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ABSTRACT

Having been schooled in the intellectual tradition of the strict separation of church and state, educational researchers have devoted little scholarly attention to how religion affects education. This paper delineates the ways in which religion and politics intersect to shape society, particularly, the impact of the intersection on education. The paper explains why the intellectual wall exists, religion's impact on society, and the relationship between religion and politics. Issues that stem from the intersection of religion, public education, and policy preferences are highlighted. The relationships between religion and political culture and between political culture and educational policy are also summarized. Research in this area is made challenging by the pluralistic nature of religion and the intangible concepts of religion and political culture. (Contains 55 references.) (LMI)

RETHINKING THE NEXUS BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICAL CULTURE: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY

by

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Introduction

Being schooled in the intellectual tradition of the strict separation of church and state, educational researchers have devoted little scholarly attention to how religion impacts education. A recent overview of research in the politics of education contains no reference to religion (Scribner and Layton, 1995) nor does one of the most commonly used textbooks in the field (Wirt and Kirst, 1992). Scholars have been slow to recognize the political impact of religion in the United States (Wald, 1992). An intellectual wall of separation divides religion from our public culture such that it is no longer obvious what difference our religious beliefs and traditions make (Nord, 1995a; 1995b). Upon reviewing the literature to date, one might come to the conclusion that this impact is minimal. However, as we hope to demonstrate in this article, this is far from the case. Religion has occupied more of the political agenda in the last decade than in the last fifty years (Fowler, 1989).

Why the Intellectual Wall Exists

There are a number of reasons why educational researchers have stayed away from studying the impact of religion on education. The modern Western privatization of religion and the notion of the separation of church and state have convinced many that religion and politics do not and should not mix (Stackhouse, 1987). In his classic critique of American society, Tocqueville observed that religion and politics occupied distinct spheres; priests seldom ventured beyond the metaphysical realm of religion (Heffner, 1956). Many people are uneasy about mixing religion and politics (Fowler, 1985). Religious freedom comes to be construed as the individual's right to worship any god or none at all and therefore a private matter removed from the public sphere (Tipton, 1993). Some view the transgression of religion from the private to the public sphere as dangerous or corruptive of our political traditions, be they individualism, liberalism, pluralism, or the like (Fowler, 1989; Cady, 1993).

Others view religion as irrational, nonrational, even mystical and thus as having no place in "modern" society (Fowler, 1989). This is derived from the modernization or secularization of society thesis

whereby religion becomes privatized and marginalized as the culture becomes more secular and the society more modernized (Robbins and Anthony, 1990; Nord, 1995a). Advocates argue that religion ceases to exert a major influence on public institutions, including schools (Robbins and Anthony, 1990). Wilson (1976) suggests that it becomes just another consumer good and therefore no longer affects the centers of power or the operation of the system. Finally, there are others who simply fear organized religion (Fowler, 1989). By moving religion from the private to the public sphere, critics contend, we move ever more toward establishment of a theocracy in lieu of a democracy (Cady, 1993).

Religion's Impact on Society

Despite these concerns, there is no denying the significant impact religion has in all areas of society, including education. Few people dismiss the influence of religion on politics (Cox, 1984). There are those who argue that religion has never been sharply separated from American culture, government, or law (Whitehead, 1982). The founding fathers believed that religion made an essential contribution to the formation of a responsible citizenry capable of sustaining a democratic republic (Bellah, et al., 1991). Religion was present at the creation of the American political system and was one of several elements contributing to the design of governmental institutions and to the core beliefs that grew into the national political culture (Wald, 1992). Churches have continuously exerted influence on public life throughout our history (Bellah, et al., 1985). As Stackhouse (1987) observed, what religion can crown, it can dethrone; what it can legitimate, it can delegitimate.

As many researchers and social commentators have noted, religion continues to be very popular in America. Churches are by far the most popular voluntary organizations in the United States (Wald, Owen, and Hill, 1988). Religion is one of the most important ways in which Americans get involved in society (Bellah, et al., 1985). According to Wald (1992), religious membership seems to be higher now than in the first official census of churches in 1890. Americans give more money and donate more time to religious organizations than to all other voluntary associations combined

(Bellah, et al., 1985). Churches are by far the most favored recipient of philanthropy (Wald, 1992). According to Fowler (1989), more than half the adult population considers religion to be a very important component of their lives and of increasing importance to society as a whole.

Since 1945 some five hundred new national religious agencies, societies, and special purpose groups have been founded, three hundred of them since 1960, compared with four hundred in existence in 1945 (Bellah, et al., 1991). Churches are powerful organizations with a formal membership, headquarters, regularly scheduled group meetings, publications, and a full-time professional leadership (Wald, 1992). When churches mobilize politically, they operate on a sizable share of the population (Wald, Owen, and Hill, 1988). Identification with a religious denomination or at least membership in a church is viewed as politically expedient; nearly all members of Congress as well as the President identify themselves as belonging to a church or religious denomination (Pierard, 1986). Far from being in a modern period of religious decline, the current age is better characterized as one of religious revival (Cox, 1984).

Religion and Politics

Given the centrality of religion to people's lives, to what extent does religion shape political preferences, culture, and institutions? Researchers have long sought to establish a link between religious beliefs, political preferences, and policy outcomes. Montesquieu suggested that a connection existed between religious beliefs and political orientation (Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky, 1990). Durkheim believed that individualism had its roots in Christianity (Giddens, 1972). Weber (1978) explicitly linked religion (in the form of Protestant asceticism) to political economy (capitalism).

Based upon data from interviews of over six hundred residents of Detroit, Lenski (1961) found that socio-religious group membership as it affects political behavior is a variable comparable in importance to class. In a survey of twenty-one Protestant churches in Florida, Wald, Owen, and Hill (1988) found that churches promote distinctive political orientations; the more conservative the congregation, the more strongly individuals within it adopt

conservative political orientations. This is consistent with a previous study by Parenti (1967) who found that religious groups retain belief systems which influence basic conservative-liberal political orientations. These belief systems provide both the principles and assumptions that shape much of the individual's basic orientation toward worldly activity. In his study, Parenti found that members of the Catholic faith were consistently more conservative than members of the Jewish faith. This may be attributable in large measure to the rigidly hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church and the manner in which authority is distributed throughout the church.

Differences between the political preferences and behavior of religious groups continue to mark political behavior today (Wald, 1992). Differences have been found in areas such as the environment, education, public health, crime, and national defense (Greeley, 1991; Greeley, 1993; Wald, 1992). Greeley (1993) found greater support for environmental spending among Catholics than among other groups. Fowler (1985) found that many Evangelicals and Fundamentalist Protestants, as well as most members of the Moral Majority, view most welfare programs as ineffective.

Wald (1992) asserts that religion helps define the national political agenda and structures mass preferences for candidates, parties, and issue positions. Religious groups expend considerable effort to influence the policy process. Religious groups engage in a wide variety of policy issues and a full range of lobbying techniques (Weber, 1994). Religious advocacy groups bring religious faith and insight to bear in defining America's vision of a good society and in making recommendations for public policy on specific issues (Bellah, et al., 1991). In his study of the impact of religion on politics, Wald (1992) found that religion has contributed to different configurations of public policy in states. This finding is consistent with previous studies which demonstrated the connection between political culture and differences in policy outputs (Sharkansky, 1969; Elazar, 1972; 1994; Stonecash, 1981; Foster, 1983).

Religion, Public Schools, and Policy Preferences

Religion has always played a major role in education. Much of the conflict surrounding the common school movement centered upon religion--over whose values would be legitimized in the public schools (Tyack and Hansot, 1982). As Fowler (1985) observed, there has long been disagreement and conflict over (1) how much religion should there be in public schools and (2) whether the state should aid religious schools as it does public schools. For decades, religion has pervaded conflict over federal aid to education, specifically over whether to provide public funds for nonpublic schools (Ravitch, 1983). Many fundamentalists in the Christian Right have actively opposed busing and sex education in schools while pressing for the return of prayer in schools (Johnson and Tamney, 1986). School prayer had long been a feature of public schools despite a number of court decisions to the contrary (Fowler, 1985).

Conflict continues to erupt over required reading material in public schools. In Tennessee, a group of Evangelical parents took a school district to court over books which were perceived to be objectionable to their religious beliefs (Hunter, 1991). More recently, the issue of vouchers for public and nonpublic schools has been the focus of much lobbying by religious groups (Hunter, 1991). This conflict centers upon what Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt (1989) identified as arguably the most American of values--the freedom to choose with a minimum of government interference. As Rose (1990) suggests, this may reflect an attempt by many Evangelical parents to exercise greater control over the education and socialization of their children.

The desire to exercise greater control over the type of education children receive represents a rejection of the teaching of secular humanism that many people of faith perceive schools to be teaching (Hunter, 1991). Cupitt (1984) suggests that secularism itself has become a new kind of religion. Many Evangelicals perceive education in the public schools as anti-Christian or as education without God. Nord (1995a; 1995b) contends that schools come perilously close to indoctrinating students by socializing them to accept, uncritically, some culturally contested (in this case secular)

way of understanding the world rather than other ways (such as religious ways of making sense of the world); religious accounts are made to seem implausible as a result. This view is consistent with many postmodernists who argue that science must dispense with its claims to "Truth" and admit that it offers simply another set of meta-narratives no better or worse in any "objective" sense than others (Nord, 1995a; 1995b). Nord concludes that because the "Truth" has become increasingly elusive, religion must be treated seriously in public schools.

Proponents of this view assert that education has never been a neutral process of imparting practical knowledge and technical skills (Hunter, 1991; Nord, 1995a; 1995b). Schaeffer (1982) asserts that those who do not acknowledge religion in the public schools are promoting a myth that there can be a setting in which the state is neutral and not involved either for or against religion. Whitehead (1982) suggests that those who favor the strict separation of church and state are really dangerous secularists. The stakes in this battle are high because all participants recognize that schools are the primary institutional means of reproducing community and national identity (Hunter, 1991). The conflict produced as a result of the involvement of religious groups in education represents an ideological struggle over values, specifically whose values the school system will reflect.

Exactly how religion shapes political behavior and preferences is a matter of some dispute. Durkheim suggests that religion has an integrative function; it binds its adherents together and unites them into one group (Giddens, 1972). Belonging to a group involves patterns of relations that bind the individual to the group (Huckfeldt, 1986). Churches transmit and maintain group norms which are enforced by its members in interaction with each other (White, 1968; Wald, 1992). Religious subcultures facilitate the development and transmission of distinctive political and economic norms (Lenski, 1961; Wald, 1992). The communal nature of religion may induce a particular pattern of political activity among members (Wald, 1992). Wald, Owen, and Hill (1988) found that the collective outlook of the church was more politically influential than the world-view of the

individual church member. Political orientation is inferred from the religious traditions of the church (Wald, 1992).

Individuals do not make political decisions in a socially-isolated manner. Choice is the product of a systematic social process that exposes the individual to the influence of others (Huckfeldt, 1986). Political acts occur within a socio-religious framework of relations of authority which limits the range of possible choices or alternatives (Stackhouse, 1987). As comprehensive systems of belief, religion provides guidance for believers about appropriate behavior in the secular realm of politics (Wald, 1992). As a result, these belief systems may influence political behavior (Wald, 1992).

Tocqueville asserted that nearly all human actions originate from an individual's conception of the Diety (Heffner, 1956). An individual's participation in politics is ultimately based upon basic convictions about human good and about the type of society which involvement in politics can help create (Perry, 1988; Bellah, et al., 1991). These beliefs are rooted in political culture and are inextricably linked to religion, particularly in a nation as professedly religious as the United States. In Protestant fundamentalism, for example, authority is upheld in every social sphere; hierarchical notions of ascription and authority serve as the foundation upon which social institutions are constructed (Ellis, 1993). This is attributable in large measure to the influence of religion on the political culture.

Finally, religious influence, like the political culture of which it is a part, leaves an imprint on the individual. Religious values infuse culture, thereby influencing, however subtly, those who stray from it (Elazar, 1994). For example, Hammond (1979) found that value orientations grounded in religion remain even after individuals become detached from their religious roots. Religion may play a role in shaping the individual's assumptions and views of the role of politics and government in society (Wald, 1992). As Wald (1992) suggests, it may contribute to political identity.

Religion and Political Culture

Although the sources, attributes, and policy consequences of political culture have received the attention of researchers, few applications of its concepts and constructs have been made to educational politics and policy development. As evidenced by the excellent case studies in this journal, religious forces, which constitute an integral component of political culture, exert considerable influence on education policy. Culture and religion are inextricably intertwined. Political culture and religion provide the foundation for rules and assumptions that govern behavior (Pye, 1968).

Political theorists (Elazar, 1972, 1994; Ellis, 1993; Thompson, Ellis, Wildavsky, 1990) regard culture as a "way of life" comprising the shared values and beliefs inherent in a pattern of social relationships that exist within a relatively narrow "zone of acceptability." From the *archaic religions* that established the "sacred philosopher kings" to the *founded religions* that derived their authority from the founders of new communities of faith, religion has played a significant role in the political systems that have evolved. The oral and written traditions designed to control nature and the good harvest, the need for efficient administrative organizations and the necessity of traditional authority in earlier civilizations were ultimately challenged by the founders of new communities of faith, offering new "ways of life" and new values and beliefs about power and authority (Waida, 1987). There has been little doubt about religion's influence on the political culture of societies throughout recorded history.

How power, authority and policy issues are viewed and acted upon must be understood within a particular political culture or subculture that exists within a socio-religious and experiential context. Religion was identified by Elazar (1961; 1994) as the most important cultural marker when examining different political subcultures within different regions throughout the continental United States. Tracing the regional settlement patterns within the original thirteen colonies, with their distinctively different religious values and denominational affiliations, such as the Congregationalists

of Pilgrim and Puritan origins, the Lutherans, Quakers, Catholics, Anglicans and others, three distinct political culture orientations were plotted throughout the continentel United States: moralistic values from New England, individualistic values from the Middle States, and traditionalistic values from the South. Elazar theorizes, on the one hand, how these values became imbedded in public and private institutions, and on the other, how the shared value patterns of particular geographical regions are predictable and tend to coalesce within certain ethnic groups. Clearly, the nexus between religion and political culture would be incomprehensible apart from consideration of historical population shifts within and between political systems.

Implicit in the denominational distinctions made by Elazar (1970) is the notion that "ways of life" do not survive over generations without some organized means to sustain them. Distinctions are based on particular interpretations of how government ought to be viewed and the extent people ought to participate in decisions that concern them. In geographic regions where moralistic political culture of colonial New England heritage prevails, political participation for the betterment of society tends to be considered a selfless commitment to the public welfare. Unlike the Puritans who viewed government as a commonwealth, and allegience to the community primary, individualistic political cultures, emanating from Lutheran, Quaker and other religious traditions found in the Middle States, pursued private ends, viewing government's existence as "a means to respond efficiently to demands" within the marketplace. Lastly, within traditionalistic political cultures, found in the South where Anglican settlers from eastern and southern England resided, as well as in Hispanic communities throughout the Southwest where Catholicism from Spain spread as a result of the early missionaries and Spanish settlers, government is necessary for two purposes: preserving the existing order, and protecting the elite. Unlike the egalitarian tendencies represented by the early New England settlers, or the competitive individualism of the Pennsylvanian and Middle State

merchants, traditionalistic political culture in the United States represents the Old World hierarchy.

Elazar's original classification of religious denominations and mapping of migration patterns have been duly criticized because of ambiguities in values common across the three cultural designations, and failure to account for later migration and immigration patterns throughout the United States (Thompson, et al., 1990; Ellis, 1993). Nonetheless, his analyses are seminal in distinguishing between participatory and deferential cultures. Perhaps more importantly, he offers a rationale for the existence of political subcultures within the larger society that survive the test of time through organized religious institutions and religious values pervasive throughout local communities.

Likewise, Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky (1990) developed a political culture theory based on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas' (1982) two dimensions of individuation, grid/group theory, which is represented by two coordinates. The *grid* refers to the extent to which people are controlled by role expectations, differentiation and structure whether within the group context or not. The *group* represents the extent to which people are restricted in thought and action by their commitment to a social unit larger than the individual. Drawing on Durkheim's (1965) discussion of the function of religion in modern societies, these authors argue that shared cultural beliefs, values, and assumptions about equality, governance, and the like can tell us how members perceive themselves in relation to other communities and how they define their standing among the members of their community. That a major function of religion is to integrate individuals into social groups, where the individuals' construction of reality is formed, underscores the importance of considering the religion/political culture connection.

Ellis's (1993) book, American Political Cultures, provides a powerful source for documenting the historical forces that have led to the pervasive cultural conflicts in American political history. Ellis acknowledges the significance of religion in shaping rival visions of equality, competing conceptions of democracy, and competing

antipower ethics. The Puritan's fled from the feudal bonds that prescribed their station in life and a theocratic governance that established the link between them and their God. As settlers in a New World, a strong group affiliation evolved in which the members lived as equals in closeness to one another near *the Meetinghouse* where all participated in local decision making. They also established an unmediated relationship between the individual and God. Elaborating on his earlier work with Thompson, et al., (1990), Ellis refers to this as the *egalitarian communty* political culture.

Add to Ellis' historical account of the*egalitarian community, competitive individualism,* and *hierarchical collectivism,* and the parallel to Elazar's (1994) earlier work on political culture is apparent. The *competitive individualism* political culture is characterized by an anti-authority consensus, competition, and efficiency, and like Elazar, politics designed to bargain over self interest (marketplace). *Hierarchical collectivism* is characterized by highly structured roles in church and society, strategically placed elites, and the idea that a good government is one that maintains order, governs sparingly and protects the elite. Ellis' main criticism of Elazar, however, is that the religious, and regional variations he uses are "neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive," he adds two additional political cultures, *atomized fatalism* and *autonomous hermitude*, which are analogous to the hopelessness and anomie associated with the culture of poverty and to an outcast or Thoreau-like relationship to the world.

Political Culture and Education Policy

The religious roots of classical republicanism and modern liberalism, the tensions between individualist and egalitarian values, the bipolarity of Lockean liberals who define liberty as the absence of external constraint, and substantive liberals who define "positive liberty" as the freedom to help others do well represent cultural biases that make educational policy making in American political culture an ongoing challenge. The literature on political culture is premised on the belief that differences in political culture produce different types of political behavior.

In education, it is hypothesized that different political cultures produce different educational policy outcomes. Several studies have attempted to test the validity of this hypothesis. At the micropolitical level, Foster (1983) found that differences in the beliefs of school board members in Nebraska and Louisiana were primarily attributable to differences in the political cultures of the states. In a study of policy elites at community colleges, Garland and Martorana (1988) found that political culture at both the state and subsystem level is associated with differences in participation, involvement, and leadership. In her case study of higher education policy in Missouri and Oklahoma, Freeman (1992) found that political culture was a major determinant of higher education policy and that differences in policy outcomes were attributable to differences between individualistic and traditionalistic political cultures.

By conducting a content analysis of the state education codes of Illinois and Wisconsin, Wirt, Mitchell, and Marshall (1988) found that differences in state political culture produced differences in policy behavior and outcomes in education policy. Differences in value preferences were partially explained by differences in state political culture. In a larger study of the effect of political culture on education policy in six states, Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt (1989) found that differences in the value orientations of the political culture (efficiency, equity, quality, and choice) shaped the political behavior of state-level policymakers. Policy preferences were shaped by the individual cultural values embraced by key policy actors.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have delineated the ways in which religion and politics intersect to shape society. The challenge to researchers interested in this area is daunting. There is a tremendous amount of religious pluralism in the United States. Religious activity is neither unified nor monolithic (Fowler, 1985). This is compounded by the fact that religion and political culture are intangible and elusive concepts to explicate (Fowler, 1985). However, as Bellah et al. (1985) have said about religion, this does not diminish its significance in our common life. The difficulty of determining precisely the impact of

religion on public policy, including education policy, is remarkably similar to Bellah's (1990) lament on civil religion when he commented that, "Yes, there seems to be something there, but what exactly is it?" (p. 411). Politics is never simply an autonomous activity; it must be seen in relation to religion (Stackhouse, 1987). In this article, we have suggested some avenues of inquiry but much additional research needs to be done in this area.

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