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Secular Education and Its Religion

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higher education, and stirrings in what, for lack of a better phrase, we call contemporary religious self-consciousness. It was formed by events, experiences, traditions, and legacies which reach far back into history — perhaps farther back than we recognize. But it came about because some sort of “we feeling,” or corporate awareness, was able to perceive, compose, guide, support, articulate, and formulate it. This must be the reason we have come to the stage in our corporate life cycle where, in Erik Erikson’s words, after knowing that we can make things and make them well, it is necessary for us to align these fundamental capabilities with our sense of endowment, opportunity, and heritage. We seek to move past the embryonic stage; we are coming of age. At earlier moments we sought purpose and competence; now, as the cycle tells us, it is a matter of fidelity.

Stated again: in lieu of a substantive definition of religion there is only an endowment of disciplined corporate awareness, and this endowment has been resourceful enough to inspire an enormous range of scholarly interest and creative activity. From the same endowment issues a sense of place, belonging, and connectedness, but always delicately, never mechanically, genealogically, never genetically. Furthermore, the resourcefulness appears to promise to not run out quickly. Some may be worried that this is not enough. To my mind, this is the way it must be.

## SECULAR EDUCATION AND ITS RELIGION: RANDY HUNTSBERRY

**T**HE separation of church and state has always been an embattled position in the American ethos. Because of its constitutional shield, however, the principle is rarely confronted head-on. Frequent skirmishes are fought over such things as school prayers, while questions about the “religious” presuppositions of the public school system itself are left unasked. Too many of these skirmishes have left a smoke screen over the real battle, the rapidly accelerating number of actual “religion” courses now being taught in the public schools.<sup>1</sup> I would predict that “religion,” though of a very different stamp, will soon be as pervasive in the public schools as it now is in the parochial.

The constitutionality of these courses has never been tested, though the Supreme Court has implied that the “objective” study of religion is constitutional.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> By 1967 over 90% of the state universities were teaching courses in religion and approximately 30% had departments of religion (statistics cited by Robert A. Spivey, “Modest Messiahs: The Study of Religion in State Universities,” in *Religious Education* 63 [January-February 1968], p. 6).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1948 *McCullum vs. Board of Education* (333 U.C. 203) and the 1963 *Abington School District vs. Schempp* (374 U.S. 203, 225).

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Those who support the study of religion in the public schools continually emphasize the norms laid down in Mr. Justice Clark's opinion in the Abington case:

Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented *objectively* as part of a *secular* program of education, may not be effected consistent with the First Amendment. (my italics)

In other words, religion may be taught as long as it is according to the standard which governs all "secular" education, "objectivity." Religion, like any other subject matter, is an "object" of study and must be dealt with "objectively." In the same case, Mr. Justice Goldberg draws attention to "teaching *about* religion, as distinguished from the teaching *of* religion, in the public schools." "Teaching about religion" is legitimate, but not "religious teaching."

At the same time that supporters of this movement advocate strict adherence to the norms inherent in secular education, they do not envisage any modification in the nature of religion as we have come to regard it. Mr. Justice Clark explicitly reassures the fearful "that the State may not establish a 'religion of secularism' in the sense of affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion, thus 'preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe.'" The consensus seems to be that if teachers abide by the norms of secular education and teach "about" the great historical religious traditions, there will be no infringement on the religious beliefs of the students.

The situation is historically unprecedented. The Christian tradition has always either set the norms for western education or remained aloof, but it has never before had to exist under a system of alien norms. The only possible analogy is perhaps the Renaissance attitude toward Greek religion. Religion could be studied as part of a humanities curriculum because it was already considered "dead" myth. In the contemporary situation, however, the Christian tradition is being subjected to the norms of secular education, while, at the same time, Christian faith is considered to be alive and apparently flourishing.

Bridges are indeed being rebuilt between secular and religious studies, but this does not mean that Christian theology will be re-enthroned as "queen of the sciences." Quite to the contrary, religion is now being subjected to the norms of the "secular" world. The Thomistic hierarchy has been turned on its head.

The introduction of religious studies into secular education places religion in a traditionally alien normative context. Two aspects of this trend, I believe, need critical attention. First, what are the norms inherent in secular education, and secondly, what happens to religion when it is subjected to these norms?

We have already seen Mr. Justice Clark's answer to these two questions. For him the norms are objectivity and secularity, and they need cause no essential alteration in either the personal beliefs of the students or the actual content of the religion being studied.

But is the matter so simple? I believe Mr. Justice Clark's views are inadequate on two counts. First, our estimation of the possibilities for objectivity has changed. Second, Mr. Justice Clark underestimates the power of secularity to alter the nature of religion.

With respect to objectivity, Mr. Justice Clark suggests that the "study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively" is not inconsistent with the First

Amendment. He implies that the norm of objectivity will protect the students' religious interests from state interference. This might be true but for the fact that the implications of objectivity have never been made rigorously operative in secular education. At the very least we must now openly admit that our public schools have been Protestant in loyalty and white in race. History textbook publishers, for example, prepare separate editions for public and parochial schools with differing accounts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. In some states, Catholics are not even hired as history teachers. Furthermore, many schools in the South abandon their textbooks for specially prepared "supplements" when it comes to the Civil War. And, Afro-American history certainly existed before it sprang up so suddenly on our campuses.

Most scholars and teachers are perfectly well aware of the fact that the rationale of objectivity is bankrupt. The limits of objectivity and importance of subjective factors in research and teaching are well known. Yet, many still support the introduction of religious studies into public education on the grounds that it will be taught objectively. Can we have it both ways? Bluntly put, is it not dishonest to legitimate religious studies on grounds we know to be no longer tenable? Rabbi Eugene Borowitz exposes the hypocrisy:

The first rule of decent pedagogy is to show the relevance of the material under study to the student's own life to involve him personally and not just verbally in the issue. Thus if the teaching "about" religion is to be meaningful, it must involve opening up the student to the truth of the religion under discussion and having him confront its *relevance*. That is hardly what proponents of teaching "objectively" would seem to be advocating; yet it is the logical parallel to what is being done to teach . . . social studies and literature effectively. (my italics)<sup>3</sup>

Learning does have to do with questions such as relevance. Mr. Justice Clark has supported religious studies for the wrong reasons.

The second question raised by the introduction of religion into secular education concerns the impact of secularity on religious attitudes. Mr. Justice Clark stresses that teaching about religion must take place in the context "of a secular program of education." Yet, he insists that this does not point to a "religion of secularism." This view, I believe, greatly underestimates the power of secularity to modify student religious attitudes. To show how this is so, I want to examine two presuppositions inherent in secular education and their impact on religion.

1) *Experiential*. The main reason that the nature of religion is modified in secular education is because the norm governing acceptable evidence is human experience. In a secular context, all metaphysical, supernatural truth claims have to be "bracketed." Divine intervention is recognized only as a believer's claim, while any causal explanations are made in terms of social-psychological, aesthetic or historical norms. So, for example, the Exodus might be seen as the particular understanding of an historical event by a particular group of people in a particular socio-political context. That God intervened in Israel's behalf would be seen not as "fact" but as an expression of the way the people of Israel reacted to the series of events leading to the Exodus. The Exodus stories remain as evidence of the way the people of Israel made sense of their experience. Whether or not God "actually" did intervene is irrelevant in this context.

<sup>3</sup> Borowitz, "Judaism and the Secular State," in *Religion and Public Education*, ed. Theodore Sizer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), p. 279.

In secular education, the emphasis has shifted from learning about divine truths to examining human questions of meaning and values in all their complexity. What does a particular religious symbol say about the human condition? Secular education implicitly agrees with Feuerbach that religious symbols are projections of human experience and that they should be examined for what they tell us about the human condition. Studying the Bible in English classes or from a humanities point of view means to look for significant "revelations" about man rather than Revelations of God. In this sense, the medium has a message because the medium establishes the final court of appeal for all truth claims.

2) *Experimental*. Another presupposition, besides human experience, inherent in secular education is a fundamental antipathy to any form of absolutism. The secular scholar operates tentatively, experimentally. He is always testing the adequacy of his theories to his data, and the relevance of his data to his theories. There is no absolutely "true" theory, since a theory must always be tested with respect to a particular set of data. Nor can the data be considered "true" except in relation to some theory. The search for "truth" must always remain experimental — there is no room for dogmatism.

According to this experimental framework of secular education, religious beliefs are not considered to be absolutely "true," but "true" only with respect to certain human experiences (the first norm above). Thus, religious beliefs must be tested as to their adequacy and relevance to a particular human experience. The possibility of new experience requires that commitment remain tentative. As Robert Bellah states, "Symbolism, unavoidable though it is, is not final but only provisional."<sup>4</sup> There is a sense in which any symbol is fictional. Life has become experimental, and its theories and symbols, even its religious ones, infinitely revisable.

I hope that it is clear by now that we must revise our understanding of religious studies within public education. Objectivity is doubtful and the power of secularity overwhelming. Secular education is fast becoming, to rephrase Robert Bellah's description of the modern church, the "favorable environment" in which the individual, in the context of his peers, works out "his own ultimate solutions." The schools, not the churches, have become the place where the human questions of meaning and value are being confronted. Robert Spivey openly maintains that this is the proper function of religion departments:

The only place where students can ask and ponder the "big questions" is the religion department. . . . In the present rapidly changing world where traditional values and institutions, such as the church and home, are losing their influence, then it is natural that the university should become a place where values, meaning, and purpose are both questioned and pursued.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, this tendency may be more advanced than we now realize. Samuel Miller, the late Dean of Harvard Divinity School, felt that the "religious factor" had already pervaded much of secular education:

<sup>4</sup> Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Spivey, "Modest Messiahs," p. 9.

Despite the vast academic factories, the research assembly lines, the factualizing machinery, the eruption of the personal quotient is increasingly evident and quite passionate in many areas. In a sense, this is the essential religious factor appearing in a new quarter without benefit of traditional forms and explicit identification. What it says, I believe, is that religion may be appearing within the educational field itself in an implicit mode rather than being merely added or inserted from the outside. Indeed, one might well say that we would not be discussing the question of how to include religion if the desire to know had not already arisen within the educational process itself. (my italics)<sup>6</sup>

While Robert Spivey naturally supports many aspects of this trend, he also realizes its inherent bias against conservative religious sects:

Religious studies must be *liberal* and *open*, seeking to understand as a part of the community of learning rather than the community of faith. But such a setting tends to produce students who favor religions that are liberal, tolerant, open-minded, etc. What, then, happens to evangelistic, conservative religious sects? Who in the tolerant university defends their right to be heard and indeed their representation on the faculty? A menacing enemy of the developing departments, those *modest messiahs*, is this conservative American religious tradition. Their enmity is not without cause. Can the study of religion interpret both liberal and conservative religion, presenting each with *accurate fairness* so that the entire range of religious phenomena becomes understandable? The goal is nothing less, but the practice may be something less. (my italics)<sup>7</sup>

In this remarkably honest pondering, Spivey maintains that “religious studies must be liberal and open,” the general norms of secular education. But he recognizes that “such a setting tends to produce students who favor religions that are liberal . . . open-minded, etc.” The norms of any environment are always seductive. To enter the environment is to lose the battle. How, then, can we expect conservative theology to be treated with “accurate fairness” when the very norms governing the study of religion are already biased against it? Even if scholars from these conservative sects were “heard” and had “representation on the faculties,” they would be at odds with the norms of their colleagues from the start.

The problem is more serious than the mere exclusion of the conservative sects. Frederick Olafson suspects,

It might lead to a religious attitude in which any sense of a reference beyond human history and culture is lost and in which religion is finally and not just provisionally treated as a dimension of *human existence*. Sometimes when I hear religion spoken of as one of the “humanities” I wonder whether something of this kind has not already happened. . . . In its more pernicious forms a religiosity motivated in this way amounts to little more than a worship of ourselves worshipping — a kind of complacent sense of wonder at what man has wrought in God. To be sure, these excesses can be avoided, but I fear that if an effort were made to encourage religious faith by means of an historical study of its role in human culture, the faith so nurtured would *bear the marks of its origins*. I would therefore question whether persons with religious convictions are wise to propose programs of

<sup>6</sup> Miller, “Oppositions Between Religion and Education,” in *Religion and Public Education*, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Spivey, “Modest Messiahs,” p. 12.

teaching about religion with expectations of real benefit to the religious life of our young people. (my italics)<sup>8</sup>

Olafson clarifies what Robert Spivey fails to develop, that the real struggle is not between liberal and conservative religious traditions. The prejudice Spivey notes in favor of liberal theologies merely marks the midway point on a much broader continuum of struggle reaching from traditional, otherworldly grounded theologies to the secular perspective of human experience. The real battle is between secularity and traditional religion.

There can be little doubt concerning the outcome. Already many departments of religion, including Robert Spivey's Florida State University, are structuring "the curriculum rationally around the subject matter of religion, rather than religions or the Christian religion."<sup>9</sup> The concern of these departments is religion in the generic sense, the theory of religion, or what Robert Bellah sees as "a sort of latter-day embodiment of Comte's 'religion of humanity'."<sup>10</sup> I take the development of this interest in generic religion to be a direct product of the challenge of secular education or secularity in general to particular religious traditions. The normative structure of generic religion directly parallels the norms of secular education. How ironic it is, then, to find scholars utilizing this more generic conception of religion to combat the evils of secularism when in fact the very idea is at least a partial product of the secular world.

Justices Clark and Goldberg, along with Robert Spivey and others, have completely underestimated just how "modest" the "messiahs" of teaching about religion really are. For, these "modest messiahs" are implicitly challenging what the various religious traditions have valued most centrally, world-rejecting transcendence, and are substituting a new set of criteria to govern their mode of operation. Once the various religious traditions are experimentally ranged side by side, they are evaluated for what they say about human experience. There can be little doubt that the schools are fast becoming the principal environment for efforts to find adequate and relevant symbols of meaning. It is therefore incumbent on those of us who continue to teach religion according to the norms of secular education to recognize that in the process we are involved in redefining the very nature of religion itself. Teaching "about" religion has become the teaching "of" religion. We are messiahs whether we like it or not!

<sup>8</sup> Olafson, "Teaching *About* Religion: Some Reservations," in *Religion and Public Education*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>9</sup> Spivey, "Modest Messiahs," p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, p. 226.