

Functional Definition of Religion

Why a Functional Definition of Religion Is Necessary If Justice is to Be Achieved in Public Education⁽¹⁾

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Is it possible to teach morality and character education effectively in our present system of public schools in America? Is public education--from Kindergarten all the way through the Ph.D.--fair to religious and cognitive minorities? Indeed, is it even possible for government actually to operate schools in a manner that is consistent with the demands of our Constitution and the American political compact? What does justice require regarding the funding of education in a democratic and pluralistic society? Questions such as these have troubled educators ever since the founding of the common school in the 1830's and 1840's and the establishment of state universities during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Horace Mann, one of the guiding spirits in the founding of the common school, believed that his Unitarian/liberal Protestant understanding of Christianity was "nonsectarian" and thus appropriate for all students in what was even in his own day a fairly pluralistic society, but Calvinists and Roman Catholics understandably did not concur. Catholic bishop John Hughes argued that the common school could not possibly be neutral or nonsectarian for Catholics when teachers routinely read from the Protestant King James Bible and pressed Protestant/Unitarian religious teachings on Catholic students. On the other hand, if religion were omitted altogether from the common school curriculum, then, Bishop Hughes argued, students would simply be left "to the advantage of infidelity" (quoted in McCarthy, Oppewal, Peterson, & Spykman, 1981, p. 90).

Americans have never satisfactorily resolved this question of religion and public education. During the post-World War II period, Bible readings, religious instruction, and prayers were gradually eliminated from government public schools, and the curriculum became progressively secular.⁽²⁾

The courts assumed secular school curricula to be religiously neutral and thus not in conflict with the religion clause of the First Amendment.⁽³⁾

But is it really possible for a secular curriculum to be genuinely neutral with respect to religion? I think not. Any genuine education (as over against simple instruction, say, in how to type or how to operate a snowblower) inevitably rests on particular religious or metaphysical views regarding the nature of the good life and the good society. Quite apart from whether a school sponsors specific instruction in morality and religion, its curriculum, including decisions about which courses are to be taught and how they are to be taught, will inevitably presuppose particular metaphysical and religious views about who we are and about the world in which we live. Kenneth Strike (1982) states flatly: "In a liberal state publicly controlled schools cannot educate their students" (p. 87). He explains this strong statement by adding: "I do not mean that schools cannot succeed in teaching basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Instead, I hold that liberal public schools cannot coherently transmit private values, and I hold that the transmission of private values is necessary for genuine education to occur."⁽⁴⁾

In trying to sort out questions about teaching religion and values or promoting good character in public education, we will make little progress unless we rethink the meaning of the term "religion" as it has to do with public education. My basic thesis is this: public justice in education and respect for the First Amendment's religion clause demand that we adopt a functional definition of religion--at least for political and constitutional purposes. That is, in reflecting on the role of religion in education we should not focus primarily on the substantive content of religion or on some hallmark of religion such as belief in a supernatural power, but rather on what role religion plays culturally. This move is necessary precisely because neither religious nor secular answers to the Big Questions are religiously or metaphysically neutral. By "Big Questions" I refer to questions about the meaning and purpose of life, how we ought to live, and the nature of the good life and the good society.

My argument rests on the assumption that human beings are creatures that do not live simply by instinct but rather regularly inquire about the meaning and purpose of their existence. We create symbols and myths, tell stories, and constantly talk with each other about what reality is like and about how we ought to live. Paul Tillich described religion in terms of the category of "ultimate concern." Emile Durkheim argued that secular stories and myths can provide ultimate meaning for a society just as well as those that are supernatural. Secular descriptions of reality, in other words, can function just like supernatural descriptions.

Despite impassioned denial, even ridicule, from many academics and the liberal media, the evidence for the claim that our public schools are dominated by secular humanistic values and beliefs is overwhelming (Baer, 1982). My claim, of course, is not that some comprehensive system of thinking called "secular humanism" is being taught in our public schools and universities. Even less credible is the view that there exists an organized conspiracy, with secular humanists across America collaborating to indoctrinate public school children in their particular beliefs. My argument is much more specific, namely that a detailed examination of curricula in America's government public schools demonstrates clearly that humanistic ideas and values dominate public education in America. Our schools are pervasively secular in an ideological sense. In virtually all government public schools humanistic values and beliefs are taught about the nature of the good life and the good society, and many of these values and beliefs directly compete with and undermine traditional Christian and Jewish beliefs. In sharp contrast, the latter are routinely excluded from school curricula. Unfortunately, the public school education establishment has for the most part either ignored or caricatured the claim that secular humanist beliefs and values are prominent in public school curricula, even though evidence in support of the claim is both clear and abundant (Baer, 1989; Vitz, 1977; 1986).

It is by no means necessary to adopt the claim of an organized conspiracy in order to make a strong case against the teaching of secular humanist beliefs and values in government public schools. Our courts routinely hold that public schools violate the Constitution's establishment clause if they recommend even fragments of Christian doctrine. For instance, no public school would be permitted to teach students that the meaning and purpose of life is to be found in obedience to Jesus Christ, or even that students ought to follow Jesus' example of self-giving, sacrificial love. By contrast, overwhelming evidence exists that our public schools are teaching many elements of secular humanist belief, often in very sensitive and controversial areas like morality and sex education. The denial that secular humanist beliefs and values play a major role in public school curricula is little more than an ignorant and unthinking reflex for most liberal academics. But the claim is a strong one (Baer, 1977; 1980; 1981; 1982).

Now, if these secular humanist beliefs and values function like religion, then if we are to achieve justice in public education we must treat them like religion. Moreover, it is important to remember that the assertion that secular humanism is a religion was not originally made by conservative Catholics or Protestant fundamentalist critics of humanism but by humanists themselves. Writing as a nontheistic or secular humanist, John Dewey (1934) concludes his book, *A Common Faith*, with the words: "Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always implicitly been the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant" (p. 87). Although Dewey's claim that his humanistic faith was always "implicitly the common faith of mankind" is simply mistaken, his statement about making it "explicit and militant" was prophetic, and it is no wonder that thoughtful religious leaders reacted with alarm. Their concern was only heightened when Dewey (1929) proclaimed that by advancing a common culture America's public schools "are performing an infinitely significant religious work" (p. 514).

One of the strongest reasons for insisting on a functional definition of religion when dealing with public education is that not to do so results in a *reductio ad absurdum* of monumental proportions. If we demand that our definition of religion must include some kind of belief in the supernatural, then the way is left open for atheists and secular humanists to promulgate their particular beliefs and worldviews in government public schools, for these views are considered nonreligious and thus cannot be excluded from public schools on the grounds of constituting a religious establishment or violating the free exercise of religion. In sharp contrast, Christians, religious Jews, and other religionists must remain silent in the public schools, for their views are religious, and thus the state is constitutionally prohibited from recommending them to children as true and worthy of acceptance.

Within such a framework, government schools are free to press on children humanistic beliefs such as the doctrine that the meaning and purpose of life is found in satisfying one's own needs and desires (the term "self-fulfillment" is often used). Under the banner of secular neutrality, sex education curricula and home economics texts simply assume and implicitly teach that rational behavior is self-interested behavior. Public schools routinely indoctrinate school children with humanistic beliefs like those found in Values Clarification, including the metaethical view that moral claims are subjective and relative.⁽⁵⁾ Christians, on the other hand, who believe that life's meaning is found in learning to love God and serve one's neighbor, that committing one's life to Jesus Christ is the essence of rational behavior, and that morality consists of more than one's personal preferences must remain silent in our government public schools. To believe that the founders of our republic could have had anything remotely like this arrangement in mind strikes me as bizarre and truly absurd. I can find no convincing historical evidence that would support such a position.

To be sure, as Americans we have developed practical ways of limiting religious influence on a broad range of "secular" activities, including many of those carried on by government. In part, this is because we have held so much of our religious and moral tradition in common that it has been relatively easy in many of our "secular" endeavors to presuppose this commonality and not get bogged down in endless controversy over those religious and moral beliefs where we disagree. In particular, we have been able to develop something like what John Rawls refers to as an "overlapping consensus" about the structure of a liberal democracy. We are able to guarantee a high degree of "justice as fairness" to citizens without relying on metaphysical or theological argumentation that is grounded in a single comprehensive world view (Baer, 1990).

However, when it comes to the Big Questions--those that deal with the meaning and purpose of life, who we are, and how we ought to live in light of our deepest religious and metaphysical commitments--Americans today hold highly divergent views about the nature of reality and about what is appropriate belief and behavior. Thus, although we do not ordinarily think of a Jewish position on harbor dredging or a distinctively Presbyterian view of managing the Post Office (although for Jews and Presbyterians these activities by no means remain outside the realm of God's concern and sovereignty), it is not at all difficult to envision a normative Catholic position on abortion, an orthodox Jewish view of the family, or an Evangelical Christian understanding of marriage and child nurture. And these religious views often directly compete with secular views, for instance those of groups like Planned Parenthood or of individuals like psychologists Carl Rogers and Sidney Simon (one of the founders of Values Clarification).

When nontheistic and humanistic beliefs serve as the philosophical basis for important parts of the curriculum in government public schools--courses in Values Clarification, decision making, and sex education are notable examples--citizens who take their religion seriously face a difficult problem. As noted above, many of these "secular" courses teach (implicitly, if not always explicitly) that self-fulfillment and satisfying one's personal needs are the goals of human existence. They insist that all value judgments are subjective and matters of personal opinion. They view tradition and traditional wisdom as a hindrance to achieving the good life. But each of these particular secular views, rather than being religiously neutral, directly competes with orthodox Christian teaching on these issues. Their promulgation in government schools constitutes an establishment of religion and also hinders the free exercise of religion by believing Christians and other traditional religionists. Secular instruction can be (and often is) just as "sectarian" (in the sense of narrow-minded, bigoted, one-sided, and parochial) as religious instruction can be. And if this is the case, then we must ask: Does the state have the right to take a captive group of students and indoctrinate them in beliefs and values that will lead them to defect from the teachings of their church and their parents?

Whether or not political philosopher John Rawls (1971, 1993) is right in his claims about justice as fairness, his views are basically relevant to how we govern ourselves, not to how we educate our children. Rawls himself concedes that as a comprehensive doctrine liberalism (and, of course, the same would apply to secular humanist beliefs and values) deserves to occupy no special place in our public life.

Nonetheless, the belief that the secular is the realm of the nonsectarian, although not defensible philosophically, continues to have great influence on how most Americans think about education. For instance, it seems to me quite remarkable that we permit secular philosophers in state universities actually to do metaphysics and normative ethics (and to recommend their results to their students), but scholars who deal with religion and religious ethics must confine their efforts to description and analysis. In many respects theological ethicists are far more open-minded than most secular ethicists; virtually all theological ethicists, for instance, have studied the most important writers in philosophical ethics, but the reverse is seldom true. In the field of animal rights/welfare, as an example, deontologist Tom Regan (Regan & Singer, 1989) uses the term "rationally defective" to describe the arguments of those who disagree with his conclusion that what he calls "the rights view" includes animals as well as humans (p. 111). Similarly, Peter Singer (1990) considers his views regarding animals to be rationally compelling, all the while overlooking the highly controversial character of his initial assumptions about the nature of human beings and animals. Explaining why he does not deal with the Biblical concept of humans being created in the image of God or the theological concept of humans possessing immortal souls, he writes: "Logically, however, these religious views are unsatisfactory, since they do not offer a reasoned explanation of why it should be that all humans and no nonhumans have immortal souls" (pp. 270-71, note 14).

Most theological ethicists (e.g., Hauerwas, 1981a; 1981b), on the other hand, recognize that their viewpoints involve an element of faith and commitment. They may believe their positions to be both rational and true, but at the same time they recognize that technical reason as such usually does not compel acceptance.

There simply are no good reasons to believe that secular thinking about morality, character development, and the nature of the good life is inherently more universal, reasonable, or nonsectarian than is religious thinking. Just as was the case with Jefferson's conviction that his own religious views were "nonsectarian," the conviction of many educators today that the secular is more rational or universal than the religious is not warranted empirically or philosophically; it is a belief that is far sooner self-serving than self-evident!

It seems clear that all human thought enterprises rest on certain initial assumptions and convictions about the nature of reality. All are limited, operate within a particular time and place, and entail risk of error. I find little justification for the widely accepted position that liberal, secular, humanistic reasoning of the sort that is prominent in public education in America today--from Kindergarten to Ph.D.--is rational and scientific, whereas religious thinking about morality and the nature of reality rests on dogma and faith.

But even if secular thinking were inherently more rational than religious thinking, within the framework of the Constitution and the American political compact--assuming a functional view of religion--government would still not be justified in preferring secular answers to the Big Questions over religious answers. And insofar as school curricula always rest on one set of answers to the Big Questions or another, government's role in actually operating schools and universities must be seen as highly problematic.

If my arguments regarding the necessity of adopting a functional view of religion are basically correct, then choice is not just an option to be employed in the name of efficiency and better access to quality education. It is a political necessity for those who wish to be faithful to the American political compact and the spirit of the Constitution.

The argument is often made by those who oppose school choice that the requirements of liberal neutrality can be satisfied by exposing students to a multiplicity of values and ideas from which they are encouraged to make their own choices. This cafeteria approach permits the school, so it is argued, to remain neutral among various visions of the good life, while at the same time inculcating specific democratic values such as justice, tolerance, and rational deliberation.

But there are a number of telling objections to such an approach. First, taking a cafeteria-like approach to values and ultimate beliefs inevitably carries with it relativistic implications. We do not teach science in such a manner; instead we present students with the best science we have. We want them to come to believe and accept what is true. To be sure, good science teaching will help students see that scientists have proposed many theories that eventually failed and have taken many wrong turns along the way, but this is part of the normal course of science. It is not the same as presenting astrology, phrenology, or Lysenko's genetics and suggesting to students that they make their own choices about what they want to believe.

Second, the idea that students in K-12 are mature enough or know enough to make rational choices among different views of morality and the good life strikes me as just plain silly. That children in grades K-12 possess sufficient maturity and understanding to make intelligent choices among the great moral, religious, metaphysical, and political traditions of the world in which we live is wishful thinking. What actually happens in K-12--to the put the matter bluntly--is that students become the patients of whichever social engineers have the power to push their own values and beliefs on them. The way schools have employed such fads as Values Clarification and most sex education curricula, or even their use of such an impressive intellectual achievement as Kohlberg's system of Moral Development, strongly supports this claim. And even a cursory look at today's fashionable commitment to diversity and multiculturalism in K-12 education makes clear that the range of diversity permitted seldom extends beyond the boundaries of the politically correct.

Attempts to deal with morality in government public schools in terms of specific courses have generally been either ineffective or else problematic on constitutional grounds. Most such courses focus on trying to teach students how to improve their moral reasoning. Amy Gutmann (1987) argues that we should help students enhance "rational deliberation" (p. 51). But she largely ignores the telling arguments presented by Alasdair MacIntyre and others that there is little agreement today about precisely what we mean by rationality.

The structure of the public school is even less hospitable to the more traditional approach of focusing on character formation. Effective character formation requires the freedom to deal with symbols, myths, and stories, and also demands opportunities to engage in ritual actions (worship, celebration, and so forth) that reinforce the lessons being taught. Furthermore, teachers must be permitted to function as role models, not at the level of the lowest common denominator, but in precise and specific ways. The public school is far too thin and fragile a moral community for effective character development, and in our society it is also severely limited by demands for religious neutrality.

At the time of the founding, Americans agreed that the federal government should not establish a single national church. And over the following half century those states which had established churches gradually cut them off from public support. But McCarthy, Skillen, and Harper correctly argue in *Disestablishment a Second Time* that this move towards freedom of religion and conscience will not be completed till we end the religious establishment constituted by our government public schools. Such a move will require drastic changes in how we think about the relation between government and education, and will also require that we begin to think of religion--for educational, political, and constitutional purposes--in functional terms.

Perhaps more than any other current social issue, school choice will challenge us as Americans to make clear whether we believe in religious tolerance or not. Will we, in the tradition of Horace Mann, side with the National Education Association in supporting a monopoly system of government schools that are fundamentally vehicles for one or another cultural elite to exercise social control, or will we, in the spirit of the First Amendment's religion clause, endorse school disestablishment and view the state's role in education as that of guarantor of just access to education rather than that of religious mentor and moral tutor?

Disestablishment will bring about wrenching changes in our educational structures and will not come about easily. But to reject such a move could very well contribute to a period of intense culture wars and widespread loss of confidence in the ability of government to guarantee justice to cognitive and religious minorities.

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Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on Religion, Politics, and Cultural Dynamics, Cornell University, April 9-10, 1994.
2. Here and elsewhere in this paper I deliberately use the term "government public school" rather than simply "public school." This is because private or independent schools, as well as public schools, serve important public purposes. Also, because poor people typically cannot afford housing in neighborhoods with the best public schools, many public schools are not really open to the general public. Overall, social, economic, and racial integration in independent schools compares favorably with that in government public schools. See Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982, pp. 28-71.
3. Here and elsewhere in this chapter I refer to the religion "clause" rather than "clauses" to underscore my belief that the framers understood nonestablishment to be in the service of free exercise: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or (otherwise) prohibiting the free exercise thereof."
4. Although I concur with Strike's judgment about the inability of the state to educate (because it cannot coherently transmit what Strike calls "private values"), I find neither his distinction between private and public values nor his emphasis on schools stressing the development of rationality altogether convincing. Mediating structures in society—including schools, churches, business and labor groups, and not-for-profit public interest groups—typically espouse values that are neither private in the sense of purely personal nor public in the sense of state-sponsored. The realm of the public is broader than the realm of the state. It is appropriate to use the term "public" in relation to the values and activities of these mediating groups, for they clearly serve public purposes, even though they are not owned and operated by the state.
- Defining the term "public" as coextensive with the realm of the state begs important social and political questions. And when Strike emphasizes the development of rationality in government public schools, it is important to understand that rationality is not an altogether objective or morally neutral concept. See: Berger, P., and Neuhaus, R. (1977); MacIntyre, A. (1988).
5. In addition to my work, the following are examples of scores of articles critical of Values Clarification that have appeared over the past two decades: Bennett & Delattre, 1978; Lockwood, 1977; Stewart, 1975.