

The Influence of Politics on Education and Religion: How Much Is Too Much?

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Abstract

Separation of church and state is fundamental to the democracy upon which America is founded. Today, however, politics, religion, and education have become entwined in a dance that is sometimes exhilarating, sometimes difficult to follow. Religious extremism has moved front and center in this new century and threatens both political and educational institutions. Furthermore, public education has received mostly failing marks from those in politics and the church. Education's role in a democracy is to train citizens who are active and informed voters and who understand that free exercise of religion is guaranteed by the constitution, with tolerance and respect for diversity critical to that guarantee. Indeed, if public education ignores the moral void left by the secularization of schools, not only youth but democracy itself will suffer.

Boundaries must be drawn around the intersections—magnifying the benefits of their partnerships and minimizing the disadvantages that can arise when religion and education are unmindfully combined. As laboratories for these issues, vouchers, charter schools, and other special solutions provide benefits as well as disadvantages. These characteristics are examined in this paper, along with a set of standards that may be helpful in distinguishing politicization from partnership.

Introduction

Hegel's dialectic¹ provides a model for examining the fracturing that occurs when politics begins to exert influence over education and religion. The Dialectic suggests that the current model, or thesis, will inevitably lead to a counter movement, the antithesis, and that the attempt to reconcile the two becomes a synthesis which in its own turn becomes the new thesis. Interaction among politics, education, and religion arouses passion in secularists and the faithful, civic leaders and educators, parents and taxpayers. The problem is intractable, in large part, because the debate is not limited to a narrow sector of society: it is not an academic problem or a legal one; rather, each citizen is a stakeholder in the issues. As a result, bringing light rather than heat to the debate requires examining the positions taken by various subgroups and determining a potential synthesis.

¹ While the popular view of Hegel's dialectic may actually be attributable more to those who try to explain his dense prose than to Hegel himself, the model is useful for the purposes of this discussion.

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Since the Enlightenment, western societies have promoted a secular model with a strict separation of church and state.² Although some countries, like England, have a state church which receives nominal support, even those countries have become increasingly secular as populations turn away from the church as the heart of the community. France, the most secular of countries, has moved so far as to ban any obvious religious display such as large crosses or headscarves.³ The United States is founded on the precept that there is strict separation of church and state, with free exercise of religion. This “Enlightenment Model” can be seen as the current thesis for Western Europe and the U.S. As societies have become increasingly secular through government policies and legal decisions, large numbers of citizens with religious agendas have launched a countermovement. At present in the U.S., the positions are almost diametrically opposed, with secularists arguing for a strict separation of church and state, and opposition groups demanding public policies which directly reflect their views. As books by Christian writers have flooded the market, militant atheists have written counterattacks which have become bestsellers. The senior religion editor for *Publisher’s Weekly* has said, “It was just time for the atheists to take the gloves off.”⁴ The tension between opposing views becomes unworkable when a critical mass is achieved for each side; recent elections in the U.S., for example, have revealed a sharply divided society with only the smallest of majorities possible in most elections. And, while not all the arguments are related to the church-state relationship, many are. School vouchers and attempts to allow churches with non-profit tax exemptions to engage in open political campaigns are just two examples of issues which polarize voting communities.

² Pavlos Hatzopoulos and Fabio Petito, *The Return From Exile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4.

³ Noelle Knox, “Effort to Ban Head Scarves in France Sets Off Culture Clash,” *USA Today*.
http://www.usatoday.com/educate/firstamendment/religion_020404.html.

⁴ Zoll, Rachel. “Atheists in the Bully Pulpit,” *LA Times*, E12, 26 May 2007.

Indeed, when the thesis and antithesis are in greatest opposition, it is a time of stress and fracture in the community. A synthesis is inevitable. However, to achieve a longer lasting synthesis that enfranchises and satisfies both groups, they must work together to examine the underlying issues, ignore the distraction of the extreme views, and converge on the concerns they have in common. Such a discussion takes us back to the essential questions: What purpose should education serve? What do we value about religion? How can we minimize the politicization of the ideals and work together toward a partnership that maximizes the positives that each group contributes?

Why Education?

While most would agree that education is well-positioned to positively shape the intellects and the ethics of the youth—and consequently strengthen democracy itself, the ideals of education have been lost in the noisy political battles raging over who should be allowed to influence education. Should there be a strict separation of state and religion where education is concerned? Do taxpayers who belong to faith-based communities have a right to expect that religious expression such as prayers will be allowed in educational institutions funded with public money? Should choice, or even more specifically vouchers, be paid from taxpayer's pocketbooks? To some extent, the answers depend on the purpose of education in a democracy.

Glaeser, Ponzetto, and Shleifer argue that an educated populace is more likely to work cooperatively and to participate in civic enterprises such as voting and organizing. They conclude:

In the battle between democracy and dictatorship, democracy has a wide potential base of support but offers weak incentives to its defenders. Dictatorship provides stronger incentives to a narrower base.⁵

Thomas Dee's research suggests that the more schooling one has, the more likely one is to vote and even to read newspapers. According to Dee, this is partly "because increased cognitive ability makes it easier to process complex political information, to make decisions and to circumvent the various bureaucratic and technological impediments to civic participation."⁶

Theorists from Jefferson to Dewey to Mann have all argued for the importance of an educated electorate through a carefully designed civic education. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey remarks that "modern society is many societies loosely connected"⁷ and that "[i]nside the modern city, in spite of its nominal political unity, there are probably more communities, more differing customs, traditions, aspirations, and forms of government and control than existed in an entire continent at an earlier epoch."⁸ Half a century later, with increasing diversity due to immigration, the loose connection in the larger community is even more of a problem.

This fracturing of society presents a challenge to civic education in today's schools.

Dewey continues:

The school has the function also of coordinating within the disposition of each individual the diverse influences of the various social environments into which he enters. One code prevails in the family; another, on the street; a third, in the workshop or store; a fourth, in the religious association. As a person passes from one of those environments to another, he is subjected to antagonistic pulls, and is in danger of being split into a being having different standards of judgment and emotion for different occasions. This danger imposes upon the school a steady and integrating office.⁹

In an increasingly fractious and divided society, civic education has become difficult, and what passes for civic education has become substandard for large groups of parents. In 2002,

⁵ Edward Glaeser, Giacomo Ponzetto, and Andrei Shleifer, "Why Does Democracy Need Education?" NBER Working Paper No. 12128. <http://papers.nber.org/papers/W12128.html>.

⁶ Thomas S. Dee, "Are There Civic Returns to Education?" *Journal of Public Economics* 88(2004): 1697-1720.

⁷ John Dewey, "Education as a Social Function," *Democracy and Education*.
<http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/soc/education>, 12.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 13.

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litigation led a Federal Judge in San Francisco to declare the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools unconstitutional because the phrase “under God” violates school children’s right to be “free from a coercive requirement to affirm God.” The decision was made although the Supreme Court had dismissed the case the previous November.¹⁰ Such decisions underline some of the divisions in society: groups who ask for all references to God to be removed from educational institutions and, in direct opposition, those who ask for the opportunity to practice their faith in a school setting. The vast chasm between the two groups has led to the voucher and school choice movements, but it has made the fight no less contentious.

While civic education has become less effective in the divided and litigious society, schools have also lost their roles as moral agents. In more homogenous societies, schools, along with churches, have often been assigned the duty of character education in partnership with families. The Harvard Divinity School’s Program in Religion and Secondary Education describes this loss of moral education in schools and affirms its importance:

An important goal of compulsory K-12 education is to train citizens to become informed and active members of ...participatory and multicultural democracy. At the core of the program... [is] an understanding of education as a profoundly moral enterprise, and a commitment to fostering the ideals of democracy with a special emphasis on social justice, respect for human dignity, and multicultural (including religious) literacy.¹¹

The program description continues:

Though it is impossible to understand the human endeavor without considering its religious dimension, misrepresentations of the First Amendment have led to either the virtual absence of religion in public education or the unconstitutional promotion of a particular worldview as paramount. Both foster a tacit acceptance of religious illiteracy which promotes an inaccurate, partial view of civilizations and human experience.¹²

¹⁰ *NPR.org*, “Federal Judge Rules Pledge Unconstitutional,” September 14, 2005. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4847626>.

¹¹ Harvard Divinity School. <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/prse/mission.html>.

¹² *Ibid.*

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Although the U.S. and most western democracies are founded on a separation of church and state, the total banishment of religion from public schools has the repercussive effect of weakening tolerance for the general practice of religion. Indeed, recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions have articulated the separation (The Establishment Clause) without adequately addressing the guarantee of free exercise. With inadequate protection of free exercise, religion a taboo topic in schools, and the thesis on which the U.S. is run becoming increasingly secular, anger has been growing in the faith-based community. The greatest dissatisfaction is with the dearth of moral education in public schools, especially in the face of what is seen as a wave of contradictory and dangerous cultural messages.

Minority parents fear that their children will be subject to discrimination, or even racism in public schools. Experience has taught them that religious schools with homogeneous cultures may be their best hope for a climate free of racism, and especially of institutionalized racism.¹³

The last eight years have seen more direct political intervention by religious groups and conservative politicians allied with them ranging from attempts to “purge liberal bias from universities”¹⁴ to demands to include theories on “Intelligent Design” into science curricula.¹⁵ In the past, many dissidents belonged to small isolated cells, and their voices would have been too weak to be heard above the secular argument. Now, new alliances of widely dissimilar groups sharing only a few common issues have given those who felt disenfranchised a strong voice.

¹³ Marie Jenkins, Dimitra Hartas and Barrie A. Irving, *In Good Faith: Schools, Religion and Public Funding* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 196.

¹⁴ Elaine Korry, “Campaign Stirs Debate over ‘Liberal’ Academics,” NPR, *Weekend Edition Saturday*, February 18, 2006. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5223047>. See also Scott Jaschik, “Conservatives Call for Equal Time on Campus, NPR, *Talk of the Nation*, October 5, 2005. Story ID=4946306; and Elaine Korry, “Group Offers Money for Reports on Left-Wing Faculty.” NPR, *Morning Edition*, January 19, 2006, Story ID=5162955.

¹⁵ Greg Allen, “Ohio Board of Ed Delivers Blow to Intelligent Design Movement, NPR, December 6, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?story ID=5206911>.

Their calls for change have created enough political and cultural tension to begin the construction of an antithesis.

Why Religion?

In this modern society, that is not so much a melting pot as a kaleidoscope of diversity, religion often seems more to divide than to unite communities. Thus, as society has taken refuge from religious strife in the embrace of secularism, the general moral guidance provided by visible religious practice has been lost in the shuffle. Indeed, before the Enlightenment, religion was seen as the chief guardian of a country's morality, often serving as the bonding agent for the community, creating a hegemony of values. After the Enlightenment, the church began to lose power and influence as Western Europe became more secular and humanistic values gained ascendancy. Strict separation of church and state, the bedrock of many western constitutions, provided the rationale for increasing secularization. Individuals were free to worship, but publicly-funded schools were not to have any involvement with religion. If we are to address the crisis of public education, we must examine not only the academic failings, but also the rise of intolerance and fall of ethical standards plaguing our democratic societies. As the role of religion in modern, heterogeneous society is unclear and religious groups react to the "thesis" of secularism, groups addressing public education concerns must work together to address the moral void left by the secularization of the schools or not only the youth, but also democracy itself will suffer.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights proposes freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including atheism and the right not to profess any belief. Countries belonging to the United Nations are obliged to secure religious freedom for their citizens and

eliminate discrimination. Success in providing this freedom lies in democratic societies which obey the rule of law, however.¹⁶

The Council of Europe suggests that democracy and religion are not incompatible, and that “[d]emocracy has proved to be the best framework for freedom of conscience, the exercise of faith and religious pluralism...and through its moral and ethical commitment, the values it upholds, its critical approach and its cultural expression, can be a valid partner of democratic society.”¹⁷ In fact, although the Council of Europe is a humanistic organization, its support of human rights¹⁸ requires the affirmation of religious rights.¹⁹

Hatzopoulos and Petito make the argument that in the study of International Relations, religion has become an “exile,” and that given the resurgence of interest in religion in large population groups, it can no longer be ignored. It is as though secularism has become a religion of its own and religion has become political:

As secular political ideologies, such as nationalism, communism, and, of course, liberalism take the form of ‘political religion,’ with their gods, holy texts, and paradises on earth, in the same way does religion, by becoming ‘political,’ begin to speak the all-too-modern (and worldly) language of revolution, rights, and the state.... [This] works as a warning against any simplistic dismissive or apocalyptic attitude toward the contemporary resurgence of religion in world politics.²⁰

The increasing power of religion is a worldwide phenomenon: theocracies in the Muslim world, growing political clout from the “religious right” in America, political wars with religious roots, integration of religious minorities into a majority culture—few geographic areas are exempt. As these religious groups react to the “thesis” of secularism within their communities, their own contradictory aspirations create a tension between the opposing positions and fractious debates

¹⁶ Jenkins, *In Good Faith*.

¹⁷ Council of Europe. “Religion and Democracy,” Recommendation 1396, Adopted by the Assembly on 27th January 1999. http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/Adopted_Text/ta99/EREC1396.htm.

¹⁸ See Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Hatzopoulos, *Return from Exile*, 7.

ensue. At the moment, in an effort to gain power, some religious groups—both Christian and Muslim— focus less on spiritual development and moral education, their intended purpose, and more on creating political revolutions.

How Much Is Too Much?

Even as religious extremism has moved to the forefront in recent days, threatening both political and educational establishments, public education has received mostly failing marks from groups on all points along the political, educational, and religious spectrum. Most stakeholders would agree that one of education's primary roles in democracy is to raise youth to be not only intellectually capable, but also good citizens. As society becomes ever more diverse and complex, it is increasingly essential that the youth are educated to be active and informed voters who understand that tolerance and respect for diversity are key to a successful democracy. Free exercise of religion, guaranteed by the constitution, is a component of such tolerance and respect.

Politics and Religion. What happens when politicians or political action groups become involved with religion? In the United States, once-forbidden activities have become somewhat commonplace. For example, in direct defiance of the ban on electioneering by tax-exempt organizations, some churches have begun endorsing candidates from the pulpit and engaging in partisan activities.²¹ Proposals have even been launched in Congress to permit religious institutions to engage in partisan politics yet retain their tax-exempt status.²² Americans United for Separation of Church and State protests:

Non-profit organizations receive tax exemption because their work is charitable, educational or religious. That benefit comes with conditions. One requirement is

²¹ Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "Americans United Urges IRS to Investigate Four Churches for Political Intervention." November 6, 2006. <http://www.au.org/site/News2?JServSession=Idr012>.

²² Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "Faith and Freedom Series: Religion, Partisan Politics and Tax Exemption: What Federal Law Requires and Why." <http://www.au.org/site/DocServer/Religion>.

that tax-exempt organizations refrain from involvement in partisan politics.... This regulation is also designed to protect the integrity of the election process.... Blurring the distinction between these two types of organizations would harm both religion and politics.²³

In the U.S., federal funding for faith-based organizations has allowed the development of programs which support particular ideologies. For example, a federally-funded, faith-based clinic in San Francisco purports to assist gay men in becoming heterosexual.²⁴ Some government-sponsored programs in sex education promote only abstinence.

Other countries are also experiencing the tension between politics and religion. In Turkey, preaching creationism can lead to jail and the government controls imams to the point of writing their sermons for them.²⁵ In a widely reported speech to the officers of the Pakistan Army in Rawalpindi, Dr. Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan's High Commissioner to the U.K., suggested that politics rather than religion is at the heart of the "growing divide" between Islam and the west. Dr. Lodhi's view is that the clash of cultures is a result of unequal distribution of power, wealth, and influence and not about religion. She notes: "There is no clash of values, but of politics and interests."²⁶ Speaking in Istanbul, Kofi Annan also indicated that the rift is due to political tensions rather than religious differences. He stated that violence and instability have been fuelled by fear, and misunderstandings, economic disparities, wars by Western powers in Muslim countries and the Arab-Israeli conflict.²⁷ Despite Annan's assertions, some politically

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ed Conroy, "Dominion over Politics," *San Antonio Current*. December 6, 2006.
http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=17551848&BRD=2318&PAG=461&dept_i.

²⁵ Ibid..

²⁶ *DailyIndia.com*. "Politics, Not Religion Root of Growing West-Muslim Divide: Pak's HC to UK." November 26, 2006. <http://www.dailyindia.com/show/86079.php/Politics-not-religion-root>. Also reported in *Daily Times* (Pakistan), "Politics, Not Religion, Cause of Divide Between Muslims and West: Maleeha." November 26, 2006. http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006%5C11%5Cstory_26-11-2006

²⁷ *News.24.com*. "Politics, Not Religion to Blame." November 16, 2006.
http://www.news24.com/News24/World/News/0,,2-10-1462_2029738,00.html.

influential theorists in the United States have defined cultural and religious identity as the biggest source of tension—and, hence, the root of terrorism—since the Cold War.²⁸

On one side, the thesis; on the other, the antithesis. Politics dominated by religion? Religion influenced by politics? The issues sometimes seem diametrically opposed, sometimes muddled and interlocked, because the tension between the two positions makes dialogue difficult.

David Kuo's book, *Tempting Faith*, provides some light on the relationship between politics and religion. Kuo, former deputy director of the White House's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, was a "True Believer" who hoped to apply his religious values in his work. His experiences in the office convinced him that the faith-based project was not about Christianity but about politics, however. When funds meant for faith-based organizations went to political cronies instead of their intended recipients, he came to believe that the "Christian right became a tool of political operatives, and Christianity was sullied in the process."²⁹ Likewise, Ray Suarez finds the current politicization of religion problematic, even leading, for example, to "one congregation's expelling members who voted for John Kerry."³⁰ Suarez points, on the other hand, to the "religionization" of politics in battles as to whether taxpayer's money can go to religious organizations for natural-disaster relief.³¹ He concludes: "We can't get American religion out of politics, or politics out of religion. It's too late for that. It would be like trying to get the sugar out of a cup of coffee. But finding a way these two behemoth

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Susan Campbell. Review of *Tempting Faith*, by David Kuo. "Believer Sees Politics Rule Religion," *Fort Wayne.com: Journal Gazette*, November 12, 2006. <http://www.fortwayne.com/mld/journalgazette/news/editorial/15995233.htm>

³⁰ Robert Siegel. "'Holy Vote' Analyzes Religion in U.S. Public Life." NPR, *All Things Considered*. December 4, 2006. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5743149>.

³¹ Ibid, 3.

institutions in American life can coexist, while respecting the convictions of believers and protecting the rights of nonbelievers and those who disagree, is the riddle we must solve.”³²

Politics and Education. In the U.K., without constitutional prohibitions for church-state relationships, religion and education have become partners with the support of New Labour and Conservatives alike. A large number of British parents have demanded choice in schooling. New Labour’s support has come from their platform for a pluralistic society and the legitimization of the identity of various cultural groups, while Conservative support has come from its demands for parental choice and moral education.³³

Families are attracted to faith-based schools for several reasons: preservation of cultural identity, development of religious ethos, and freedom from institutionalized racism. Some public community schools provide strong academic preparation but fail to provide a culturally sensitive environment. In such schools, minority and immigrant families fear loss of their cultural identity through the pressures of assimilation and integration.³⁴ Although conventional wisdom holds that public or community schools will actually promote tolerance and respect for opposing and minority viewpoints, the atmosphere in such secular environments may actually be hostile to religious, racial, or ethnic minorities, especially in public schools stratified by class or race.³⁵ Lester believes that in the U.K., religious schools have helped to mainstream some cultural groups by developing tolerant attitudes in some racial and ethnic minorities.³⁶ Politicians have responded to parental pressure by increasing options for choice and expanding the network of religious schools. There is debate about the issue in the larger society, however. Although the

³² Ibid.

³³ Jenkins, *In Good Faith*, 193.

³⁴ Ibid, 3, 6, 196.

³⁵ Emile Lester. Review of *In Good Faith: Schools, Religion, and Public Funding*, by Marie Parker Jenkins and others. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 38, no. 3 (2006):351-363. <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>.

³⁶ Ibid., 354.

U.K. has a long history of supporting Church of England schools, at one point Roman Catholic and Jewish schools struggled to secure state funding. Now Muslim, Sikh, and Greek Orthodox schools requesting the same support are receiving some opposition from the general public. At the heart of the debate is the question of segregation by race and ethnicity³⁷ and the general public's preference for assimilation. Jenkins and her colleagues ask whether Muslim schools would provoke the same outcry if their students were predominately white.³⁸ A recent U.K. poll indicated that 27% of the population opposed funding of faith-based schools. The numbers increased to 43% when Muslims, Sikhs and Greek Orthodox schools were included.³⁹ Indeed as Dewey said: "What is strange or foreign (that is to say outside the activities of the groups) tends to be morally forbidden and intellectually suspect."⁴⁰

How far is the public willing to extend public funding of religious schools? Would they fund Zoroastrian or Wiccan schools or schools of Scientology?⁴¹ Wide-open Amsterdam's politicians banned the "Devil's Church" once they determined that sexual depravity was not religion, but the group, for a while, had identity as a church.⁴² Who decides? Should any church be permitted to establish a school, regardless of its teachings?

Although faith-based schools exist practically everywhere, there is one significant difference between religious schools in the U.K. and in other western countries. British religious schools funded by the government must meet the same standards for curriculum as community schools. Only Madrassas and Chederim with narrow agendas are outside this curriculum umbrella. Because standards must be met, many religious schools employ teachers from other

³⁷ Jenkins, *In Good Faith*, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Dewey, "Democracy and Education," 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 193, 195.

⁴² *US-Europe Public Forum 2006: Faith and the State*. "Religion, Enlightenment, and Democracy." November 9, 2006. <http://www.ishss.uva.nl/Lectures/0601FaithAndState/091106.htm>.

cultures or faiths to fill their faculties. This diversity helps ensure a climate of tolerance. Jenkins and her colleagues warn that we must not focus simply on funding faith-based schools “but also on assuming that such schools can provide education that is socially just.”⁴³

In the U.S., politicians have moved to create charter schools with fewer curriculum requirements and less oversight, or to provide vouchers to be used in any school of the parent’s choice, unaccredited or not. Some of these educational enterprises have been successful, others have not. The *Los Angeles Times* recently reported on a charter school which has been accused of fraud and nepotism. The charter school, designed as an independent study center, serves 2,200 students and operates out of several churches in the greater Los Angeles area. An audit revealed that the school over-claimed by \$7.7 million when applying to the state for operating funds. Most troubling was \$18,000 paid for rent for the school’s human resources director, payment to his daughter of an inflated wage for reviewing student writing samples, and an expenditure of \$20,024 for purchase and upkeep of an aquarium for the director’s office, which he insists is helpful as a study guide when his—independent— students come to visit.⁴⁴ Any school or institution, public or private, can spawn illegal or immoral acts, or simply poor choices. The concern in the model used in the United States is that less oversight for these schools could mean that such actions can be hidden for a longer time or that they might occur more often. While there are some benefits to less bureaucracy, there are some very real dangers in too little oversight.

Some conservative theoreticians have suggested that we take the matter even further: to the dissolution of the public school and its replacement with market-driven school choice

⁴³ Jenkins, *In Good Faith*, 188.

⁴⁴ Joel Rubin, “School Misused Funds, Audit Finds,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 2007, sec. B.

programs.⁴⁵ Glenn Elert, a critic of those policies, notes that choice itself is a myth given that nothing assures that there will be a full menu of choices available at the right price in the right place, and that the poor often have no choice at all. He suggests that a choice system—especially one with vouchers—will quickly disintegrate into a system that is separate and unequal due “to the free-market economists’ confusion [of democratic choice with consumer choice].”⁴⁶

Elert is especially concerned with the privatization movement which is creating schools-for-profit. He reports that in EAI-run schools, student-teacher ratios have increased and that turnover has been unacceptably high in the college interns hired to replace paraprofessionals.⁴⁷

In a postscript to his document, Elert reproduces an article from the *Toronto Globe and Mail* dated 30 October, 2002:

Facing an educational crisis last year [Philadelphia] handed 20 of its worst-off high schools, in some of the most abject slums in the country, to a private, for-profit company called Edison School, Inc. Now those institutions appear to be going the way of Enron, Tyco and Worldcom...

Days before classes were to begin in September, trucks arrived to take away most of the textbooks, computers, lab supplies and musical instruments the company had provided—Edison had to sell them for cash....

As a final humiliation, Chris Whittle, the company’s charismatic chief executive and founder, recently told a meeting of school principals that he’d thought up an ingenious solution to the company’s financial woes: Take advantage of the free supply of child labor, and force each student to work an hour a day, presumably without pay, in the school offices.

‘We could have less adult staff,’ Mr. Whittle reportedly said at a summit of employees and principals in Colorado Springs. ‘I think it’s an important concept for education and economics.’ In a school with 600 students, he said, this unpaid work would be the equivalent of ‘75 adults’ on salary.

Although Mr. Whittle said he could have the child-labor plan in place by 2004, school board officials were quick to say they would have nothing to do with the proposal.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Glenn Elert, *School Privatization & Choice: A Sociopolitical Analysis*. E-World, 1994. <http://www.hypertextbook.com/eworld/choice/shtml>, 3, 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁸ Elert, 21.

Although most people long for an easy answer to the complex issue of school improvement, determination of motive, as Elert reminds us, is an important part of the decision making process. Because public schools often have failed to provide a good outcome for the investment, it is easy to assume that business people will be able to manage schools more effectively. That could be a dangerous assumption given that there are plenty of failed businesses and that the profit motive may not be a comfortable fit with education's more noble goals.

While it is obvious that politics and politicians often stir the educational pot, sometimes schools interfere with politics. Madrassahs in Pakistan and elsewhere— Islamic schools which have a single curriculum, the study of the Koran—have been identified by western governments as schools that breed terrorists. In the hands of charismatic imams with a political agenda, these schools can be breeding grounds for political ideology. But, then, so can any school, based on any faith, with a powerful, central moral teaching. As the Council of Europe has noted:

There are still certain tensions between religious expression and political power. There is a religious aspect to many of the problems that contemporary society faces, such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts, racism and xenophobia, and ethnic conflicts; consideration should also be given to inequality between sexes in religion.... Extremism is not religion itself, but a distortion or perversion of it. None of the great age-old religions preaches violence. Extremism is a human invention that diverts religion from its humanist path to make it an instrument of power.

It is not up to politicians to decide on religious matters. As for religions, they must not try to take the place of democracy or grasp political power.⁴⁹

Magnifying the Positives

It is clear that strong, oppositional forces are vying for power. The impenetrable thesis of separation of church and state which has guided the work of most western democracies for the last few centuries is under attack by conservative, faith-based groups that perceive themselves as disenfranchised. It is important to note that this group does not represent all religious people. It

⁴⁹ Council of Europe, 1.

is, rather, a diverse group of political action centers which share a few common issues, and even this group is fracturing. Recent news stories have described the defection of some younger ministers from religious political action groups because they want to expand the groups' agenda beyond the right to life and sexual abstinence to a broader one which includes environmental issues and poverty. In spite of the fracturing of the movement, there has been a tremendous influence on the American president who has taken their issues as his and who has begun to shape the landscape through Executive Order and political influence. New Labour in Britain has been involved in some of the same issues. This is the antithesis.

In fact, when internal tension splits the thesis, neither approach is satisfactory any longer. The synthesis that emerges will not be completely satisfactory to either group, and the extreme edges of both positions will not be served. For the larger population—those in the middle and the moderates from the opposing positions—working together toward a synthesis will provide a more positive approach and will satisfy for a period of time, until internal tensions and divisions break it apart and a new synthesis is born.

So what is the synthesis that will bring the opposing views together? Jeffrey Stout's book *Democracy and Tradition* is an attempt to bring secular liberalism and theological traditionalism to a conversation. Pagano's review of the work concludes:

The appeal to theological traditionalists will be stronger if the version of pragmatism which underlies our democratic practices could claim that the spirit of self-criticism, tolerance of other viewpoints, and open-ended inquiry are a means to moving along the path to truth.⁵⁰

Although practices such as self-criticism might not appeal to individuals at either extreme, they should be attractive to moderates in both groups.

⁵⁰ Joseph Pagano. Review of *Democracy and Tradition*, by Jeffrey Stout. *Journal of Religion and Society* 6 (2004). <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2004/2004-r6.html>.

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The Council of Europe has made very specific suggestions to achieve this aim. In order to combat religious extremism and avoid the negative interactions of politics and religion, as well as combating ignorance and stereotypes, they recommend that school and university curricula should be revised to give a better understanding of all religions, but that “religious instruction should not be given at the expense of lessons about religions as an essential part of the history, culture, and philosophy of humankind.”⁵¹ The Council believes that this should be a part of guidelines of education for democratic citizenship and history teaching and that conflict between state-promoted education about religion and the religious faith of families should be avoided.⁵²

With the U.K. already funding some faith-based schools, Jenkins and her colleagues present Jackson’s arguments in favor of faith-based schools. They

- Provide a positive response to racism;
- Promote social justice for pupils, parents and community;
- Offer high-quality education; and
- Promote social cohesion and the integration of minority communities into the democratic way of life.⁵³

The authors outline the arguments and counter-arguments:

[A]lthough the argument has been constructed in terms of equality of treatment before the law and the right to freedom of religion, it could be contended that in any society there is a limit to the extent to which individual rights and collective rights can and should be supported before social cohesion and harmony are placed in jeopardy. Human rights...are never absolute....[T]he notion of state funding for any faith-based school could be seen as undermining the collective good of society as a whole. Yet to deny the children of religious parents the right of access to faith-based education also implies that moral values and ethical codes can be universally determined and applied to all, regardless of community desires.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Council of Europe, 3.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Jenkins, *In Good Faith*, 197.

⁵⁴ Jenkins, *In Good Faith*, 200.

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Based on the British experience with faith-based schools and recommendations by the Council of Europe, several alternative models are possible:⁵⁵

1. Require that all schools teach courses on the history and culture of different religions.
2. Require that publicly financed faith-based schools be more inclusive in their admissions programs, creating a more diverse student body.
3. Create inclusive community schools with opportunities for all faiths to be educated together, with inclusive assemblies and courses specifically designed to teach all philosophical viewpoints.
4. Create time and space in community schools for pupils who wish to engage in religious study and worship.
5. Teach tolerance and social justice in community schools, while focusing on moral education required for citizens in democratic societies.
6. Require that faith-based institutions teach tolerance and social justice and all curricular areas such as science.
7. Encourage the study of the history and philosophy of religions and research in those topics at the university level.

Ultimately, as Jenkins and her colleagues point out, the view must be reaffirmed that “education be regarded as a collective act, with individual schools existing as part of a wider social and political community.”⁵⁶

It is not clear how the voucher and for-profit models advocated by some groups in America fit into the above recommendations. Because the move has been away from standards, there is some possibility that these models will lead to less tolerance and more fractiousness, and

⁵⁵ Ibid, 200-202, and Council of Europe.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 203.

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maybe even poorer education. Choice is a very general term and may refer to parents being able to choose from a menu of schools in a system such as charter schools, magnet schools, or high-performing institutions. Vouchers are a more specific instrument for allowing parents to choose any school—public or private, accredited or unaccredited, secular or faith-based—by providing at least minimal tax-based funding for the schooling. For-profit schools run institutions with a profit motive and may be designed around any focus. Unless the funds provided by vouchers and similar models are available only for schools with some accreditation or oversight, they are not a good solution.

The question is always this: How much is too much? To what degree does the collective will predominate? How far can we take individual rights? It is knotty questions like these that affirm that we do, indeed, live in a democratic society. And it is our ability to become dissatisfied with what we know and our desire to work to create something better that helps us know that we are free.

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Published by the Forum on Public Policy

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