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Religion's Influence, Place, and Future in Education

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Abstract

One of the most significant themes of this course is how social and cultural values are reflected in schools. I sought to take that one step further and uncover the reflection of religion in public schools. In America we have long since talked about the separation of church and state, yet schools have been molded by religion for centuries. As we have seen in the course material, there is a relationship between cultural identity, society, and education - and this can include religion. I have spent three summers in three different countries - Guatemala, South Africa, and Swaziland - where religion was paramount in the creation and maintenance of schooling.

These experiences have left me with a desire to uncover the relationship in more developed countries. What type of influence does religion have on schooling? What is religion's place in education? What is the future relationship between religion and schooling? While the focus will be predominantly on the United States, these three areas of study will provide insight into an important aspect of our cultural identity, and delve deeper into the formation and growth of schools in different cultures.

Introduction

In Kantor's 2007 article "Terms of Inclusion: Unity and Diversity in Public Education" he writes, "Until recently, historians of education have paid minimal attention to cultural conflicts, focusing instead on topics such as the meaning of progressive education, the expansion of secondary schooling and the rise of vocational education, and the politics of school desegregation and community control" (p. 370). The focus on these topics took historians away from examining past and present conflicts over the content of history instruction and the place of religion in the schools. However, this type of research can inform us about the broader politics of inclusion within public education and the role that different groups of Americans have expected public schools to play in determining who counts in defining the nation's social and cultural norms (Kantor, 2007). There is a wide breadth of research on religion's influence, place, and future in education; and, religion's influence over educational practice, curriculum, and standards has been documented for thousands of years.

In the United States, specifically, the religious beliefs of the settlers and colonizers deeply impacted the course of public schooling. This same type of religious influence is seen in most of the Western world. The majority of the literature on the subject focuses on Western nations and Christianity, and there seems to be a lack of focus on tying in the historical influence to the future relationship between religion and schooling. In fact, in Lawson's 2006 article, "The Research We Need in Religious Education: Four Facets", he writes "It is tempting to respond to the question of what research is needed in religious education by saying,

"Everything!" Although religious education as an academic discipline can be viewed as over one hundred years old, and much research has been done on a variety of issues, there is still so much that is not understood" (p. 157). While the "need" for research may be overstated, it would be valuable to analyze our present global educational situation, and give insight to the future relationship. In this paper I will focus on the time from imperialism and colonialism to the present globalized state, and analyze the literature identifying religion's current place in education, and trends for the future.

Impact of Religion on Schooling

Religion and ethnic identity are often tied together, whether one is Jewish, Native American, Punjab Sikh, Scottish Presbyterian, Tibetan Buddhist, or Greek Orthodox (Marshall, 2006). Political scholar Ted Gurr (1993) writes of communal groups that "people have many possible bases for communal identity: shared historical experiences or myths, religious beliefs, language, ethnicity, region of residence, and, in castelike systems, customary occupations" (p. 3). These shared facets of "communal identity" overlap in different cultures. This overlap is especially true in nations such as the United States, whose history has been shaped by immigration and settlement. U.S. religious history is characterized by patterns of ethnically and religiously diverse immigration as well as Christian missions.

In his article, "Nothing New under the Sun: A Historical Overview of Religion in U.S. Public Schools", Marshall writes, "From their founding over 400 years ago, public schools have tended to reflect the religious heritage of the white Protestant

majority, whether in, to borrow Mary Metz's (1978) phrase, "classrooms or corridors," simply because white Protestants were the first to colonize the east coast and establish public education" (2006, p. 182). Similarly, Germany's well-established, and often envied, public elementary schools of the early twentieth century, encompassing the years from the late German Empire through the Weimar Republic, were both centers of reform pedagogy and sites of persistent confessional religious education (Kennedy, 2005). In Great Britain the changes in religious belief, and shift away from Catholicism, brought educational transformation as well. This, as Marshall points out, is because like other social institutions, such as families, religious institutions, and community organizations, schools function as a place to socialize the young (2006). Because schools are usually locally organized and governed, historically they have reflected the communities in which they are located, and in particular they have reflected the most politically powerful group—whatever that group is—in that community (2006, p. 183). The cultural reflection of the most powerful group is also demonstrated in the religious and educational persecution of minority groups.

Marshall explains the persecution: "As the U.S. West grew in population during the 19th century as a result of the Gold Rush, the military actions against Native Peoples, and railroads, schools were needed in the new settler communities. White clergy and female teachers were sent West with missionary zeal to "civilize" and "settle" it by means of education" (2006, p. 185). Church and government-run day and boarding schools for Native Americans forced children to give up tribal customs, language, and dress (Marshall, 2006). While this type of persecution has

been documented in many different nations' past, most of the literature focuses on western civilized history. Literature on today's educational practices shed light on religious and educational persecution happening today in countries in the Middle East and Asia. "Public schools" in some Middle Eastern countries require students to pray during the day, and study the holy books of Islam; and, the Chinese persecution of Tibetan religious practices, through education, has been well documented. The impact of religious practice on education has been twisted and transformed over the centuries, and is now taking a new role in the era of globalization.

Religion's Place in Education

As the correlation between religious doctrine and education is illuminated so is the question: What is religion's place in education today? Historically, one of public education's purposes in America has been the development of moral citizens (Copley, 2008). However, educators currently face more academic accountability due to No Child Left Behind, and other state based assessments. Similarly, the global community has "upped the ante" with high-stakes testing and international comparisons. This newfound data collection has made it increasingly difficult for nations to justify any type of religion in public schools – because this is not what students are being assessed on. Currently, religion has been all but "banned" from the U.S. public schools. This same trend is followed, even more stringently in Europe and the rest of the Western world. However, many Middle Eastern nations, and Latin America countries have kept religion as a cornerstone to school curriculum. This, again, can be attributed to that particular culture's emphasis on religious belief

– which is reflected in the schools themselves. Terence Copley's 2008 article, "Non-Indoctrinatory Religious Education in Secular Cultures. Religious Education" states:

In democratic societies there will be a natural and inevitable struggle for the mind between religious values and secular values. Religious values tend to be more visible than secular values. Secular values tend to portray religion as too private or too dangerous for the public sphere. They are based on rejection of religion or theism or the supernatural as a means whereby life can be explained or enhanced or as a vehicle for truth. Both religious and secular values can be legitimated intellectually. Both are associated historically with power and its extension or preservation, sometimes with its abuse or corruption. Both have historically demonstrated their capacity to be establishment values or revolutionary anti-establishment values. Yet although religious values and secular values each carry—and on occasions attempt to conceal their own intellectual, moral, and ethical presuppositions, dimensions, and difficulties, value-neutrality is not possible (p. 22).

Copley's explanation of the dichotomy between religion and education is described in his depiction of values. Schooling has been pushed to be a secular entity, devoted to creating social progress, nationality, and economic growth. The debate of religion's place in schools is not limited to only the United States. Leirvik's (2008) article, "Religion in School, Interreligious Relations and Citizenship: The Case of Pakistan", analyses the relation between religion, education and citizenship as reflected in recent research and current debates regarding religion in Pakistani schools. In "Teaching about Islam in Secondary Schools: Curricular and Pedagogical Considerations" Moore (2006) argues for teaching religious diversity, particularly Islam, in European nations as well as the United States. Both authors discuss the current demographic trends that are contributing to a rapid increase in religious,

racial, and ethnic diversity in the United States (Moore, 2006, p. 279). These trends point to a number of options for the future relationship between religion and education in the global community.

Future of Relationship Between Religion and Schooling

Trends indicate that minority religions are growing in the U.S., while the Protestant majority is declining; and, as the global religious landscape continues to shift, the ethnic and religious landscape in the U.S. will continue to change. Schools will need to continue changing in order to meet the needs of all students. In order to put this change within context, better historical understanding of the role of religion in public schooling is an important first step. The future relationship between religion and schooling will be predicated on this movement. In recent times, questions of religious education--about the place and significance of knowledge and understanding of religious belief and practice in the general educational development of children and young people--seem to have been largely overshadowed or overtaken by controversies concerning the relative merits and shortcomings of public and religious schools (Carr, 2007). While high-stakes testing, and the age of "accountability" has led to this concern over schooling, there has always been some sort of debate about education concerning the relationship between religion and schooling. In Jauhiainen's article, "Education as a Religion in the Learning Society" he writes, "In the 20th and 21st centuries there has been strong faith in the power of education to create and maintain many kinds of progress in society including social cohesion and order, equality and justice (2004, p. 459).

Whereas, religion was used to create and maintain this type of progress in the past (and still is in some cultures) the current global trend is relying on secular schooling to instill values, knowledge, and economic growth. Still some like Cush (2007), Koetting (2005), and Rosenblith (2007) believe religion is finding its way back into educational curriculum.

Cush's article, "Should Religious Studies Be Part of the Compulsory State School Curriculum", examines "the increasing presence of religion in public discourse, various educational responses to this, and argues that a separate subject, taught by specialist teachers, is the most likely to achieve the aim of the United Nations for mutual understanding and peace between diverse religious and cultural traditions" (2007, p. 218). In Koetting's article, "Spirituality and Curriculum Reform: The Need to Engage the World", the authors argue the need for connecting the search for meaning and authenticity found in the language of "spirituality" to the search for meaning and authenticity in curriculum, and that this search is most powerful, transforming, and sustainable when connected to the sociocultural context (2005). However, Koetting separates the "spiritual" from "religion" when he writes, "The current movement in spirituality is extending into both K-12 and higher education. There is discussion at both levels of the need for the spiritual (not religion) to be a recognized part of the curriculum, to enable individuals to find personal meaning in the curriculum" (2005, p. 81). Rosenblith's article, "Comprehensive Religious Studies in Public Education: Educating for a Religiously Literate Society", aims to enlarge the conversation about religion and public education by inviting readers to think about the benefits to be gained in society by

providing a comprehensive religious studies curriculum in public schools (2007).

Rosenblith sums up the overarching argument:

In such a program, students will develop knowledge and understanding about various religious traditions, forge greater respect for the religious (and nonreligious) other, and think through existential concerns that have interested human beings for thousands of years. While recognizing that such a program is deeply contentious, we nevertheless reason that students, as participants in a democracy as well as members of a global community, must have the skills, tools, and knowledge to function in a religiously diverse world (p. 94).

Although each of the authors raises interesting arguments, their perspective is still the minority in the field of education. In the developed world, religion has been methodically pushed out of schooling. As the separation of church and state becomes wider, so does the integration of religion into the curriculum.

Conclusion

There is still a lot to be uncovered on the relationship between religion and education, and how different cultures handle this issue. In the U.S. and the rest of the developed global community, we have seen the technological age's strong influence on standardizing and comparing education across nations, cultures, and religions. These comparisons will continue to stress the importance of academic achievement in regards to national competence, and further eliminate religion from education. However, current trends have a powerful minority wanting religion back in school curriculum. The culture wars will persist, especially in the developed world, where religious faith (as reported by U.S. News) has diminished. This weakened faith,

especially in schools, has fired up the minority of religious backers to take up action against the secular world. As public funding for schools has increased, so has the pressure to teach a secular curriculum. Kantor writes, "the inequality of resources that accompanies segregation raises questions about the ability of schools that serve low-income students to afford the newer, costly history texts or, for that matter, to hire science teachers properly trained to teach evolution. And it suggests that perhaps the real victors in the culture wars are upper-middle-class whites who have superior access to a desegregated curriculum without facing any pressure to desegregate their schools or their resources" (2007, p. 388). Kantor's analysis is directed at the current situation in the United States, but the situation here mirrors what is happening around the world. In the new global economy, a nation's economic success is predicated on the academic achievement of their students. Human capital theory suggests that an investment in education is an investment in the economy. Many developed nations, and third world nations, have taken note of this correlation and pumped massive amounts of public funding into education. As the state becomes more involved in academic achievement, so too has religious influence declined in schools. This pattern will continue, and so will the debate, until religion can be seen as a needed component of academic achievement, and thus contributing to economic success.

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