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ARTICLE

Public Speech and Religion in the Public Square: Creating Citizens who can Breach the Wall

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Introduction

One of the problems with treating schools like a market and treating students and parents like customers is that what students might want from schools is not necessarily what they deserve. Preparation for democratic life—learning to give as well as to take in public discourse, learning to hold others as dearly as myself—may not at all be what children want, but it is what they deserve. Further, democracy is both messy and contentious. Religion is one, but hardly the only, fundamental commitment that divides us, and fundamental commitments by their nature are not easily compromised. And when not religion, it is often something else.

We sometimes talk as though relations between secular and sectarian communities have never been as bad as they are today, which is not the case. The struggle to balance private conscience and public policy has always been part of U.S. public life. In 1934, John Dewey wrote:

Never before in history has mankind been so much of two minds, so divided into two camps, as it is today. Religions have traditionally been allied with ideas of the supernatural, and often have been based upon explicit beliefs about it.... The opposed group consists of those who think the advance of culture and science has completely discredited the supernatural and with it all religions that were allied with beliefs in it. (p. 2)

In 1844, the Philadelphia Bible riots pitted Catholics and Protestants against each other over which version of the Bible should be read in schools. Thomas Jefferson was vilified as an atheist because of his unconventional religious beliefs (and his presence has been greatly reduced in the U.S. History curriculum in the state of Texas for the same reason) (Tanenhaus, 2010). Our current political divisions based in religious differences raise the same educational questions that they have in the past: How can we prepare children to become members of a public in which they can contribute to civil discussion across differences over “things that matter” (Kunzman, 2006)? People’s views on religion, morality, and the shape and content of a good life well-lived cannot be separated from a wide variety of political and social issues, and so we must, if we are to live democratically, find ways to communicate—to speak *and* to listen—across these differences in order to find social arrangements that will allow maximum freedom and respect for all. Though this ability to listen is neither natural nor automatic, neither is it impossible. It can be taught: As Barber (1998) reminds us, “we may be natural consumers and born narcissists, but citizens have to be made... Public schools^[1] are how a public—a citizenry—is forged and how young, selfish individuals turn into conscientious, community-minded individuals” (p. 220). Our children deserve, but do not currently have, public schools that assist them in this transformation.

Prior to 1947, public debate over which religious traditions would shape public life was the exception, not the rule.^[2] The default answer was Mainstream Protestantism, a sort of generic Christianity (excluding Roman Catholics and evangelicals). Since the 1947 landmark case of *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Township*, the role of religion in public life has been a matter of intensifying controversy. Certain segments of the fundamentalist evangelical religious community have become increasingly active in trying to preserve Christianity’s privileged position in the body politic, while fundamentalist secularists^[3] have demanded ever more exclusion of any religious perspective from political discussion, policy, or decision-making—the so-called *wall of separation*.

Justice Hugo Black’s opinion for the majority in *Everson* elevated the idea that the First Amendment required a “wall of separation between Church and State” from the profane domain of politics, where it had been coined by Jefferson in his response to the Baptist Ministers of Danbury, CT, to the sacred realm of Constitutional law.^[4] In an apparent paradox, Jefferson’s call for a wall of separation was quoted in a 5-4 decision *permitting* the indirect government support of religious education: Public funds were being used to transport children to private religious schools. The decision of the Court, rhetoric notwithstanding, was that the aid in question was permissible, since it was ostensibly given to the families, not to the school. As Justice Robert H. Jackson observed in his dissent: “...the undertones of the opinion, advocating complete and uncompromising separation of Church from State, seem utterly discordant with its conclusion, yielding support to their commingling in educational matters.” In the long run, that “undertone” has become the dominant chord among fundamental secularists.

The first time that the wall metaphor was invoked to actually end a long-established practice was in *Engle v. Vitale*, the 1962 decision that even a non-sectarian school prayer violates the First Amendment.^[5] Justice Black, again writing for the majority (6-1, two justices not participating), references the same Jefferson quotation, this time referring to “...the *Constitutional* wall of separation between Church and State” (emphasis added). As noted above, the concept of a “wall of separation” is *not* a Constitutional construct, though Justice Black had successfully made it function as one.

In response, evangelical fundamentalists began the effort to restore religion to what they see as its rightful place in public life. Also in response, secular fundamentalists have worked to strengthen the wall of separation, an image that has gone from an obscure historical footnote to a metaphor for the deep divisions in American public life. As we will shortly see, there have been several major efforts to clearly articulate the proper relationship between religion and politics, between private and public conscience. We will look briefly at three quite different answers to this dilemma of American politics: John Kennedy’s address to the Houston Ministerial Association (1960), Mario Cuomo’s address at Notre Dame (1984), and Mitt Romney’s address at the Bush Presidential Library (2007). These three speeches by politicians negotiating the tension between their religious beliefs and the responsibilities of their public offices present three clearly different versions of the relationship between private faith and civic membership.

These different positions play out in the world of politics in significant ways. In the United States today, we face unique issues of the place of religion in public life and the role of individual conscience in the formation of public policy.^[6] Examples of this truth are at the heart of some of our most divisive political questions: abortion; civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) people; and prayer in schools, to name just a few of the most obvious and persistent. Many of the most fraught battles are fought over these issues in the context of schooling, as both sides of the debate understand that education of the young shapes the future, and both evangelicals and secularists want to shape the society their children grow up in.

Part of the point of this essay is that political speech, both in and constitutive of a public, is one of the many institutions and practices that exercise what Martin (2002) calls “multiple educational agency” (Ch. 2). It is the function of public education to help form a public, and it is within and in response to the needs and demands of the public that these agencies—schools, politics, and media included—function. The job of schools can be conceived as preparing children to enter full citizenship in the public, where they engage in self-education while contributing also to the education of their fellows.

A different part of the thesis is that there is no easy answer to the policy dilemmas we face. Talk about *neutrality* is just that: talk. While it may make sense to talk of neutrality in the civic square as not only desirable, but actually possible, it is certainly not the latter, and may not be the former. Controversies need to be decided by laws, actions, and/or policies. Either lesbians and gays are allowed to get married, or they are not; either abortion is legal, or it is not; either public money will fund religious schools, or it will not; either the school day will begin with a prayer, or it will not; either creationism will be taught in schools, or it will not. Adherents of both positions on these (and many other issues) will argue that their solution is neutral and respects other points of view, but that is an easy and comforting belief to hold when policies align with one’s beliefs.

To pretend that resolutions of any of these issues are neutral with respect to religious belief (of at least some citizens) is to conduct public discourse dishonestly. To conduct education on the presumption that schools (or any other institution) can be neutral is to ill-prepare the young to take their place as responsible citizens capable of honest civil debate.

The reality is that, while all views might be listened to in the discussion leading up to policy-making (even if they often are not), the policy itself will reflect a point of view, and will not be anything like neutral. In public discourse, a serious problem is created when the holders of the majority point of view take the position that their point of view is a neutral one, and therefore one that any reasonable person should endorse, and only the stupid or wicked would disagree. To recognize this as false does not mean the majority cannot make legitimate policy decisions on these issues. Biblical stories will not be taught in science classes as science, for example, nor will the doctrinal particulars of one or several religious sects be used to make public policy on marriage, sexuality, or reproductive choice. However, it does mean that there are serious constraints on the majority.

First of all, the majority must make sure that the restrictions placed on religious practice or the public policies that violate private conscience must be necessary to fulfill serious public needs and carried out with minimum intrusion. Second, the majority must truly listen to the objections of the minority and seek to accommodate them. As we will see in looking at the Hawkins County textbook controversy, this is not always done. Lastly, honesty requires that the secular (or, for that matter, the evangelical) majority admit that the decision is not neutral, but embodies a specific point of view rooted in specific beliefs about how we ought to live together. Secular does not mean neutral: It is underpinned by some beliefs, and holding

it requires excluding other ideas as candidates for belief.

One disservice we do to apprentice citizens is to emphasize the consensus function of democracy. Often enough, perhaps too often, consensus is not possible; the best we can hope for in many disputes is that the disagreement, however fundamental, be civil; that the majority act carefully with respect to both the arguments and the feelings of the minority; and that the minority act civilly and honestly in any efforts to change public opinion. These are reciprocally interrelated: If the majority does not act respectfully toward those who hold minority opinions, the minority has some license to act less civilly (as was the case for the Civil Rights Movement, for example). Similarly, if the minority does not act civilly, they become less worthy of respect (think, for example, of the Westwood Baptist Church and its behavior at military funerals).

The problem is, as we will see in looking at the textbook controversy in Hawkins County, Tennessee, is that once civil discourse becomes unraveled, it becomes very difficult to get public discussion back on track. This makes it all the more imperative that the discussion begins and continues in a civil manner. And this, in turn, makes schools all the more important as the laboratories where this skill is developed: Children must be taught to engage in civil discourse despite the contrary examples constantly on view in Congress, on cable TV, and on talk radio.

Citizenship and Religious Belief

The democratic experiment in the United States is complicated by the demands and prohibitions of the First Amendment. On the one hand, democracy both allows freedom of religion and expects citizens to reflect their conscience in advocacy of civil policies. On the other hand, there is the Constitutional requirement that public policies in no way establish religion and that religion and politics be kept separate. This is a paradox, and it is one with which we have struggled in many ways on many issues. Among the ways in which political leaders have sought to frame the issue, three stand out as either quite influential or exceptionally thoughtful reflections on the proper role of religious belief in the arena of public policy-making: John F. Kennedy's Speech to the Houston Ministerial Association (1960), Mario Cuomo's address at Notre Dame (1984), and Mitt Romney's address at the Bush Presidential Library (2007).

These three addresses are quite different in tone and audience. Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, was talking to leaders of other Christian denominations, defending the idea that, if elected President, he could live his faith while fulfilling his responsibility to the Constitution. In this speech, Kennedy argued that his religious beliefs would be irrelevant to the conduct of his duties were he to be elected. He tells his audience that his speech would be about "...not what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me—but what kind of America I believe in.... I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute... I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish.... I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President who happens also to be Catholic."

In taking this position, he seems perilously close to saying that his religion does not matter, that it is something like stamp collecting, peripheral to his identity.^[7] While this was the politically expedient, perhaps even necessary, thing to do, it does not do justice to the centrality of religious belief and commitment to the identity of at least some adherents within any religious tradition. If one just *happens* to be Catholic (or a member of any other faith), it is arguable that one is not Catholic at all, and to the extent that one's religious beliefs and commitments do not shape the sort of President (wife, husband, supervisor, worker, teacher, person) one will be, it can perhaps be inferred that one does not truly hold those beliefs or share those commitments at all. This is the conundrum at the heart of a secular civic space inhabited by people of different faiths and different moral schemes: how does one find a space for these different belief systems, including the religious ones, while also honoring the secular nature of the civic space?

Cuomo, also a Roman Catholic, was speaking to coreligionists defending the idea that, as governor, he could fulfill the duties of his office and still be faithful to his religious obligations. His analysis of the problem and of its solution was far more nuanced than Kennedy's. His argument was not that there could be no conflict between religious commitments and the responsibilities of a public-office holder, but that in such a conflict there were both moral and prudential reasons to bracket one's faith.

Recall that Kennedy assures his audience that he is not the Catholic candidate for the Presidency, but the Democratic Party's candidate for President who happens also to be Catholic." That "also happens" as discussed above, is a significant formulation, and points up the significance of the subtitle of Cuomo's address: "A Catholic Governor's Perspective." Cuomo does not *happen* to be Catholic; it is part of how he identifies himself. Certainly the different audiences partly account for the difference in message, but that cannot be the whole explanation, since both men were very much aware that

they were addressing a national audience through the media, not just the individuals in the room.

Cuomo sees the issue as one of loyalty:

...must politics and religion divide our loyalties? Does the “separation between church and state” imply separation between religion and politics? Between morality and government? And are these different propositions? Even more specifically, what is the relationship of my Catholicism to my politics? Where does the one end and the other begin? Or are they divided at all? And if they’re not, should they be?

To this question, Cuomo gives two different answers, one principled, and one prudential. Both answers are rooted in the fact of American diversity and the presumption of civil equality for all. The principled answer was that no matter how devout the Catholic (or, by extension, any other religious person) office holder might be, that person does not represent just Catholics (or any other faith group), but also “Jews and Muslims, atheists and Protestants.” He reminds us that it is the office holder’s job—sworn responsibility—to “create conditions under which all can live with a maximum of dignity and with a reasonable^[8] degree of freedom... where the laws protect people’s rights to divorce, to use birth control, and even to choose abortion.”

The prudential reason he gives is related: if one religious group is one day in a position to impose its conscience on others, it may find itself on the receiving end on some future day. However, he also recognizes that we cannot completely separate private and public morality, that public policy is inherently a matter of moral decision-making about how we should live together. Even in a “radically secular world,” lawmakers face questions of “...when life begins, under what circumstances it can be ended, when it must be protected, by what authority; it must decide what protection to extend to the helpless and the dying, to the aged and the unborn, to life in all its phases.” These are moral issues that concern all citizens. Romney (2007) sees a very different way that these moral issues are implicated in policy making.

A Mormon running for President, Romney was also inevitably addressing an audience wider than those physically in attendance. He was speaking to a secular audience at the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, but was widely regarded as addressing evangelical Christians—a key voting bloc in Republican primaries—assuring them that he considered religious (by implication, Christian) belief to be central to public life and essential for democratic life, specifically assuring them that Jesus Christ is his Lord and Savior. He thus stood Kennedy’s position on its head: the principles that govern his religious life are the proper principles for the public sphere as well.

Specifically, Romney argues that “Freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom... Freedom and religion endure together, or perish alone.” Now, the question of faith is a broad one, and Romney does try to construe it broadly. He does not want to discuss his church’s (or any other official’s church’s) “distinctive doctrines,” but his reason for that claim is itself interesting: If he becomes President, he says, “he will need the prayers of all the people of all faiths.” Unlike both Kennedy and Cuomo, atheists are not included in the scope of who is included within Romney’s areas of concern. Further, his claim that freedom requires religion is then followed up with the statement that “...any person who has knelt in prayer to the Almighty, has a friend and ally in me. And so it is for hundreds of millions of our countrymen: We do not insist on a single strain of religion—rather, we welcome our nation’s symphony of faith.”

The three men were all using the public institution of politics to respond to teachable moments—that is to shape or reshape or modify the public’s ideas about the proper relationship between a public official’s personal beliefs and conscience on the one hand and the discharge of his or her public duties on the other. Public schools are not the only institutions of public education in this (or any other) country.

One of the educational problems we face as a society is how to teach our young to hear each other as fellow citizens, as members of a public constituted by public speech. And how do we learn to do this ourselves? Public speech is part of the education of the public, just as it is also part of the formation and creation of the public (Green, 1994). The problem we face as a culture is how to have a conversation among a citizenry in which all three of the views about religion and public life are strongly held.

Between those who believe that (1) there is no place for religious belief in public discourse, (2) that the public space should be secular only in the weaker sense that it will accommodate all (or, more minimally, several) religious points of view equally, and (3) that the proper form of civil life is what we might call a soft theocracy contend for a victory in the *culture war*. This war created by the gap between these views is a real threat to democratic life because it calls into doubt the existence of the sort of public that makes democratic life possible.

We can see how badly civil discourse can go wrong in the school book controversy that was decided by U.S. Court of

Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in *Mozert v. Hawkins City Board of Education* (Bates, 1993). In rural Hawkins County, Tennessee, a group of parents organized by Vicki Frost found the Holt, Rinehart and Winston *Impressions* reading series (1978), adopted by the school board in 1983, to offend their religious beliefs. Their general objection was that the series overall was an expression of secular humanism and, therefore, an offense against their Christian beliefs. In addition, Frost and her supporters felt the readings in the selected for the series favorably depicted Satanism and witchcraft, which they also found objectionable. Specific objections included stories showing children being rewarded for lying, telepathy and other occult practices; religions other than Christianity being portrayed positively; woman's liberation; the legitimacy of non-Biblical sources of truth; and other examples of what the evangelical citizens of Hawkins County consider impious and disrespectful of their religious beliefs. More significantly, they felt that such teachings put the souls of their children at risk and undermined their parental authority.

For this reason, Frost and others addressed their concerns to the school board, at a meeting of which they were treated with real disrespect. Through they did have an opportunity to present their concerns, the teachers, administrators, and school board members did not appear to listen to them very seriously. As the controversy in Hawkins County developed and festered, eventually ending in the courts, we can see two distinct questions that are always involved in these sorts of controversies: What is the proper decision? And, do the advocates on various sides of the debate treat each other as interlocutors or as adversaries? Especially when fundamental beliefs are involved, as they are in many of the controversies of our time, respect is difficult to come by: The view one rejects often seems so obviously incorrect and unsupportable that those holding it must be deficient either in intelligence or character.

This lack of respect appears to have happened in Hawkins County: the educators in the community looked down on those who found the reading material offensive and contrary to their literal reading of the Bible as the only path to truth, while the fundamentalist evangelicals came to see the school board and the educators of the community as doing the Devil's work, whether inadvertently or otherwise.

What is important to note for our purposes is that there is no such thing as neutrality: whether the reading series was anti-Christian or an expression of secular humanism only appears to be a factual dispute. In reality, it depends on what one means by *secular humanism*, and by how one interprets the significance of the Bible. As battle lines were drawn, the two contending sides hardened their positions against the unreasonable other. These kinds of controversies are often portrayed as being between faith and reason. However, this way of seeing things is, I would contend, an example of the problem: It presumes that Frost and others motivated by faith were therefore not being reasonable, and why should we engage in reasonable conversation with people who are unreasonable? It is an arrogant and democratically unproductive way to frame the issue.

The problem with construing the issue this way, of course, is that the textbook opponents, though certainly motivated by faith, did not feel they were being unreasonable, though their standards of *reasonable* and their reasons differed from those taken to be relevant by the supporters of the Holt series.

The resolution, if we can call it that, could only come about in a court action that settled the question in favor of the school board, but divided the town. It seems likely to me that this was the right decision, but the wrong outcome of the dispute. It further seems to me that this is all-too-common today, where many public issues touch those morally significant areas of American political life referenced by Cuomo: "when life begins, under what circumstances it can be ended, when it must be protected, by what authority; it must decide what protection to extend to the helpless and the dying, to the aged and the unborn, to life in all its phases."

We commonly say that we cannot legislate morality; Cuomo suggests, I think rightly, that we legislate little else. To the obvious ones Cuomo mentioned, we might add tax policies, social safety net policies, issues of war and peace, and many others that are at root moral issues, though we rarely talk about them in that way.

I think there is something terribly important about Dewey's descriptions of democracy, but we must recognize that it is very optimistic about human nature and civic life. For democracy to work as Dewey envisions it requires a great deal from its citizens. We are dreadfully divided over issues of morality and religion, but this has always been true. Before the culture wars that started in the 1980's and which are discussed above, there was the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War; both of these, though not typically discussed as *religious* issues were clearly *moral* ones. Before that were the battles over Communism and the New Deal. Before that was the battle over the inequitable distribution of wealth that marked the Gilded Age, the Civil War and Reconstruction. Before that, the divisions between slave holders and abolitionists. Since the time of Cuomo's speech, the civil rights of members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community have been added. And that does not mention class-based divisions, like dealing with

immigrants, religious minorities, and the labor movement. And so on.

In each of these periods there were deep and fundamental divisions in American society; there is nothing new about the American people waging “culture wars” among themselves. The evidence is that the divisions that operate in democratic politics are often, if not always, fundamental, not trivial, and therefore not easily amenable to compromise. Although we teach our history in schools so that we focus on consensus and mention conflict in a sanitized way, if at all, the reality is that democratic life is often a struggle between contending groups who want to see their way of life as instantiated in and protected by law.

It is time to consider the role of public schools in creating citizens who can bridge the gap.

Schools and the Public

In her defense of public education and discussion of how it can do its public work, Deborah Meier (1995) argues that one function of public education in a democratic society is to bring together people with different views of how we should live together (and, therefore, how we should educate children in preparation for that shared life). Against those who advocate education reform through privatization and narrowly focused charter schools because they will allow like-minded parents to come together to educate their children in the manner and in the content they see fit, Meier argues for a renewed commitment to public education on the ground that it brings people together who have different views about how we should educate children, and then requires that they work together to find common ground:

In schools that are public, citizens are joined by right, not by privilege.... In schools kids sit down next to their classmates, whoever they are.... If democracy survives ...hostility [among people with different views] it's because we assume we are members of a common club, stuck with each other. Public schools can train us for ... political conversation across divisions of race, class, religion, and ideology. (p. 7)

If children are to learn to live democratically they need good role models, first, to learn that such life is possible and, second, to learn how it is done. On the other hand, if the older generation teaches the younger that differences are best handled through separation, with each group pursuing its own version of the proper education for an individually desired social existence (as argued for by, for example, Chubb and Moe [1990]), we make it less likely that democratic citizens will be able to negotiate their differences and preserve democratic governance. Both children and democracy, in short, deserve schools that teach children, regardless of whatever else is part of the curriculum, to take into account the needs, interests, and concerns of their fellow citizens. Disagreement among members of the community, if handled properly, is exactly the sort of democratic education our children need. It is this, if anything, that will inoculate them against the toxicity of talk radio and shout TV.

While many schools and educators act as though democratic education must be neutral between competing visions of the good, there are many examples of others, who take the job of public education to be the education of the public—the instrument of its very creation and sustenance (some examples include Paley, 1992; Meier 1995; Purpel and McLaurin, 2004; and Kunzman 2006). Education for democratic life cannot be neutral: it is committed to developing those virtues necessary for democratic citizenship.

In *The School and Society*, Dewey (1907/1980) states the challenge of democratic life: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (p. 5). We must understand that this is a normative claim about the moral nature of democracy, not a descriptive one of how democracy functions. People will surely continue to give preference to the needs of their own children. Dewey's point, however, is real: that preference must not be pursued to the point where it disadvantages others' children. That line is not always clear, which does not mean it is not real.

How, then, can we educate children so that they are more likely to become the sort of citizens prepared to meet Dewey's challenge? To see an example of how schools can so prepare students, consider this story told by Deborah Meier:

I recently had a conversation that gave me a good deal to think about. Two students had gotten into one of those stupid quarrels. The origins were silly. But what became clear was that one of the kids was a “victim”—over and over he was the subject of teasing and other minor cruelties on the part of his classmates. Everyone knows about it, including we adults. We worry, feel bad, get angry and end up doing very little good.

I asked the student about it and he agreed that the other student was indeed the target of a lot of peer cruelty, and

also that the reasons were silly, petty, and unkind. “Which side are you on?” I asked. “His side or his tormentors?”

We were both startled by my question. He said he wasn’t really on any side.

I didn’t stop, because I was busy thinking about it myself. So I pushed. If someone is being cruel to someone else, if someone is the victimizer and someone the victim... abused and abuser—can you really be neutral?”

He paused. “No,” he said, “I’m never with the abusers.”

What we realized was that there were two questions here and they were getting mixed up together. (1) Whose side am I on? And (2) what am I prepared to do about it. (pp. 85-86)

We can assume that Central Park East has a rule against bullying, but Meier was not discussing any such rule. Her focus is on getting the student to ask himself what sort of person he is, and, by implication, what sort of person he thinks he ought to be, and how these compare.

Meier believes that, in order to be effective in its democratic mission, a school must be small—no larger than 350 students in an elementary school and no larger than 500 for a secondary school. Her argument is that *this is not a matter of student-teacher ratio, but of scale*. To be a morally formative community, every student and every teacher must know personally every other student and teacher. This is the essence of a community, and it is within community that one is morally formed.

The counter to this sort of education is the sort of behavioral control that is all too common in schools, where students are rewarded for desired behaviors and punished for undesired ones. The manipulation of behavior is the opposite of what we mean when we speak of moral formation (Covaleskie, 1992). The problem with this approach to shaping children’s behavior is not that it does not work—it certainly can shape behavior under certain circumstances. The problem is that it is not morally serious, and it threatens to produce adults who do not take morality seriously (Kohn, 1999). Further, if Dewey is correct about democracy being a system that requires moral citizens, that would be bad news for democratic life.

In another example of pedagogy for democratic citizenship, Vivian Paley (1993) decided one year that she needed to intervene in a common experience of childhood: exclusion from play. She saw intervention as a way to help form citizens more responsive to the welfare and the concerns of others. In response to this concern, she made a new rule in her class that year: “You can’t say, you can’t play.” Having made this rule, she did not enforce it with a system of rewards and punishments. Rather, when it seemed the rule was being broken, she discussed with the class the situation and the feelings of the children involved. The rule was the catalyst for these conversations and was often part of the discussion, but the core of the discussion was to get the students to take, and to take seriously, the perspective of the other members of their classroom community. Thus were these children prepared to meet Dewey’s challenge.

Frequently schools will avoid discussing “things that matter” (Kunzman, 2006) because of a mistaken notion that the only way the schools can be neutral on matters of religion and/or morality is by being silent. This misunderstanding is what leads us to what Purpel and McLaurin (2004) call the “moral and spiritual crisis” in education. It is also a failure of democratic education. It is true that schools must be *neutral* on matters of religion, but that is not at all the same as being *silent* about matters of religion, and even less the same as being neutral about *morality*. Meier and Paley, as well as many other teachers, understand that public school teachers and administrators can discuss things that matter while still respecting the “liberty of conscience” (Nussbaum, 2008) of their students. If children do not learn this skill, they are unlikely to have it as adults. And schools must be part of the process.

We are all formed and then sustained in moral communities. Schools must help the young to understand that social issues are moral at root, and that moral questions must be taken seriously. Perhaps more difficult, schools must help children learn to speak to and, more importantly, listen to people with whom they have serious differences of opinion on important and difficult questions about the required forms of decent social life. On the one hand, such civic conversations require being willing and able to find common ground where possible. On the other hand, children must learn because citizens must know how to manage respectful disagreement when common ground cannot be found or does not exist. The sort of moral teaching by conversation that Meier and Paley model shows us how this might be done.

Schools are especially vital in the formation of citizens today, when much public discourse in the media assumes and argues that those who differ with us are our enemies and must be destroyed. We should not compromise with evil, and yet democratic life is complicated and demanding precisely because it requires not only that we have principles but also that we compromise for the common good. Further, democratic life requires that we see our fellow citizens, even those with whom we seriously disagree, *as fellow citizens*.

The current political culture makes it more difficult than it needs to be to accomplish all this, which makes it all the more necessary for schools to do the work of shaping the private conscience of children so they will become citizens of a democratic public. Our children and our democracy demand it and deserve no less.

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Notes

[1]The word “public” in “public education” has a multiplicity of meanings, all at the same time: education by the public, funded by the public, in pursuit of public purposes, and with the goal of mentoring the young into public membership, to name but the most obvious.

[2]Though there were others in prior times, as mentioned above.

[3]There are many who might object to the equivalence suggested by use of *fundamentalist* to describe secularism, but my point is exactly that fundamentalisms involve certainty and implacability. That sort of certainty makes compromise seem like either treachery or stupidity. This is a tendency to which secularists are no less susceptible to this mindset than anyone else. See, for example, Dawkins (2006) or any edition of Bill Maher’s *Politically Incorrect*.

[4]Ironically, the Baptist ministers of that time *wanted* the separation.

[5]The Jefferson letter had been used in one previous Supreme Court decision, *Reynolds v. United States*, but in that case it was used in a way that did not create a new line of Constitutional reasoning: The Court ruled that religious beliefs could not be used to avoid compliance with laws prohibiting bigamy.

[6]*Unique* because of the First Amendment. Other civil societies have to also figure out the proper relation between religion and politics, church and state, but their argument is about what would constitute the best civil solution. Because our debate is framed and constrained by the First Amendment, we tend to parse that text to divine what is required and what is forbidden rather than what is better or worse. We thus argue legalisms and fine points of Constitutional law, not the best way to live together with our differences.

[7]Eamonn Callan (1989, p. 273) points out that religion, taken seriously, shapes a world view and partly constitutes an identity; it is not something added to one’s life “like a new interest in stamp collecting.”

[8]Note that *dignity* is to be maximized, but *freedom* is to be reasonable in degree.