

Religion, the State and the Schools:
Reflections on the Deweyan Perspective
by Allan C. Carlson

Historical consciousness among Americans today does not run very deep. We tend to confront each public issue as though it was emerging for the first time, divorced from the earlier history of the nation. Contemporary debate on the relationship between church, state and school is no exception.

When history is called in at all, it is usually for rhetorical purposes. Those arguing against school prayer or tuition tax credits go to great lengths to cast Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and other founders of the American nation as largely secularized "free thinkers," or as Deists "at worst." Those pressing for enhanced religious presence in elementary and secondary schools commit similar sins. For example, the over-zealous publisher of one otherwise-respectable book on the framers of the Constitution, placed on his dustcover the claim that "50 (and perhaps 52) of the 55 Framers of the United States Constitution were Christians. Not humanists, not Deists, not agnostics--Christians!"

The Secularization of American Education

Fortunately, amidst the smoke, there is occasional light. Perhaps the most useful book on the subject is still the slim volume written in 1912 by legal scholar Samuel Windsor Brown. Entitled The Secularization of American Education, the book avoids descent into the vast controversial literature bearing epithets such as "Godless public schools" or "stunted religious minds." Dr. Brown makes the eminently reasonable statement that "state legislation, state constitutional provisions and state supreme court decisions seem best suited to give us the matured judgment of our people as a whole on this matter."¹

What did he find in his comprehensive review of such evidence? Laws from the colonial and early national period, Professor Brown concluded, show the close connection of church and school and of religion and education. They reveal "the largely religious aim of education, the largely religious nature of the subject matter of instruction, and the considerable part played by the church in the control of schools." When the United States was founded, the historical record shows, church and school were closely bound together and there is no convincing evidence that the founders of this nation, taken as a whole, intended for the situation to be otherwise.

The great shift in direction, Brown asserted, came about 1850 when state predominance in educational affairs began to supplant that of the church. "The dominant aim of the school becomes a civic one," Brown wrote, "the subject matter of instruction is purged of everything savoring of a sectarian or denominational religious nature, and control shifts from the church and her ministry to the state and her officials." State constitutional provisions emerged denying the diversion of tax funds to religious educational claimants. By 1912, no less than thirty-five states had enacted specific provisions against sectarian religious instruction or the use of textbooks containing religious materials in state supported schools. The reading of the Bible was still provided for in the laws of fourteen states, but even this provision was frequently limited by requirements that such reading be unaccompanied by any commentary and that those who objected to the Bible being read must be excused from the room.

This secularization of public education, Professor Brown insisted, represented but one phase of the separation of ecclesiastical from civil power, a recurring theme in this country's history since the early colonial days. "The American States," Brown noted in closing, now held "unbounded confidence in

their ability to educate for their purposes." More recent Federal court decisions on state aid to private schools, while commonly drawing on Constitutional arguments resting in historically dubious interpretations of the First and Fourteenth amendments, have not significantly deviated from the political consensus Brown described.

Yet, as Professor Brown himself hinted, this dramatic shift in educational philosophy and structure after 1850 had deeper roots. Not coincidentally, this turn accompanied the dramatic change in immigration patterns that the United States experienced in the same decade. Before 1850, the large majority of new immigrants to America continued to come from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and, to a lesser degree, from Germany. The Anglo-Saxon predominance in politics, culture and religion continued to be undergirded by sheer numbers. Beginning in that decade, though, new waves of immigrants began flowing in from Ireland, Scandinavia, Italy, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Between 1845 and 1930, nearly fifty million non-English speaking persons poured into the United States. The creation of a national railway network over the same years accelerated their spread across the the Midwest and West. The various states correspondingly faced a wholly new problem: the assimilation of this polyglot mass, representing many distinct cultures and religions, into a standard American identity. The schools became the states' major vehicle for integrating immigrant children, and through them their parents, into the mainstream. Hence, the civic need to build minimum degrees of social and national unity replaced the educators' more traditional concern with passing on a distinct moral-religious heritage.

Nonetheless, while necessarily abandoning sectarian doctrine in pursuing this integrative task, it is critical to note that the schools continued to embody and present a common value scheme to their students. It was a code still

firmly rooted in the nonconformist Puritan heritage and in the Ten Commandments, albeit stripped of religious terminology. The code embodied what the 19th-century understood as the "bourgeois," middle-class or Victorian virtues. No less a proponent of the "new education" than John Dewey, in his fundamental work Democracy and Education, stressed that "[c]ertain traits of character have such an obvious connection with our social relationships that we call them 'moral' in an emphatic sense--truthfulness, honesty, chastity, amiability, etc. They are moral in an emphatic sense . . . because they are so intimately connected with thousands of other attitudes which we do not explicitly recognize."² Elsewhere, Dewey added the "natural" relations of "husband and wife, of parent and child" to his list of clear and self-evident moral attributes.³ America's secularized schools, like Dewey himself, rested within a cultural matrix that bonded "chastity" and "family" to "honesty" and "amiability" as the virtues upon which all reasonable people could agree. Thus, even when stripped of distinctly religious sentiments and language, the public schools of this era remained eminently Victorian or bourgeois, living off what historian Arnold Toynbee once called the accumulated moral capital of traditional religious and moral philosophy.

A Divisive Debate Continues

The question arises: If the public schools had been effectively secularized by the turn of the century--over eighty years ago--why is this nation still facing bitterly divisive debates over issues like school prayer and government aid to private and church-related schools? There are, I believe, three reasons:

1. The resilience of the remaining church schools.

While the large majority of American children were in state schools by the early 1900s, two significant segments of the more recent immigration--Roman

Catholics and a hefty portion of German-American Lutherans--retained their commitment to religiously based primary education. For somewhat different reasons, both groups resisted the social integration efforts of the public schools. Since the mid-1960s, a rapidly growing number of orthodox Jewish, fundamentalists, Baptist, Pentacostal and "generic" Christian schools have--for complex, widely varying and occasionally less-than-uplifting reasons--sprung up throughout the country. Quite simply, these groups represent a political force of some potency, and one unwilling to accept the essentially political decisions about state funding of church schools made nearly a century ago.

2. The necessity of religion in the schools.

To emphasize the complexity of this brief statement, let me present a pair of quotations. The first: "Education is the modern universal purveyor, and upon the schools shall rest the responsibility for seeing to it that we recover our threatened religious heritage."

And the second: "The way we think of ourselves and our neighbors and the innermost motivations that inspire and promote these relations become the unifying or disintegrating forces of society. Religion is a spiritual process of union, the question being whether the unifying bond be God and His laws or some pragmatically established ethos."

The first of these quotations, affirming the necessity of religion in the schools, comes--surprisingly--from John Dewey in his 1908 essay "Religion and Our Schools."⁴ The second quote, affirming the need for some common, socially integrative value base, comes from the Jesuit scholar Joseph Costanzo, whose 1964 book This Nation Under God remains one of the better Roman Catholic arguments for a renewal of religiously based education.⁵ What's going on here?

To begin with, it is true that Dewey had his own definition of the word "religion." In the essay cited above, for example, he dismissed any return to the traditional religious ideas which he believed science had undermined or to those old religious symbols "which have been emptied of their content of obvious meaning." Instead, Dewey attempted to separate "religious experience" from doctrinal "religion," hoping thereby to save man's recognition "of some unseen higher power . . . having control of his destiny" from the dead hand of the traditional churches. Dewey consequently called on "the positive creed of life implicit in democracy and in science" to turn its energies towards "the control of the things of the spiritual life."⁶

For his part, Father Costanzo recognized the critical role of both the American educational system and shared religious values in pulling the nation together. "Other countries have been held together by culture, tradition or race," he wrote. "Our Republic has rested on a common will to live together through ethnic diversity, racial distinctions, even through the plurality of religious beliefs The uniqueness of the American experience has been that men of different faiths have confessed to a core of religious and moral truths which are an integral part of their own distinctive creed."⁷

In the abstract sense, I believe, Dewey would not have disagreed. "Our schools," Professor Dewey once wrote, "in bringing together those different nationalities, languages, traditions, and creeds . . . are performing an infinitely significant religious work. They are promoting the social unity out of which in the end genuine religious unity must grow."⁸

In sum, both Dewey and Costanzo agreed on the absolute need for a kind of religion in the schools. Moreover, they agreed on the core values which the schools, public and private, must support--including chastity, family solidarity,

truthfulness, and amiability. Their disagreement came over the foundation for those common values. Costanzo saw their roots in the still viable, common Judeo-Christian heritage of most Americans. Dewey emphasized the failure of the churches to answer the challenge of modernization and saw these values hanging in thin air. He hoped to rebuild a foundation for them through his new religion of democracy and science.

It is important to note, though, that in pursuing his task, Dewey came at the tail end of a long line of philosophers involved in what one writer has called "The Enlightenment Project." By the mid-1600s, a core of leading Northern European philosophers had reached the collective opinion that Christianity, as received doctrine, was no longer capable of supporting moral order in Western society. The content of morality remained clear to these new philosophers. Just as with Dewey in a later century, marital fidelity, family, sexual restraint, promise keeping, and justice were the unquestioned core of moral life. But revealed religion, in the philosophers' minds, no longer seemed able to maintain these virtues. Instead, the Enlightenment figures began a search for an independent, rational foundation for social morality. It was a task that consumed about 200 years. Dewey's effort to create what he called "a common faith" supporting morality on the techniques of democracy and science was merely one more expression of this centuries-old search. But like the efforts of his predecessors--among them, David Hume, Denis Diderot and Immanuel Kant--Dewey's attempt ultimately failed.

Which brings the argument to:

3. The collapse of the Victorian consensus.

It is difficult for modern, self-styled pragmatic Americans to accept that our current social and educational disarray might stem in large part from the

debates and failures of philosophers in centuries past. Yet I believe that they do.

The fatal flaw in Dewey's argument on morals and religion, for example, lies deeply embedded within the overall failure of The Enlightenment Project. Space does not permit a full explanation of the sources of this failure. Alasdair MacIntyre's recent study After Virtue⁹ does so in detail. Indeed, it is one of the most important books that has appeared in recent decades. I do want, however, to look at the specific philosophical problem that Dewey faced, one which he was unable to solve.

As noted, Dewey shared with other late Victorians--indeed with virtually all secularized Western thinkers shaped during the 19th-century--a commitment to a core of common values. For them, the "content" of morality was clear, natural, and self-evident. As Dewey wrote, justice, affection and truth were "so assured in [their] hold upon humanity" that it was unnecessary for humankind to encumber itself with religious dogma. Rational human beings, he believed, could agree on "ideal ends." "There is at least enough impulse toward justice, kindness, and order," Dewey wrote, "so that if it were mobilized for action, . . . the disorder, cruelty, and oppression that exist would be reduced."¹⁰

Clearly, Dewey's faith in the ability of human reason, or science, to agree on common "ends" and "values" for mankind is a direct descendant of philosopher Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative," the belief that human reason would generate moral principles that ought to be held by all men and women. Even before Dewey's birth, though, the fatal logical inconsistencies of Kant's work were drawn out in Danish theological Soren Kierkegaard's 1842 book Enten-Eller. Some decades later, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche put the final nails

into the coffin of Kantian rational morality. As Nietzsche wrote in his volume, The Gay Science:

You admire the categorical imperative within you? This "firmness" of your so-called moral judgment? This "unconditional" feeling that here everyone must judge as I do? Rather admire your selfishness at this point. And the blindness, pettiness, and frugality of your selfishness. For it is selfish to experience one's own judgment as a universal law Anyone who still judges "in this case everybody would have to act like this" has not yet taken five steps toward self-knowledge.¹¹

Above what he saw as the ruins of both Christian morality and The Enlightenment Project, Nietzsche then proceeded to define the new philosophical imperative. "Let us therefore limit ourselves," he declared,

to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the creation of our own new tables of what is good, and let us stop brooding about the "moral value of our actions"! Yes, my friends, regarding all the moral chatter of some about others it is time to feel nauseous Let us leave such chatter and such bad taste to those who have nothing else to do but drag the past a few steps further through time We, however, want to become those we are--human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.¹²

For Nietzsche, not only the morality of God, but the morality of reason, too, was dead. In place of both "Christian man" and "rational man" stood the radical, unbound individual. Consequently, there was nothing left to morality but the expression of each individual's desires, passions and will. Moral judgments had become, in Nietzsche's world, functions of whim and power.

As MacIntyre suggests, Nietzsche has emerged as the moral philosopher of our modern age. His radical individualism has come to infect our bureaucratic and managerial cultures as well as those irrational social movements of both the left and the right which periodically shake Western society: the "spiritual" fascism of the 1930s as well as the student radicalism of the 1960s. Moreover, I would add that the great danger facing the American educational enterprise today is not, as some maintain, the dominance of Dewey's brand of secular humanism, nor, as others argue, the threatened return of religious indoctrination to

the schools. Both the Victorian-humanistic and Judeo-Christian systems, despite the deep and profound differences between them, recognize the same content of morality--sexual continence, family values, honesty and justice--and both agree that the schools have a responsibility to reinforce these values for children. Instead, the great danger confronting our schools is the slow, quiet spread of the moral nihilism of Nietzsche into every corner of our lives.

Not only do we Americans suffer from a deficiency in historical consciousness; our memories also tend to be short. As late as the 1950s and early 1960s, the Victorian or bourgeois code of behavior, once celebrated as self-evident by Dewey, supplied Americans with their core of common values. Social analyst Daniel Yankelovich, assessing polling data from this era, found "an extraordinary cohesion" among Americans resting on shared familial and moral values. These included maintenance of an intact family, a good home, civic responsibility, and adherence to a sexual code focused on marriage and children.¹³ America's schools--both public and parochial--strongly undergirded these values as unifying, democratic and moral constructs, a fact which a look at any grade-school reader or curriculum from the 1950s would confirm.

However, that consensus came under assault over the course of the 1960s and it had collapsed altogether by the mid-1970s. Examples of this attack would include the work of sociologist Robert Harper, who demanded in 1971 a "blockbuster intensive therapeutic" federal program to help children "overcome the contamination and crippling of their sexual beings by our culture." He called on parents to "encourage, help, and foster" sexual play among their preadolescent children. "To prevent sexual hang-ups in interactional as well as masturbatory sex," Harper concluded, "we have to start when children are barely toddlers."¹⁴ More subtly, psychologist Larry Constantine argued in a 1971

teacher education book for the training of children in alternative life-styles. "We must inform young people of the enormous range of alternatives open to them," Constantine wrote, "and fairly, without prejudice, provide them with the basis for rational choices of what might be most fulfilling to them" He continued: "We must abolish stereotypes of fidelity and nonfidelity, marital and extramarital, heterosexual and homosexual."¹⁵ In a surprisingly short time, such ideas emerged triumphant. Indeed, it appears that most courses in public schools today that deal, directly or indirectly, with sexuality and family life have come to adopt this nonjudgmental, supermarket approach to values and lifestyles.

There are historical reasons and there may be sound arguments for this educational approach. It is a fundamental error, however, to consider techniques such as "value clarification" or goals such as "self-fulfillment" to be within the tradition of John Dewey. As a man rooted in the manners of the 19th century and as one committed to the unquestioned central values of marital fidelity, sexual restraint and family life, the classic Dewey would--I suggest--be shocked by and opposed to such practices. For the radical individualism and the denial of common social values implicit in such moral anarchy undercuts the cultural and epistemological foundations of Dewey's educational and social philosophy. Values clarification and similar techniques aimed at moral individualism are not expressions of the secular liberal ideal; they are Nietzschean or socially nihilistic, to their core. Paraphrasing Plato, schools may not be able to teach virtue--but it is clear that they can reinforce or undermine virtuous behavior. Today, many of our schools--instead of serving as the critical unifying force in society--have tended to become prime engines for national disintegration, encouraging through absolute value relativism the emergence of thousands of

moral-ethical ghettos within the United States, even a cynicism towards social morality altogether. No result could be further removed from the vision held up by Professor Dewey.

Diversity and Democracy

I do not celebrate this result. In fact, I look upon the situation we face with great sorrow, even dread. More than ever before, our society needs strong vehicles for social integration. Yet most voices on the left celebrate a nation "exploding with diversity." On the right, one conservative educator, Lucy Patterson, notes that "[i]n a society as incredibly diverse as late twentieth-century America, the only way we can all live at peace with one another is to take volatile issues like feminism, sex education, and creationism out of the 'winner take all' arena of monopoly education." Unless moral-ethical minorities have the option to send children to schools consistent with their beliefs, she suggests, "the politics of public education will keep growing harsher, shriller, and more depressing."¹⁶ I fear that Professor Patterson is right.

Given the realities of contemporary cultural ferment and deep division, I believe it is time to implement alternatives to the existing educational structure. This time of challenge demands a new burst of creativity and experimentation, in the hope that such a free competition of fresh ideas and disparate values might in the future result in a new synthesis and measure of unity.

Specifically, a joint program of tuition tax credits and vouchers would open all elements of the population, not just the relatively wealthy, to the contemporary imperative of choice in education. In this respect, tax credits and vouchers become the vehicles for true equality and democracy in the late 20th century. A Federal income tax credit for a portion of tuition paid to private

schools would assist middle-income families in the exercise of such choice. While a full-fledged voucher scheme, distributing education funds directly to children's parents, is beyond the resources of the Federal Treasury, consideration should be given to a voucher plan aimed specifically at the poor. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, for example, could be restructured to parcel out the approximately \$3 billion involved directly to the parents of disadvantaged children, leaving each family free to spend its voucher at the public or private school of its choice. Both tuition tax credit and voucher schemes should and could be structured to prohibit support for private schools which discriminate on the basis of race, without violating the schools' right to due process. While it is true that recent Supreme Court decisions have tended to overturn certain state tax-credit and related plans that indirectly aid church-related schools, there is no certainty that the court would overturn a carefully constructed Federal plan. Indeed, the court's recent 5-4 decision upholding a Minnesota statute that allows parents to take tax deductions for educational costs incurred at private or public schools suggests a basic turn in its approach to the church-state-education question.

It is clear that such a plan would fundamentally change the educational enterprise. Many educators understandably react to that prognosis with fear, even panic. Might I note in closing, though, that such a time would also offer unprecedented opportunities for experimentation, imagination, creativity, growth, and renewed progress in educational theory, endeavors certainly in accord with the spirit--if possibly not with the letter--of John Dewey.

FOOTNOTES

¹Samuel Windsor Brown, The Secularization of American Education (1912: reissued 1967) (New York: Russell E. Russell, 1967), p. 157.

²John Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), p. 415.

³John Dewey, A Common Faith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 71.

⁴John Dewey, "Religion and Our Schools" The Hibbert Journal (July 1908), pp. 796-809.

⁵Joseph F. Costanzo, S.J., This Nation Under God: Church, State and Schools in America (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), p. 378.

⁶Dewey, "Religion and Our Schools," pp. 797-799; Dewey, A Common Faith, pp. 1-28.

⁷Costanzo, This Nation Under God, p. 374.

⁸Dewey, "Religion and Our Schools," p. 807.

⁹Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

¹⁰Dewey, A Common Faith, p. 47.

¹¹Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 265.

¹²Ibid., pp. 265-266.

¹³Daniel Yankelovich, New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), pp. 119-121.

¹⁴Robert A. Harper, "Sex and American Attitudes," in The New Sexuality, ed., Herbert A. Otto (Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1971), pp. 259-261.

¹⁵Larry L. Constantine, "Alternative Life Styles and Family Life Education," in Family Life Education Re-Examined: Applications for Teachers, eds., Joan Baird and Dorothy Keenan (n.p.: The American Home Economics Association, 1971), p. 42.

¹⁶Lucy P. Patterson, "Department of Education," in Agenda '83: A Mandate for Leadership Report, ed. Richard N. Holwill (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 1983), p. 117. Emphasis added.