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## **Religious Citizens in a Secular Public: Separate. Equal?<sup>1</sup>**

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### THE PROBLEM

In our generation, the crisis of democracy is embodied in the conflict between those who view the U.S. as a Christian republic to be governed according to (their interpretation of) the Bible and those who view the United States as a purely secular state, neutral on moral questions and the general nature of a good life. The hope is that, despite these radically different and incommensurable visions of the good, society can be held together by a thin consensus on procedures combined with public neutrality on the nature of the Good (Rawls, 1971/1999).

The great problem of our generation, then, is how to form a public in the face of such deep and incommensurable differences in religion and the sources of political legitimacy and societal thriving. To understand why and how, we need to consider the nature and meaning of a public and how one comes into being, as well as the serious challenge radical differences in moral worldview present to democracy.

I have previously argued, elsewhere and in this journal (Covaleskie, 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2011a; 2011b), that religious and moral voices and claims must be fully legitimated in the public square because of an understanding of democracy as a way of life that is, at root and unavoidably, itself moral. For that reason, moral claims based in religious belief must not be marginalized relative to secular ones. The emphasis in these previous essays has been optimism regarding the possibility of a more inclusive public discourse. That optimism remains, which is to say that I still believe we can do a better job at including religious voices and motives in public discourse. However, this present essay is more concerned with the possibility that there are limits to the degree of diversity that can be productively contained within the democratic polity, and that certain kinds of religious commitments may test those limits and indicate precisely where they are.

Multiculturalism is an imprecise concept. It is not always clear what the many cultures are, how they are related to each other, or even exactly what is meant by the term. A Jewish man of European descent is simultaneously part of a racial majority, a religious minority, and is ethnically variable. As a matter of social justice, multiculturalism is about including voices of the marginalized and excluded; as a matter of education, it is developing a sensitivity to and sensibility about cultures different from one's own, especially the epistemology, ontology, and axiology of those other cultures: How do others know, how do they see the world, and what do they value? Paradoxically, many progressives in the United States, though consciously concerned about

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of the original draft of this essay. The current version is much improved thanks to their thoughtful, skeptical, and insightful comments.

multicultural sensibility and awareness, seem unaware that the secular democratic public has been constituted so as to exclude a significant number of their fellow citizens: members of certain religious traditions within Christianity.

This is not to say we should take seriously the phony “War on Christmas” declared and covered every year on Fox News for political effect and ratings. It is, however, to take seriously the claims by certain communities of fundamentalist Christians that they have been and continue to be excluded from full and equal participation in discussion of matters of public policy and significance. More basically, even if one could argue from outside that this is not the case, it is the reality that is constructed from inside these communities, which is the fact that creates the problem of democratic life I am considering here: Members of those sects of Christianity with a strong belief in a Covenant Community experience pluralistic, secular democratic life as exclusionary, as dismissing them and their concerns.

The response from the secular democratic public is to say, quite rightly, that Christianity, far from being under any kind of marginalization, has been and remains central in American spiritual and social life. This is true, but also beside the point. There are many versions of Christianity, and those in the centers of power generally tend to be members of the more mainline churches that long ago made their accommodation with the secular world. Members of these sects have no problem justifying their preferred social policies in secular language, for they readily assent to Stephen Jay Gould’s idea that the church and the state represent separate “Non-overlapping magisteria” (Gould, 1997) whereby knowledge about the material world is left to science, not religion, while religion is one means (among many) by which one may speculate about the meaning of life. Religion thus becomes, not just a set of *personal* commitments, but *private* ones as well, unfit for argument in the public square about the public business. Science constitutes one magisterium, one worldview, in which there is a search for verifiable information. Religion, a different and independent source of authority (magisterium) becomes one way among many to seek moral wisdom and insight.

The problem with this division of labor between science and religion is that it does violence to the views of a very large segment of the American population with traditional religious beliefs. For example, in 2012, a Gallup Poll (Newport, 2012a; 2012b) found that 46% of Americans believed that God created humanity in its present form 10,000 years ago, while only 15% believed that humans had evolved without divine intervention. The remaining 32% believed that humans evolved, but with divine guidance and following a divine plan. Another way of putting this is that for every American who believes in the Two Non-Overlapping Magisteria thesis, there are three who oppose it. Put yet another way, while 47% of Americans would probably be comfortable with Darwin’s Theory of Evolution being taught in schools, 46% would find that to be an example of the state explicitly contradicting the religious beliefs by which they are trying to raise their children.

Nor is this, as it is often imagined, a matter simply of educational attainment: Even among Americans with postgraduate education, 29% of Americans believe that humans evolved without God’s intervention, only slightly more than the 25% who

believe that God created humanity in its current form, 10,000 years ago; 42% believe that humans evolved according to God's plan.

According to an earlier Gallup survey (Jones, 2011), 30% of Americans believe that the Bible is literally the "actual word of God." Lest we should think that this is an indication of political point of view and/ or education (or lack thereof), we should note that the 30% includes 22% of Americans with some college, 15% of those who are college graduates, and 16% of citizens with postgraduate education. The division is less absolute by political party than we might presume, with 42% of Republicans and 27% of Democrats believing in Biblical inerrancy; ideology is a little more predictive, with 46% of conservatives but only 14% of liberals so believing.

This same 2011 poll indicates that another 49% of the population does not believe it is literally true in every word, but that it is still the "inspired word of God." This includes 56% of those with some college, 64% of college graduates, and 55% of those with postgraduate education. Breaking those averages down, 51% of Republicans and 46% of Democrats so believe, as do 45% of conservatives and 48% of liberals. Overall, only 17% of Americans think that the Bible is only a "book of fables/legends" (Jones, 2011).

Significantly for the topic of this paper, the first Gallup survey cited is on the *Gallup Politics* webpage: This seemingly *religious* question, or perhaps this seemingly *scientific* question, is, according to the Gallup organization, actually a *political* issue. I think they are importantly correct in this, as I hope to explore in what follows. For now, note that the secular democratic public embodies a view of the world that is in some ways fundamentally at odds with what other members of that public view as not just true, but obvious and incontrovertible. While secular and many religious Americans would contend that it is impossible to look at the available evidence and believe in the literal truth of the Bible, it remains true that a lot depends on what counts to the individual as evidence.

Those who take seriously the idea that floods and earthquakes can – must – be understood as God's punishment for infidelity to the covenant are often seen by more mainstream Christians as not sophisticated (see, for example, Bates, 1993). On the other hand, when secular society ridicules and marginalizes these same Christians, not because they *misinterpret* the Bible, but *because they believe in it*, this tends to alienate not only those marginalized sects whose beliefs essentially exclude them from democratic discourse, but also more moderate Christians who understand that their beliefs are also being dismissed with condescension at best and contempt at worst. So while it may well be that the Gallup data identify a much larger group than what I am calling Covenant Christianity, there are a great many Americans who do not see the Covenant in quite the same way, but who see those Christians in a sympathetic light and are offended by their exclusion from public discourse.

In this paper, I want to suggest a view of the public that allows, but does not privilege, religious reasons for public policy. More than that, for reasons I hope will be obvious shortly, I want to say that the claims put forth in religious terms must be

carefully considered by those who do not share those religious views. I will flesh out the reasons why this is necessary and proper. I will then argue that the secular democratic public, as it is presently constituted, is often hostile and exclusionary from the perspective of Covenant Christianity. Many religious citizens feel that their diversity is not only not included in the public domain, but it is also mocked, ridiculed, and positively excluded.<sup>2</sup> Nor are they entirely incorrect: Consider such recent best-seller titles as *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Hitchens, 2007), *The God Delusion* (Dawkins, 2006) and *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (Harris, 2004). Consider also just about any performance by Bill Maher or the frequent juxtaposition of faith and reason, as though faith can never be reasonable. Religious views cannot be endorsed by the state and are excluded as a matter of Constitutional principle when given as reasons for public policy. The secular democratic public calls this neutrality, but that is not how it is experienced by Covenant Christians. It may be appropriate. Indeed, I think it is, but it is not neutral.

At the same time, we must recognize that there may be limits to the ability of a democratic polity to absorb and be open to cultural differences. One consequence of being in a community that views its sources of belief as being both infallibly correct and uniquely moral is that one has little incentive to participate in democratic dialog with those who think differently, and even less incentive to compromise with them. Further, if, as I will show, Covenant Christians believe that they are responsible not only for their own moral behavior, but also for the collective purity of the society in which one lives, it is not possible for them to assume the position of *live and let live*, which is often (though mistakenly) taken by the secular society as a position of neutrality.

As one anonymous reviewer of this article noted, “The covenant community wants significantly different rules infused into the game [of democratic life] so as to render it a completely new game. While the game itself is not neutral, the rules within the game are neutral – they are the rules that govern the game.” While I wholeheartedly agree with the first point – Covenant Christians indeed want a different set of rules, as to both decision-making and the standards for epistemological warrant – I disagree with the contention that the rules are neutral. In truth, what they do is create a secular game. It is not my point that there is something wrong with the fact that the rules of the game favor secular society and a certain kind of evidence. However, I think it is important for us to understand that neither the rules nor the game are neutral, that significant numbers of citizens reject or seriously question the rules, and that Covenant Christians are aware of the fact that much of secular society does not just judge them as incorrect, but also as

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<sup>2</sup> One of the anonymous reviewers of this article at this point commented, “Why is ridicule inappropriate if a particular claim is ridiculous?” There are, I think, two answers to this question. First, “ridiculous” is in the eye of the beholder. While most (perhaps) Americans believe that we must interpret the Bible (if we believe it at all) in the light of the physical evidence, a significant minority contend the opposite: The Biblical truth as the very word of God is the standard by which reality must be understood, and material evidence must be understood in its light. Second, when we view the self-defining beliefs of our fellow citizens as ridiculous, we do damage to the fabric of democratic life and make democratic governance that much more difficult to attain.

ridiculous. Furthermore, when they are forced to play a game that is not neutral by rules they experience as hostile, the claim that we are being neutral is not just hollow; it is also offensive.

This is a relatively recent divide. Through the middle of the twentieth century, the American polity was defined in large part by its moral grounding in a sort of generic Christianity. This state of things was first successfully challenged in 1947 in the Supreme Court decision *Everson v Board of Education of Ewing Township* (1947), in which the idea of a wall of separation between religion and politics was moved from political rhetoric<sup>3</sup> to constitutional law<sup>4</sup>. There was a broad and general consensus that religious morality was a legitimate part of public policy-making. The early common school reformers were consciously grounding civic formation in a non-sectarian but generically Christian view of the world. Or, as President Eisenhower (December 12, 1952) put it, “In other words, our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and *I don't care what it is*” (emphasis added).

Despite this consensus, it would be a mistake to read the present back into the past and think that religious people were of one mind on any of the issues that have divided us, or that they were silent on the issues of the day. Neither is true. Christian churches split into Northern and Southern branches largely over the question of slavery and then segregation. Few thought that Martin Luther King, Jr., should not advocate for equality because he was an ordained minister, nor that it was somehow unseemly for Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to march at Selma, when he famously said that his “feet were praying” (Herschthal, 2011).

While it is commonplace to point out that ordained clergy were leaders in the civil rights movement, we tend to forget that ordained ministers were also on the side of segregation. Similarly, while ordained clergy were in the forefront of the opposition to the Vietnam War – Daniel and Philip Berrigan come to mind – many clergy, such as Cardinal Francis Spellman and Archbishop Fulton Sheen, supported it as part of a campaign against what was generally referred to at the times as Godless Communism. The moral questions inherent in most public policy decisions were held to weigh on both sides of most debates, and the discussion of policy was, I think, the richer for it.

First I want to clarify what I mean when I speak of the public. Then I will consider the centrality of moral formation to even the most secular democratic public. Next I will address the importance of public schools in the formation of the public. I will then examine some ways in which the secular, public discourse excludes certain religious voices systematically, and the consequences of doing so. Finally, I will look at some ways of thinking about school that might allow for a more inclusive future.

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase was originally used in a letter from President Thomas Jefferson to the Baptist ministers of Danbury, CT, who wanted assurance that the government would not be involved in matters of religious belief or practice (1802).

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the practice being challenged in *Everson*, of using public funds to pay for children to be bused to religious schools, was permitted.

## THE PUBLIC

In *The Public and its Problems*, John Dewey (1927) theorized the nature and role of the public in democratic life. His thesis was that the existence of a public is absolutely essential to democratic life, but that it cannot be taken for granted.<sup>5</sup> His insight was that it is only when citizens act *as a public* that the potential of democratic life to contribute to human thriving can be fully realized.

A public requires connection, communication, and mutual regard. It is the public that defines the nature of a public problem; deliberates in public discourse the possible courses of civic action in response to the problem; as a public (not merely as a collection of individuals) chooses the best resolution of the problem; implements the chosen solution; and evaluates the effects of that implementation on the common good. One of the ways that our ancestors hoped to create citizens capable of constituting a public in this sense was through the creation of a system of public schooling.

The *public* in *public schools* has several overlapping meanings. It reminds us that they are schools that are governed by and funded for the public and intended to serve the public interest. When properly designed, the education they provide prepares children to become part of the public when they graduate. Further, they are open to the public with respect to access: No child can be denied admission to his or her local public school. In all these respects, public schools differ from private, voucher, charter, and magnet schools (though charter and magnet schools are modified versions of public schools meant to serve *selected* portions of the public).

In a deeper sense, public schools are intimately connected to the specific kind of *political public* theorized by Dewey. Note that in most the above, *public* really means *everyone*, as in, open and accessible to all, like a public beach or a public park. However, the public schools are also intimately connected to the kind of intentional *political public* described by Dewey. It is central to Dewey's thought that the public *is an entity, not just a plurality*. So public education is the education that is formed by the public, in that formal, democratic, political sense. That is, *when there is a public, the governance of schools is not just done by majority rule, but as the negotiated common solution to the common problem of how we should educate the community's children for the common good*. This can happen only when all members of the community can see other members of the community as at least in some sense like themselves. It requires that all come to the commons attempting to see the good sought by others to be as important and as valid as the good sought by themselves. This requirement is today sorely unmet, and, left untended, may yet result in the unraveling of the democratic experiment.

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<sup>5</sup> There are other valid ideas of democracy than Dewey's – democracy as simple majority, democracy as competing ideas and shifting coalitions of temporary majorities – that do not rely so strongly on the existence of a public, but Dewey's vision of democracy as a search for a common good has long held deep appeal.

At its best, public education helps to form the public itself. The public is brought into being in the process of governing, if at all: The question of education is one of those common problems that can summon the public to its task of communal decision-making. Furthermore, within the walls of a good school, there is the process of public-making in the establishment of a rich educational community (see, for example, Deborah Meier's [1995] description of the way Central Park East schools operate). In short, there can be one public formed inside schools by the way they are run, while the public outside considers how the schools should be governed in their communities. Ideally, the form of the public inside the school is such that it prepares students to enter the public outside the walls. It is this fact that makes public schools the sites of so much contention: They reflect current social conflicts and controversies at the same time that they are inevitably shaping the attitudes of those who will make the public of the future.

So, then, *public* schools are those institutions designed for the education of the young, in the sense of bringing the young into mature membership in their civic community – their public. Whence comes this public? And how do we fail to create it?

## PUBLIC SPEECH

Tom Green (1994) gives us an important way to understand part of the problem we have in making democracy function. Whereas Dewey tells us what a public does and why it is vital to democratic life, Green helps us understand how a public comes to be through what he calls *public speech* – speech of a very special kind.

He points us to some important but not-so-obvious facts about public speech, among the latter the fact that speech is not made public merely by being uttered in the presence of others. Recall Dewey's insight that a public is the place in which we gather to identify in common the problems we face as a public, that we do this with the goal of defining and clarifying those problems, and that the desired solution will be good for the public as a whole. That is, there are two elements here that matter: One is the quality of the outcome/solution, the extent to which it solves the real problem of the public, but the other, equally important element is the degree to which the public itself is the source of both the problem identification and the solution. That is, the best possible solution developed by an oligarchy or by even the most benevolent dictator would not be democratic.<sup>6</sup>

The key feature of the public is the work it does and the way it does that work. The public is not a place, but the entity that does the business of the public, that attends to

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<sup>6</sup> This idea that the public should be where public problems are identified and solved is the chief reason, from a democratic perspective, to resist school reform as philanthropy, a so-called solution in which the democratic public is replaced by the wise and benevolent philosopher-ruler. Still more is it reason to reject the corporatization of the charter movement, in which schooling comes under the direct control of corporate interests, eliminating democratic governance at the root.

the *res publica* – literally, the concerns of the public. At least one vision of democratic life presumes the existence of the public, and so we must consider how this thing comes into being. Green tells us that the existence of the public is the result of what he calls *public speech*, a very special kind of speech that is both the source and the instrument of the public will.

As Green put it:

Without public speech, there is no public, only a babble of lamentations and complaints, pleadings, pronouncements, claims and counterclaims. Without public speech, the public dies, politics turns to polemics, becomes partisan in the worst sense, even venomous, and we are left with nothing we can reasonably speak of as public education, public service, or public life. (p. 370)

This sounds depressingly familiar today.

He describes two kinds of public speech, each with a different function: what he calls the *forum view* and the *umbilical view*. The forum view is close to what Dewey (1927) had in mind. It is “the speech of inquiry, evidence, demonstration, argument, and claims and counter-claims of entitlement” (p. 370). It is public speech in work clothes.

But the umbilical view is harder to discern and in many ways more basic than and prior to the forum function, which it enables. It is the failure of this function today that makes our civil life so “venomous.” Or, more accurately, the problem is the existence within a subset of the public of an umbilical story that creates a public-within-a-public partly defined by the need to convert all others to its point of view.<sup>7</sup> This umbilical story, I will call the Story of the Covenant Community. This story is one of purity and the need for universal conversion, and it is these features that make it difficult to fit this Community into the secular democratic public, which values diversity and a more *laissez-faire* attitude toward the beliefs and private activities of others.

Readers should note the bias here: I am speaking from the point of view of the secular democratic public, so I define the problem as how the secular democratic public can both protect itself from and respectfully include members of the Covenant Community in the discussion of public matters. From within the Covenant Community the problem looks quite different: How can a Christian republic, covenanted with God, convert the members of the secular democratic state and so be saved?

As Dewey made clear, for the public to function as a public we must believe that we are all in this together, that what is good for the community is good for all its members. Effective umbilical stories help make this true. Without such a story, or at least

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<sup>7</sup> This multiple membership is not necessarily bad: We all enact multiple memberships that overlap to greater or lesser degrees. What is unique about the experience of Covenant Christianity is that it is both an identity-conferring membership and non-negotiable in its obligations and demands. The obligations of other memberships, in other words, are subordinate to the demands of the Covenant.

the willingness to look for one, the public remains divided and unable to do its work. At a minimum, democracy will require that the larger polity find an umbilical narrative that allows it to both (1) govern itself despite the resistance of a significant portion of the citizenry, and (2) govern itself democratically with respect for the members of the Covenant Community who are required to abide by the decisions of a government whose legitimacy they cannot fully assent to.

Neil Postman (1995) put this in secular terms when he argued that the educational problem we faced at the end of the twentieth century was really the social problem of needing, but not having, a narrative that tied us all together, and that education was empty and could not succeed without such a unifying narrative. We must today consider the implications of the possibility that no such narrative exists or is even possible.

Green's (1994) central claim is that "*Public speech occurs when what A says is heard by B as a possible candidate for B's speech.* [This] principle points to hearing, *in a certain way*, as the font of public speech rather than any array of actions by the speaker" (p. 375, italics in original). He goes on to claim, "declining to listen to or hear another is among our more efficient ways of denying that those others even exist... It is not enough that there be freedom of speech if nobody listens or if nobody listens *in a certain way*" (p. 376, italics in original). This is the reason why multicultural education is critical to democratic life: If the other is truly the *other*, then we cannot form a public together. Only when we see ourselves *as* a *we* can we call into being a public. It is the fact that we do not so see each other that is at the root of the impasse between religious citizens of a certain sort and secular citizens of a certain sort. A premise of the ideal of multicultural education is that such cultural differences can be accommodated and/or transcended. This may not always be true, but the democratic imperative is to make sure that any failure that leaves members of one group outside the democratic public is the result of refusal by the group to be incorporated, and not a determination by the public to make democratic participation impossible.

Now, it might well be possible that B has already listened to A, and has already deemed A's reasoning not worthy of further consideration.<sup>8</sup> However, even when this is the case, it is possible that democracy requires B to attend to A's concern. That is, A's reasons for desiring a particular policy might not hold water, or the evidence brought forward in its support might be invalid. However, the intensity of A's commitment to the policy might sway B to support it, if the costs (however computed) are not too high. And even if that is not the case, *how* we reject the policy can be significant to the question of whether the decision to reject the policy amounts to a simultaneous rejection of the individual's membership.

And from both inside and outside Covenant Christianity, its members are indeed seen as other. From within that community, they see themselves as a righteous remnant intent on keeping the covenant intact and the community thriving. From the outside, the assumption of the secular polity is that the members of Covenant Christianity are either cynical (the leaders such as Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson), deluded, or delusional (the

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for raising this point.

followers). Given these assumptions, the members of the secular polity are able to ignore any claims made on them by Covenant Christians: Their claims are not to be responded to, having been explained away. It is just not the message that is rejected; it is the messenger. This is the death of the public: Covenant Christians have full freedom of speech, but no one hears them.

A sense of *we*, Green tells us, comes not from the forum, but from the umbilical stories we tell in which others can see themselves that constitute the conditions of a public:

Public speech is not limited to truth claims. *This narrative way of entertaining the speech of another as candidate for my own is what I have in mind primarily as “public speech.”* When someone like Martin Luther King, Jr., says, “I was in Egypt,” we do not expect people to say, No, you weren’t”... These words announce what genre of speech we are about to enter... This is public speech... This is not the speech of inquiry; it is the speech of membership. It is the speech of some public, not because it pronounces public truth, but because it appeals to an umbilical story of some membership. Consider once again the example I cited earlier of a society in which there are speakers, but no auditors, those who speak but none who will listen to their speech as candidates for their own. In such a society, even one that prides itself on freedom of speech, there will be no public speech at all and hence no public to speak of. (p. 379; italics in original)

This rather precisely describes the state of affairs in the United States today, as a large group of traditionally religious citizens are unheard by a large number of radically secular citizens, and vice versa. The public has yet to be formed that can bridge this fundamental gap between Covenant Christianity and the secular democratic polity. As Postman (1995) has pointed out, part of the problem is that the secular democratic society – but not the Covenant Community – lacks a strong umbilical story, what he calls a narrative. His point is that without a narrative, the morally normative community that might hold a national community together lacks the attractive force to do so. The concern that shapes this present inquiry is the possibility that there may be no such story.

## PUBLIC MORALITY

We sometimes hear it said, in defense of neutrality between ideas of the good life on the part of the secular state, that we cannot legislate morality. That seems wrong as a matter of fact and as democratic rhetoric. As to the fact, the democratic polity inevitably is faced with questions of how we should live together, how we should treat each other, and how social and material resources are properly distributed: We legislate hardly anything but morality. As to the rhetoric, it is an error to fail to put policy reasons in moral language: People respond when called to act in pursuit of some higher purpose. People want to see themselves as good.

One consequence of what has been called “the naked public square” (Neuhaus, 1984/1997) is that there appears to be not only a separation of church and state, but also a separation of policy from morality. One consequence of trying to form a public square that is devoid of strong moral commitments<sup>9</sup> is that there can be no real public there, and without narratives to unite us, it is difficult to have reasoned arguments about public policy. In such an attenuated, synthetic public, arguments tend to be, quoting Green, “a babble of lamentations and complaints, pleadings, pronouncements, claims and counterclaims,” rather than questions of right and wrong: Discourse is certainly not about the common good (MacIntyre, 1981/2007).

From both theorists about moral education (for example, Dewey, 1916/1944; Grant, 1990; Kunzman, 2006; Purpel, 1988; Sizer & Sizer, 1999) and practitioners of moral education (for example, Covaleskie, 2004; Meier, 1995; Paley, 1993), comes the insight that moral education is not about teaching children right from wrong; it is a matter of us showing them, by our actions, that certain things are just not done (or are done)<sup>10</sup>, at least not by *us*.<sup>11</sup> Moral learning is peculiar in that it is a product of formation into a certain kind of moral being. This is not taught, so much as it is learned by imitation and initiation. As every adult who works with children knows, teaching children the rules is very easy, but getting the children to think that there is a relationship between keeping or breaking the rules and the kind of person one is, is a very much more difficult task.<sup>12</sup>

Moving from knowing the rules to understanding the difference between right and wrong and knowing that such things matter is the process of *normation*. We can define normation in two quite different ways: It is the process by which rules become internalized, by which *the* rules become *my* rules – rules, that is, that control my behavior even when I am not being watched. I come somehow to understand that these rules are definitive of what sort of person I am; *not just how others see me, but how I see myself*. The other way of understanding the meaning of normation is to see that I become normed as I become a *member of some normative community*. This is one reason that schools are most likely to be successful at moral normation when they are welcoming places for children to be.

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<sup>9</sup> In truth, it is probably impossible to construct a public square, or any community of humans, that does not have some moral architecture as its default for valuation. The naked public square Neuhaus theorizes is not so much naked, as clothed in the thin morality of crude utilitarianism, where not happiness, but efficiency and productivity are the measure of value.

<sup>10</sup> The sense of what is and is not done here is complex, and far more than a matter of obeying rules and regulations. The kind of norms I am talking about are those that are defining. Some things are not illegal or forbidden in other ways; nevertheless, they are just not done.

<sup>11</sup> The question of who *us* is, is a difficult one, and in large measure is the uncertainty at the heart of these reflections.

<sup>12</sup> Readers interested in seeing what this pedagogy of moral formation might look like are encouraged to read Meier (1995) and Paley (1993).

Next I want to briefly sketch the social vision and umbilical stories that result in a significant portion of our fellow citizens feeling – and not without warrant – that they have been excluded from the public. I also will point out why the moral community formed by these stories presents a particularly difficult challenge to democratic governance.

## COVENANT CHRISTIANITY

One thing to keep in mind through this part of the discussion is that the differences between the democratic secular public and Covenant Christianity regarding two fundamental foundations of political and social life may be both fundamental and irreconcilable. My aim here is less to solve this problem than to point out its dimensions and form, to which we insufficiently attend. Let us consider the umbilical stories of Covenant Christianity. Foreign as these stories may be to some of us, we should try to understand the way the world looks to our fellow citizens who inhabit this worldview.

Covenant Christianity’s umbilical stories tell of a community defined by belief and practice, called into existence by an ancestral covenant that still binds. In this community, there is a shared moral responsibility to live a certain kind of life, one in accordance with a certain set of commands.

In the umbilical stories of this public, the people are formed in and by the covenant with God. Abraham is the original member, and those who follow become his heirs and part of the covenant community. God can terminate covenants and create new ones, but within the covenant, the people are promised prosperity only so long as they collectively abide by its terms. In the Christian version of this story, God’s new covenant is with those who worship and follow Jesus of Nazareth. In the American continuation of this umbilical story, the United States is the newest covenant community – the “shining City on the Hill” – an image that comes originally from the words of Jesus to his disciples (Matthew 5:14). The image is used at the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony by John Winthrop (1630),<sup>13</sup> and then brought forward to its modern use by both John Kennedy (1961)<sup>14</sup> and, most memorably, Ronald Reagan (1984)<sup>15</sup>. The Covenant

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<sup>13</sup> “For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. Soe that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world” (Winthrop, 1630).

<sup>14</sup> “I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arabella* [sic] ... Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us—and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, State, and local, must be as a city upon a hill—constructed and inhabited by men aware of their grave trust and their great responsibilities” (Kennedy, 1961).

<sup>15</sup> “We raised a banner of bold colors – no pale pastels. We proclaimed a dream of an American that would be ‘a shining city on a hill’” (Reagan, 1984).

Community can best be described as what we might call a soft theocracy (where its members do not, in fact, desire something even stronger).

Origins and continuity of this story are important to both its members, and to understanding that is important to those who would engage them in public speech. The civic and public implications of this story are that we are indeed our brothers' keepers, but not in the sense that we must contribute to each other's material or physical thriving. Rather, *members of the Covenant Community are each responsible for the keeping of the covenant by all*. The goal is not what secular progressives and more progressive religious traditions would refer to as *social justice*, but a deep and identity-conferring commitment to ritual purity and the maintenance and expansion of what they take to be God's plan for social organization and righteousness.

In such a world, it is not sufficient (and may not be possible) for a believer to be righteous in a community that is not living according to the covenant. The Covenant Community – all its members – will be punished for sins committed and permitted in its midst; this is the message the Hebrew prophets communicated to the Chosen People to explain such catastrophes as the Babylonian exile. In this world, one proves one's own personal righteousness by witnessing and converting others to the *Truth* (hence the centrality of the so-called Great Commission to Covenant Christians<sup>16</sup>). Members of this community are not likely to assent to the notion that they live in a secular state. Indeed, in a very real sense, they do not.

The umbilical stories of the Covenant Community dispose its members against democracy. First of all, humanity is either seriously flawed or positively disposed to evil. The only way to be worthy of God's protection is to live in strict adherence to God's law. Since this is true, democracy is a constant temptation to corruption, substituting as it does, human intentionality and preferences for God's. Further, if the essence of democracy is dialog and compromise, then it must be resisted and refused, since truth comes only from the Bible (as the word of God), and dialog can thus be had only with those who live in error. In the end, given the set of beliefs that constitute membership in the Covenant, compromise can be only with evil, not merely with difference.

At the same time, those who do not live within this particular public hear much of its utterances, *intended as public speech*, as either delusional or dishonest. In this way, the secular democratic polity declares the members of Covenant Christianity not worthy of respectful attention and ignores them out of public existence. It is not sufficient, I think, to justify this exclusion on the grounds that the worldview of the Covenant Community is simply wrong on the testimony of the evidence (though it most certainly is). The ultimate disagreement between Covenant Christians and the secular polity is precisely the question of what counts as evidence.

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<sup>16</sup> In Matthew 28:19-21, Jesus tells his disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (NIV).

Many in the United States, even many who are religiously devout, shake their head in bemused disbelief when such as Pat Robertson claim that the attacks of September 11, 2001, or the disaster of Hurricane Katrina were divine retribution for sins, but that is a perfectly logical extension of belief in the Covenant, a belief that has deep roots in American social, political, and intellectual soil. The umbilical stories that construct the Covenant Community are fundamentally at odds with the stories that construct the secular democratic state, which is grounded in visions of personal liberty, not communal thriving. *In the Covenant Community, the basic unit of analysis is not the individual; it is the member.*<sup>17</sup>

Again, this reminds us why public schools are one of the sites of conflict: The Covenant Community has a clear sense of what education for the public square must look like, just as they have a clear vision of what that public should look like, one organized according the terms of the Divine Covenant, not a secular contract. One fundamental difference between the secular democratic public and Covenant Christianity is the source of rights: Covenant Christians see human rights as being God-given. In addition to the idea of the Biblical Covenant, they tend to quote from the Declaration of Independence, with its reference to rights granted to us “by our Creator.” In contrast, the secular democratic polity sees the source of rights as being in the form of a political contract and being granted by “We the people” through the Constitution, which makes no mention of God.

## SCHOOLS FOR A DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC

Consider now this problem of the public and the Covenant Community in the context of public schools.<sup>18</sup> In the schoolhouse, there are battles over sex education, prayer in school, display of the Ten Commandments, teaching of evolution, sexual diversity, and traditional gender roles, all of which have, or can and frequently do have, connections to one’s religious beliefs and the teachings of one’s religious community. All of these are questions also faced by the broader public, and the evidence is that adults are unable to negotiate the worldview difference between the secular democratic public and

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<sup>17</sup> In this respect, the Covenant Community is not unlike the Deweyan or Communitarian versions of democratic life. That is to say, there is a secular understanding of *community*, in which individuals only truly thrive in a community that is rightly ordered, however different is the sense and source of right ordering.

<sup>18</sup> Public *schools*, not public *education*. The latter domain is quite a bit larger than the former, encompassing as it does churches, media, politics, museums, and civic organizations, to name just a few institutions that are not schools. While I think it is important to theorize the ways in which these institutions can better do their work of educating the public, that is not my task here.

the Covenant Community. Discussion about these deeply contentious issues more often than not is aimed at demonizing one's opponent, not finding common ground.<sup>19</sup>

Nor is it obvious that common ground always exists, even the carefully attenuated common ground specified by such as Rawls (Rawls, 1971/1999, pp. 340, 347-350). In questions of the civil order in general, this is clear once we take the time to understand the clashing views. For advocates of marriage equality, the issue is one of simple justice and individual rights. However, within the Covenant Community, it is a matter of fidelity to the community's covenant with God. Nor can the state be neutral here: It either grants the possibility of marriage to LGBTQ citizens or it restricts marriage to one woman married to one man. Covenant Christians believe that for human authority to change the meaning of marriage would be to violate the Divinely-ordained meaning of the relationship, to which the members of the secular democratic public say, "Of course it is done on human authority. How else could it be?"

This is no less true when we come into the world of childhood and schooling. Either we read children's books about dinosaurs that lived hundreds of millions of years ago, or we read children's books that show humans coexisting with them, or we leave dinosaurs out of the curriculum. None of these is a neutral act. Either we teach teens safe sex practices in a comprehensive sex-education curriculum, or we tell them "Just don't do it," and pray that they are like no generation before them. In high schools, we either teach challenging literature that opens young minds, or we teach stories that honor only conformity and obedience.<sup>20</sup> We can teach the Theory of Evolution and teach precisely what a scientific theory is (that is, not *just* a theory); we can teach the story of creation presented in Genesis; we can teach both stories as though they are equivalent; or we can say nothing about human origins. None of these actions is neutral.

Schools cannot avoid taking a stand on any of these issues or many others (such as class rules, discipline policies, prayer in school, the Ten Commandments on plaques, and the accommodations for religious minorities); there is very little the school can do *or not do* that is neutral on the issues that matter most to a small, but nevertheless significant, portion of the American polity. And when the public chooses against that Covenant Community, and adds insult to injury by pretending that it is merely being neutral on some disputed issue as required by the First Amendment or as justified by liberal democratic theory, or that it is merely taking a position that is obviously true, this is an example of refusing to consider the point of view of the other, and results in the sort of exclusion from the public described by Green.

It is not obvious whether we are *unable* to speak to each other so as to call a public into being, or *unwilling* to do so. But if we cast this as an educational question,

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<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the best deconstruction of the corrosive and toxic nature of public political discourse was delivered by Jon Stewart (2004) in his appearance on CNN's *Crossfire*.

<sup>20</sup> Some great books, some great books for teens, are on the list of the ten most banned books. The top ten banned books of 2012 included the *Captain Underpants* series, *The Kite Runner*, and *Beloved* according to the American Library Association.

then the question becomes whether schools can help children learn the skills that will foster the habits and dispositions – the virtues – that will allow them to form a public in their time. This is a very difficult task. On the one hand, the disagreements themselves are fundamental in nature. This makes it legitimately difficult to find common ground and even perhaps illuminates the possible limits to and limitations of public speech. Compounding this difficulty, the adults who must help teach the children the skills necessary for public speech are not likely to have had much experience at it themselves. Fortunately, we do have models of education that appear to give some reason for hope.

Moral formation in civic virtue would teach us to hear the other differently than we now do. Consider, as two examples of this pedagogy, the stories told by Deborah Meier and Vivian Paley, two masters of this form of education. They connect the moral imperatives of democratic life with the process of educating children into membership, and they do so by hearing the speech of their children as *public* speech, thus making their schools *public* in the fullest meaning of the word. (I have previously discussed the work of these two moral educators in Covalleskie, 2004.)

In *The Power of Their Ideas* (1995), Deborah Meier tells the following story:

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 victim and someone the victimizer, rapist and [raped], 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. 86-87)

It is safe to assume that Central Park East (CPE) School had a rule against bullying, but we note that it is not the point of the conversation. Meier was asking the boy what sort of person he wanted to be, not how he could become a better rule-follower, not how he could become more compliant with Meier's wishes. It was an exploration of his own standards, and how he might more consistently live in accordance with those standards. The question was not about a rule, but about the proper attitude, and therefore action, toward others. Meier is concerned with making the student better, or at least getting him to think about the kind of person he is, not with making him simply obedient. This is one hallmark of a moral community.

Similarly, we can learn a great deal by studying the pedagogy of Vivian Paley. In *You Can't Say, You Can't Play* (1992), Paley tells the story of how one year she saw the tendency of kindergarten children to exclude each other from games and socializing, which is to say, she saw this as a problem to be ameliorated, not just "the way things are." Specifically, she saw this as a problem of moral formation for democratic life.

So she made a new rule for her class: "You can't say, you can't play." Consider what followed: Like Meier, Paley's approach to violations of the rule was discussion – education. When the rule was broken, Paley did not punish violators, but discussed violations in and with the classroom community. Violations of the rule became teachable moments, not punitive occasions. There was no preordained curriculum, no moralizing, just a respectful and inclusive, but persistent, conversation about what it meant to be part of a community that included all its members, not as a matter of friendship or even of liking, but as a matter of right. The defining feature of the morally normative community that was Paley's classroom was that it was made up of a *we* who was inclusive, not exclusive. The topic under discussion was always about how my actions affected others.

The lesson was to hear and see others as equal participants in a public with themselves.

It is important to note that, as Green puts it, *the law creates the state, but narratives create the public* (Green, 1994, 371). This is simply to understand that the law governs our actions in enforceable ways; it binds us whether we will it so or not. The public is not like that; the public can only bind us with our consent. Indeed, without the consent of the governed, the public does not exist at all. Members of the Covenant Community exist in space shaped by a civil order whose legitimacy they refuse to acknowledge. The public binds through its laws, but it is not as a public that it binds, but as the state (though it may still bind its own members as a public).

Now the notion of the *common good* is both fragile and central to the health of the democratic community: This is at the heart of the democratic morality. The common good is not a material, physical, or scientific fact, and yet it is as real as the computer on which I am writing, *once it is called into being*. But it, like all social constructs, is an example of the Tinker Bell effect: Belief calls it into being, and lack of belief causes its light to fade. Thoughtful and reflective pursuit of the common good is one indication that a public exists, and one of the threats it faces today is the gap between Covenant Communities and the secular democratic state. The question we face is to what extent we can preserve a commitment to democracy while minimizing the obstacles to public

membership on the part of those who are committed to non-democratic ways of living and non-democratic sources of legitimacy.

## CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

It is clear that the American public is deeply divided by incommensurable visions of the good life. There are other divisions to be sure, but in some sense this split between the Covenant Community and the secular democratic public is not only the most obvious, but it is also the most potent in its distortion of democratic discourse as a whole. The problem becomes a threat when disagreements about policy become efforts to delegitimize those who hold the views. Public education cannot reconcile the incommensurable, but it can, perhaps, help students develop the virtues that will enable them to hear their fellow citizens as fellow citizens, not as either deluded or evil.

This will certainly not mean that we stop disagreeing, nor that we stop trying to change each other's minds and hearts. Education is not a panacea, and Dewey was probably more optimistic about the possibility of finding common ground than is justified by the realities of human variability and social life. The practical and human consequences of the recent decision by the Congress of the United States to close the government are significant and may wind up being catastrophic, but we should not ignore the symbolic importance of this act: When political divides become deep enough, when political discourse becomes disconnected enough, democratic government is quite literally unable to function.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, Green's work on the importance of public speech and the consequences of its destruction were remarkably prescient.

We live today in a country with little robust public speech, and with less evidence that we are capable of or interested in creating it. It has always been the hope of those who have believed in the possibility of democratic governance that public schools would take the lead in fostering the virtues needed for democratic life, not the least of which is the predisposition to listen to others. This is a difficult task, and one that may well come to naught, but if this work is not done in the schools, where do we think it might be done? And if it is not done, do we think we can function as a democracy when the purpose of political maneuvering and of political rhetoric is not to seek the common good, but to delegitimize and exclude from the public square those whose foundational views differ?

Robert Kunzman (2006) helps us think about how school people can teach by example how to disagree respectfully about "things that matter" (p. 121) even when the disagreement is deep and fundamental. As Emile Durkheim (1961) put it, speaking of France at the beginning of the twentieth century:

We can only reanimate collective life, revive it from this torpor, if we love it; we cannot learn to live it unless we live it, and in order to do so, it must exist.

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<sup>21</sup> This essay is being completed during the 2013 shutdown of the United States government by the Republicans in the House of Representatives.

It is precisely at this point that the role of the school can be considerable. It is the means, perhaps the only one, by which we can leave this vicious circle. (p. 235; Wilson & Schnurer, trans.)

As in Durkheim's France, we today face a crisis of legitimacy, one in which a vicious circle of mistrust and alienation makes democratic governance more precarious. In seeking to balance incommensurable visions of The Good, Kunzman suggests that what is needed is genuine respect, not procedural neutrality. He recognizes that society must indeed make choices on conflicting ideas about what we should value in common, and that this means that we – the public – cannot be neutral. But his expectation is more than *fairness*; it is a call for true respect of the views of the other in the civic space and conversation.

What Kunzman charges the majority with is the responsibility of always taking care before taking any public action that, in one way or another, puts the public and the state on the side of the majority to the disadvantage of the minority. Significantly and correctly, he recognizes that there are times when there is no alternative to doing so, which makes all the greater the need to do so with both care and a certain regret, and only when there are no alternatives.

So, in the matter of marriage equality, the state must in the end side with either those who defend marriage equality or those who defend the traditional family. A secular democratic public cannot equivocate, at least not forever. But if there is a true public – if we call one into being – decision-making will be made with a different tone than is currently done. To take one example, it seems to me we should – indeed, must – reject the arguments against marriage equality, not because they are religious in nature, but because they demean some members of the public without due cause. However, it must remain significant to the public that the granting of marriage equality deeply wounds members of the Covenant Community, who are also members of the public. This should not sway policy by itself, but their concerns deserve our respectful attention and response.

Is school the answer to our current failure to form a public? We cannot know, but it seems likely that citizens raised under the care of such as Deborah Meier or Vivian Paley will be more suited to life in a democracy than otherwise; they will have learned to practice the virtues of democratic life. This will not bridge the gulf between members of the Covenant Community and those of the secular state, but it might enable numbers of them to join with people in the middle to form a functioning public that respects both points of view. The current attitude of dismissal of those so rooted in Biblical literalism might well discomfort believers who are somewhat less literal, or at least who do not share the strong view of the covenant, but who are nevertheless devout. Secular ridicule of religious belief cannot but contribute to the alienation of citizens who share even a portion of those beliefs. And, of course, it provides ammunition for the cynical propagandists who arouse opposition to the War on Christmas and the more general War on Christianity in order to boost ratings.

It is true that no public will be one hundred percent inclusive. What seems democratically relevant, however, is whether those who wind up outside of the public do so because they reject the public, or because the public rejects them. Today's secular democratic state and Covenant Community seem to be largely defined by memberships that seek to do their best to delegitimize their fellow citizens, ruling them as unfit for life in the public each conceives. Will a different kind of education allow membership to evolve in such a way that differences remain, but within a more united public? We cannot know without trying, but even more importantly, we cannot continue as we are.

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