CHARLES L. GLENN

Public Education Changes Partners

Although actual classroom practice has changed far less than one might imagine over the past hundred years, the *function* and the *meaning* of American public education have become profoundly different. There are few occupations whose day-to-day activities have changed as little as have those of schoolteachers, but the relationship of schools and society has become very different than it was in 1900.

With the perfect hindsight of history, we can see that two possible directions were available to the public school a hundred years ago, as it became impossible to ignore that several generations of heavy immigration and urbanization had made the United States irreducibly pluralistic. Horace Mann, in the 1840s, had insisted that public schools could teach the "pure religion of heaven" and a distinct moral code upon which all could agree. The social consensus that made such claims reasonable no longer existed in 1900, at least in the industrialized cities and states.

We can now see that two choices were available. One would have been to redefine the "common school" as a school based upon the shared values of a particular group of parents or community, as was still the case in rural areas and in the growing Catholic, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, and other alternative schools. This was the course then being followed in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and England, all of which organized publicly supported schooling along denominational lines, with parents free to choose.

The other—the one taken with little debate—was to purge the public school, over time, of the explicit value-commitments that Mann and his contemporaries took for granted. Thus John Dewey, writing in the 1890s and many decades thereafter, offered a vision of education in which norms and mean-

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ings would emerge from the interactions in the school. "The primary root of all educative activity," he wrote, "is in the instinctive, impulsive attitudes and activities of the child, and not in the presentation and application of external material."[1] This understanding of education as oriented exclusively toward the future that it was itself creating fitted conveniently with changes in its organizational basis.[2] Schools a hundred years ago mirrored the society that they served, or at least its white, Protestant, middle-class mainstream. Public schools today, while they continue to be invoked as the talismans of democracy, are often deeply alienated from their public. Perhaps the most dramatic sign of this alienation is the expansion of "home schooling" during the 1990s to what is now estimated to be over a million children. While religious motivation has played an important part for many home-schooling parents, there are many others who simply do not trust the message communicated by how public schools operate as well as by the explicit teaching they provide.

In 1900, public schools were strongly local institutions, controlled by more than a hundred thousand local elected school boards, some of which supervised a single school. Teachers were often local, too, typically the daughters of prosperous farmers or businessmen who had gone off after high school for several years of training at a state "normal school" or denominational college. Schooling consisted largely of the first eight grades; in 1900 there were almost fifteen million public school pupils in these elementary grades, compared with only half a million in high schools. While the South lagged well behind the rest of the country in the provision and quality of schooling, there were great efforts under way in North Carolina and elsewhere to make schooling universal and effective for white children, though the post-Emancipation push to educate black children had faltered from lack of conviction.[3]

There have been many changes in the scope and mission of schooling, but none is more significant than the fact that it is no longer a *local* enterprise as it was for so long. Even though, by European standards, American public schooling is absurdly decentralized to some 15,000 autonomous districts, the schools operated by these districts have come to have far less local flavor than they did seventy years ago, when there were more than 127,000 local districts. To an overwhelming extent, schools and those who work in them now respond to norms set by the education profession and by state and federal policymakers, and not to local norms and societal consensus.

This is not to call for a return to the old ways in American education. There have been many gains, as well as many losses, in the curriculum, in the quality of teaching, in how pupils are treated. The close control of schools by

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local elected officials made it difficult to introduce new material and to expose pupils to broader perspectives. Children today receive a much broader, if also often much shallower, schooling than did those of a hundred years ago.

Among the losses, however, is the taken-for-granted engagement of parents (at least middle-class parents) with the content of their children's education. In no way is this more apparent than in the banning of religious themes from public schools. It is not an exaggeration to say that pupils who relied exclusively on what they were told in school and on their assigned readings could come out after twelve or thirteen years unaware that such a thing as religion existed in the contemporary world, much less that it continues to play a major role in American life.

I will be arguing, in this article, that a primary cause of this change in the relationship between public schools and the religious beliefs of the public is a long-standing fear of religion on the part of policy elites, a fear and consequent hostility that can be traced consistently over more than two hundred years of European and American history. I will also contend that this fear is reinforced by a way of conceptualizing education that inevitably casts religion as its enemy.

Religion-Free Schools

Opposition to any hint of religion in public schools was illustrated a few years ago when the American Civil Liberties Union took a stand against a proposed state law calling for abstinence-based sex education on the grounds that "teaching that monogamous, heterosexual intercourse within marriage is a traditional American value is an unconstitutional establishment of a religious doctrine in public schools."[4]

The relentless secularization of the curriculum and daily life of American public schools is in stark contrast with the practice in other Western democracies, despite the fact most have a level of religious belief and practice outside of schools much lower than in the United States. Most Western European countries provide for regular religious instruction as part of the public school curriculum, as well as providing public funds for independent religious schools chosen by parents.[5] Often it is assumed that the religion-free character of American public schools is a consequence of the disestablishment of state churches during the early years of the Republic, and the "wall of separation between Church and State" that Jefferson and others understood to be a feature of our constitutional order. The assumption is mistaken.

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Religion—specifically Christianity in some nondenominational form—was very much present in public schools through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. A national survey in 1946 found that "Bible reading in the schools was required in thirteen states, and authorized for school districts as a local option in twenty-five more. In 1960 one-third of the Nation's schools reportedly began the school day . . . with devotional prayer, and 42 percent required reading the Bible."[6]

Support for religious practices in public schools was especially strong among those public school advocates who feared the growing competition of alternative religious schools, both Catholic and Protestant. Thus the National Teachers Association (forerunner of the National Education Association, the three-million-member union that is the most powerful force in American education today), expressed opposition, in 1869, to public funding for "sectarian" schools, but resolved that "the Bible should not only be studied . . . but devotionally read, and its precepts inculcated in all" elementary schools.[7]

What accounts for the change from public schools permeated with broadly Christian themes and practices only forty years ago to the exclusion of Christmas trees and Santa Clauses from many today? A quick answer might be that our society has become more respectful of cultural diversity, and that the exclusive presence of Christianity would no longer be considered acceptable. While true, this is not an adequate explanation. It is routine, in other Western democracies, to give equal, or at least proportional, time to different religious traditions as they are represented in a particular school. Wouldn't that be the appropriate "multicultural" thing to do? But few American public schools do so; their presentation of cultural diversity rarely includes religious themes in a serious way.

No, all expressions of religion as it is actually lived today are banned from most public schools. Children may do a unit on Greek gods and goddesses or on the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, but what modern-day Greeks and Egyptians believe is unlikely to be mentioned. Native American spirituality is a partial exception, but pupils are unlikely to learn that many Sioux are Episcopalians and many Navajo are Catholics or Methodists.

As with most social phenomena, there is no single explanation for the exclusion of living religions from American public schools. It would be easy to assume that it is an inevitable consequence of modernity and of a growing societal pluralism, leading to the secularization of public life. Public schools would, by this account, simply be following wider social trends. But this explanation doesn't work. In the first place, the American people are not growing more indifferent to religion than they were in the past, nor are they

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as "secularized" as the peoples of Western Europe, where religion continues to play a much more prominent part in public education. And, in the second, the public schools are not following a trend in public life, but leading it. Religion receives much more public recognition and support in Congress, in the military, in government-funded social and health services, in prisons, and in higher education than it does in American public schools.[8] The schools are an island of secularity in a sea of varied but frequently dynamic religious expressions.

How do we explain the anomaly, then, that schools, which we would expect to be more intimately concerned with communicating an account of the nature of the Good than any other sphere of public life, are in fact the most rigorously purged of any such themes?

Among the contributing factors to this development (for, like most social phenomena, it is overdetermined) is a way of thinking about education and religion that was originally held by a relatively small elite who saw universal schooling as a means of transforming society by "popular enlightenment." This way of thinking (which it would not be misleading to refer to as an ideology) has come to be widely accepted by teachers as a result of the norms absorbed during their professional training. It is possible to trace the expanding influence of this ideology over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to interpret some of the recent developments in American education as reactions by the broader public against this now-dominant set of assumptions within the rather closed world of public education.

It may seem strange to refer to an enterprise that employs several million adults and takes up half of the waking hours of tens of millions of children and youth as a closed world, but the leadership of the guild of professional educators—in the professional associations and the teacher-training institutions—has become very good at tuning out any signals from the wider culture that call its self-understanding into question.[9] Currently, for example, most criticisms of teaching methods or content are dismissed as coming from the "religious right," whether or not those making them are especially religious or politically conservative.[10] Critics who can be so described are immediately deprived of any right to be heard.

While we will be focusing primarily upon how thinking about education has evolved, it is important to set that within the context of the structural changes that have occurred over the past century.

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How American Public Education Has Evolved Since 1900

First, some numbers. In 1900, 28.4 percent of the American population was between the ages of five and seventeen, compared with 18.2 percent in 1990. Although we are very conscious of the substantial proportion of school-aged children who are recent immigrants or members of minority groups, the proportion was even higher in 1900 and, without the socializing force of radio and television, the mission of the schools in teaching English and bringing these children into the productive mainstream of the society seemed even more crucial then. American schools, both public and religious, were in their different ways intensely concerned with forming citizens.

As noted above, there were almost 15 million public school pupils in the first through eighth grade in 1900; this number doubled to almost 30 million in 1990, but meanwhile the total American population had tripled. At the high school level (grades 9 through 12), the change was much more dramatic, from about half a million in 1900 to more than 11 million in 1990. Most of this expansion of the proportion of pupils going on to high school had been accomplished by 1940 (well ahead of most European countries), in part as a result of the unavailability of jobs for youth during the Depression. Higher education enrollments also grew between the wars and then took off after World War II, rising from 238,000 in 1900 to 1,494,000 in 1940 to 3,640,000 in 1960 and 13,820,000 in 1990.

The first point to be made about these numbers is that schooling has come to be a much longer proposition for most pupils, extending over sixteen or more rather than eight or fewer years for many. The impetus for this extension of schooling was largely economic; in an information-based economy, the payoff for more years of formal education becomes much more significant. Not only did the nature of employment change, but there was a natural ratcheting effect: as more youth completed more years of schooling, those who did not find themselves at a competitive disadvantage in the labor market. A high school diploma has come to be the norm, and its lack an indication (whether fairly or not) of serious unfitness for employment. *Achievement,* what is actually learned in high school or college, has come to be in some ways less important than *attainment,* what level of education has been completed.

A second implication of these enrollment trends should also be noted. In 1900, the focus of education was largely upon what pupils learned in the elementary grades. Secondary and higher education—though more widespread than in other countries at the time—were the privilege of a small proportion of youth. One consequence was that the focus of the overall educational enterprise was less on preparation for employment and more on preparation

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for life as a citizen of good moral character and patriotic sentiments.

Although, as we will see, the governance of American public education was highly dispersed, there was broad-based agreement about this mission. David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot noted that "the system of public education expressed an ideological coherence represented by established churches or centralized governments in other nations."[11] This coherence was broadly Christian, though avoiding what were regarded as divisive doctrines about the nature of God and the means of redemption. The precepts to which the National Teachers' Association resolution referred, in 1869, were moral rather than strictly theological; avoidance of the distinctive teachings of any Christian denomination was seen as the best guarantee of continuing to permeate public schools with a general Christian flavor.[12]

As formal education has increasingly been extended until the student is of an age to enter directly into a career for which the education has ostensibly prepared him, this character-shaping mission has taken second place (often a very distant second place) to vocational or professional preparation.

A second development has been the consolidation of the governance of public education. In 1940 there were about 118,000 local school districts; today there are about 15,000. State governments regulate these districts much more closely than they did in 1900, and the federal government is also far more influential through regulations, enforcement actions, and categorical funding. Over the past fifteen years the states have greatly expanded their funding of local districts, and have expanded even more vigorously the standards that local districts are expected to meet. What in 1900 was a loosely-knit "system" of locally governed schools has become a complexly integrated system in which the voice of parents and voters and the authority of the school boards that they elect have a much more limited impact. While American public education is still, by European standards, highly decentralized and unstandardized, it has become less and less responsive to local values and priorities. Outsiders, including elected officials, find it very difficult to have any influence upon the actual functioning of schools.

This evolution is related in complex ways to a third development, the growing professionalization of teaching and educational administration. Bringing "trained intelligence"—what we would call "expertise"—to bear upon social problems was, for John Dewey and many of his contemporaries, the infallible route to social progress.[13]

Historian David Tyack has described the process of educational reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when "articulate professionals agreed on the remedies: consolidation of schools and transportation of pupils, expert supervision by county superintendents, 'taking the schools

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out of politics,' professionally-trained teachers . . . the result was to be a standardized, modernized 'community' in which leadership came from the professionals." These "new educational standards reflected an increasingly cosmopolitan rather than local scale of values among schoolmen, who sought to blur the differences between district and district, county and county, and even state and state."[14]

The "articulate professionals" who have increasingly provided the leadership for American education are big-city and state superintendents, professors of education, and officials of the educational associations and teachers' unions. They see little need to respond to the uninformed views of the general public and of parents, as was recently illustrated by a survey of "teachers of teachers," professors in teacher training institutions. Seventy-nine percent of the 900 professors surveyed agreed that "the general public has outmoded and mistaken beliefs about what good teaching means," and communication with parents was considered important, not to learn what parents wanted for the education of their children, but so they could be "educated or reeducated about how learning ought to happen in today's classroom." "What bothers me," one of the professors complained, "is for the public to make the decision of what I, the teacher, should do in the classroom. I really resent that. . . . They're getting into methodology, and what methodology [you can teach] they're going to tell you by law."[15] That is, by the democratic political process.

Now, of course, majority opinion should not always prevail, and expertise has an important part to play in the complex world we and our children live in. Whether to teach reading by phonics or a "whole language" approach can most appropriately be decided by careful research (which, not unexpectedly, suggests that elements of both should be employed!). But much of what is referred to by this professor as "methodology" involves choices about how to teach that depend directly upon opinions about the goals of education. The professors of education surveyed were convinced, for example, that "the intellectual process of searching and struggling to learn is far more important . . . than whether or not students ultimately master a particular set of facts." Sixty percent of them called for less memorization in classrooms, with one professor in Boston insisting that it was "politically dangerous . . . when students have to memorize and spout back."[16] By contrast, according to another study by the same public-interest organization, "eighty-six percent of the public, and 73% of teachers, want students to memorize the multiplication tables and do math by hand before using calculators."[17]

These are not purely technical questions, but reflect assumptions about the very nature of education, value-judgments in which parents deserve a

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voice. The professors are expressing one form of the "cosmopolitan" values that have been promoted by American schooling increasingly over the past century, and that have made the exclusion of religion from the public schools seem not a matter of political convenience or respect for societal diversity, but essential to the mission of education. To understand how that has come about—considering that our educational institutions at all levels grew from religious initiatives—requires an exploration of the self-understanding of educators.

The Self-Understanding of Educators

Every profession has norms that describe its core mission and provide an idealized account of what it means to exercise it. Norms describe what it is to be a lawyer or a doctor or an accountant or a psychologist. Educators are no exception, and the dominant norm for the past two hundred years, it is fair to say, is that educators are *liberators*. What is perhaps the oldest and still one of the most influential accounts of education, in Plato's *Republic,* consists of a parable that begins with prisoners in a cave. Socrates offers, in this parable, "an image of our nature in its education and want of education."

> Behold! Human beings living in an underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets. . . . And do you see men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.
> You have shown me a strange image, [one of his interlocutors replies], and they are strange prisoners.
> Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave? (514a–515a, Jowett)

"Like ourselves," Socrates says; that is, we are also prisoners of the illusions that he has been describing. Education is the process by which one

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imprisoned in illusions of what appears to be reality is forced to look toward the light of the fire, which at first is painful, and then is led unwillingly up the path out of the cave to stand in the light of day, and at last look toward the sun itself. "Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?" Of course, and this is why the educator is called literally to disillusion pupils from what parents and society have taught.

Plato's understanding of education was radical for its day, and continues to be radical today. Most people, and especially most parents, think of education as communicating a tradition and the skills to make use of it in confronting new challenges. For Plato, parents were part of the problem, and their influence should be minimized by sending out of the city all those over ten years old. Why? Because parents usually seek to convey to their children their own understanding of reality, of the goals of a good life, of how to treat other people, of all that can be brought together under the names of culture and religion. To take an example roughly contemporaneous with Plato, in *Deuteronomy* Moses tells the people of Israel:

> See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations. . . . Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. . . . These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (*Deuteronomy* 4:5–6, 9; 6:4–7)

There is no suggestion, here, that parents are chained in a darkness from which their children need to be set free. Not that parents are, in this account, the ultimate source of truth and authority; they, like their children, are subject to a tradition of moral obligation that they are expected to obey and to cherish.

The theme of education as liberation from the dead hand of the past and of parents in order to build society on a new foundation came to have canonical status among the nation-builders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[18] Rousseau wrote in 1755

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> that government which confines itself to mere obedience will find difficulty in getting itself obeyed. If it is good to know how to deal with men as they are, it is much better to make them what there is need that they should be. The most absolute authority is that which penetrates a man's inmost being, and concerns itself no less with his will than with his actions. It is certain that all peoples become in the long run what the government makes them . . . Make men, therefore, if you would command men.[19]

It was through education that the authority of the state could establish itself in the "inmost being" of its citizens, making them into what one of America's Founding Fathers, Benjamin Rush, called "Republican machines." Rousseau was one of the first, but by no means the last, social reformer since Plato to insist that the State should not "abandon to the intelligence and patriotism and prejudices of fathers the education of their children, as that education is of still greater importance to the State than to the fathers."[20]

The Jacobins of the extreme phase of the French Revolution articulated this ambition as clearly as it has ever been stated. "It is in national schools," Danton told the National Convention, "that children must suck republican milk. The Republic is one and indivisible; public instruction must also be related to this center of unity." Only in this way could the "total regeneration" of the French people called for by Robespierre and his allies be accomplished. But this could be accomplished only through resolute denial of the claims of parents. As a Jacobin orator warned his colleagues, "You will lose the younger generation in abandoning it to parents with prejudices and ignorance who give it the defective tint which they have themselves. Therefore, let the Fatherland take hold of children who are born for it alone."[21]

John Dewey, the most significant education theorist of the twentieth century, explicitly aligned himself with this tradition of social change directed and accomplished by schools, writing that "all the educational reformers following Rousseau have looked to education as the best means of regenerating society. They have been fighting against the feudal and pioneer notion that the reason for a good education was to enable your children and mine to get ahead. . . . They have believed that the real reason for developing the best possible education was to prevent just this."[22]

Though his phrasing is characteristically more roundabout than that of Rousseau, Dewey believed just as firmly that "we must think and act upon the assumption that public education has a positive responsibility to shape those habits of thought and action which in turn shape organized conditions of social action. . . . I see no other way of rendering education in fact,

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and not just in name, the foundation of social organization."[23] Dewey insisted that religious and other "partial" viewpoints be banished from the school lest they compete with what he termed "state-consciousness."[24]

It is striking how seldom Dewey mentions parents in his voluminous work on education. Using schooling to reshape "patterns of belief, desire and purpose," and thus to achieve "the clarification and development of the positive creed of life implicit in democracy and in science" that he had written of as early as 1897, was a bold agenda for a society in which the institutions of democratic decision-making were by no means calling for such changes. But Democracy, for Dewey, was by no means identified with the political system by which ordinary citizens, through their elected representatives, make decisions about schools and other public services.

Dewey justified his disregard for democratic politics by arguing that "school boards at present . . . are representative of a special class or group in the community, not of community interests,"[25] and, again, "the reactionaries are in possession of force, in not only the army and police, but in the press and the schools."[26] Nor were school boards the only problem: parents and the general public joined in frustrating the intentions of social intelligence: "Professional education has its results limited and twisted because of the general state of education. . . . Parents, school officials, taxpayers have the last word, and the character of that word is dependent upon their education. They may and do block or deflect the best laid plans."[27] The only remedy was to strive for control of educational decision-making by teachers, through their professional organizations, that Dewey saw as "a constant and aggressive force in combating the efforts of various organized interests . . . to exploit the schools for their own ends."[28] Dewey did not appear to notice that critics could accuse him and other social progressives of a similar intention to use the schools to accomplish their social goals; he expressed outrage at the activities of industry to influence public opinion about schooling as "efforts of special interests to control public and private education for their own ends. . . . In some respects these revelations seem to me more sinister than those of the oil scandals, in that they represent an attempt at corruption of the source of public action,"[29] while taking for granted that the interests of teachers represented the "public interest" in the broadest, purest sense—if only the public knew what was good for it! He asserted

> the right of teachers to determine the subject-matter and methods employed in the schools. . . . If the teaching profession can educate itself and the public to the need of throwing off this incubus [of lay control of schools], genuinely educative forces will be released to do their work. In consequence, the freedom and impetus that result will enable the

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> schools, without a centralized system, to develop a system of truly national education—by which I mean one animated by policies and methods that will help create that common purpose without which the nation cannot achieve unified movement.[30]

The distancing of children from the values represented by their families and communities was one of the aspects of the Russian educational system that Dewey found most intriguing when he visited in 1928. Deeply impressed by the changes being brought about by the communist regime, Dewey told his American readers in *The New Republic* that "the main effort is nobly heroic, evincing a faith in human nature which is democratic beyond the ambitions of the democracies of the past."[31] He reported that, for the Soviet educational authorities, "the great task of the school is to counteract and transform those domestic and neighborhood tendencies that are still so strong, even in a nominally collectivistic regime," and he went on to note that

> to anyone who looks at the matter cold-bloodedly, free from sentimental associations clustering about the historic family institution, a most interesting sociological experimentation is taking place, the effect of which should do something to determine how far the bonds that hold the traditional family together are intrinsic and how far due to extraneous causes; and how far the family in its accustomed form is a truly socializing agency and how far a breeder of non-social interests.[32]

In Russia, Dewey was able to observe in action "the role of the schools in building up forces and factors whose natural effect is to undermine the importance and uniqueness of family life."[33] Although he does not mention it, he cannot have been unaware of the vigorous antireligious propaganda that marked the Soviet education system.[34]

Dewey himself mentions parents and families remarkably seldom in the thousands of pages that he wrote about education and human development. Typical of his thinking about families seems to be the statement, in 1922, that "parents, priests, chiefs, social censors have supplied aims, aims which were foreign to those upon whom they were imposed, to the young, laymen, ordinary folk. . . . men in authority have turned moral rules into an agency of class supremacy [but] any theory which attributes the origin of rule [*sic*] to deliberate design is false."[35]

It is the responsibility of teachers, Dewey argued, to help their pupils to break free of these authorities, including that of their own parents. Teachers would have to constitute themselves an alternative source of authority to

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determine the direction of social change, given the conservative domination of school boards and the highly decentralized nature of American education. "We need an authority," he wrote, "that, unlike the older forms in which it operated, is capable of directing and utilizing change and we need a kind of individual freedom that is general and shared and that has the backing and guidance of socially organized intelligent control."[36] This authority would be that exercised by a self-aware educational profession:

> Teachers may be appointed by school boards and boards of trustees, but teachers are first and foremost responsible to 'their moral employer,' the public. They are 'the servants of the community, of the whole community, and not of any particular class interest within it.' Their 'primary loyalty is to an idea, to a function and calling,' which is 'the pursuit and expression of truth,' and they have a responsibility and right to organize to insure that they and their institutions carry out this social function.[37]

It is easy to applaud this high sense of the teacher's mission, but what does it mean to be servants of the whole community, if the will of that community is not expressed through the organs of democratic government? And are teachers as a collective body to decide for themselves what "idea" or "truth" they are to serve? Do parents—or students—have any say in this? Dewey seemed to have no doubts about the mission of educators.

> The schools will surely, as a matter of fact and not of ideal, *share* in the building of the social order of the future according as they ally themselves with this or that movement of existing social forces. This fact is inevitable . . . according as teachers and administrators align themselves with the older so-called 'individualistic' ideals—which in fact are fatal to individuality for the many—or with the newer forces making for social control of economic forces. The teacher will . . . not be content with generalities about the desired future order. The task is to translate the desired ideal over into the conduct of the detail of the school in administration, instruction, and subject-matter.[38]

Like others before and after him who saw the mission of education as being to free the young from the traditions and superstitions of the past, Dewey recognized that a new set of beliefs would have to be put in place of those dismissed. For many of the education reformers, the substitute belief was some form of faith in science, in progress, in humanity itself, always

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advancing toward a brighter future. "By the 1850s," James Turner notes, "a great many Victorians on both Atlantic coasts invested science with power and promise, by the 1870s even with sacredness, hard now to credit. The belief became common that only science could make the world intelligible: science seemed the avatar of all knowledge."[39] As early as 1894, Dewey wrote that "it is because science represents a method of truth to which, so far as we can discover, no limits whatsoever can be put, that it is necessary for the church to reconstruct its doctrines of revelation and inspiration, and for the individual to reconstruct, within his own religious life, his conception of what spiritual truth is and the nature of its authority over him."[40]

A few years later, as Dewey became deeply involved with experiments intended—and destined—to change how American educators thought about their work, he wrote of the need "to labor persistently and patiently for the clarification and development of the positive creed of life implicit in democracy and in science, and to work for the transformation of all practical instrumentalities of education till they are in harmony with these ideas."[41] The word "creed" was not chosen lightly; as he moved away from the liberal Protestantism of his early manhood, Dewey constantly employed its vocabulary to describe his new beliefs. "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897) was his earliest and still perhaps his most influential statement of the principles and assumptions of what would become Progressive Education.

Dewey was not at all shy about suggesting that science could take the place of traditional religion as the basis for an improved morality and system of belief. "A culture which permits science to destroy traditional values but which distrusts its power to create new ones," he warned, "is a culture which is destroying itself."[42] "The root of the religious attitude of the future may lie immensely more in an improved state of science and of politics than in what have been termed religions. . . . the democracy and the science, the art of today may be immensely more prophetic of the religion which we would have spread in the future than any phenomena we seek to isolate under the caption of religions phenomena."[43]

We have lingered long over John Dewey because his thinking was at once highly representative of the direction in which nineteenth-century thinking about education had been moving, and profoundly influential upon what became, in the twentieth, received opinion in educationist circles. This is not to say that every teacher—or every education professor—has mastered the intricacies of Dewey's thought, but that his emphasis on the experience of the pupil over the content of the curriculum, his confident rejection of the influence of tradition and the uninformed public, and his convictions about the culture-transforming mission of the school are essential to the self-understanding of public school educators.

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To summarize this self-understanding, it is that educators know better than parents what is good for their children, and that what is good for them is to become "autonomous" in a Kantian sense, that is, not influenced by inherited beliefs or standards that they have not themselves reflected upon critically and arrived at independently of any external authority. The task of educators, then, is to lead children out of darkness into the light. Religion is part of the darkness of received belief out of which pupils should be led, not by antireligious propaganda, as in Soviet schools, but by consistently presenting a version of reality in which religion has no place at all.

This can lead to a systematic distortion of both history and contemporary life, as when a National Education Association publication insisted that "when the Founding Fathers drafted the Constitution with its Bill of Rights, they explicitly designed it to guarantee a secular, humanistic state."[44]

What's so bad about educators having goals that are different from those of either parents or the society at large? The short answer is that it is inappropriate for any group, in a democratic society that rates freedom of conscience high among its guiding principles, to use the authority of mandatory and state-funded schooling to seek to turn children against the convictions of their parents. Law professor John Coons points out that a free society should not proceed on the assumption that any group knows better than average parents what is best for those parents' children.

> The right to form families and to determine the scope of their children's practical liberty is for most men and women the primary occasion for choice and responsibility. One does not have to be rich or well placed to experience the family. The opportunity over a span of fifteen or twenty years to attempt the transmission of one's deepest values to a beloved child provides a unique arena for the creative impulse. Here is the communication of ideas in its most elemental mode. Parental expression, for all its invisibility to the media, is an activity with profound First Amendment implications.[45]

The longer, more complex, answer is that the health of the civil society institutions, like families, churches, and ethnic and other voluntary organizations, upon which a free society so crucially depends is undermined if they cannot communicate distinctive ways of understanding the world and specific behavioral expectations. Public education, perhaps ironically, is in an unintended alliance with the mass media to communicate a version of reality purged of the virtues that enoble human life and make for a healthy civil society. Neither makes an appeal to the "better angels of our nature," the

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media because of pervasive cynicism, the public schools because of pervasive timidity. Neither celebrates nobility, self-sacrifice, obedience to duty, love of and desire to know a Truth that transcends appearances.

At least Plato believed that the process of liberation would finally bring the pupil to see and understand a higher reality; at least Dewey believed that the right sort of schooling would produce citizens capable of cooperating to solve society's problems. Public education in our time has retained their emphasis upon liberation from the influence of family, tradition, the common opinion, but has nothing to put in their place but careerism and self-esteem. It is as though Plato's educator abandoned the arduous journey out of the cave and began to enthrall the prisoners with sitcoms displayed on its walls!

Out of an instinct that much the same message is communicated by schools and by the mass media, many home-schooling families report that they throw away their televisions or use them only to show selected videos.

It is curious that many educators whose own lives have been shaped by their religious convictions have no difficulty compartmentalizing these from what they do as teachers or administrators in public schools. This is not to suggest that it would be appropriate, either ethically or legally, for them to seek to make converts or to persuade their pupils of the superior truth-claims of their own beliefs. It would be enough, and entirely appropriate, for such educators to demonstrate in word and actions that faith is a factor of real—even central—significance in their own lives.

Similarly, all teachers should present the curriculum in ways that show how profoundly influential religious convictions and the behavior shaped by them have been and continue to be. Naturally, they should not conceal the fact that religion can have negative as well as positive effects. The goal should be to ensure that pupils have a balanced understanding of the role of religion and that, at least occasionally during their years of schooling, they encounter teachers and administrators who make no secret of the significance of religious or philosophical convictions in shaping their own lives. Pupils are unlikely to come away from their schooling with a mature and settled religious faith, nor should nurturing faith be the mission of the public schools, but schools should communicate that these are important matters with which every fully experienced life must come to terms.

Education, rightly understood, is the lifelong process by which convictions are acquired and tested. A good school, a good teacher, a good book provide the resources from which an understanding of the world and its demands can be constructed. Taken together, the elements of a good education expose us to a variety of sources of meaning. And a good education also

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exposes us to models of coherent systems of meaning, not only in books but also in people worthy of admiration and emulation, including our teachers. It does so in a way communicating to us that achieving a stable set of beliefs and a settled disposition to act in ways consistent with these beliefs is not only possible but indeed is the highest calling of man and women.

Perhaps the best metaphor to describe a good education is as a voyage of exploration that departs from the known into the unknown but knowable. Explorers are not aimless wanderers; they are purposeful and they go out searching in conviction that there is something real to be discovered. What's more, they see themselves as part of a shared enterprise, bringing back discoveries that must be fitted into what is already known and what others have found. That process of reconciling observations is a safeguard against purely idiosyncratic or delusional interpretations of individual experience. In other words, the exploration takes place within a context of already-established meaning; it is not free-floating, but is disciplined by the shared experience of a culture and, ultimately, of humanity in general.

Religious traditions are the repository of much that humanity has experienced, of how men and women have sought to come to terms with life and death, of how they have come to understand the nature of the Good Life. Children are cheated of much of what schools should contribute toward their education if they are presented with a version of reality which implies that there is no need to raise such questions, and no value in learning about the various answers by which human beings have lived.

America's Emerging Educational System . . . and Religion

There are some encouraging signs that America's public education system will begin, once again, to do justice to the importance of religious questions and answers, and thus will not only serve its pupils better but also will become more responsive to the concerns of parents.

The fundamental problem raised by controversies over education and religion cannot be addressed by simply doing justice to the history and present role of various faith traditions in the curriculum.[46] Desirable as that would be in the interest of accuracy, it would not remove the alienation that has grown up between public education and the public. The more basic problem—conflicts over religion are merely one of its more obvious manifestations—is the failure of American education to adapt to the changes in American society and culture.

One of the most significant of these changes is that most of us have come

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to accept a pluralistic understanding of our differences. People do not necessarily differ more than they ever did—indeed they probably differ less—but we are more aware of each other and that many of those around us do not accept many of our own assumptions about the purpose (if any) of life, and how it should be lived.

The pluralistic way of thinking about these differences is to be distinguished clearly from relativism, which denies that there is any such thing as ultimate truth, insisting instead that there are different perspectives all of which are at least potentially true for those who hold them. The corollary of this apparently liberal and tolerant stance is that we have no common ground of right and wrong that we can count on sharing with others around us and upon whom we depend. Each of us, relativism claims, makes choices based upon our own "values," and the mark of personal authenticity is that these values are not accepted on the basis of anyone else's authority or of any tradition, but are simply our own. Pluralists, by contrast, "hold . . . that some values have rational and moral authority not only within but also outside of the context in which they are held. According to pluralists, not all values are context-dependent."[47]

A pluralistic understanding of society accepts, even celebrates, the organization of much of life by the autonomous associations, organizations, and relationships of the civil society, in which find expression "many reasonable conceptions of a good life. These conceptions are formed of the values provided by the agents' moral traditions and of the agents' efforts to fit some of them to their individual characters and circumstances."[48] While all must play by certain common rules in the "public square" of society, they bring distinctive perspectives to bear on how they think about and respond to issues, and *that is just as it should be,* so long as they respect the common rules and one another.

This understanding of the nature of a healthy and free society differs profoundly from the assumption held by Dewey and others, that those who employ the "trained intelligence" that he identified with the scientific method would inevitably come to agree about the best course of action in all cases. That assumption now seems quaint; we have come to see that intelligent and well-meaning men and women can disagree profoundly because they have different fundamental assumptions. We have come also to have confidence that our society can live with these differences.

The idea that a public education system can and should promote "a common faith" has come to seem another of the quaint assumptions of Dewey's generation, midway in the transition from Protestant hegemony to our present pluralism. As we have pointed out above, in 1900 there were two ways out of

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the no-longer-tenable dominance of American culture and its public education system by an ecumenical Protestantism that had largely lost its nerve.[49] One, the false path taken by Dewey and other educational leaders, was toward substituting a secularized orthodoxy, Dewey's "common faith," "rescued through emancipation from dependence upon specific types of beliefs and practices, from those elements that constitute a religion."[50] The other path was toward acceptance that no single alternative belief-system could replace the old certainties.

Public education did indeed become increasingly uniform over the course of the century, as we have seen, but at the same time (and as an inevitable consequence of the encounter with a diverse and diversifying society) the curriculum lost its old assurance. Rather than expressing a new, secular faith, it came to express a yawning emptiness.[51]

In recent years, however, there have been encouraging signs that American public education is becoming pluralistic, providing space for schools that express distinctive ways of understanding their goals and how to attain them. It is no longer possible to speak of a single model of public education, a "one best system" in David Tyack's phrase. Those who organized and led the alternative schools of the sixties, the thousands of magnet schools of the seventies and eighties, and the seventeen hundred charter schools founded over the last five years have made it their business to articulate distinctive profiles in order to attract parents who are no longer bound by residential assignments.[52] They have in a sense reinvented the local school, responsive to those it serves. In the process, the monopoly system of public education, while still formally in place, has been subverted from within.[53]

Schools that must attract parents on the basis of distinctive educational offerings can no longer afford to see their mission as liberating children from the influence of their families and communities. Instead, they must seek to enable their students to move beyond without repudiating the achievements of those who have gone before them. To return to the metaphor used earlier, they must launch them upon explorations that extend the map of human experience drawn by the explorations of earlier generations.

This enterprise of "bounded exploration" can best be undertaken, I would contend, if it starts in schools and colleges that make no apology for expecting students to have mastered a common heritage and to know its contours well before they push off to discover new islands and continents on their own. Since an essential part of this exploration is concerned with how to live, it can best take its starting point from induction into a coherent set of moral convictions. These will be tested, called into question, perhaps modified by individuals, but they need at least a starting point and a compass to make that process fruitful. A school or college where ethical questions are

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avoided will not educate morally-autonomous individuals.

Fortunately for the health of our society and for serious engagement with important moral issues and questions of ultimate meaning, a new American educational system is beginning to emerge. There is now an apparently irresistible drive toward more diversity in American education, whether through charter and other alternative public schools or through vouchers that make it possible for parents to choose nonpublic schools. Much of the educational establishment deplores this development, warning that it will divide the society in all sorts of harmful ways. Like Plato in *The Republic,* they perceive unity as the highest social good and fear that it is vulnerable to any alternatives forms of education. They should have more confidence in the good sense of parents and teachers; there is little evidence of demand for weird or bigoted forms of schooling.

One of the great advantages of this new educational diversity is that it encourages schools and colleges to be distinctive rather than to provide a lowest-common-denominator education. Distinctive schools and colleges are more likely to be coherent, to stand for some tradition of culture and conviction that can be the starting point for that exploration which alone can complete an education—not that it is ever completed!

> The most important experience within schools of choice may be the child's observation of trusted adults gripped by a moral concern which is shared and endorsed by his own family. The content of that concern may be less important than its central position in the life of the institution. Even where particular values seem narrow and one-sided, a child's engagement with them at a crucial stage of his development might secure his allegiance to that ideal of human reciprocity which is indispensable to our view of autonomy. . . . this hypothesis seems as plausible as the traditional notion of professionals that compulsory and early severance of the child from his home culture is an act of merciful liberation.[54]

Public education does not have to be provided in schools operated by government; nor does it have to conform with the bureaucratic urge toward standardized operation. In most Western democracies, public education is provided in a mix of government-operated and "free" schools that are sponsored and controlled by churches and other private associations.

I've offered a metaphor for education as a deeply individual though shared process; let me offer another for the educational system that a free and just society requires. To borrow a phrase used cynically by Mao Tse-tung, "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend." The

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sort of educational system that our society needs is like a garden with many different flowers. It is not like a neatly trimmed lawn from which all diversity—dandelions and crabgrass alike—has been carefully removed. A richly diverse garden is not promiscuous; the gardener removes what does not belong there, just as the state should ensure that no schools (or families) are allowed to brutalize children, and that all children have the opportunity to learn what is essential to their future participation in society.

Uniformity is not sought in a garden, though. The eye and the soul are pleased by a rich diversity that expresses many different ways of being healthy and beautiful, of exploring and finding meaning. Among these are those rooted in religious traditions and experience. They have been too long missing from American public education.

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Notes

1. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (1900, 1915), in *The Child and the Curriculum and The School and Society* (Chicago, 1956), 117.

2. The best account remains David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

3. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill, 1988); James L. Leloudis, *Schooling the New South* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

4. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York, 1991), 310.

5. Charles L. Glenn, *Choice of Schools in Six Nations* (Washington, D.C., 1989).

6. A. James Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life* (Washington, D.C., 1985), 145.

7. Hunter, *Culture Wars,* 134.

8. Charles L. Glenn, *The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-based Schools and Social Agencies* (Princeton, 2000).

9. A personal testimony: I was a manager (urban education and civil rights) in the Massachusetts Department of Education for more than twenty years, attending hundreds of cabinet-level meetings. Not once was there discussion of the radical critiques of public education from both the left and right, and not once mention of the fact that 12 percent of Massachusetts schoolchildren were in nonpublic schools. These realities were invisible.

10. Charles L. Glenn, "Outcome-based Education: Can it be redeemed?" in *Curriculum, Religion and Public Education: Conversations for an Enlarging Public Square,* ed. James T. Sears with James C. Carper (New York, 1998).

11. David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York, 1982), 31.

12. Gerard V. Bradley, *Church-State Relationships in America* (New York, 1987), 127.

13. See, for example, Dewey's *Intelligence in the Modern World* (New York: Modern Library, 1939).

14. Tyack, *The One Best System,* 23–25.

15. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson, *Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education* (New York, 1997), 12.

16. Ibid., 10, 13.

17. *Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today* New York, 1996),

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19.

18. Charles L. Glenn, *The Myth of the Common School* (Amherst, 1988).

19. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy" (1755), in *The Social Contract and Discourses,* trans. G. D. H. Cole (London, 1993), 139.

20. Ibid., 148.

21. References for Danton, Robespierre, and Billaud-Varenne are found in Glenn, *Myth,* 291–92.

22. John Dewey, "Schools of To-Morrow" (1915), *Middle Works, Volume 8: Essays on Education and Politics 1915* (Carbondale, Ill., 1979), 319.

23. John Dewey, "Education, the Foundation for Social Organization" (1937), in *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 11: 1935–1937* (Carbondale, Ill., 1987), 235.

24. John Dewey, "Religion and Our Schools" (1908), in *Essays on Pragmatism and Truth, 1907–1909* (Carbondale: Ill., 1977), 175.

25. John Dewey, "The Need for Orientation" (1935), in *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 11: 1935–1937* (Carbondale, Ill., 1987), 165.

26. John Dewey, "The Future of Liberalism" (1935), in *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 11: 1935–1937* (Carbondale, Ill., 1987), 294.

27. John Dewey, "Body and Mind" (1927), in *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 3: 1927–1928* (Carbondale, Ill., 1988), 38.

28. John Dewey, "Why I Am a Member of the Teachers Union" (1927), in *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 3: 1927–1928* (Carbondale, Ill., 1988), 273.

29. John Dewey, "A Critique of American Civilization" (1928), in *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 3: 1927–1928* (Carbondale, Ill., 1988), 141.

30. John Dewey, "Toward a National System of Education" (1935), in *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 11: 1935–1937* (Carbondale, Ill., 1987), 358–59.

31. John Dewey, "Impressions of Soviet Russia II: A Country in a State of Flux" (1928), *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 3: 1927–1928* (Carbondale, Ill., 1988), 213.

32. John Dewey, "Impressions of Soviet Russia, IV: What Are the Russian Schools Doing?" (1928), *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 3: 1927–1928* (Carbondale, Ill., 1988), 228.

33. Ibid., 230.

34. See Charles L. Glenn, *Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe,* 2d ed. (Washington, D.C., 1995), 33–38, 53–56.

35. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), 5.

36. John Dewey, "Authority and Social Change" (1936), in *Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 11: 1935–1937* (Carbondale, Ill., 1987), 137.

37. Steven Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York, 1991), 286.

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45. John E. Coons, "Intellectual Liberty and the Schools," *Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* 1 (1985): 511.

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46. Charles L. Glenn and Joshua L. Glenn, "Making Room for Conviction in Democracy's Schools," in *Schooling Christians,* ed. Stanley Hauerwas and John H. Westerhoff (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1992).

47. John Kekes, *Against Liberalism* (Ithaca, 1997), 162.

48. Ibid., 170.

49. Thomas C. Reeves, *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity* (New York, 1996).

50. John Dewey, "A Common Faith" (1934), in *Later Works, Volume 9: 1933–1934,* ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Ill., 1986), 11. It is striking how frequently, throughout his many decades of writing, Dewey the "secular humanist" uses the word "faith."

51. Charles L. Glenn, "Religion, Textbooks and the Common School," *The Public Interest,* July 1987.

52. Chester E. Finn Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Gred Vanourek, *Charter Schools in Action* (Princeton, 2000).

53. Charles L. Glenn, "School Distinctiveness," *Journal of Education* 176, no. 2 (1994).

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