

CENTERPIECE

Character education

By THE REV. WILLIS ELLIOTT

"Character education should be taught in our schools," says Gov. Paul Cellucci.

Public schools on Cape Cod will likely face such consequent questions as:

1. Do our public schools have any obligation to teach morals, ethics, character?
2. Is there an essential religious component in character education?
3. If not, how can our schools go about nonreligious character education?
4. If so, how can we include the religion factor without violating "the separation of church and state"?

Moral development

The American culture's fountainhead and mainstream assume that religion is essential to moral development and character.

In a June 11, 1783, letter, our first president said, "I hope we shall not forget that to Divine Providence is to be ascribed the Glory and the Praise."

And John Adams, New England's supreme contribution to the Founding Fathers, warned that our American way of government is not designed to "contend with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."

The notion that ethics can be taught, character engendered, and our democracy sustained without religion in education is a recent novelty. "Progressive education," beginning with John Dewey and the 1936 Humanist Manifesto, promised to remove religion from our public schools and replace it with humanism, a pseudo-religion substituting self-esteem for God-esteem.

The humanists have kept their promise. Religion has been banned from lower public education (not from government higher education) more effectively even than in some communist countries.

'Secular humanism'

To distinguish it from religious humanism, scholars have called this strange new notion "secular humanism." It's a flawed educational theory which has now clearly failed, with far more evidence than the recent rash of school violence.

Now, responsible elements in American society should work together toward healing public education of its mind/spirit split, naming as sick the dualism that brackets religion off from the way our children are taught to think, value and live.

The Jeffersonian phrase "the separation of church and state" was addressed to religious and political institutions as institutions, but its sphere has been wrongly enlarged to include the separation of religion from public education, which has had the passive effect of separating our children from religion.

Passive: there's little direct attack on religion, little promotion of atheism. But Occam's razor (the principle of minimum hypothesis) works in our public schools against religion: If the world and human life can be studied and explained without religion, why add religion?

Religion made peripheral

Religion is made optional to sense-making, therefore peripheral. Peripheral, so private. Private, so no place in public education - so goes the circular reasoning. Result? While in the American populace there's little theoretical-ideological atheism, most Americans live their lives as practical atheists; and religion's institutional expressions (churches, synagogues, temples, mosques) are low on the totem pole of seriousness and respectability.

Defenders of the present separation of



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religion from public education are sadly behind the times. Speaking of past realities as though still present, they ask, "Why not continue to have our children educated secularly by tax-supported schools and religiously by religious institutions?"

That arrangement was workable when the philosophies of the two educational structures were coordinate (not, as at present, mutually alien) and most children were under the educational influence of both (whereas at present, only a minority of America's children get any formal religious education at all).

Mutually alien? The alienation is even deeper than secular vs. religious humanism, a humanism that is self-contained (with no need for religion). Worse: that humanism's philosophical base is materialism, which teaches that all being and processes can be adequately explained as manifestations of matter: the immaterial, including religion, is unreal.

without religion?

The American Experiment

Since biblical religion, which is the spiritual root of the American Experiment, our particular conception and practice of democracy, claims that God, creator of the universe, is the really Real, all materialisms are inherently antagonistic to Christianity and Judaism.

Three materialisms in particular are impediments to honesty and clarity in confronting the profound problems of "religion and public education," including the character-education issue:

First, Freudian materialism, sexual determinism on the basis of the pleasure principle (namely, that animals, including human beings, behave to avoid pain and to achieve pleasure, especially sexual pleasure). This flawed theory, while now intellectually weakened, continues to feed hedonism and thus our entertainment and celebrity culture.

Second, Marxist ("dialectical") materialism, economic determinism. We are nothing but physical bodies, our minds being nothing but our brains; and we produce and consume to pleasure our bodies and their relationships.

Communism, the political expression of this flawed theory, has self-destructed; but our consumer culture and some social-manipulative schemes continue to be nourished by the notion that "the bottom line" is society's fundamental dynamic. We become what we love, and this ideology teaches us to love money most.

Finally, Darwinian materialism, naturalistic determinism. It's never been better expressed than by the pagan Roman Lucretius, who died a half century before Jesus was born: There's "no design," no purpose, in the universe: "many atoms in infinite time have moved and met in all manner of ways...the universe has by no means been made through divine power."

Lucretius' atheist assertion reappears in Darwin's double assertion that God has nothing to do with either the generation of life (it's "spontaneous," self-origi-

nating) or with its development (the selection of species is "natural," self-articulating).

All three of these materialisms have fraudulently paraded themselves as sciences. Freud, the science of the psyche. Marx and Engels called theirs "scientific materialism." And Darwin's "evolution," a philosophy and not a science, continues to be taught in America's public schools as science.

Before Darwin's atheist version of it (for example, in the case of his grandfather Erasmus), "evolution" meant development by mutation, a meaning that qualifies as science. Darwin's adding the notion that the universe is self-enclosed, self-sustaining and self-evolving converted the science of evolution into the mechanistic, materialistic philosophy of evolutionism – a distinction common among philosophers but which has not yet trickled down into our public school curricula.

A closed-minded system

Public education should be open-minded in teaching the rival theories of the origin of the universe, namely, creationism (the design theory) and evolutionism (the no-design theory). That it is presently closed-minded in favor of the no-design theory is in violation of the spirit of public debate.

H.L. Mencken said that every complex problem has a simple solution and it's wrong. The relation of religion to public education is a complex problem, and those who are impatient of complexity are unfit to help us face the full problem of public-school character-education.

But I believe that increasing numbers in the populace and in public education have the humility and intellectual integrity to see and struggle with the problem. I am hopeful.

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