Difficult Knowledge(s) and the False Religion(s) of Schooling

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Abstract

This analytic essay builds on recent work examining the ways religiosity in U.S. education is manifest in the particular discourses that come to shape popular understandings of the possible in and through schooling. The authors analyze the function of four concepts, in light of recent constructions of religions and their relative positioning as 'true' or 'false,' in order to make a larger point about the ways in which religious understandings of difficult knowledge (Pitt & Britzman, 2003), falsehood, truth, and risk underline that which is im/possible in the U.S. educational project. Building from an "exorbitant moment" (Gallop, 2002) in a Catholic school, and putting it in conversation with recent discourses about ISIS/ISIL, Christianity, and the possibility of a true (and thus, false) religion, the work argues that ultimately schooling, averse to the risk of falsehood, continues to posit a single road to what is true and who has access to truth. This orientation, the authors suggest, is especially manifest in the ongoing moment of educational reform.

Introduction

> Truth is the agreement of our ideas with the ideas of God.
> —Jonathan Edwards, *Memoirs*

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In a typical Catholic mass, the General Intercessions, or Prayers of the Faithful, is a time set aside to pray for contemporary persons and events. The moment constitutes an exceptional break from the otherwise rigid traditionalism of the mass, rooted as it is in the extrahistorical continuity of ritual (see, for example, McLaren, 1999), in which the current happenings of the world are brought into the sacred, isolated space of the church. It's also a moment in which the immediate context of the service matters: intercessions at a mass in Nigeria today would look very different from those given in New York 50 years ago, though the rest of the service (e.g., the readings, the Nicene Creed, the Eucharist) might look quite similar. We share this to set up just how the following event could make its way into a Church space which might not be concerned with contemporary Islam (except by its tacit exclusion) otherwise.

The first author, while teaching at a Catholic high school in Chicago, attended an all-school mass in the spring of 2015. During a typical Prayers of the Faithful, sandwiched between intercessions for the recent death of alumni and the impending departure of a group of seniors on a service trip to West Virginia, the lector enjoined the congregation: "We pray for the victims of violence at the hands of ISIS, who practice a false version of Islam. Let us pray to the Lord." The congregation provided their solemn, expected response, "Lord, hear our prayer," and the mass proceeded on, as always.

We call attention here to the ordinariness of this "exorbitant moment" (Gallop, 2002): the rhetoric of religious truth and falsehood, far from seeming odd or inappropriate as it was employed to delegitimize a disturbing religious act, went mostly unnoticed. Indeed, we suggest this rhetoric was not only so common as to seem natural within a Catholic context, it was also natural to the students (this happened as a part of official programming at the school, after all) in the congregation that day. Moreover, we're interested in thinking about how the rhetoric of true and false religion shapes the experiences of students in religious schools, certainly, but also in all schools through pedagogies of religious truth and falsity. If we take seriously the historical context of U.S. education, and recent arguments around the embedded religion of public schooling (e.g., Apple, 2006; Blumenfeld, 2006, Burke & Segall, 2016), then the kinds of discourses present in and available to faculty and students in both religious and public schools may well not be entirely different. In other words: students are taught all the time about what is true and by contrast what is false and we would do well to think about the ways this Manichean distinction (free of nuance as it is) is religious at base, when it takes place within a liturgy, as above, as well as when it occurs in so-called secular contexts. There is little ambiguity around these concepts and some of that has to do with the scientific management-ification of

education (Labaree, 2010; Lagemann, 2002), but it also comes from a deeper wellspring, we think, in religious understandings of im/possibilities in U.S. discourse.

In another context, Mustafa Aykol, writing in *The New York Times* (12/21/15), seeks to undermine the theological underpinnings of ISIS by citing the Islamic concept of "irja," a doctrine "put forward by some Muslim scholars during the very first century of Islam" in the midst of bloody battles around who could lay claim to being "a true Muslim." The tack of the argument is that in answer to the extremity of ISIS, "irja is…[the]theological antidote [to what] the Islamic State presents…as piety" for irja "is…true piety combined with humility." It's not for us to judge the theological claim made by Aykol. Rather what we point towards is the use value of the claim embedded in his argument, nearly identical to that which bled into the Catholic mass noted above: that there are true and false religions in the world. That there is no reflection on the ways in which this argument nicely mirrors that of Aykol's presumed antagonists is precisely the point from our perspective, for he and his counterparts in the Islamic State are embedded in the same discursive frame where true neatly abuts false, asymptotically. That is: there is true and there is false, but such things never overlap. Similarly Graeme Wood's piece in *The Atlantic*, "What ISIS Really Wants" addresses (in flawed ways, of course) the notion of The Islamic State in the Levant (and Syria) in reply to a number of discursive constructions that have arisen around it, just as it arose, and fell, as a world power. He notes that former President Obama had been very careful in stating that the group was "not Islamic"—at least in partial response to jeremiads and cassandras both, really, on the political Right suggesting that the civilized West is at war with the radical and regressive East and thus Islam.

Of course, and to the point of our work, this is not a phenomenon limited to the contemporary Middle East. Indeed Armstrong's (2015) *Fields of Blood* does a nice job of collecting the historical strands of Eastern and Western major religions; this to do the work of establishing how they are linked to state power and particularly violence, nearly all of which can be distilled to a clash of true believers against apostasy and heresy. Agamben (2011) does similar work particularly in a Christian context. It can be dizzying, really, to consider the simultaneity with which we are all, in this frame, heretical and thus, to a degree, ungrievable (Butler, 2010) from any number of perspectives. It's important to note then our argument here isn't particularly about Islam, and certainly not its doctrine, except in the sense that it has been demonized and racialized in the West and specifically in relation to schools (e.g., Gonzalez & Balakit, 2016); we think the ease with which religion becomes racialized through a conflation of the two concepts is vital to consider (Joshi, 2009, p. 45).

The implications of this sort of racialization are easily seen in work like Buecher's (2016) where a high school student, an Afghan refugee who wears hijab is made to stand in for all of the stereotypes and identities that her peers in a Colorado school assume she might claim.

The careful point at the outset here is thus not to take an Orientalist (Said, 1978) (and ahistorical) approach (for a ready antidote see: Carroll, 2001, 2004) that leads to the shining city on the hill in the West, as we want to avoid exacerbating the current Islamophobic moment in which we continue to exist. Nor is it to single out Islam for the pedagogical implications it has in U.S. classrooms, as others have already compellingly done (e.g., Jackson, 2010). To that end we point to Rahimi's (2017) recent piece in the *Huffington Post* on Christian terrorism as just one example of how the rhetoric of true and false religion cuts across faiths:

> Most analysts are hesitant to associate terrorism with Christianity, a world religion with the most followers in the world, and prefer to view such violence as a [sic] mere marginal features of the Christian world. Christianity, they argue, is the religion of love and peace. Those terrorists who claim to be Christians have merely perverted the true teachings of the Bible to justify violence for their personal gain.

(And Rahimi goes on there to convincingly trace the violent history of Christianity that contradicts this very rhetoric). Indeed in seeking to avoid the kind of "theological redlining" of which Joshi writes (2009, p. 52), we further invoke the long history of Christian rhetoric around true and false religion (e.g., Caputo, 2006; Curtis, 2016; Kruse, 2015) as part of a colonial/imperial/evangelical project of bringing Truth to heathens. That certainly is a better target here and there is indeed much to critique.

Our main interest lies in the notion from Wood's piece, as from Aykol's and Rahimi's, that when such a rhetoric of true and false religion is used "we are misled…by a well-intentioned but dishonest campaign to deny the Islamic State's [or Christian terrorist groups'] medieval religious nature." Pundits point to the falsehood of ISIS' brand of Islam or of violence done in Christ's name in order to avoid, we'll argue shortly, the difficult knowledge that religion broadly might be worth critiquing. Or, differently, that true religion might itself well be violent, vicious and deadly. To put a finer point on it, as above in the General Intercessions, this is about the creation of true and false religions and the language that's leveraged to do so, not just in general interest periodicals, but in schools.

Within schools themselves—and U.S. schools particularly—a whole body of literature on hidden Christianity (Bindewald, 2015; Brass, 2011a, 2011b; Burke & Segall, 2016; Macaluso, 2016) attests to the privileging of the truth of (particularly Protestant) Christianity, its values, and ways of thinking, living, and teaching. As a brief example of this, we might

think about the way salvation—for a particular branch of Christianity, perhaps the most important Truth—is baked into assumptions about what teaching is for: saving students. That is, Christianity is often privileged as True in the ways we teach even in secular classrooms; this at the expense of others' un(der)valued (ir)religious beliefs. The trick baked into this privileging is that students (schools, teachers, and society alike) need to be saved from the inherent wickedness of falsehood in order to be brought to the truth. While teachers might be evangelical (i.e. Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015), teaching itself, differently, might be constructed as evangelizing practice whereby error (in whatever form) in public schooling is constructed in the U.S. imagination as tacitly sinful (Burke & Segall, 2016). The ability to construct public schooling as fallen has served certain reform movements quite well[1] and missing the religious nature of, say, *A Nation at Risk* or "No Excuses" approaches to discipline, is to lose the thread of the underlying mission of much reform language, purpose, and structure.

We began with the anecdote at a Catholic school to tell the story of how the first author came to this work, as one way into this larger conversation of how religious rhetoric makes its way into U.S. schools. What we want to engage is the propensity lately—as well as historically— in education (and its rhetoric) to produce argumentative frames similar to these religious constructions of truth and falsehood in order to justify pedagogical, theoretical, and political (all of which we'll argue are inflected by theological) decisions made in the name of schooling. Such frames problematically narrow and limit what counts as true and false in our schools, yet these approaches are on the rise in contemporary U.S. school reform. We ask, then, what exactly is risked when we label certain religious beliefs, interpretations and practices false? Or, perhaps more pointedly, in what ways are our understandings, in education, of what is true and what is false always already undergirded by religious understandings of the possible? On what grounds are these claims justified? And how are such claims employed rhetorically and pedagogically, in the public sphere and the classroom?

The work of the piece, building on prior research (Jarvie & Burke, 2015) regarding the possibilities of leveraging religious schools in engagement with Britzman's (1998) *difficult knowledge*, is to consider the ways in which conceptions of 'falseness' and 'false religion'—and by necessary contrast, truth and true religion—operate rhetorically and pedagogically in schools. We build from the rhetorical examples above to think about the ways in which religion, cast as 'false' in educational settings teaches, just as it closes down certain discourses along the way. Further, though we do situate the initial 'moment' of this research in a religious school, we don't wish to limit the scope of the discussion to the narrow concerns

of, say, Catholic schooling. Some of that intentionality arises from our sense that particularly in the United States, public schooling is always already religiously Christian in nature (see: Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild 2009; Burke & Segall, 2016) but, further, it comes from a belief that social science is at a crossroads as regards religion and theology (Wexler, 2013). That we may be at a post-secular moment in research, as Wexler claims, allows us to differently conceive of the kinds of questions we ask around the use of religious rhetoric in and around schools and particularly the ways in which such arguments shape notions of truth and falseness.

By attending carefully to a "focus on…religion as structured social practices, social forms, and the social relations of religious practice" (Wexler, 2013, p. 23) we think we can come to differently make sense of the current neoliberal political moment broadly in education as one that understands truth (and falsehood) *religiously* first of all. Or: though we begin with, and read through, religion as understood to be true or false (and seek to trouble such distinctions) what we're really writing about are orientations to truth, falsehood, and risk in ways that bear the very real traces of religious certainty. Eric Foner suggests that "the country's religious roots and its continuing high level of religious faith make Americans more likely to see enemies not just as opponents but as evil" (as cited in Asad, 2003, p. 7). These issues have been heightened in particular in relation to the current federal administration not only amidst the leveraging and counterleveraging of the notion of fake news—not to mention the laughable idea of alternative facts—but also in the appointment of a dominionist Christian as Secretary of Education. One point to make is that this particular religious proclivity at the heights of power in the U.S. system isn't necessarily novel, but we might take the opportunity in the very public relitigation of the nature of what is true in relation to research around schools, to think back through religion as it continues to color the very idea of claims or, say, in relation to evidentiary standards.

We might think, in the immediate, about the ways in which debates around educational reform so often devolve into recriminatory epithets questioning the motives of anyone who dare disagree with, say, charters, or local school control. More to the point, however, is the question of just what makes a discourse "and an action 'religious' or 'secular'?" (Asad, 2003, p. 8). We'd suggest, in some degree that the distinction falls not only to the reader herself (as Asad asserts) but moreso to the discursive im/possibilities made present in particular and limited understandings of truth. Foucault (1972) is useful here as we find that "discourses…constitute" objects even as they "work" them to "the point of transforming" them altogether (p. 32). Noting further and elsewhere

(1980) in thinking through regimes of truth that "we must produce truth as we must produce wealth" while asking the fundamental question: "how is the discourse of truth…able to fix limits to the rights of power?" (p. 93). The object of the true and (its constitutive other) the false requires an examination, most particularly in relation to religion and education and will require an archeology of the presence of religious influences in the production of discourse. Engagement with *difficult knowledge* (Garrett, 2017; Pitt & Britzman, 2003) can help us better make sense of the limitations of our frames here, we think.

Framing the False Religions of Schooling

To get to a more universalized implication for U.S. education in particular, however, we make our way in this essay through four conceptual frames which help us to understand the way religious truth and falsehood get constructed in schools. First, we begin with conceptions of difficult knowledge and falseness, demonstrating the difficult knowledge of religious truth/falsehood and considering how teaching often begins with the assumption of falsehoods (of students, of curricula, of religions). We then move to the other side of the epistemic coin, describing constructions of truth in pedagogy and especially with respect to religion. Having moved through that, we turn to a consideration of risk as a conceptual frame, exploring how, in pedagogical contexts, risking falsehood necessarily (and productively) implicates the self with difficult knowledge. We conclude tying these threads together, making an argument for the usefulness of such risk in engaging religious truth and falsehood in schools as well as offering an alternative way of approaching truth that may help avoid some of the problems of religious truth/falsehood.

Difficult Knowledge

We do this work through Britzman's (1998; see also Pitt & Britzman, 2003)) engagement with difficult knowledge which asks:

> How [is] learning put into question? How [does] learning put the self into question? How [can] this work reverse its content and turn against the learner? And how [can] learning become entangled in the vicissitudes of unhappiness, suffering, conflict, accident, and desire? (p. 30)

These are questions which account for the ways, Garrett (2017) explains, "knowledge may be experienced as unwelcome" (p. 111). Read through the lens of difficult knowledge, how can we make sense of the rhetoric of true and false religion? What does, in other words, dismissing certain versions of religion as false allow schools, policy makers, and public

officials to avoid? Difficult knowledge helps us to think about the ways in which rhetorics of truth and falsehood may be deployed religiously by schools, in the service of exercising and consolidating power in a pursuit, often enough, of not knowing some things while holding forth the value and comfort of knowing other things well.

In prior work with difficult knowledge in Catholic schools, we found that addressing such difficulty required the teacher to risk asking questions and proceeding without fear through answers which engage directly the upsetting aspects of a difficult curriculum, generating crises of learning. Such work may or may not be possible in the current educational milieu, particularly in public schools where teachers are, of course, agents of the State (and thus party to its commitments to certain versions of truth, falsehood and imagined student bodies). Still: the work of thinking about how taking epistemic risks perhaps mitigates the effects of embedded understandings of truth and falsehood seems fine fettle in educational research. That taking those risks may not be possible, again, probably reinforces our point about religious understandings of truth and the potential demonization that comes through challenging claims, particularly in relation to teacher autonomy at the current date.

We tend to think that this engagement with risk might well be considered the work of dealing with the difficult knowledge of false religion in and around schools. If, conceptually, difficult knowledge is grappling (or not) with problems we'd rather not consider, then what is more apropos to think about and through than religion (mostly absent from discussion in education) and falsehood (the negation of that which is supposed to be sought—the truth)? Or: In what ways do religious understandings embedded in how we conceive of schooling make certain forms of truth easy to falsify and eliminate from schooling altogether? We think part of the difficult knowledge of false religion reflects a fear of what is possible to say about religion and schools, and particularly of how that speech might implicate the speaker. Indeed, much of the work of understanding the rhetoric and pedagogy of falseness, in schools especially, may be upsetting, and may end in crisis. That this is so is not, of itself, problematic to us: while crisis can be unsettling, teachers have a duty to provide students with "a learning process that helps them to work through their crises" (Jarvie & Burke, 2015, p. 30). As we learned previously, failure to engage difficult knowledge with students runs the risk of missing out on that which is essential to their formation as persons; this risk is compounded in the context of difficult religious knowledge, the mis/treatment of which, the parsing into truths and falsehoods, (or the avoidance altogether) in schools is our focus here.

Of Falseness

"Falseness" or falsity or falsehood has, to a degree, to do with the impossible. Britzman (2009) writes that "what might be most impossible is the education of the impossible professions…because those who carry out the education of others convey both the experience of their own education and their experience of what is impossible in the profession itself" (p. 20). The impossibility implied in the invocation of false (and by contrast then of course, 'true') religion misses the potential fecundity of the notion that "teachers may hate their education" (p. 22) without rendering their lives in the classroom impossible. That is, in other words, "what was never meant to be education is precisely the responsibility education inherits" (p. 24) and so the real work of the educational project is in engaging the impossible, in addressing falsehood in order to reveal its particular truths. A turn toward falseness, then asks, what might we gain by engaging with Foucault's concept of fearless speech, what he calls *parrhesia*? In one sense we might read this recourse to falseness as a way of engaging "logos itself, the discourse which will give access to truth" (2008, p. 151) as of course truth and falsity are set up as constitutive opposites. Missing, however, in the dismissal of a religion (or of, say, a teacher for insufficiently practicing it well) is the notion that a true Cynic, "the [embodiment] of *parrhesia*, cannot promise not to say anything" (p. 169). Tacit in the making of impossibility, of course, is the limiting of what is able to be true, to be said, to be lived. The risk of difficult knowledge, in the parrhesiastic sense, allows us to conjure falsehood as a route to possibility in education. 'False,' after all, can be the right answer on a test.

To a certain degree no educational project can escape an orientation toward its students that begins from a sense of falseness. This is, famously, the central tenet of nearly all of critical pedagogy/theory: the work of replacing a false consciousness (Freire, 1974) with something more progressive, or humanizing, but generally critical. It's not that this is an unworthy project, per say, but it is an approach to students that suggests falsehood in need of correction. We won't spend time here playing with the possibility that sits in so much of the way standardization currently relies inherently on the interplay between true answers and wrong, false, ones but we think the larger discourse is a reasonable one given the general contours of what is possible in an education that must replace the ignorance, the false beliefs, of any given student, with the curriculum that will bring truth (or the examination of truth, say). Indeed:

> Even good and democratic teachers…impose their views. Such an imposition is inevitable; it derives from the very act of teaching, of making choices among a variety of possible learning opportunities for

one's students; choices that advance some knowledge, knowing, and knowers over others. (Segall, 2002, p. 98)

Biesta (2014) tries to work around these implications (and indeed any constructivist educator does something of the same thing) by seeking "subjectification" as a way to think of students as beings "coming into presence" (p. 85) rather than as vessels to be banked. But this critique has been around since Dewey (and indeed before him) and certainly more prominently since the kinds of Marxist critiques of Freire which worried about emancipation and the pitfalls of switching poles. What we're suggesting, however, is that even with something like Ranciere's (1991) ignorant schoolmaster teaching that he has "nothing to teach" (p. 15) we're still in territory where a student has come to the situation of schooling expecting a lesson and though the lesson may be about the ignorance of the instructor, that's still a replacing of the false notion the student began with. Bingham (2008) takes a different tack and suggests that "the teacher always needs to be authorized by the student just as much as she needs to enact authority" (p. 38). And while we're sympathetic to his claims about relationality and particularly the value of friendship between and among students and teachers (Jarvie, 2019), we still remain in a frame where the teacher is building the individual situation in which authorization might or might not happen. It's still the teacher's space, as it were, and students are authorized to authorize the teacher. Or not. That this is so doesn't allow us to escape the frame where students must be taught that their coadjuting of authority can happen and matters; they must unlearn their prior false expectations of the teacher and the classroom.

Education, in the end, will always grapple with choices about truth and falsehood and we don't see a way around the sense that students are constantly to be led out of their particular caves and into the light; perhaps and probably this points to the fundamentally religious nature of the project. That doesn't make it unworthy or problematic of itself, but it does suggest an epistemological sense that students are in need of something from teachers. This sets up situations where students, and particularly students who will teach (Garrett & Segall, 2013; Segall & Garrett, 2013) are well served by the narrative of their lacking in order to engage only partially with difficult knowledge. If, after all, students are immersed in false consciousness, what incentive is there for their showing a particular grasp of truth that might, say, elucidate the privilege of their various positionalities?

Of Truth

Religion—and here we mean monotheistic and particularly Abrahamic religions—of course, is uniquely concerned with truth (and by contrast, falsehood, heresy, apostasy). It's no mistake, then, that John, the final of the Christian Gospels (the most literary; the most removed from the literal story of Christ in language and in time) has Jesus asserting, "I am the way, the truth and the light" (14:6). It's not that this assertion of (a) God as truth is particularly unique, but that Jesus was both referred to as rabbi (teacher) and asserted himself not as access to the truth, but as truth embodied, is important. It has implications for how we think about teaching and possibility in education, first of all, but it also points us to the fundamental fact that all religion is pedagogical: it is about teaching. The nature of how that teaching gets engaged may well vary and in some sense is moot for our concerns here, but ultimately the pedagogical project is about replacing false consciousness with truth. There's something to the Christian ritual of (literally or figuratively) eating and drinking God: this is the ingestion of the way, the light, and the truth. Prior to the reforms of Vatican II in the Catholic Church in fact, the Communion wafer, having been transubstantiated into the literal body of Christ, was not to be touched by the hands of the faithful, nor was it to be really even chewed. Placed on the tongue, believers were meant to avoid de-sanctifying the truth of God with their heathen teeth as much as possible. The battle for truth was literally happening in the mouths of believers. The trouble, theologically (and ontologically) was that humans only had momentary access to that full manifestation of truth: sin inevitably intervened, and the false living of being in the world corrupted the serenity of that moment. At that time, and indeed still, Catholics weren't to take the Eucharist without first seeking absolution through the sacrament of Reconciliation where a full confession of sins was made and absolved, after penance. For devout believers: rinse and repeat.

The point here isn't to proselytize but to suggest that this pedagogical relationship where the full truth is only momentarily available to the fallen, and through the ministrations of a preacher in the role of surrogate for the ultimate teacher, the first rabbi, Christ, mirrors the pedagogical relationship in schools. It's not, further, to say that religious schools have unique purchase on this sort of cyclical return to falseness and the weekly/daily bringing of truth from a teacher, but that reading educational practice, policy and theory back through a religious lens might well give us different ways to engage the educational project and its general orientation to truth. If, in other words, students are penalized for chewing over difficult truths because the educational project is really

about their receiving and swallowing lessons whole, then the distinction between religious and irreligious dissolves fairly easily.

We run up against the problem, then, of truth in education. For Foucault (2008), in his later lectures, the question of truth came through the body (bodies) of the parrhesiast "who is the unlimited, permanent, unbearable questioner" (p. 18). He makes a hopeful, for our project here, distinction between the "expert who speaks of *tekhne*" which is equated with "the professor or teacher" who is, in the end, his own mode of veridiction linked to wisdom through tradition (p. 25) and the parrhesiast. *Parrhesia*, Foucault argues, has its own mode of truth-telling which is different from the technical (and the prophetic): "parrhesia [is] courageous frankness of truth-telling; exetasis as practice of the examination and test of the soul…; and finally, care as the objective and end of this…interrogatory frankness" (p. 122). Or, more clearly, again: the parrhesiast "cannot promise not to say anything" (p. 169).

For the sake of clarity, it's worth noting that teaching, as a profession, is full of the kinds of constraints on speech that precisely deny the promise of saying anything in the classroom. That's not an accidental grammatical construction: it's not that teachers can't say everything, though this is certainly true, but that of late and in the midst of the kinds of reforms that have imposed themselves on education writ large (stripping away of collective bargaining rights; rampant de-unionization; etc.) educators quite often really can't say a thing.[2] They risk their jobs should they make impolitic remarks (which we might be ok with, given the ways in which teaching has always been constrained by the kinds of political realities that go along with institutions of universal training) but they also have had their voices taken away in the form of scripted curricula and test-driven standardization. One point to make is that religious school teachers, who were once less protected than their public sector peers, may actually enjoy, in some sense, greater freedom in engaging the parrhesiastic in and around their classrooms.[3] Or more likely, we're coming to a place of convergence whereby the kinds of academic freedom that might have been available to public school teachers are pared down in different though similar ways to the dogmatically limited avenues for expression available to teachers in religious schools (see, for example, Schweber, 2003, and Schweber & Irwin, 2006). No teacher is fully free of constraint; indeed to borrow from Ahmed (2006), bodies that move easily—which is not to say that teacher bodies do, universally, but some might—don't necessarily move freely. Still: given the ways in which religion, as the ultimate truth claim, can be leveraged, it might be worth suggesting that teachers in denominational religious environments might have different leeway to leverage the parrhesiastic and particularly in rebuttal to the kinds of narrow falsehoods that threaten the profession.

And, again, the claims we make about truth and parrhesia here are not primarily about religious schools. Indeed, the point of this work is to understand how religiosity comes to shape conceptions of truth in U.S. schooling generally, public and private. We orient ourselves towards this end because of our understanding that these schools, by way of their history, are always already religious (Burke & Segall, 2016). We touch, then, on religious schooling for the possibilities it offers the parrhesiastic, not as exceptional but rather as an explicit and visible example of what may well be possible in our public schools, if they came to be differently understood, as we see them, if not as religious institutions, certainly as institutions often unquestioningly informed, reformed, and deformed by religious discourses. Of course all religion is about truth, but in this case, it might just be time for teachers in religious schools to begin to take risks around the whole truth of education, as it were.

Risking Falsehood

Part of what makes the fearless speech of turning towards falsehood risky is that it necessitates a certain type of difficult knowledge: knowledge which implicates the self. We found this to be true in our previous work with difficult knowledge in schools (Jarvie & Burke, 2015), noting that in pedagogically engaging with the difficult:

> Much is at risk here: the relationships between not only students and themselves, but also their friends, relatives, role models, and parents; their faith and beliefs; the legitimacy of other members of the faculty and administration; the community at-large; and, of course, my job. (p. 88)

We see such self-implication as part-and-parcel with parrhesia; indeed, this is what makes the speech fearless (and risky) instead of merely transgressive. Telling the truth, about oneself and one's school and one's religion, necessarily risks all three; and yet, in Foucault's telling, such risk is at times the only way towards truths. This may seem contradictory, but it rings (well, not true, but) resonantly for us, in that it explains how a turn towards falsehood might help enlighten rather than further confuse. For Foucault, true speech can only ever be fearless; that is, it can only ever be said (and heard) within a context that makes its telling risky, that threatens the teller. *Parrhesia*, for Foucault (2008), is not only "the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears" (p. 13). What we have to conceive of, and what schools often persist in imagining is their mission, is telling hard truths about sin or discipline or less often, content, to students who may not want to hear it. The true

risk of parrhesia, were it to be engaged, would be to open the schools themselves up to the possibility of respecting students and the world enough to give them some level of engagement that would make both refusal of that truth or agreement with it possible. The agreement has been easy, if coerced; the refusal has been little if ever engaged except through exclusion, marginalization, punishment.

There is something, too, about the way education tends to takes up the true and the false that makes risk essential and unavoidable. Papastephanou (2006) argues that in education "risk becomes a monolithic and auto-effective business of either/or: a daring personality 'tries' it all, goes 'where no (wo)man has gone before' and browses over everything within reach" (p. 49) and that education is especially "susceptible to the 'either/or' mentalities" (p. 50) necessitated by an engagement with risk, and, we argue, by religious constructions of truth and falsehood. The goal for us, then, is to think an education which is both willing to risk the false (i.e., a parrhesiastic one) that also seeks a way outside of the often (but not only) reductive religious logic of either/or, true/false, which renders the false a problem, an impossible foundation for education, rather than an avenue for other educational possibilities.

The risks teachers take may provide routes to reckoning with the impossible and the false; but for myriad reasons, teachers often eschew risk in favor of more traditional and tested pedagogical territory. Risk-aversion in teaching manifests in a variety of ways: as resistance to reform implementation and change (Howard, 2013), particularly that which is politically risky (Iredale et al., 2013); as an obsession with teacher effectiveness, teaching outcomes, and data collection (Papastephanou, 2006); as an avoidance of risky classroom activities like discussion (Hills, 2007); and in a deep reluctance to center the class around students, provide them with autonomy and ownership of the curriculum, make use of their knowledge, and incorporate their personal lives and relationships (Clayton, 2007). Quite simply the risk, as Biesta (2014) puts it, is part and parcel with the work:

> Education always involves a risk…The risk is there because, as W.B. Yeats has put it, education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. The risk is there because education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. (p. 1)

We think such risks may open up something worthwhile with respect to truth. Going forward, we hope to see research which explores the generative possibility of risk-taking and truth-questioning in (particularly, but not only) educational environments, informed by theory and theology or rather theology as theory. Such exploration means, very explicitly, engaging with the difficult im/possibility that what we know to be false

(and true) might not be so, or so easily taught. Some of this work, then, will require the teacher to risk asking difficult questions and proceeding without fear through answers that may present crises. In this spirit, Kumashiro (2004) has suggested:

> Learning what we desire not to learn (as when learning that the very ways in which we think, identify, and act are not only partial but also problematic) can be an upsetting process, [and so] crisis should be expected in the process of learning, by both the student and the teacher. (p. 55)

We see broad implications for such considerations of the false, difficult, risky, and impossible in pedagogy, and are left with a series of questions which deserve more extensive treatment: How are claims to falseness produced? Who is served through the rhetorical/pedagogical use of falseness? How do understandings of false religion continue to shape claims to truth in schools? Engaging these questions likely means that schools risk undermining the certainty with which they teach what they teach as true or false. A reckoning with Britzman's (1998) impossible will require that we take seriously "the paradox...that learning is provoked in the failure to learn" (p. 31).

Beyond the Religiosity of Truth in Schooling

As we've argued, it's rather easy to see how religion itself presents a narrow version of truth that depends on the dismissal of the false. Part of our task here is to explain how the religiosity of rhetorics of truth and falsehood come to bear on the (nominally, perhaps) secular spaces of our public schools. There are, we suggest, similar rhetorics in play in these realms of schooling as well: one might look to the school choice movement as a set of ideologies that falsify historical notions of public education and teaching, avoiding the difficult conflicts of collective bargaining for example, in order to legitimize and advance their own beliefs through the framing of truth and falsehood as first mutually exclusive and second as morally separable. The zeal and strategy with which these rhetorics are employed treads close, we think, to religiosity. We might also draw on the role risk plays in our consideration of religious truth to look at the way risk generally gets dismissed within a neoliberal worldview: much of education reform, with its neoliberal roots, is necessarily risk-averse (as markets are, at least in theory). Within this discursive backdrop, pedagogical risk becomes an act of transgression and resistance. This excites us for the possibilities it opens up at the pedagogical level, because this may lead to falsehood; and yet of course in the ways in which reform has set teachers up, this is increasingly impossible.

A shift is needed, then, in moving away from a rhetorical construction

of truth-and-falsehood which renders certain modes of thinking and teaching impossible; which, following Butler (2011), blinds us to the frames we use as educators, religious, and secular, to make sense of the difficult. This may require, in part, a shift away from a dogmatic, truth-seeking religious rhetoric which refuses to see the self as critically implicated in the teaching of difficult knowledge, or indeed as part of what makes it so difficult. As scholars, we see that anecdotal exorbitant moment at a school-mass in Chicago as not an exclusively or even primarily religious one: not as a story which says something about Catholicism or Islam or Catholic schools, but rather as a discursive instance of the type of rhetorical truth-production which goes on daily in our schools, religious and secular, private and public.

We call for, then, an attendance to the way the religious comes to shape secular pedagogy, particularly in the way it frames truth and falsehood to make certain ways of thought, methods of teaching, and modes of being possible. To ignore this is to elide the risk of the difficult knowledge that public education is, by way of its history, always already religious (Burke & Segall, 2016) and as such often treats truth religiously. This ignorance serves certain rhetorical and pedagogical ends and interests, protecting some and denying others, dividing the schooled world into the saved and the damned as it were. The rhetoric of truth and falsehood obscures the violence of this division in serving those interests.

Put another way, we might reconceive of truth and falsehood through a shift towards a more literary understanding of the true and the false. We conclude here with two examples of resistance to the limiting rhetoric of religious truth and falsehood. In a recent interview, Salman Rushdie (Neal, 2016) no stranger himself to what it means to risk blasphemy and violence in challenging religious truth, positions the literary as opening up for critique what has been rendered false by religious rhetoric: "We are asked to define ourselves as this and not that in ways that have to do with religion…The novel knows that this is a problem." What novels and stories can call attention to is a different kind of truth-telling, indeed a difficult one, that schools, religious and secular, often turn away from: truths they're afraid of acknowledging about themselves. It seems to us that what schools so often do is ignore something like Tim O'Brien's (2009) revelation at the end of *The Things They Carried*:

> I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story. (p. 273)

That is, we think the high leaps into the darkness of falsehood we recommend might be better understood as discursive strategies, as

stories we write in place of truth that make our schools and lives more livable.

Notes

[1] Take, for example, the 2015 video (Figure 1) featured in the "About Us" section of Teach For America's website, which succinctly explains TFA's mission and purpose. Thirty seconds into being schooled on the achievement gap, a child falls from the sky, only to be saved by the Teach for America logo rocketing up like a superhero in flight:
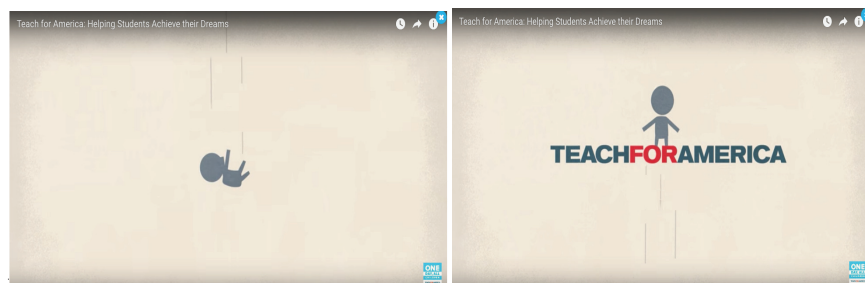
Not lost on us is how the child in question is, given TFA's record and the reality of the larger reform movement in the U.S., likely black or brown, to be saved by a white teacher wielding high expectations.

[2] The irruption of wildcat teacher strikes in conservative, southern states suggest a, perhaps, reorientation of this politics and its embedded power relations, but the long term implications for teacher lives remains to be seen.

[3] Though a spate of recent firings of gay teachers at Catholic schools (e.g., Kuruvilla, 2019) troublingly suggests otherwise.

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