
FOR COMMUNITY SAKE

Jeffery W. Dunn
Ohio State University

In the preface of his book, *Judaism: Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, Christian theologian Hans Küng writes these words concerning the religious situation of our time:

No peace among nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.¹

Coming to Küng's book was the result of a somewhat meandering search for the historical origins of personal religious traditions. Upon my initial reading I dismissed his quote as a platitude for poets and "politicians" willing to hold hands and sing songs around a campfire, yet its admittedly utopian images continued to unsettle. Its implausibility loomed beyond its beginnings. It seeped into the margins of the pages, filled in the discursive spaces of the text, and demanded a deeper consideration of its implications. Alongside its call for an experiment in "utopian pedagogy" rests Küng's dream that religious dialogue might play a positive role in national relations. Though some may imagine, along with John Lennon, that unity and world peace will come as religion dissolves, all signs suggest the world is becoming more religious. Scott M. Thomas, Senior Lecturer in International Relations and the Politics of Developing Countries at the University of Bath, claims as religion continues to expand it will "likely alter relations in the traditional nation-state system. At a basic level, religion will be an important factor in understanding the general foreign policy orientations of many countries." The understanding of religions worldwide—"their beliefs, values, and practices and the way they influence the political goals, actions, and motivations of states and religious communities—will be an important task for US and international foreign-policy makers in the coming decades."² Yet foreign-policy debates amidst the muddy waters of a globalized economy rarely rise above the rationality of the market. If the study

¹ Hans Küng, *Judaism: Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), xxii.

² Scott M. Thomas, "A Globalized God: Religion's Growing Influence in International Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2010, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66804/scott-m-thomas/a-globalized-god>.

of religion is no more than another tool co-opted for national economic advancement, then efforts toward any kind of peace will remain a pipe dream.

In this paper I argue a broad religious education with a dialogical approach goes to the heart of what it means to be a citizen in a global community. If public schools are properly to address the requirements of liberal pluralism then religious education requires a place within liberal pluralism's purview. If a place were to be granted, the understanding and investigation of the foundations of the religions are very much questions to be posed of education, along with examining the scope and place of religious education in a global society. Should the study of religion be a public concern as Kūng's ideas imply? And if study of religion were to become a public concern—if indeed religious knowledge and inquiry go to the very heart of national politics and, dare we say, world peace—where should such investigation take place? Should it be relegated to private religious institutions, or should a kind of religious education be part of what happens inside public schools? Should non-religious people, indeed the atheist, be educated for this brand of religious dialogue?

Walter Feinberg wrestles with issues of religious education and the public in his book, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenry*.³ Here Feinberg is concerned with the question of what the public interest is in the kind of education taking place in religious schools. Though his and my scholarship covers similar territory, my question has to do with ascertaining the public's interest in including religious education in public schools. While Feinberg's work focuses upon an exploration of private religious schools, his analysis has implications for how religion should be treated in public schools. If one takes seriously Feinberg's "requirements of liberal pluralism," then religious education will come to play a greater role within the public school context.

It is one thing to recognize religious diversity among a student body but quite another to call for a more expansive role for the religious in public schools. But this is precisely, I think, what Kūng's vision inspires. Since so many US public schools' student bodies show increasing levels of religious and ethnic diversity reflecting the rich variety of a global community and as national, political, and economic forces come to require a certain kind of world cultural literacy, I argue Kūng's vision is worth moving toward. His admitted trajectory is a "global ecumenical responsibility" brought about through the global consciousness of a shared fate.⁴ In this paper I move toward Kūng's vision of dialogue as it relates to Feinberg's discussion of liberal pluralism's requirements, and sketch what such movement might mean if public schools are to adopt intentional curricular practices that enable this type of religious

³ Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenry* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ Kūng, *Judaism*, xvii.

dialogue, and how this might shape the ethos of schools and shape implications for the “souls” of teachers.

Opening a wider space for religious education in public schools begins with recognizing diversity as one of the goods of a liberal, democratic society. Meira and Sanford Levinson demonstrate diversity itself is an indispensable component for educating citizens.⁵ The inevitability of crossing paths with those much different from ourselves is a practical reality in modern society. “In order for people to come to tolerate and respect others, it is generally thought that they need to interact with these ‘others’ in close, meaningful ways that enable them to see the commonalities among them and at least understand the reasons for the differences that remain between them.”⁶ They recognize schools as one-of-a-kind institutions where a variety of people are brought in close proximity. Their argument includes personal anecdotal evidence of encountering others in diverse settings that served to inspire a greater respect and understanding of difference.

Not only is exposure of otherness an important aspect of liberal democratic living, it is also vital for the development of autonomy.

[A]s children encounter peers and teachers who do and believe different things from what they do and believe, and as they discuss, compare, and debate their own ways of life with others, children necessarily move from accepting their lives simply as unexamined givens to some version of an examined life.⁷

The Levinsons raise the issue of religious diversity to call for development of civic duty and autonomy, focusing their call on implementing the physical presence of diverse individuals within any one particular school. Their perspective discourages voucher systems that would pull religiously affiliated students away from public schools, effectively decreasing diversity in public schools and homogenizing religious schools. They argue it beneficial both to individuals and to society for students to experience religious diversity within schooling’s social aspects.

In the context of a religiously diverse population it remains within public schools’ purview to do more than put students in close proximity in hopes they might have “meaningful” lunchtime conversations or develop friendships with the religious other. The curriculum itself can provide public schools with the tools to develop civic and religious autonomy. Harry

⁵ Meira Levinson and Sanford Levinson, “‘Getting Religion’: Religion, Diversity, and Community in Public and Private Schools,” in *Philosophy of Education: An Anthology*, ed. Randall Curren (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 283.

⁶ Levinson and Levinson, “Getting Religion,” 284.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

Brighouse agrees that facilitating autonomy in relation to “religious and moral commitments requires exposure to alternative views.”⁸ His view is curriculum that facilitates autonomy should focus on a “range of religious, non-religious, and anti-religious ethical views in some detail, about the kinds of reasoning deployed in those views, and the attitudes of proponents towards non-believers, heretics, and the secular world.”⁹ The facilitation of autonomy relates directly to that which constitutes the good life. Putting aside for a moment questions of the ultimate meaning of life, the particular ethical questions religions address provide opportunities for students to examine their own cultural backgrounds for resources for conceiving the good life. Making intentional space for religion also opens possibilities for what Pauline Lipman calls, “counterhegemonic discourses.”¹⁰ Religious discourse has the potential to work against curricular thinning in a climate where dominant curricular goals focus on testing performance, and where, as Lipman points out, neoliberal policies focused on economic competition make “irrelevant any talk about humanity, difference, democracy, culture, . . . personal meaning, ethical deliberation . . . social responsibility, and joy in education.”¹¹

Walter Feinberg reveals a significant tension between aspects of liberalism and pluralism in the context of religious education. A requirement of liberalism is that children are given skills to make their own decisions about important life choices; they are not “destined to live the life of their parents,”¹² and normative pluralism suggests in the process of making choices there should be a variety of good options from which to choose. Since public schools have been, as Feinberg puts it, “hands-off” when it comes to parents’ rights to decide upon the child’s religious education, a violation of the principles of normative pluralism becomes evident. In an attempt to be respectful of religious diversity, public schools essentially have neglected or avoided the topic altogether. Public schools’ silence on religious education not only consigns sole responsibility for religious education to parents, but relinquishes schools’ obligation to operate as a public institution that lives within the requirements of liberal pluralism.

Feinberg raises the issue of indoctrination when it comes to considering how religious schools go about teaching the primacy of their own doctrines when those doctrines make exclusivist claims to truth. He points to Dewey’s distinction between “religion” and the “religious” ultimately as unhelpful to religious educators in particular. But Dewey’s distinction may indeed be helpful in meeting liberal pluralism’s requirements in a public setting. Dewey defines the religious as “Any activity pursued in behalf of an

⁸ Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Pauline Lipman, *High Stakes Education: Inequality, Globalization, and Urban School Reform* (New York: Routledge-Falmer, 2004), 180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹² Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake*, 172.

ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value.”¹³ For him religious experience is “concerned with estimate of possibilities, with emotional stir by possibilities yet unrealized, and with all action in behalf of their realization.”¹⁴ Although Dewey articulates a religious functionality independent of a commitment to theistic foundations, he does provide us with a “common faith” through which one can recognize the religious nature of all human experience. Particularly to assuage secularists’ fears, one can make adequate distinctions between “insider’s truth and outsider’s dogma.” Given the proper groundwork for educators concerning the development and understanding of a philosophy of religion, the dogma or beliefs of a particular religion can be interpreted in a way that strikes an admittedly difficult balance that opens possibilities for deeply held religious belief while recognizing the good in the often-contradictory belief of the other. Feinberg ties the source of religion to the need to give meaning to the complexities of human existence and sets this need in the context of communal life.¹⁵ The communal context is crucial when it comes to the demands of pluralism in a liberal public educational setting where respect for other conceptions of the good life can be cultivated. As Feinberg asserts, “all that the outsider needs to know for pluralism’s sake is that from the inside it gives substance and expression to the communal life of the believers. It stands as a form of good for many people.”¹⁶ This is where, I argue, the dialogue Kūng envisions truly begins. Religious education in the public school is not simply about the transfer of information about traditions of religions but more expansively about the recognition of religious experience in ourselves and in the religious other. Curricular efforts can only begin by helping students understand the role of religion and religious systems in society and by teaching a respect for those roles in people’s lives. As Feinberg suggests, “leave a window available for students to appreciate the value that other religions hold for their believers.”¹⁷ This sort of “window” into the life of the religious other falls short of Kūng’s vision unless one asserts a more robust definition of dialogue.

The dearth of dialogue in public discourse is easily recognizable. Most of what passes for public conversation is polemic sound bites catapulted over opposing castles’ walls. Well-fortified positions under attack rarely pause for self-reflection or consider the value of the other. And there is a considerable amount of risk involved in dialogue. As theologian Leonard Swidler defines:

Dialogue is conversation between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each

¹³ Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934), 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵ Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake*, 175–179.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow. . . . Minimally, the very fact that I learn that my dialogue partner believes “this” rather than “that” changes my attitude toward her; and a change in my attitude is a significant change, and growth in me. We enter into dialogue, therefore, primarily so that *we* can learn, change and grow, not so that we can force change on the *other*.¹⁸

Swidler’s definition of dialogue is unsafe because it requires an openness to the possibility one might be persuaded by the “other.” Dialogue places one in a position to see the “light” in other conceptions of the good (to see them *as* good). This is perhaps the essence of liberalism and liberal education: a dialogue with otherness. This precarious relation is exactly what I sense contributes much of the tension around issues of private religious education and the teaching of religion in public schools. Religionists fear their children will be unduly influenced by the hedonistic ideology of a secular world while secularists fear the heavy hand of religious intolerance and insist religious perspectives have no place in public schools. The “change” dialogue brings about does not mean personal and communal identity must be compromised. Feinberg recognizes the “radical incommensurability between traditions”: that the boundaries marking off traditions are a requirement of pluralism. They “contribute,” he says, “to a society where many different conceptions of the good may flourish.”¹⁹ The turn dialogue requires is what Feinberg calls an “additional level of commitment” required by pluralism, namely the ability to “allow that regardless of ‘the truth’ of one’s own beliefs, others have an equal right to hold conflicting beliefs.”²⁰ The acknowledgement of the equal right of another may provide a fissure in Swidler’s problem concerning truth, for what seems to derail the prospect of dialogue is the holding of absolute truth claims. Without a “deabsolutized understanding of truth”²¹ it becomes difficult for persons to engage fruitfully in dialogue. Recognizing the rights of the other provides a beginning point that can open the way for the growth and change dialogue promises.

Swidler suggests interreligious and interideological dialogue functions in three areas.²² These areas provide a helpful structure for thinking about the place of religious education in public schooling. The first functions on a practical level in which a people work together for the good of humanity to solve some continuing human problem or respond to disaster. Many religious thinkers who have given up on doctrinal unity prospects agree social action

¹⁸ Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 3, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake*, 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

²¹ Swidler, *After the Absolute*, 66.

²² *Ibid.*, 45–55.

presents the one place where religions can lay down ideological swords and cooperate in a practical way. Public schools involved in service to the world may be taking steps toward realizing even diverse people can think and act together for public good. This notion is close to David Hursh's vision of schools that will "promote democratic deliberative discussions in which we can engage in discussions of not how we can increase profits but what kind of society and world do we want—and then how to work toward those visions."²³ Public schools can make intentional efforts to serve communities with ideas that come from this kind of practical dialogue: ideas formed in dialogue with neighborhood groups and ideas informed by the historic responses of a variety of religious and non-religious communities. This kind of intentional dialogical effort toward solving practical human problems can transform the fundamental ethos of schools and their place within one's neighborhood or community. Schools then change from primarily places where students go to have something done to them—to get some "thing," some learning, some educational experience within the walls of the building—into places of outreach. This sort of change promises a vision of public schools where students are not disengaged from their community for six hours a day, but where a sense of neighborhood application and responsibility are linked with the curriculum. For instance, a dialogical science curriculum could incorporate projects connected to solving local environmental problems and a dialogical social studies curriculum could provide opportunities for students to engage in local neighborhood issues such as poverty, housing, and transportation.

Dialogue also functions on a "spiritual" dimension where there is movement beyond the interchange of doctrines and intellectual ideas and work is done imaginatively to experience the other's religion from within. Warren Nord rightly cautions against participating educationally in other religious rituals for reasons of moral integrity, participating as an "investigator" in something that requires heartfelt commitment, and because the emotional and psychological nature of some religious practices may serve to cloud reasoning.²⁴ However, Nord suggests there are ways to get "inside" religion and, similar to Swidler, contends the imagination plays a key role whether through various forms of literature or anthropological study.²⁵ Clear in this level of dialogue is a narrative approach to knowing that provides a counter-script to a strictly rational and phenomenological knowing of religion. Nord nudges one toward an empathic knowledge of religion. "To understand a religion is to be able to look out on the world and on human experience and see

²³ David Hursh, *High Stakes Testing and the Decline of Teaching and Learning: The Real Crisis in Education*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 132.

²⁴ Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 218.

²⁵ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 220; Swidler, *After the Absolute*, 52–53.

and feel it from the viewpoint of the categories of that religion.”²⁶ There is an unlearning that is required. In one’s move from outside observer to an empathic imaginative look through the eyes of the other he or she seeks to “unlearn misinformation”²⁷ that has shaped the outsider’s view. The condition of pluralism, says Feinberg, requires engagement with the voices of the religious other.²⁸ The rational dogmas and propositional truths of a religious tradition are upstaged by the stories of the other that are met in this application of dialogue. This second level might begin with simple explorations concerning universal human experiences and dilemmas such as love, joy, pain, or loss and move to various religious and ideological responses to such experiences. Counselors and community leaders often are called upon to help students make meaning of tragic events such as school shootings or natural disasters that provide opportunities for the intentional exploration of our common humanity.

The third area is the cognitive, where we work *toward* a ground of understanding that might shape what Swidler calls a “universal systematic reflection (theology) of religion-ideology.”²⁹ He defines theology as the “systematic reasoned reflection on the religious and ideological convictions held by human communities” and religion-ideology as “all the insights of a faith or an ideology that attempts to explain the ‘ultimate meaning of life and how to live accordingly.’”³⁰ Perhaps intentional efforts to establish ongoing religion-ideology dialogue, so defined, can provide students with some optional frameworks for understanding the cultural embeddedness of their own traditions and the religious traditions of others. Again, this becomes a reflection on our common humanity. By situating oneself in his or her own “truth”, one becomes better able to hear the “truth” in the other.

Twenty years ago I started a career in the public school classroom because I, like David Hursh imagined “teaching could be part of a larger effort to create a more humane world.”³¹ Walter Feinberg writes “teachers of religion juggle three different goals”³² and have a responsibility to transmit doctrine, to tend to souls, and to refine the conscience. It is my sense that public school teachers struggle with very similar purposes. We too are responsible for transmitting a body of knowledge and information, and, far from what test scores may indicate, we too attend to emotional and spiritual needs and help develop moral and ethical behavior in our students. The everyday practice of teaching requires teachers live with a fluctuating emotional barometer as we come to our task with the greatest optimism about our abilities, our efforts, and

²⁶ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 214.

²⁷ Swidler, *After the Absolute*, 46.

²⁸ Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake*, 168.

²⁹ Swidler, *After the Absolute*, 53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

³¹ Hursh, *High Stakes Testing*, 6.

³² Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake*, xxvi.

the potential of students, yet are confronted with a pessimism that looms over us in subconscious structures threatening to form teacher and student alike into tools for national economic security. Stephen Ball recognizes current educational reforms that focus on testing and accountability structures have changed the environment of teaching and learning. “The act of teaching and the subjectivity of the teacher are both profoundly changed within the new management panopticism (of quality and excellence) and the new forms of entrepreneurial control (through marketing and competition).”³³ In this climate, as Lipman suggests, many things become irrelevant. “The result,” says Ball, is “inauthentic practice and relationships. Teachers are no longer encouraged to have a rationale for practice, account of themselves in terms of a relationship to the meaningfulness of what they do, but are required to produce measurable and ‘improving’ outputs and performances, what is important is *what works*.”³⁴ As this is a problem for the “souls” of teachers, it is, in the Deweyan sense, a religious problem.

I am not advocating for the creation of religious communities, but rather in some sense I advocate for a religious-like community within the public school: a community that attends to the “souls” of teachers and students. I argue for the creation of a civic community of “global ecumenical responsibility,” where students learn to be citizens who can interact coöperatively in a global context, requiring religious education have a more generous space in public schools. Curricular emphasis and federal funding focused on testing and accountability structures are too often driven by global market values that seek to prepare students to be consumers, if not expressly competitors, focused upon economic power and agility. I wonder how we will prepare students to coöperate in the global community rather than compete in a global marketplace. I want to open a window to the possibility the measure of our success in public education could be more than the production of students educated to contribute to the economy. The inclusion of religious education in public school is just one way to work through and implement a vision of schools as places to prepare global citizens—places where students can “obtain a complex and sophisticated understanding of the world”³⁵ in all its human variation.

It is admittedly easy to relegate Kung’s vision as too grand a proposal. Perhaps it does place too rosy a glow on the ability of religion to be an ultimate force for good in the world in light of its convoluted collusion with power, its history of tribal warfare, and its tenacious insistence on the transcendent. Perhaps, too, his vision is naïve about the prospects of education. Certainly the US has a long-enough history of laying society’s ills at the feet of public

³³ Stephen J. Ball, “The Teacher’s Soul and the Terrors of Performativity,” *Journal of Educational Policy* 18, no. 2 (2003): 219.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 222, emphasis in original.

³⁵ Hursh, *High Stakes Testing*, 3.

schools. However one finds the intertwine of religion and education to be problematic, the responsibilities of global citizenship suggest K ung’s vision will continue to unsettle. “Whether or no we are, save in some metaphorical sense, all brothers [and sisters], we are at least all in the same boat traversing the same turbulent ocean. The potential religious significance of this fact is infinite.”³⁶

³⁶ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 84.
