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Religionless Religious Education? Secularizing for the Common Good

Abstract

This paper is a creative application of John B. Cobb's proposal of "secularizing" religion for the common good to the scope and practice of religious education. As religious private schools participate in state-funded voucher programs, they can "secularize" in terms of emphasis and mission. "Religionless" religious private schools may affirm critical examination of their inherited traditions, seek to serve public needs, and solve social crises rather than to simply remain internally focused. Religious education may thus become a valuable and contributing voice in the public square that is focused "outward" rather than "upward" or "inward". If religious private schools open themselves to secularizing, they can effectively partner with public school districts to meet the real and pressing needs of the community at large and contribute to the "salvation of the world".

Introduction

In an age of intense secularism, religious education is experiencing marginalization in the public square. Such secularism is not a result of outside forces alone, but religion's own tendency toward withdrawal from or reaction against real-world problems. In the case of religious education, the era of withdrawal from broader society, or the tendency for religious private schools to be escape hatches from public life, is rapidly waning. Instead, religious education finds itself at a crossroads of cultural engagement: religious education must either make meaningful contributions to broader society or face the threat of irrelevance. If the latter is realized, religious education may be entirely eclipsed by secularist education.

However, religious private schools are also currently experiencing unprecedented opportunities. The expansion of state-funded tuition voucher programs in various states and countries are enabling religious private schools to expand their reach to socioeconomic communities who have not been historically able to pay private tuition. Publically-funded tuition voucher programs are available in 12 states and more than 50 cities in the United States (NCSL 2013; Berends, et. al. 2009, xvii).

When religious private schools were predominately driven by tuition privately paid by families, they posed no real threat to the public sector. Families paid tuition to send their children to religious private schools and simultaneously paid taxes that funded public schools. However, with the emergence of state-funded voucher programs for private schools, public school districts are beginning to notice the effects of private appropriation of public funds. Because religious private schools that participate in voucher programs are serving a public need using public funds, they are seen as direct "competitors" to public school districts, who have historically maintained a monopoly on such funding.

As religious private schools participate in state-funded programs, scrutiny will increase about issues such as religious indoctrination and the validity of religious perspectives taught in the classrooms of such schools (Hand, 2004). If religious private schools cannot demonstrate that they are meeting public needs

and engaging public concerns, criticism will continue to be leveled against religious education as a viable component of the educational sector.

As Jack Seymor notes, “religion is an important and growing aspect in the public sphere” (Seymor, 2013, 233). In fact, Friedrich Schweitzer (2013) argues, “all children (that are interested in it) have an inalienable right to have access to some kind of religious education... this claim makes religious education a public matter, and no competing principle, for example, of the separation between state and church or religion can override this human right in order to neglect it” (250). If indeed religious education is a right, then religious private schools may be considered institutions rendering a public service, especially in locales where tuition vouchers are available. However, religious educators must reflect critically on their own scope and practice in the context of prevailing secularist education.

Inadequacies of Secularist and Religious Education

John B. Cobb argues that both secularist and religious education have been largely ideologically driven and both have failed to meet the direst needs of the world. Secularism has marginalized religion from the public and religiousness has marginalized the public from religion. In so doing, both ideologies have done harm to one another and to the general public. Quite succinctly, Cobb identifies such blind, ideologically-driven mutual destruction “insane” (2010, 5-9). In terms of extremes, Cobb defines “religiousness” as the tendency toward legalistic escapism and secularism as the tendency toward economic self-interest (Cobb 2010, 125). According to Cobb, both extremes are inadequate as ideological foundations of education. Thus, religious education must secularize.

On one hand, secularism has presented itself as a “sane alternative to religiousness” but in so doing, it has sought to exclude religious voices from the public square (Cobb 2010, 8). Because religious education is assumed to be fundamentally sectarian, it is “relegated and confined to the private sphere” in order to preserve public unity around so-called shared “secular” values (Schweitzer 2013, 251). However, these secular values have not produced thoughtful solutions to public needs; instead, they have only perpetuated economic self-interest, which Cobb calls “economism”, at the expense of real human values and concerns (2010, 127). By marginalizing religion from education, secularist education silences the human spirit and de-emphasizes pursuits outside of pragmatic economic gain. By marginalizing religious education, secularist education represses its own religious heritage. After all, a “secular society is impoverished if it marginalizes the faiths from which it has emerged” (Observer 2011).

On the other hand, being “religious” is no sane alternative to secularism because it simply confirms existing patterns of behavior (Cobb 2010, 12). In other words, religiousness seeks to change others but does not seek to be changed by others; it has its own self-interests. In such a holding pattern, religion stagnates and cannot fully meet public needs or promote the common good. Its priority is the promotion of its own institutional and structural systems. Arguably then, religious education, and religious private schools in particular, have largely been quite “religious” according to Cobb’s definition. While this has not been the case for secularizing higher educational institutions, it has remained the case for religious primary and secondary schools.

Cobb’s proposed solution to this problem is that religion must secularize. But, secularizing is not capitulation to secularism. Cobb draws a sharp distinction between “secularism”, which he rejects, and “secularizing” which he affirms. Secularizing de-emphasizes the “us and them” dichotomy because it

does not elevate the superiority of a particular tradition; rather, it elevates the public need and common good above the needs of the religious institution. Secularizing religious schools should seek to be “relevant to the real needs of our time” (Cobb 2010, 106). However, because of the extremism so often part and parcel of religious education, it is still openly questioned whether religious education can “play a legitimized role in the public domain” (Meidema 2013, 239). To be “religionless” is to be free of the extreme of religiousness, not to be religion-free. This distinction is critical to Cobb’s proposal. Religious ideology, not religious values, is problematic. Cobb argues:

“... the real need is for an intensification of moral feeling, not its anesthetizing. It is important that more and more people feel a moral urgency to work for the salvation of the world. Our work for the common good is to be motivated by love rather than duty. It will respond to needs rather than conform to rules” (2010, 182).

Religious private schools have the moral architecture in place to secularize. However, religious educators must embrace the secularizing alternative and reform the scope of religious education to meet broader public needs. A creative application of Cobb’s proposal of “secularizing” religion for the common good is a viable alternative for expanding the scope and practice of religious education into the public sphere. But, religious educators must act. Cobb warns that the “dominance of secularism today is an even greater obstacle than religiousness” to the changes that the world desperately needs (2010, x).

Secularizing the Practice Religious Education: An Alternative

As a viable alternative to such extremes, Cobb sees secularizing as the sifting of religious insights through the “best thinking of the day” and the sifting of the “best thinking of the day” through religious insights. While secularism focuses on economism, secularizing focuses on the “salvation of the world” without obsessing over “otherworldliness”. By secularizing, religious education may thus become a valuable and contributing voice in the public square.

Cobb defines the term, “secularizing” as the process by which religious educators can:

“...critically examine the inherited ideas [of their religious tradition], clarify their valid meaning and use for life in the real world, and organize the resulting thoughts so as to ensure their mutual coherence” (Cobb 2010, 11).

In so doing, religious private schools can legitimately help shape the current thinking and practices in ways that benefit society as a whole, without succumbing to the extremes of religiousness on one hand or secularism on the other. When applied to religious education, religious private schools might seek to produce secularizing students, teachers, and citizens who are capable of not only deep literacy in their religious tradition, but the direct application of such thinking to public life. This need not mean political engagement; instead, it might simply mean the formation of students who are capable of living in and through the critically-examined values of their religious traditions in ways that lead to wholeness and healing in the world. Thus, religious private schools can seek to serve public needs and solve social crises rather than to simply remain internally and institutionally focused. Cobb calls this distinction “looking out” rather than simply “looking up” and “looking in” (2010, 11).

Cobb’s proposal for secularizing can be applied to religious education to mitigate the effects of secularism. As religious private schools participate in state-funded voucher programs, they can secularize,

not in terms of values or religious convictions, but in terms of emphasis and mission. A “religionless” religious private school may affirm a critical examination of its inherited tradition without, as Cobb notes, “wiping the slate clean” as secularism attempts to do. In spite of secularist claims of being “value free”, the effects of such secularism have been devastating.

Secularizing religious education can at once reject secularism, reject religiousness, and critically embrace the values and wisdom of their faith tradition for practical engagement of the world at-large. Secularizing embraces the “ought” of religion and applies it to a world in need (Cobb 2010, 9). The process of secularizing applies not only the practice of religious education, but to the scope of religious education in the public sphere.

Religionless Religious Education? Secularizing Funding and Function

In accordance with Cobb’s definition, William Davis (1999) argues that religious private schools must “provide for the common good of society and to address vigorously the serious challenges that they face”. Moreover, Davis notes that “generally speaking, private and especially religious schools, have a strong sense of community and an emphasis on increased human concern”. Such deeply-rooted values are examples of secularizing religious education. Thus, a “religionless” religious private school is one that critically applies the wisdom of its faith tradition to the real problems of the real world. When religious educators look “outward” to the needs of their communities (rather than “upward” to religious hierarchy or “inward” toward religious piety), they affirm the reality that in religious private schools “teachers and administrators see their efforts as involving more than a job; they view their efforts as a service” (Davis, 1999). Service, then, is more to the general public than to their own institutions. As Marissa Crawford and Graham Rossiter (1996) note, “if religious education is perceived as almost exclusively committed to the maintenance of traditional [religious] structures and teachings, it will have little credibility” (138).

There remains contention over the public role of religious private schools. However, Jason Bofetti (2001) refutes the three most common misperceptions about such schools; namely, “that they cater to the rich, they are essentially unregulated, and they do not serve the public good”. These assumptions are simply no longer the case, especially when secularizing religious private schools participate in state-funded tuition voucher programs. Even when public funding is available, however, religious private schools provide educational service to the public at a fraction of the cost of their public school counterparts, saving state governments, and the public, significant proportions of state and local education budgets (Aud and Michos 2006). Moreover, Bofetti (2001) notes the even minimal regulation of religious private schools “shows that we already believe that private schools serve a public function and must have some degree of public accountability”.

In spite of subsidization by tuition voucher programs, many religious private schools are “maintained at great cost” because of a “commitment to bring social justice and quality education to the poor and those most at risk educationally” (Davis 1999). When religious private schools operate for reasons such as this, rather than to indoctrinate adherents and perpetuate the causes of their own institutions, they are secularizing. Religious private schools that participate in publically funded tuition voucher programs provide not only a religious education for their own religious followers, but have proven to be “a life preserver for thousands of inner-city children drowning in failed public institutions” (Bofetti 2001).

However, the primary means by which religious private schools and public schools are distinguished are governance and funding. Funding is the crucial differentiator, especially if secularizing religious private schools seek to meet public needs in high-risk, high-poverty areas. Davis (1999) observes that “if a solid financial base is absent there is a danger that the poor will not be able to take advantage of these schools and could easily lead to the development of a more elitist school community”. When state-funded tuition voucher programs are available, public districts assume that religious private schools are draining their coffers of funds. There remains debate concerning the legal and political viability of tuition voucher programs (Harris, Herrington, and Albee 2007). Out of the funding debate, conflict emerges between secularist public schools and secularizing religious private schools.

However, Kevin Schmiesing (2010) contends that opposition to religious education on the grounds of public-private funding conflict is unfounded:

Despite heated rhetoric to the contrary, it is not true that school choice measures drain public schools of resources. Implementation of choice, because of the positive incentives it frames, results in a more efficient allocation of available educational resources, benefiting all students.

The reality is that secularizing religious private schools operate efficiently, thereby potentially saving local, state, and federal resources that can be re-allocated to public school districts (McEwan 2010; McEwan and Carnoy 2000; Jimenez, Lockheed and Paqueo 1991). In that function alone, secularizing religious private schools can be said to do a public service. Moreover, public-private partnerships have been demonstrably produced residual benefits to the public system; in some cases, tuition voucher programs were found to improve academic outcomes at corresponding public schools (Clowes 2009; Forster 2008, 5). Other studies have noted a litany of private and public benefits to such options, including freedom of choice, expanded achievement, productive efficiency, and social equity (McEwan 2010; Berends, et. al. 2009, 25; Levin 2009, 28-29; Levin 2001, 8).

Conclusion and Implications

As Bofetti (2001) argues, “some schools may be privately run and others publicly run, but all schools serve the public”. Although school choice has been an issue championed by political conservatives, Cobb notes that liberals, conservatives, progressives, and everything in between can secularize (2010, ix). Public-private partnerships between public school districts and religious private schools are “good for individuals, and... good for society” (Schmiesing 2010). If religious private schools can effectively secularize to meet the needs of the common good, they can “generate enormous social capital” that benefits society as a whole (Bofetti 2001).

Two proposals are viable paths forward for secularizing religious education. The first proposal is the secularizing of religious private schools through tuition voucher programs. This process is already drawing religious private schools into the public square and enabling them to meet general public needs, especially in high-need public school districts. In many cases, such schools are meeting important needs in public school districts where the job is simply too immense for the public education system alone. These needs include general access to educational options, education blended with social services, safe school environments, and pathways out of poverty. By partnering together, public and private schools can work together for the common good. The second proposal is for cooperative partnerships between

religious private schools and their public school counterparts to develop targeted programs to meet specific needs of students, families, and communities. Programs such as state-funded tuition vouchers for students with special needs, for example, allow religious private schools to develop comprehensive special education programs that lighten the operational and financial responsibilities of public districts. Because funding for such programs has been otherwise unavailable, religious private schools have not been able to adequately meet such specific needs and thus, have been marginalized, whether internally or externally, from the public square on such specific public needs.

Thus, “religionless” public-private partnerships may allow religious educators to break free from the tendency toward insular escapism and instead embrace a transformative vision for their scope of practice. In so doing, religious private schools may help overcome the dominant forces of secularism, yet provide a legitimate role for critically examined faith traditions in the public square. In such scenarios, “religionless” religious education can be achieved, not for the sake of religious institutions, but for the sake of the pressing needs of society. If religious private schools open themselves to secularizing, they can effectively partner with public school districts to meet the real needs of the community at large and thereby contribute to the “salvation of the world”.

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