

The Catholic Obligation to Educate

Neil G. McCluskey, S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

This Symposium Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Catholic Lawyer by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact selbyc@stjohns.edu.

THE CATHOLIC OBLIGATION TO EDUCATE

NEIL G. McCLUSKEY, S.J.*

TODAY AMERICAN EDUCATION is undergoing a top-to-toe reappraisal. The uneasiness over schools that had been mounting during the post-war period has erupted, and an aroused American people are belatedly demanding to know what has happened to its schools.

Some critics allege that poor discipline, lack of character training and the chilly secular climate in the schools have bred a generation of delinquents who are on their merry way to rock, roll and ruin. Some critics indict our schools for failure to develop intellectual talent and scientific leadership. There are increasingly loud demands that the fluff and flim-flam of the curriculum be cleared out and the traditional academic meat-and-potatoes courses be restored to the place of honor in the school. These criticisms have, in the main, been directed against State-supported public education, but before we breathe the prayer of the pharisee and thank the Almighty that we are not, like the public schools, sinners, we should make certain that our own schools are in good order.

If we Catholic educators have any temptation to complacency because our parochial and private schools have not been deeply invaded by serious juvenile crime, we might humbly remind ourselves of the great advantages our schools possess here in contrast with the public schools, and of our consequent obligation to educate in the full and Catholic sense of the word.

Our schools are religious institutions and under private control. We are not constrained by law to keep God and religion outside the school threshold. We are not required by State law to make place in our ordinary schools for the seriously disturbed student or to retain there the chronically incorrigible and inveterately delinquent. Through a common bond of faith our students and their parents are united to us in Christ's Own Mystical Body, the Church, whose motherly sanctions they have learned to love and respect.

*A.B. (1944), A.M. (1945), Gonzaga University; S.T.L. (1952), Alma College; Ph.D. (1957), Columbia University. Associate Editor of *America*.

Fundamentally, the issue is not whether the public schools are "godless," but whether the public schools, as they are presently constituted, can teach what many millions of parents believe in conscience should be taught their children. And if the government-established schools cannot discharge this obligation, then Catholic parents and pastors, by building and staffing the kind of schools in which a complete education can be given their children, are exercising a right rooted in a God-given obligation. Our greater freedom to educate, however, does not give us Catholics a right to look down our noses at the public schools. In these institutions are many deeply dedicated men and women, teachers and administrators, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, who are doing a magnificent work for America's youth. It is hardly their fault that their hands are pretty well bound in what concerns the moral aspect of education, for even after a century and more of experimenting the problem of character education in the common school is more defiant of solution than ever — is in fact insoluble. Let us see why.

Often enough criticism of the moral shortcomings of the public school or of its alleged godlessness fails to consider the central problem: the limitations inherent in the idea of one *common* school serving a pluralistic society. The coexistence within the same society of groups holding fundamental differences regarding the nature and destiny of man makes for an impasse in the approach to the moral side of education. For in the final analysis moral and spiritual values are based upon what men hold as ultimate or supreme in life — in what may be called in a broad sense "religion." Obviously it is only in an ideal society, wherein men agree freely and completely about ulti-

mate values, that there can be a common approach to the moral side of education.

For a long period in American history there was some basis for a general agreement on values and their sanctions in our public philosophy. The Old World inheritance of Greco-Roman natural law and of many of the central religious concepts of the Judaeo-Christian tradition was universally accepted and widely operative in American society. Despite Protestant-Catholic tensions which drew agonizingly taut during certain years, there was agreement at least on the basis and general content of a philosophy of character education for the common public school.

However, even during this period the fissures steadily widened and new ones appeared. The fragmentation of the Protestant churches multiplied differences over dogma, both among Protestants themselves, and with the Catholic group whose numbers were rapidly increasing. Non-European religious groups established themselves. New groups arose whose ultimates derived from a secular and humanist, rather than Christian tradition. All these factors entered into the historical process which resulted in the secularization of American public education. The inclusion of what is usually referred to today as "moral and spiritual values" within a universally accepted religious framework, however, is no longer feasible. When the attempt is made to formulate a religiously-based statement of values, many groups in American society no longer give their assent. Though most Americans continue to avow belief in God, their ideas of the nature of divinity and of the implications of religious belief for conduct run to every shade of the spectrum. For the traditional orthodox believer, God is still an absolute, eternal, transcendent, personal — and

for Christians, triune — Being. Yet each of these attributes has been the occasion for religious division, separating groups of Americans into different sects. Today the public school serves children who come to it from families divided into more than 250 different religious bodies.

One solution to the problem of religion in the public school is that of those well-intentioned people who argue that there are certain commonly-held essential truths in religion, such as the being of God, the revelation of God's will in the Bible, etc. These truths, according to the desire of all God-fearing men and women, should be part of public school instruction and training. But this solution amounts only to the setting up of a new religious sect, and adding one more to the many denominations of Christianity.

There is no such thing as an undenominational religion. Even the doctrine of the existence of God implies a specific conception of Him, and the conception of the divine varies from that of the finite deities of animism to the infinite deity of Eastern Asia and the Old Testament. It varies from the pantheistic Brahma, whose concept is that of negation of all attributes, to the Jehovah-God of the Bible, who is self-determined and personal but entirely above nature. Mere deism is opposed to every Christian creed. When we come to teaching a live religion in the public schools we see that it must take a denominational form and, moreover, must derive its validity from some authority.

Advocates of this "common-denominator" approach, moreover, are continually frustrated by the courts, which are under the necessity of defending the religious freedom and the rights of conscience of all citizens in the State's common schools. Nearly all state constitutions forbid the teaching of

any doctrine favorable to a single sect or distinctive of any religious group. This renders it impossible legally to keep religion in the schools. For if this means anything, it means that there is not a single religious belief or moral practice of one group in society which could not be challenged in law by another group. If, for example, Sect "A" believes in a triune God, the contradictory belief of Sect "B" (which does not) must cancel out belief in a triune God. Similarly with other religious propositions, such as the resurrection and miracles of Jesus Christ; the nature of the Church; the eternity and transcendence of God; the existence of divinely appointed sanctions.

Similarly with any ethical pattern involving marriage, divorce, birth control, gambling, drinking, blood transfusions, vaccination, nudity, flag-saluting, military service — all of which have at one time or another in recent years been defended or attacked in the name of religion. Any affirmative proposition or affirmation of one of these items would be favorable to the group advocating it — which inexorably means that such an affirmation of belief or ethical practice would be unfavorable to any group holding the contradictory position. In court test after court test, the decision handed down has been in favor of the dissident group — to save them from real or fancied invasions of their religious liberty.

But even if there were an inoffensive non-sectarian religion, from the family's point of view what has been gained? What parent is satisfied when his children are merely *not* being educated in a belief contrary to his own? Ordinarily we assume that he wants them brought up to believe that what he holds is important truth. And as Orestes Brownson said long ago, "I always hold that to be important truth, wherein I differ from

others." His meaning of course is that if differences were inconsequential, there would be no point in being different. It is precisely the conviction that a doctrinal difference is important that keeps the sincere churchgoer in a Lutheran rather than a Baptist or Catholic pew. The compromise approach, whose great patron was Horace Mann, father of the public school, contained the principle of its own dissolution. The precious little common ground that once existed among Unitarians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Jews, Catholics and Deists gradually was eroded away.

The positive doctrinal elements regarding church organization, sacraments and the mission of Christ had to be strained out of the common school piece by piece to avoid offending dissenters. Such a process of attrition inevitably worked to the advantage of groups holding a minimum of positive doctrine. A blandly Christian flavor that contented Unitarians and Universalists could only dismay Congregationalists and Episcopalians. The soup in time got so thin that it pleased no palate. Belief in God, the Golden Rule and the Bible were about all that long survived this disintegrating process. The Bible in the classroom later became an object of contention between Protestants and Catholics with the result that the courts have banned Bible-reading in many States. Belief in God has until recent years fared better, but a number of communities have had to impose silence on this point upon their schools. In 1956, for example, New York City public school officials and their lay advisers found considerable opposition to a value policy statement that contained preferential references to God and belief in God, and had to delete several references to these ideas in the final form of their statement on moral and spiritual values. Our

blind allegiance to the principle that religious freedom in a religiously divided community requires the elimination of any teaching or practice from the public school not acceptable to the entire community has made it impossible to preserve any kind of traditional religion in these schools.

The shadowy, moralistic, natural substitute for traditional religion that survives in the schools, optimistically called "moral and spiritual values," might as well be based on the Koran, the Vedas or the Tables of Confucius.

Another well-intentioned and commonly heard solution to the religious question proceeds on the assumption that the public school can lay a foundation for character — if not general Christianity, at least basic natural law morality — upon which other educative agencies in society can build. Underlying this assumption, however, is a theory of religion and religious commitment which is not compatible with the Catholic understanding of these things. This makes it impossible for Catholics to be fully satisfied with statements of moral and spiritual values which make claim to supply such a foundation.

What have come to be known popularly as the three great American faiths are not simply variations of one basic theistic philosophy. The prophetic and individualistic genius of Protestantism runs athwart the authoritative and institutional character of Catholicism, while the ritualistic and communal spirit of Judaism sets it apart from either Catholic or Protestant Christianity. If there is some theoretical common denominator among these three faiths which the public schools might present as a basis for a common value philosophy, it is not universally acknowledged.

Nonetheless, a large number of educators

have argued that, since natural law theism has been the basis of the American political consensus and is still commonly accepted, it should be reaffirmed as the basis for a program of moral and spiritual values in the public school. This is better than nothing, but is still a far cry from what a Catholic ideally wants for his children. For a Catholic starts with an assumption (shared by many non-Catholics) that religion is the central concern of human existence. Religion for a Catholic answers the questions: What is man? What is man's chief end? Whence did he come? Whither is he going? How did he come here? Quite patently the character of education will depend to a large extent on the answer to these questions. A Catholic believes that his purpose in life is to learn to live in such a way as to prepare himself for an immortal supernatural destiny.

Today any philosophy of education presenting such a goal is constrained to operate outside the public schools. Faced with the ultimate question of whether religion is the starting point and essence of true education the public school has had to adopt a theoretical neutrality. Yet the public school, in a Catholic analysis, gives an equivalent denial to the question by actually taking another starting point and aiming at another goal. What is worse, by default the public school facilitates the entry of a religion of democracy or cult of society into the vacuum.

The 1951 document *Moral and Spiritual Values in the Public School*, prepared by the Educational Policies Commission of the NEA, lists only sanctions of the natural order, and warns that religious sanctions ". . . may not be explicitly invoked in the public school classroom." Once more, from a Catholic point of view, this attempt at compromise or neutrality puts the public

school on the side of the ethical scientists, the scientific humanists, the naturalists and all those who reject traditional religion. Because sanctions are limited to the secular order and cannot normally be related to religious values, natural or supernatural, character education in the public schools is necessarily circumscribed by the purely secular order.

By default civic or political virtue must be the primary goal of public school education. In other words these schools exist primarily to produce good citizens. Those who believe the perfection of the temporal social order to be the supreme and ultimate aim of life will have no quarrel with this interpretation of the public school's responsibility for character education. Those who, while believing in a supernatural dimension to education and life, see here no irresolvable conflict of value systems can continue to give allegiance to the public school value program. Those believers in a supernatural, who do see an irresolvable conflict here, cannot.

The conclusion is inescapable. We prescind from the theoretical question as to whether the public school could ever adequately care for the moral side of the child's education under any circumstances. We do say that the system as presently constituted is simply incapable of doing so for some of the reasons seen. That our Catholic schools can provide the proper atmosphere and training and do not qualify for the "Blackboard Jungle" category of school, we do give real thanks. But let this fact never lull us into thinking that our Catholic schools are thereby superior academic institutions, or that we have somehow satisfied our obligation to educate because we are keeping some of our Catholic youth "off the streets" of the public schools.

Ethical nihilism and moral flabbiness in the schools have drawn much of the critics' fire, but the heavy fire today is aimed at the deplorable scholastic standards in schools. The scholastic sins of our Catholic schools may not be as black nor as many as those of some public institutions, but in varying degrees some of our own schools do seem to have been infected with forms of the virus of progressivism. How many of our own schools share in the strictures passed upon the public schools for failure to provide for the gifted student? How many of our schools have become obsessed with "life adjustment," "American citizenship," "Democratic living" and vocational training? And just how do we defend before the critics Catholic schools in which Latin and trigonometry have been crowded off the curriculum by driving courses and business arithmetic, or in which sports extravaganzas including high-stepping drum majorettes and high-reaching basketball players on scholarships dominate the high school scene and monopolize faculty and student energies? Next time someone raises the question "Where are our Catholic scholars?" he might well ask his question, not of the colleges, but of the high schools.

Our theme speaks of the right to educate: I have chosen to discuss the obligation to educate. For rights flow from obligations, and if there is a Catholic right to educate, then surely there is an obligation. We insist upon the right because we are obliged to raise up our children, to establish schools in which they can be taught to "think rightly and to live rightly." The full recognition of the dual obligation to educate was given official voice by the leaders of the American Church 125 years ago at the second conciliar gathering of the bishops. They stated in 1833 that they had sought ". . . to create

colleges and schools in which your children, whether male or female, might have the best opportunities of literature and science, united to a strict protection of their morals and the best safeguards of their faith."¹ The next Provincial Council of Baltimore, in 1837, said of our Catholic schools: "It is our most earnest wish to make them as perfect as possible, in their fitness for the communication and improvement of science, as well as for the cultivation of pure, solid and enlightened piety."²

The greatest council of the American Church, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, held up as an ideal the perfecting of our schools, and flatly repudiated the notion ". . . that the Catholic school need be in any respect inferior to any other school whatsoever."³ In fact, the bishops stressed the ideal of academic excellence even to the point of stating that, if precautionary measures were taken, the lack of academic excellence in a Catholic school would be sufficient justification for a Catholic parent to send his child to another type of school in preference to a Catholic one.⁴

We can close appropriately with these words of exhortation from the same Third Plenary Council, by those visionary men of 1884:

And if hitherto, in some places, our people have acted on the principle that it is better to have an imperfect Catholic school than to have none, let them now push their praiseworthy ambition still further, and not relax their efforts till their schools be elevated to the highest educational excellence.⁵

¹ THE NATIONAL PASTORALS OF THE AMERICAN HIERARCHY 74 (Guilday ed. 1954).

² *Id.* at 115.

³ *Id.* at 247.

⁴ ACTA ET DECRETA CONCILII PLENARII BALTIMORENSIS III 103 (1886).

⁵ THE NATIONAL PASTORALS OF THE AMERICAN HIERARCHY 247 (Guilday ed. 1954).