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Jones, Steven P. & Sheffield, Eric C. (Eds.) (2009) *The Role of Religion in 21st Century Public Schools*. NY: Peter Lang.

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In the dozen chapters that comprise this edited collection, there are many viewpoints to consider. For example, each author seems to understand the crucial term ‘religion’ somewhat differently. What they do agree on is this: The matter at hand is controversial. Each author claims, in his or her own way, that the intersection of ‘religion’—in the particular way that she or he defines it—and public schooling is a volatile issue. This consensus leaves open the possibility for an uncritical basis for the controversy itself. Underneath this agreement there exists a more-deeply embedded assumption: the normative orthodoxy of liberalism and the heterodoxy of forms of religious life that might threaten it.

I will review the contents of the book in terms of how the authors go about addressing—and not addressing—this

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theme of “controversy” by considering the question of *meta-controversy*: What makes the controversy controversial? In my view, there is a predominant tendency in this book to take a rather ‘religious’—in the authors’ own ways of understanding the term—stance on the discontents we find between religion and secularism playing out in public schools. This predominant tendency naturalizes the controversy itself based on the (faulty) assumption that religion is almost always fundamentalist and secularism is not—even while some advocate for, not against, the role of religion in public schools. From my view, the controversy is better understood in terms of the chapters that take a more sophisticated approach and address the question of religious-vs.-secular controversy as situated in a particular psychological, hermeneutic, historical, and genealogical context. While the review is critical in nature, I will also try to point to literature that provides alternatives and justifications.

The predominant tendency. For the majority of writers, including the contributing editor (Steven P. Jones), the tension between religious people and secular schools is something like a natural necessity. It appears as a universal, antagonistic dualism. For the majority of authors, conflicts between the private domain of religion and the public domain of liberal nation-states seem to be inevitable. Under “normal” circumstances, the two simply do not mix. (The abstract on the cover invokes combative and bellicose terms like ‘fight’ and ‘battlefield.’) Where we find religion and public schooling co-existing somewhat peacefully—such as in the final chapter on a Danish public school—the case is presented as deeply paradoxical. (The title, “Holding Tight With Open Hands,” reveals this paradox.) The problems, as I see them, are the assumptions that the authors carry with them when they go about describing religion and liberalism.

According to Jones (in chapter one), we can find a clear divide among parental sentiments about schooling. He claims that there are two kinds of parents: “religious” and “nonreligious parents.” For Jones, this taxonomy is not a sociological observation. He even goes as far as to presume to know the thoughts of these “religious parents.” He writes,

“The question, ‘How do I help my child become a good person?’ then, has an *obvious answer* for the religious parent: Do what is necessary to see that one’s child learns the tenets of the faith and encourage and support his or her faith development.” (3, emphasis mine)

This question and “obvious answer” on behalf of “religious parents” seems to beg at least three possibilities:

- 1.) Jones only intended to describe the narrow scope of theistic, religious fundamentalism in its most limited and dogmatic manifestations of parental sentiment as told to him by some specific person, but did not mention that explicitly in this book chapter.
- 2.) Jones wrongly assumes that the sentiments and desires of “religious parents” can be completely reduced to a single, “obvious answer” based in a very particular ecclesial affiliation or creed.
- 3.) Jones has some kind of comprehensive psychical (or mystic!) insight into the minds and desires of “religious parents.”

Andrew N. McKnight makes a similar move in chapter eleven (“Seeking Spaces for Emotionally Connected Rationality Amongst Dogmatic Belief Systems”) where he “suggests an emotional vehicle for the *segregation* of dogmatic mystical and spiritual beliefs, specifically those that infringe upon the purview of science or that are odds with the inclusive and respecting goals of democracy” and goes on to suggest that science and metaphysical realism—the belief in absolute truth—create a “cognitive conflict.” In effect, McKnight declares beliefs that go beyond “a compartmentalized space that acts as a general moral center or aesthetic that comforts, creates meaning, or gives us a feeling of solidarity with others” to be anathema (pp. 190-191, emphasis mine). While McKnight does seem to initially imply that not all mystical and spiritual beliefs do in fact infringe on science or are at odds with democracy, the petition for segregation that follows ignores this more careful articulation. In both cases, we find that whether ultimately writing for or against religion or secularism, the “controversy” in this book is set according to the orthodox

principle of liberalism: the almost messianic belief in a neutral, secular, nation-state.

In chapters three and four, we find lessons in the apologetics that surround questions of legality, constitutionality, and jurisprudence with regard to things like school prayer and religious expression from the contrasting points of view of the *Alliance Defense Fund* (in chapter three) and the *American Civil Liberties Union* (in chapter four). These chapters again suggest, that this is what religious controversy really, truly is. This is what it amounts to. It is this lack of imagination—and the assumption that world religions are theistic to begin with, a tendency for Western commentary on religion to do—that leads to a rather caricatured, albeit not completely untrue, presentation of religious “controversy” in public schools.

It is very easy to use outrageous, and all-too-true, examples such as young earth creationism, literalist and fundamentalist approaches to scriptural exegesis, and fire-and-brimstone eschatology as a way to advance this rather dualistic view of religion and, more seriously, the religious experiences of others. It is also easy to dismiss many other things this way. For instance, it is common to reject socialism by citing the crimes of Stalin. Many capitalists rely upon the popular and unimaginative red scare assumptions that the U.S. status quo takes at face value. But this is not true for the former (religion) anymore than it is for the latter (socialism). For those who experience socialism in socialist democracies or in theoretical critiques of capitalism these hasty, popular generalizations hold little to no value. The same is true for the “religious people”—(most) people who have religious beliefs of some kind and experiences—who are not fundamentalists.

Yes, it is undeniable that religious fundamentalism—in its most narrow forms—is presently at odds with many things, including the current liberal project of compulsory public schooling. But this being the case is not reason to promote the idea that religion, theology, and mysticism necessarily share ties to fundamentalism or that a religious subversion of (neo)liberalism would necessarily be outrageous. The

Marxist and atheist philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, famously argues for the exact converse of this assumption in many of his books. (See, for example, *The Fragile Absolute: Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For?* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*.) For Žižek, it is precisely the liberal castration of belief that breeds the impossibility for the desire for an end of capitalist oppression and, consequently, emboldens and preserves transnational capitalism—and shockingly, for Žižek, Christianity is actually best suited to oppose it.

Regardless of what one thinks of Žižek, any book that wants to moderate a discussion should not present any ideals—including liberalism, secularism, democracy, or modernity—as (super)natural or universal; at least, not in advance. To do such a thing would be nothing short of what this approach (rightly, in my view) critiques certain forms of religion for being: too fundamentalist.

In his recent book, *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*—that critiques the stultifying effects of religion upon discourses on God—Mark Johnson dismisses similar views from popular names, like Dawkins and Hitchens, that naturalize the tension of religion-vs.-secularism as “undergraduate atheists.” It seems that much of the predominant tendency of this book could be re-interpreted as addressing the “controversy” that happens when undergraduate atheists meet undergraduate theists. (Or, when undergraduate capitalists meet undergraduate socialists, for that matter.) There is no denying the descriptive truth: these meetings do happen with alarming frequency, just like many other popular stereotypical tensions (such as the ones we find in assumptions about race and gender relations). The question is whether the stereotype is the tail or the dog, and which one is wagging the other.

Less obvious in this book are the voices that weigh-in in favor of religion as a matter of constitutionality, jurisprudence, and liberal pragmatism; an outright defense of religion—understood as both theistic and nontheistic belief—in civic life (in chapter ten); stories about having tolerance for religion in regions where a non-fundamentalist

finds oneself outnumbered (in chapter nine); and the measured and qualified advocacy for the consideration of atheism and unbelief in God (in chapter two). While these chapters do not feature the same hasty generalizations about believers as the previous two examples, and some even defend religion-as-they-understand-it, they still seem to treat the subject from the view that the “controversy” itself is natural by necessity of either religion or secularism being too devout and fundamentalist. As I see it, this polemic not only a tired argument, it is, at worst, philosophically contradictory, and at best, a very ungenerous discussion.

In sum, this predominant tendency lacks the ability to either limit the conversation to a very particular religious expression and ecclesiology or to take a richer conception of religion as a whole into consideration. Consequently, the nature of the meta-controversy is set in stone. While the purpose of the book is to invite discussion on the subject of religion, the invitation seems to insist that religion show up dressed as a fundamentalist; which the advocates of ‘religion’ (in this book) mistakenly, yet understandably, protest against as being too fundamentalist a judgment to have. In the end, the predominant tendency in this book is to render “controversy” as “controversial” by the fundamentality of the conceptions of religion and secularism and the viewpoints and temperaments of the discussants.

Nonetheless, there are other chapters that take a different, and in my mind better, approach to the “controversy” between religion and public schooling. Most noteworthy is chapter five: “Metaphysics, Metaphor, and Teaching Meaningfulness: How to ‘Teach the Controversy’ in Science Class.” Here the author, Steve Broidy, takes the controversy as descriptive, not normative. He notes that, in his local state department of education, teachers are urged to “teach the controversy” (58). He never naturalizes the “controversy” himself, he simply reasons how one might do such a thing as it exists historically in the most meaningful way.

His sense of “religion” is also vastly different than others in this book. Rather than assume something like common-

sense or make a go of it on his own, he cites the generous articulation of religious sensibility coming from William James' seminal *Varieties of Religious Experience*—not the stereotype of a rural, southern, First Baptist Church. Also noteworthy, are two historical treatments of the issue (in chapters seven and eight). These authors, like Broidy, discuss the “controversy” of religion and public school as the descriptive product—not the normative cause—of historical and social context. These chapters alone make the book a worthy read, in my view.

In many ways, the limits to this book are indicative of the current, over-cafeinated political climate. The deeper question that this book does not address is whether the “controversy” itself is more than anecdotally true. Is this true, is this the way things *really* are? Is this “truth” and “reality” normative or descriptive, essential and fixed or contingent and changing?

While preparing his Gifford Lectures (what became *The Varieties of Religious Experience*), William James—a modern man through and through, a man of science—explained his motives for taking such an interest in religion in a letter:

The problem I have set myself is a hard one: *first*, to defend (against all prejudices of my ‘class’) ‘experience’ against ‘philosophy’ as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life—I mean prayer, guidance, and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world’s meaning; and *second* to make the hearer or reader believe, what I myself invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind’s most important function. (*Selected Unpublished Correspondence 1885 – 1910*, p. 211)

Later that year, James would go on to argue in *Human Immortality* what he argued over a decade earlier in *The Principles of Psychology* (in “The Mind-Stuff Theory”): “The Soul is the least objectionable hypothesis” (p. vii).

This book could learn a lot from James, and others. We all could, really. Perhaps, the blessed “controversy” between religion and secularism has less to do with a normative controversy and more to do with a descriptive failure of the imagination—and subsequent fundamentalisms—from particularly tiresome brands of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ people. Imagine this: What if William James himself were to moderate this so-called “controversy”? What would the result be?

I doubt it would be this book.

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