Intellectual Agnostics: Preparing Public School Teachers to be Open-Minded Interpreters in the Religion/Public School Debate

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Introduction

I live in the state of Kansas, a fertile battleground for the frequent skirmishes in the ongoing religion/public school debate. Our state Board of Education has received national attention, and more than a little media derision, for its ideological infighting and for how personal political and religious views have infiltrated educational policy.[1] Policy decisions affecting the state's educational system have tended to be revisited and revised, based on the power dynamics of the ten-member Board. For the past several years the power has shifted, depending on whether the ultra conservatives or the moderates controlled the majority vote. The latest election shifted the power once again from a pervasively ultraconservative worldview to a more moderate understanding of social, political, religious—and, hence, educational—issues.[2]

Local boards of education, particularly in the more urban communities, are also continually faced with contentious issues that mirror how diverse understandings of the world impact the public schools. There seem to be never-ending possibilities for emotionally charged, sometimes antagonistic, interpretations of the purposes of public schools. And, we are continually reminded that religious issues are among the most divisive and contentious. The question, "what role—if any—should religion play in public schools?," continues to be asked.[3] The question—with all of its political, sociological, and pedagogical implications—is not going to go away; not if we continue to engage in the open-minded discourses that define a democratic society. In reflecting upon the religion/public school question we may be reminded of the Zen Buddhist aphorism: "There are no answers, search for them lovingly." We are not going to have a single answer that satisfies all participants in the debate. The parameters of possibility are too broad, too infused with differing worldviews.

We are reminded by an educational philosopher that "(n)either the limited truths of science nor the dogmatism of religion can provide real answers to the fundamental questions of life, which must always be examined anew" (Kneller, 1958, p. 81). Perhaps, in ever-renewed examinations—in the search for answers, *and* for new questions—we will find ways to soften ideologies, ameliorate antagonisms, and allow communal dialogue to move us forward.

Connecting Thoughts

The judicial system, in all of its wisdom, has frequently disagreed on First Amendment interpretations of issues related to the question.[4] Here again ideologies have entered into the decision-making equation. It is obvious that ideologies, whether sectarian or secular, are endemic in

the religion/public school debates. "Religion, like other aspects of culture, is often related to struggles over power. These struggles extend into the educational system" (Spring, 2002, p. 50). One problem is that, perhaps inadvertently, we have—as a society—separated not just the religiously dogmatic but also the religiously relevant from the public school educational process. As a society we recognize the divisive potential inherent in religious sectarianism. This makes it difficult to allow the vitality of meaningful religious inquiry to share space in the marketplace of ideas that is—or should be—the public school classroom.[5]

The possibility of "in school" dialogue is made difficult by the fierceness of the ideological debate occurring in the broader society. Differing views too often become battle lines. On one side of the battlements we find forces looking for ways to dismantle the Jeffersonian "wall of separation," and to restore sectarian religious purposes to public school curricula and practices. On the other side we have defenders of the wall who are just as adamant in their defense of the secular purposes of public schooling. Too often both sides see the issue in stark, black and white, either-or terms; and alternatives are not considered. It becomes a case of an "I win, you lose" competitive mentality in which constructive dialogue is replaced by defensive postures and an argumentative, eristic-style confrontation.

It is dialogue, an open-ended, critically reflective process, which is needed; not a one-dimensional thought process that closes the door to intellectual options. "Advocacy doesn't create respect—teaching the controversy does" (Seiple, 2007). This requires a pedagogical process in which secular knowledge and religious faith are not viewed as irreconcilable opposites and combatants in the educational arena, but are allowed to exist in a state of dynamic creative tension. "We must be able to perceive both the sacred and the secular aspects of a person" (Maslow, 1971, p. 116). It is difficult to achieve and sustain a *positive*, productive tension between the religious and the secular in the public schools. But, where ideas are the currency of intellectual exchange there should be opportunities for both secular and the religious diversity to be heard and explored.

> Human life becomes much more interesting, stimulating, and even exciting when there are many varied ways of thinking, feeling, expressing, acting, and viewing the world . . . No one person or group's way of life is so rich that it may not be enriched by contact with other points of view (Pai, 1990, p. 97).

Several years ago there was a meeting of organizations from both ideological sides of the "wall;" a meeting that provided evidence of the possibility to move from reactionary rhetoric to responsible dialogue. Eighteen organizations (ranging on the religious-political spectrum from the Christian Coalition [right] to the People for the American Way [left]) met to discuss principles of "religious liberty, public education, and democracy" (Walsh, 1995). There was recognition of two fundamental principles; (1) Public education must be "sensitive to, and open to, the concerns of religious-minded parents, who sometimes feel they are less than welcome," and (2) "Religious-minded Americans must be willing to build bridges, to respect the freedom of conscience of other Americans, and to not see public education as the enemy" (Riley, 1995).

As it is, many parents of school-age children have opted out of the public school system because of a perceived lack of sensitivity to their religious conviction. Public school privatization groups, proponents of school vouchers, corporate sponsored management organizations, etc.

have aggressively responded to this "voting with the feet" approach. This has intensified the ideological "market mentality" which infects education, and which could seriously weaken and fragment the fabric that is public education. There will, of course, always be legitimate—and important—rationales for religious and other private schools in our diverse society. But the vital importance of public education in a democratic society should not be underestimated, or undermined. Perhaps a concerned effort to better understand the diverse religious thinking of students (and parents) who desire education in a public setting would make classrooms more accepting places for all students.

The opportunity exists to use the secular/sacred tension in American society to empower reflective thought in the public schools; to enhance student understanding of the diverse voices that provide a cacophony of possibility in the classrooms of our schools. "Religion and non-religion raise *first* questions that deserve heated exchange . . . we must find ways of talking to each other and not just past each other" (Wolfe, 2004, p. 38). A total divorce of the secular and the sacred in schools—whether by legal fiat, educational policy, or by parental choice—creates a disconnect between the schools and their democratic mission. We have an opportunity—no, a responsibility—to build upon the integrative, ecumenical, heterogeneous, and inclusive possibilities inherent in public education. This requires a vision of education that not only accepts but also encourages diversity in all of its positive forms including the incongruity of religious difference. As thoughtful educators, we are reminded that

> thinkers who try to be holistic, integrative, and inclusive learn inevitably that most people think atomistically, in terms of either/or, black and white, of mutual exclusiveness and separativeness . . . (This) leads to dichotomizing life into the transcendent and the secular, and can, therefore, separate them temporally, spatially, conceptually, and experientially . . . An education which leaves untouched the entire region of transcendent thought is an education which has nothing important to say about the meaning of human life (Maslow, 1976, vii, 33, 58).

It is, of course, obvious that often the "religious voice" is dogmatic and authoritarian in tone; and proselytizing in intent (more sectarian than sacred). And the same may be said of many secular efforts. There can be narrow-mindedness and arrogant self-assurance on both sides of the religion/secular divide. It has been said, "atheists can be as mindless as theists" (Wieseltier, 2004, p. 25). We can easily recognize that "there are competing but parallel tendencies" in the "closed-in rationalities of the (secular rationalists) and the closed-in world of institutionalized religion" (Kelly, 2000, p. 405). This makes it all the more important to search out and compare the foundational principles that fuel different versions of the "truth."[6] The search can be an educational opportunity. Religious diversity does not have to be educationally divisive. It can represent a unique opportunity for an exchange of ideas and perspectives: "Somehow we must embrace the paradox that both commitment and critique need to inform all that ultimately gives our lives meaning, if we are to walk a chosen path with eyes wide open" (Proctor, 2002, p. 54).

This is why we need public conversational dialogues (not win/lose debates) that allow and encourage parents, educators, legislators, judges, lawyers, clerics, the general public—the religious and the non-religious—to rethink the religion/public school issue from a more flexible, open, even paradoxical, perspective. This, of course, presupposes educating participants to be open to dialogue and conversation. It requires those who seek to understand differences, to ac-

tually *hear* and learn from the voices of others. Such on-going dialogue might help us recognize the "false dilemma" that is involved in an either/or mindset. As William Nord (1995) has written: "We need not dismantle the wall of separation or build it higher, there are alternatives—in the Reasonable Center" (p. xiv).

It is the search for alternatives—for a reasonable center—that may result in turning seemingly irreconcilable differences into a positive tension. The religion/public school issue contains both dangers and opportunities. We know that religion as dogma and misused power can indoctrinate, divide, control authoritatively, oppress, suppress, and silence; even give theological permission for violence. But, religion may also encourage, enlighten, liberate, motivate, raise questions of purpose and meaning, and seek justice and peace—all valid educational goals.

Perhaps the opportunities are worth the dangers. Public school silence on religion in our increasingly more pluralistic society does not eliminate the issue. Rather, it contributes to a lack of knowledge of the "other"—a knowledge that is needed to "build bridges" and create reasonable centers. If educational critics and reformers, either of the political and cultural right or left, are really serious about critical thinking as a learning goal, then academically sound opportunities to hear and *think* about diverse religious ideas and practices will be part of an integrative curricular process. We will "find ways to recognize and honor the place of diverse religious beliefs in human experience and history while prohibiting religious indoctrination" (Milligan, 2002, p. viii). All of our pedagogical concern for multicultural education is like "clinking cymbals and sounding brass" if we do not consider the cultural and educational implications of religious sensitivities. A strong proponent of humanistic, non-theistic values reminds us:

> What should we teach our children? Surely, how to think critically, how to develop mature values, how to appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of life, and how to prepare for a life of challenge and fulfillment . . . In particular we should cultivate the habit of thinking critically about one's own beliefs . . . This is especially important in democratic societies, where students of every cultural background, secular or religious, must master the values of citizenship together (Kurtz, 2007, p. 6).

Ideological rigidities in both the "for" religion and the "against" camps result in the hardening of adversarial positions when the question of the role of religion in the public schools is raised. The emotional depth of the issue is such that it can easily seep into individual classrooms; sometimes with strong overtones, sometimes on the periphery of a classroom learning community. It is at this point that schools of education in our nation's universities have a role to play. Teachers need to be educated to understand and to interpret the premises and the power of religion. They need to be educated to be aware of—and better understand and deal with—the ambiguities, complexities, controversies, and epistemological variety which religious sensitivities bring to the classroom atmosphere.

Teachers who have had significant academic preparation for understanding and appreciating "alternate ways of seeing" will be more aware of—and open to—the creative educational opportunities that exist to integrate religious questions, dialogue, and discussion into various subject areas. They will be better prepared to "negotiate passages" between the varying and emerging worldviews that their students bring to the formal educational experience. These are the

teachers who will seek—in their repertoire of creative teaching—ways to connect differing worldviews (including religious perspectives) while encouraging all voices to be part of the classroom dynamic. These are the teachers who will understand the importance of perfecting a personal "intellectual agnosticism" as preparation for interpreting to self and others the existentially powerful issues which slip under the official curricular radar, and filter into the classroom.

Background Implications: The Agnostic Interpretively Defined

The term "agnostic" has a distinctly theological ring. But, theological terms are frequently reinvented—almost in a mythological sense—as a way to critically assess other ways of thinking, reflecting, and doing—even *being*. Even the powerfully evocative word "religion" reflects a broad horizon of definitional possibility.

> 'Religion' is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes, and therefore, is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology (Smith, 1998, p. 7).

With this thought in mind, this paper makes use of a little "creative linguistic license" in transferring "agnostic" and "agnosticism" from a theological home, and hanging them on an educational peg. After all, evocative words create possibilities for interpretive exploration.

> Even when lines of definition seem to be clearly drawn, terms remain irreducibly complex . . . Constituted by the intricate interplay of sameness and difference, the distinctive contours of any term are a function of both its multiple components and its relation to other terms. Boundaries that separate terms are necessarily permeable and complex. This complexity renders terms polysemous and multivocal (Taylor, 1998, p. 16).

As a linguistic invention, "agnostic" was given birth by T.H. Huxley in the late 1880s as a way of describing how he was different from other thinkers of his day. He believed that his mind was more open, more uncertain of what others defined as certain. In creating this neologism of questioning open-mindedness Huxley made use of the ancient Greek, *gnosis* (knowledge). An *agnostic*, in Huxley's lexicon, was one who did *not* claim to possess *the* truth, to have "certain knowledge," particularly of God, creation, and other religious conceptions.[7] There is a strong echo here of the Socratic epistemological benchmark: "To know that I do not know is the beginning of wisdom." The wisdom of agnosticism allows one to be open to possibilities. It allows one to accept the possibility of personal transformation. It allows one to be an intellectual *heretic*, if interpretively repositioned as derived from to the original Greek meaning of the word: "one with the ability to make choices."

As interpreted for the purposes of this paper, to be an intellectual agnostic is to be: intellectually open, flexible, heretical as a thinker, not certain of certainties, a willing listener to counterpoint worldviews, and a believer in the possibility of connecting the incommensurable. It is to be a believer in the power of paradox, and an understander of the positive power of creative tension. It is to be willing to open the self to the adventure of ambiguity. And here we have intellectual qualities that allow the teacher to build bridges of understanding, and to be a thoughtful interpreter in the religion/public school debate.

Educating the Teacher to be an Intellectual Agnostic

Intellectual agnosticism will never be one of the measurable outcomes for schools of education in America's universities. In all too many cases, preservice teachers are—to draw upon theological imagery—baptized in the faith; immersed in a metaphorical pool of sanctified, pedagogical truth that is to prepare them for the promised land of officially sanctioned high stakes tests, accountability, and conformity to authority. It is the premise of this paper that somewhere within a school of education there should be a learning space where handed-down, official educational faith is demystified; where it is evaluated, questioned, and challenged. Dogma is handed down from on high, but as Chomsky (2000) reminds us "true learning comes through the discovery of truth, not through the imposition of an official truth" (p. 21).

As the religion/public school debate continues—and it does—the teacher who has been exposed to intellectual agnosticism will be prepared to mediate, referee, and interpret that debate; both in the classroom and the community. We need teachers who have an agnostic streak of intellectual curiosity that applies to the pronouncements of the self-assured on both sides of the religious/secular divide. "All too often the search for ultimate meaning stalls at a self-satisfying reassurance" (Livingston, 2000, p. 405). One place of critical interpretation and questioning possibility in a school of education is the social foundations classroom. Here is where educating teachers-to-be in pedagogically-inflected intellectual agnosticism just might be an acceptable option. This is in spite of accrediting pressures that increasingly mirror the "teach to the test" expectations that have been imposed by dogmatic fiat on the public schools.

In reflecting upon this possibility, a question arises: how do we teach a respect for intellectual agnosticism in a school of education? How do we academically sanction the right and the responsibility to challenge the certainty of a belief system, whether it be religious or secular? Whether it be self-held, or an expression of the "other?" How do we teach educators to be prepared to listen to, acknowledge, question—even build upon the many and diverse expressions of the human experience—and human spirit—that are brought to the classroom? We have a beginning in the emphasis on multiculturalism and multiple intelligences, concerns that have become ubiquitous in our teacher education classrooms. But, because of misunderstandings and deliberate misrepresentations of court interpretations of the meanings and intent of the first amendment, we have been reluctant to allow religion to play its leading role in the drama that is multiculturalism. We need to respond to the fact that

> religion is not an ancillary but, rather, a pivot in understanding the worldview of a culture . . . (R)eligious beliefs and practices are something more than "grotesque" reflections and expressions of economic, political, and social relationships, rather they are coming to be seen as decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about the natural and social environments in which they operate (Summers, 1994, p. 71).

It is in the social foundations classroom that expressions of personal religious sensitivities can—and *should*—be legitimately allowed into the academic dialogue. Here is where—according to a standard setting body—"a number of academic disciplines, combinations of disciplines, and area studies" should become "disciplinary resources to bear in developing interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives on education, both inside and outside of schools (Standards, 1996, p. 4). It is here, in the most interdisciplinary of education classrooms, that intellec-

tual agnosticism should be welcomed as a way of learning, and incorporated into the pedagogical toolboxes of future teachers. Here is where future teachers may be inducted into an understanding that controversy—if handled appropriately—can not just enliven but also enrich the classroom. We are reminded that

> many administrators and teachers (are) unprepared to face the explosive forces that now surround (issues of) religion in the public schools. Because religion is so controversial a subject, many educators have opted for benign neglect in their classrooms . . . The outcome has been massive ignorance of any faith besides one's own, and sometimes even of one's own (Davis, et. al., 1987, p. 9).

Lack of preparation for using controversy as a learning opportunity limits a teacher's ability to fully use the lived experiences of students to explore issues of existential importance. And every religious issue is fraught with existential importance. Different ways of viewing the world—whether seen through a secular or a sectarian lens—may lead to confrontations, but these may be transformed into opportunities for personal growth. "Good academic study . . . is a process in which one has to repeatedly risk interpretation . . . in risky, transformative exposure to an as yet ungrasped truth" (Highton, 2005, p. 179). It is the transformative possibility that motivates the intellectual agnostic's search for the ungrasped truth.

In being introduced to intellectual agnosticism, the future teacher is not only exposed to the reality of opposite truths, but also to the expectation of an open-minded "hearing" of the other's interpretations There is a similarity here to what John Bennett (2000) has defined as "intellectual hospitality."

> An indispensable characteristic of healthy learning communities, intellectual hospitality involves welcoming others through openness in both sharing and receiving claims to knowledge and insight . . . Being intellectually hospitable means being open to the different voices and idioms of others as potential agents for mutual enhancement, not just oppositional conflict . . . The object is not to convert the other but to provide insight into the positions held . . . Genuine hospitality recognizes a multiplicity of persons and gifts; it is a witness to contemporary pluralism; it acknowledges the provisional character of knowledge (pp. 24-25).

Intellectual agnosticism incorporates intellectual hospitality into its welcoming embrace of differing worldviews. Each student in a classroom - as well as the teacher - is motivated by a personal worldview, consciously or unconsciously held.

This worldview is essentially a "philosophy of life," with a metaphysics, an epistemology, and an axiology—even though these "big" words may be unknown to the individual. A worldview often contains hidden and/or unexamined philosophical assumptions that are reflected in what we believe, and what we say and do. A worldview is the lens through which a person views the world, the self, other people, and events. It involves knowledge, prejudices, attitudes, assumptions; and beliefs, religious or secular—perhaps even irreligious. A personal worldview grows from transmitted traditions, and from lived experiences. A worldview is a personal *interpretation* of the universe. The teacher as intellectual agnostic welcomes diverse worldviews - including religious interpretations - as valid currency into the marketplace of ideas that is the classroom.

The preparation of future teachers for practicing this kind of openmindedness (defined by John Dewey (1997 [1910]) as "mental play" (p. 219)) has a place in the school of education curriculum; specifically in the social foundations classroom. It is in this academic venue that the future teacher is expected to practice intellectual agnosticism as a pedagogical possibility.

Conclusion

The above discussion adds a word invented by T.H. Huxley to the many "outcomes" expected of teacher education programs. The idea is presented that "agnosticism"—as applied to intellectual endeavors—has a place in the lexicon of pedagogical practices. Huxley's definition of "agnosticism," is linguistically sculpted so that it becomes an educational term.[8] The case is presented that intellectual agnosticism is a teacher *disposition* which should be stimulated and encouraged in teacher education programs. The disposition toward intellectual agnosticism allows the teacher to use the varied religion/public school controversies as ways to bring diverse voices into the classroom. As an intellectual agnostic the teacher is prepared to interpret the voices that are heard, and to be a neutral, objective referee as divergent worldviews are expressed. The teacher is prepared to help students to challenge "certainties," their own and others, and—at the same time to build bridges of understanding between worldviews.

Public education will continue to provide ideological battlegrounds for the cultural wars—including religious skirmishes—even as bridges are being built. As Michael Apple and Lois Weis (1983) have written, "the culture of the school (is) a terrain of ideological conflict, not merely a set of facts, skills, dispositions, and social relationships to be taught in the most efficient and effective way" (p. 16). A problem is that teachers are being prepared to emphasize "the most efficient and effective way" to define educational purpose in measurable, testable, student-as-human-capital terms. Where are the intellectual agnostics who are able to interpret, build upon, and learn from the broader issues that stoke ideological conflict?

The opportunity *does* exist to use the religion/public school tension to allow those who are unsure of certainties—either sacred or secular—to moderate and interpret the dilemmas presented. It is possible to educate teachers for our public schools who are intellectually agnostic; those who value both religious and non-religious diversity, who encourage a search for truths instead of *a* Truth, who are open to the creative challenge of opposing views; those who—as noted earlier in this discussion—are intellectually open, flexible, heretical as thinkers, not certain of certainties, willing listeners to counterpoint worldviews, and yet believers in the possibility of connecting the incommensurable. We are "seeking thinkers who help bridge the two worlds" of the secular and the sacred (Kreimer, 2007, p. 79).

Benjamin Barber (1995) has reminded us that "education is a training in the middle way between belief in absolutes and the cynical negation of all belief" (p. 167). The intellectual agnostic understands this is not an intellectual atheist. He/she is educated in intellectual skepticism, but does not allow the skepticism to degenerate into cynicism. As a teacher, the intellectual agnostic encourages questions about basic assumptions (religious and secular), about doubts and uncertainties, about the ambiguities that are found in contentious issues. The intellectual agnostic is willing not only to listen to—but also to "hear"—those who express religious curiosity, interest, and knowledge. Intellectual agnosticism allows the teacher to bring repressed issues "out of the closet," and to encourage silenced voices to speak. "Silence on issues of religion in schools, far from easing tension, fosters ignorance and mutual incomprehension among people

with widespread religious beliefs and practices that live in an increasingly pluralistic society" (Ross, 1993, p. 213).

And so, we understand that "engaging in ecumenical, cooperative, and self-reflective dialogue on the difficult issues of religion . . . in the schooling context is essential" (Slattery, 1995, p. 629). It is essential because every student brings a personal worldview into the classroom; and in many cases this individually internalized way of interpreting the world is saturated with religious knowledge, myths, and aspirations. The teacher educated to be an intellectual agnostic is best prepared to stimulate, encourage, mediate and interpret an ongoing dialogue based on complex issues raised by religious sensibilities.[9] This teacher is also prepared to mediate disagreements arising between religious and secular ways of knowing.

To allow these sensibilities and disagreements into the classroom setting is to understand that public education is more than socializing a student into predetermined societal roles based on a political/economic status quo. It is to recognize that "existentially, education is becoming aware of the possibilities of *being* . . . (and) cosmically, education is the journey of becoming at home in the universe" (Vandenberg, 1990, p. 3). To educate toward these possibilities of human becoming requires allowing religious/secular opposites into the classroom, and then using the tensions aroused to generate the power of reflective, open-minded thinking.

> When groups deeply at odds . . . get beyond confrontation to define real questions and work toward mutual answers, something important and hopeful is going on. We can't solve problems or build a democratic future without learning those skills. And learning those skills requires that we have enough faith in our own beliefs to risk at least hearing the beliefs of others (Merritt, 1996).

The teacher who has been educated in the pedagogical possibilities of intellectual agnosticism will be most willing to risk the vulnerability of uncertainty, and be open to hearing the beliefs of others. It is this intellectually adventurous teacher who will be able to ask the right questions, create the stimulating dialogue, and encourage an open-minded, even "loving," search for answers. It is in her/his classroom that the impenetrable (whether wall of separation, or wall of silence, or wall of ideology) may be breached by questioning, curious, critical inquiry.

Notes

1. In 1999 a majority of the Kansas State Board of Education, representing a neoconservative movement, removed the teaching of evolution and the discussion of the earth's origins from the state's science standards. This opened Kansas to ridicule in media coverage across the nation. Bumper stickers appeared with such messages as: "Kansas, as bigoted as you think." By 2001 the moderates again held power, and evolution was reinstated as an important part of the science curriculum. Fast forward to 2005, and - with another election – the neoconservative majority ignored their own science curriculum committee, and reframed the standards. In September of 2005 thirty-eight Noble Laureates wrote a letter to the Board defending the integrity of evolution as a reputable theory; they were ignored. Once again, in 2007, a moderate Board was installed, evolution was back in the science curriculum, and the non-educator selected as Commissioner of Education by the neoconservatives was gone. A *Wichita Eagle* editorial noted that "Kansas . . .

can't afford every few years to host these fringe debates which place our image firmly in the 19th century" (Schofield, 2007).

2. I was once informed by a political/cultural conservative—but moderate—member of the Kansas State Board of Education that the neoconservatives who had recently been elected to the Board made him feel like "a flaming liberal." At the next Board of Education election, this conservative moderate lost to a candidate who not only was a "Creationism" advocate, but also suggested that children of illegal immigrants had no right to be in public schools. (I once heard this person comment that the Board should use its power to tell teachers *what* and *how* to teach.)

3. Horace Mann, father of the "Common School," wrestled with this question in his 1848 *Twelfth Annual Report*. Even after several pages of discussion regarding four possible, alternative ways to view religion and public schools, Mann (1957/1848) wrote: "This topic invites far more extended exposition, but this must suffice" (p. 110). Mann (1957/1848) viewed public schools as non-sectarian and as vehicles for "free thought" (p. 110), yet encouraged the inculcation of a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) religious commitment.

4. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution contains both the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"). The amendment provides opportunities for differing interpretive possibilities regarding the involvement of religion in the public schools. Those who challenge the removal of religion from the schools look to the Free Exercise clause for constitutional support. In counterpoint, those who buttress their argument with the Establishment Claus believe that it "functions to depoliticize religion (and) . . . the establishment clause separates government and religion so that we can maintain civility between believers and unbelievers as well as among the several hundred denominations, sects, and cults that thrive in our nation" (Levy, 1994, p. xiii).

5. It should be noted, however, that there are those who assert that our society has adequately addressed the religion/public school issue. This is because they believe

> relevant Supreme Court rulings and other developments have pretty much brought public education into line with the religious neutrality required by the First Amendment and the increasingly pluralistic nature of our society. A fair balance has been established between the free exercise rights of students and the constitutional obligation of neutrality (Doerr, 2007, p. 100).

6. Some philosophers have challenged both the religious right *and* the scientific community's efforts in regard to "truth" as implied in the Creationism (Intelligent Design) curriculum issue. An example:

> Both ID and science education have faith in their respective modes of knowledge production, yet neither displays a strong faith in the democratization of knowledge production through schooling . . . ID's indictment of neo-Darwinian models of science . . . promotes certainty as opposed to openness and democratic sensibilities . . . (and) science education as a mode of knowledge production . . . advances antidemocratic content by teaching there is a false separation between science, on

> the one hand, and society and culture on the other (Pierce, 2007, pp. 126, 129, 131).

A thought expressed almost one-half century ago remains valid today: "Neither the limited truths of science nor the dogmatism of religion can provide real answers to the fundamental questions of life, which must always be examined anew" (Kneller, 1958, p. 81).

7. Huxley's linguistic invention *agnostic* is part of today's vernacular. When, however, considering, the original meaning of early Greek words he might have chosen to add the "a" (antithetical) to another form of "knowledge," *episteme*. *Aepisteme* would then mean a challenge to literal interpretations of various forms of dogma.

> Gnosis, with its focus on meanings of existence, tended toward more poetic genres and made use of such figurative devices as myth, parable, fable, allegory, personification, and metaphor . . . Episteme, more oriented to the practical, everyday matters, was more suited to linear chains of reasoning, and literal expressions (Davis, B., 2004, p. 27).

8. Words are often redefined for specific situations. The interpretive usage of "agnostic" is here, however, not so much a redefinition as a transfer from theological to educational meaning and reflection. Perhaps, "(m)eaning is not 'in' words. Meaning is in people, and whatever meaning words have are ascribed to them by people" (Postman and Weingartner, 1969, p. 106).

9. It is important to help teachers understand that the right to discuss religion and religious issues has *not* been negated by judicial interpretations of the Constitution. Teachers may not advocate, or proselytize, for a particular belief system. They may, however, teach *about* religion in an objective, neutral manner. They may also respond to student questions and concerns about religious issues, as long as the response is accurate, objective, and neutral in interpretation. They may even bring up religious issues, if they are in relation to academic content, and if the objective/neutral stipulations are followed.

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