning of human flourishing. Following in the tradition of Socrates, it is simply assumed that knowledge of the truth is what is most necessary for acting in an ethical manner. But contrast this with traditional Christian thinking about these issues: A person can know the good and the right and still not do

it, and, above all, Christians need to experience what it means to let the old self be crucified with Christ so that the power of the risen Christ can enable them to live as they should. What all this means is that for Christians, neither religion nor morality can be dealt with adequately without dealing with both together, a task really quite beyond the capability of the public school, except possibly in a released-time setting.

Would children under a released-time arrangement become less tolerant of others who hold different moral and religious beliefs, or would they become incapable of participating effectively in a democratic polity? We think not. For one thing, no good evidence exists that children educated in independent religious schools or in Catholic parochial schools (or, for that matter, children who are home schooled) are any less tolerant of others than are children taught in government public schools. And a recent study by Jay Greene (1998) suggests that private schools show, on average, greater racial tolerance and tend to transmit stronger democratic values than do their state counterparts. This should not be surprising, for a central theological conviction of Christians is that people should come to faith in Christ not under coercion but freely. And politically, the great majority of Christians are strongly committed to a democratic polity and to religious freedom—for everyone, not just for Christians.

Clearly, religious Americans have no monopoly on bigotry and intolerance. Indeed, we would like to suggest that the entire discussion of religion/spirituality in public education would be greatly facilitated if educators would abandon the common practice of referring to religious schools, curricula, textbooks, and students as *sectarian*. It is really quite amazing that in an age as sensitive as our own to racial and ethnic slurs, even our courts—including the U.S. Supreme Court—continue to use the biased formulas *religious = sectarian* and *secular = nonsectarian*. It is amazing because the term *sectarian* has a disreputable heritage. Its meanings include narrow minded, schismatic, heretical, unorthodox, and rigid. Historically, the term *sectarian* has been used to marginalize and disenfranchise one's religious and political opponents. Both Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann used *sectarian* to refer, not to religion in general—as is common today—but to the wrong kind of religion. They claimed that their own nonsectarian Unitarian/Enlightenment religion emphasized what was truly common among all Christians. It was based not on dogma, superstition, and revelation, as were sectarian religions like Calvinism and Catholicism, but rather on reason and common sense. It was rational, universal, and compatible with science, and it deserved to become the basis of public morality and politics (Glenn, 1988; Healey, 1962).

Horace Mann, of course, like virtually all educators of his day, believed that public schooling would not be complete without the teaching of religion

and morality, but these needed to be nonsectarian. He simply assumed that Bible readings would be from the King James Bible, and he claimed—mistakenly, we believe—that such nonsectarian religion was common to all Christians. Not surprisingly, Mann's nonsectarian religion was theologically almost identical to his own Unitarianism (Baer, 1990).

As controversy developed concerning school funding between the early 1820s and early 1840s in New York City, Roman Catholic Bishop John Hughes identified what Rockne McCarthy, James Skillen, and William Harper (1982) describe as "the fundamental dilemma created by every effort to maintain a majoritarian, monopolistic public school system in a religiously pluralistic society" (p. 67), namely that whatever religion is taught will inevitably offend one or another religious minority, or, if all traditional religion is excluded, the state will end up giving an unfair advantage to secularism. Commenting on precisely this dilemma, Richard Baer (1990) writes,

For Catholics, who were not in favor of individual interpretation of Scripture, the simple reading of Scripture (especially from the King James version) commonly practiced in the "public" schools was anything but a religiously neutral or "nonsectarian" activity. It was an establishment of a majority's religion against a minority's. Moreover, Bishop Hughes noted, if religious instruction were altogether omitted from the school curriculum, this would merely leave students "to the advantage of infidelity." (p. 457)

It is not difficult for us today to understand that Horace Mann's claim that his Unitarianism was nonsectarian was far sooner self-serving than self-evident. But the contemporary claim that secular education is nonsectarian and that religious education—not just some religious education but all religious education—is sectarian is just as problematic. The background for this claim of a nonsectarian secular realm can be traced back to roughly the time of the Civil War, when the term *sectarian* began to be used to describe, not the wrong kind of religion, but religion in general, while at the same time the term *nonsectarian* began to be applied to the secular or nonreligious. But why should we think of secular education as being nonsectarian, or as neutral, or as somehow more scientific or rational than religiously grounded education? Even the most cursory examination of secular school curricula in government public schools makes it clear that every secular curriculum rests on a variety of initial assumptions about the nature of human beings and the good life and that these assumptions are in no way inherently more rational or scientific than are, for example, the underlying assumptions of a religious curriculum in a Christian or Jewish school (Nord, 1995). All human thought enterprises and research programs and all educational institutions employ basic

assumptions about the nature of reality that may be rational, yet they are not compellingly rational for every reasonable person. To argue that school curricula grounded in religious worldviews are inherently more sectarian than school curricula grounded in secular worldviews is simply a case of special pleading. Indeed, insofar as close to 90% of Americans claim to believe in God or in the realm of the supernatural, on simple empirical grounds it would appear that secular thinking is more sectarian than religious thinking.

This is not to dispute the fact that in public life, particularly in government, it is eminently reasonable for citizens of a religiously pluralistic nation such as our own to set aside religious differences and seek common ground in beliefs and values that are widely accepted. Indeed, it makes little sense to talk of a distinctive Presbyterian way of building superhighways, or of a Jewish way to dredge harbors, or of Catholic procedures for running the post office. On the other hand, precisely the same is true of secular thinking. What possible advantage might there be in advertising that one was a Marxist, an atheist, or a secular humanist when trying to get a zoning change approved in rural Alabama or when trying to gain passage of a particular local government ordinance in a highly diverse township in New Jersey? When trying to forge public policy, we typically do not emphasize our differences but rather look for common ground and overlapping consensus. This is simple common sense.

Education, however, is not the same as politics. In talking about human nature and human flourishing, it makes very good sense to refer to an orthodox Jewish view of marriage, a Catholic view of abortion, or an evangelical Christian view of divorce—just as it does to speak of a utilitarian view of land-use management or a neo-Kantian, rights-based view of how we ought to treat animals. In the realm of government, we find that we can often (but not always: think of tough issues like abortion or euthanasia) set aside our religious, moral, and metaphysical differences and emphasize what we have in common. We can look for a kind of Rawlsian overlapping consensus when it comes to formulating constitutional principles and basic procedures of government. But this bracketing of our various religious and metaphysical commitments is hugely impractical, probably impossible, in education, a realm where one's worldview commitments and understandings of human flourishing inevitably will inform the curriculum, and these understandings will be anything but neutral. From one perspective, it is appropriate to speak of all of them—religious and secular alike—as sectarian. Or, to put the matter another way, from the standpoint of a functional view of religion, all education is inevitably religious, and the only interesting question within our present winner-takes-all approach to education and curriculum is who will be the winner who gets to impose his or her sectarian views on everyone else. Clearly, postmodernist epistemology would seem to confirm this analysis—

even though few postmodernists seem willing to openly discuss the implications of their thinking with respect to the monopoly access government-operated schools have to public monies.

If all human thinking is, from one perspective, sectarian, then on what possible grounds do our courts, the media, and most educators continue to stigmatize religious Americans as sectarians, while at the same time describing secular Americans as nonsectarians? To be sure, the term *sectarian* still can be used in the sense of *denominational*, as in the expression *sectarian prayers*, but even that usage of the term implies that there is a contrasting orthodox mainstream, and clearly it is not within the legitimate purview of government to declare just which religious group constitutes that orthodox mainstream. On what possible grounds is the secular declared to be orthodox and mainstream, whereas the religious is deemed unorthodox and parochial? We have not yet heard a satisfactory answer to this question, just as we have never met anyone who preferred to be described as a sectarian.

The implications of this analysis for education are far reaching. At the very least, it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that our present system of monopoly public funding for government schools is fundamentally unjust and constitutionally suspect. Much depends on our understanding of pluralism and multiculturalism. One does not need to be a sociologist to understand that particular traditions and communities will survive and flourish only if parents and communities (we here refer to communities of people committed to different moral and religious and metaphysical understandings of the world, not to political jurisdictions) are able to play a dominant role in the education of their children. A one-size-fits-all and a winner-takes-all model of education, namely that which now prevails in our government public schools, is ultimately destructive of genuine diversity. Indeed, history makes clear that the common school was founded in the first part of the 19th century as an antidote to pluralism. Provide incentives or even require all children to attend government schools and then turn up the heat under the melting pot to force the dross to the surface, where it can be properly segregated and finally eliminated. What remains after this refining process will then be acceptable to the cultural elites that control the government-operated common schools. But this is a recipe for state-directed uniformity, not a model for diversity and genuine pluralism!

To be sure, there is a danger in permitting citizens the freedom to educate their children according to their own plural backgrounds and beliefs, just as there was a danger at the time of the founding in rejecting the European model of territorial, state churches as the preferred path toward achieving social cohesiveness in the new republic. But religion in America flourished under disestablishment, and there is good reason to believe that dis-

establishment a second time would lead to a renaissance of education in America (McCarthy et al., 1982). But this is a consequentialist argument, whereas the basic argument we present is a principled one based on our understanding of what justice demands with respect to freedom of conscience and religion. Marx is reputed to have said that trust is good, but control is better. Our argument in this article is that control may be good, but trust is better. At any rate, trusting parents to make good decisions with regard to the education of their own children—in spite of the gloomy predictions of establishment K-12 educators to the contrary and notwithstanding the arrogant pronouncements of the National Education Association that professional educators know what is best for other people's children—seems to us more worthy of a free people. At the beginning of a new century and a new millennium, it would be salutary for us as a free people to be more honest about the structure of our government public schools. Clearly, they are no longer local schools except in terms of financial support. Virtually all of the important educational decisions in public schools are today made at the state level and increasingly, because of the power of financial incentives, at the federal level. But even if we still had local schools, we would still have to question their suitability for a free people. They were founded to foster social control of "suspect" minorities, and they remain instruments of state coercion and social control to this day. All that has changed is the worldview commitments of those who exercise that control. Not only has our present system of government schools failed to deliver quality education to many children, particularly to racial and ethnic minorities, but it also is a system that guarantees continual strife and controversy concerning who controls what our schools will be and what they will teach. This should not surprise us, for the educational paradigms Horace Mann drew from were primarily those of the Prussian military state and of postrevolutionary France (Glenn, 1988).

In conclusion, we would underscore our earlier point: If one accepts a functional view of religion, then the truth about government public schools today is not only that they are utterly pervaded with religion—of a secular sort—but that they are also thoroughly intolerant of all competitors. Secular religion and spirituality can in our present system legitimately be imposed on students, for they are considered by the courts to be religiously neutral, but theistic religion must be excluded. This is hardly a model of religious tolerance. A released-time model, on the other hand, is thoroughly consistent with liberal political commitments.

Ideally, government should get out of the business of operating schools altogether. But because such a move is at present politically impossible, we ought—as a fallback position—to implement universal school choice with all deliberate speed. But until universal school choice is implemented, and in

those government public schools which parents choose for their children under a universal choice plan, the released-time model may well be the best option we have. Released-time would empower parents to make decisions about their children's religious/spiritual education and would go a long way toward eliminating the kinds of societal conflict James Davison Hunter (1991) so well describes in his important book *Culture Wars*.

NOTES

1. For the most part, the term *liberal* is used throughout this article in the classical sense of English liberalism. According to this usage, both Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan would be considered liberals, even though in popular usage Reagan would normally be called a conservative.

2. The phrase *of a secular religious sort* is not a misprint but is used deliberately. Taoism, Confucianism, and some forms of Buddhism do not entail belief in the supernatural, but we still easily accept them as religions. Similarly, as we shall argue below, from a functional perspective, it is thoroughly appropriate to refer to secular humanism as religious or as a religion.

3. We consider the works of Glenn (1988) and McCarthy, Skillen, and Harper (1982) to be among the most important books on education of the past 50 years, but, unfortunately, they have been almost totally ignored by most professional educators.

4. *Humanist Manifesto I* (Kurtz, 1973) openly speaks of the position it endorses as "religious humanism" (p. 7). The concluding paragraph begins with the sentence, "So stand the theses of religious humanism" (p. 10). By contrast, *Humanist Manifesto II* avoids describing humanism as religious, but it uses many terms typically found in traditional religion. It speaks of "faith" (p. 13), "the ultimate goal [of humanity]" (p. 14), "positive belief in the possibilities of human progress" (p. 15), and proclaims that "no deity will save us; we must save ourselves" (p. 16). It concludes that "commitment to all humankind is the highest commitment of which we are capable" (p. 23). The authors recognize that "some forms of political doctrine . . . function religiously" (p. 17), specifically mentioning capitalist and communist viewpoints, but they seem not to think of themselves as religious, or, if they do, they are keeping quiet about it!

5. Madison's original wording of what became the religion clauses of the First Amendment spoke directly to the right of conscience: "The Civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext, infringed" (Cord, 1982, p. 7).

6. Stephen Bates (1993) points out that "the mission of public education forces the government to do what the First Amendment as a rule frowns on: select particular ideas, package them, and present them with the imprimatur of the state" (p. 229). See also Justice Robert H. Jackson's trenchant remarks with regard to compelled orthodoxy of belief in the public schools in his opinion of the Court in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943).

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