

Worlds Apart

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Israel Scheffler gave me a new perspective on metaphor -- those symbolic structures that give cognitive and affective access to domains of experience and knowledge which otherwise would remain enigmatic. He exposed me to their pervasiveness, creative power, articulating capacity, and indispensability in the tasks of meaning-making. One of my consequent interests has been to identify some of the grounding metaphors that structure our understanding of education, to critique them, and to exploit their capacity to renew our vision of what education is or can be.

And so it was with great expectation that I took up *Teachers of My Youth*¹ to explore it for the metaphors that might have informed quintessential Jewish education. My expectations of a fruitful and even inspiring search for these thought and practice shapers were not only sparked by recalling Professor Scheffler's critical analyses of educational language,² but were further fired up by the introductory promise that he was undertaking "to give a picture"³ of his remembered schooling and by the recognition that accounts of religious education are often couched in richly figurative language.

At first, my anticipations were disappointed. *Teachers of My Youth* literally told me a great deal about Jewish education in the years before World War II. I learned about the successive levels of schooling, the curriculum, the teaching methods, the texts, the structure of the school day, the qualifications and even the personalities of young Israel's various teachers through the years. I now know about the learning that was done in Yiddish, in Hebrew, in English, in Aramaic, and in French. I even know how long it took him to get to his various schools on the elevated railway and what Rabbi Shunfenthal had for lunch (a boiled egg, a bread roll and a bottle of milk⁴) -- fascinating, informative and even engrossing detail.

But metaphors of Jewish religious education were, to say the least, sparing. Scheffler does lapse into figurative language when he describes his feelings of sitting in semi-isolation at the back of the room before he could speak Hebrew, as a hunger like that of a child staring at chocolates behind a store window;⁵ and his anticipation of being admitted to the class as gaining entry to a "magic circle" where "secrets are unlocked, knots untied, and mysteries revealed."⁶ He speaks of his evening classes with his revered Reb as taking his "first dip in the sea of the Talmud"⁷ and his initial brush with the philosophy of religion as "love at first sight."⁸ But while these may be instances of metaphor in the narrow grammatical sense, they are not living metaphors in the broad epistemological sense, serving not to organize a whole realm of understanding, but simply to bolster the descriptive elements of these passages. Clearly, in writing this book, his project was intended to serve different purposes than those I had looked for.

However, while metaphors by which to appreciate the overarching design, purposes and strategies of this era of Jewish religious education are virtually absent, there is a prevailing metaphor for the young Scheffler's experience of it. It is personal and, lacking the surprise element one expects of an effective metaphor, it is also conventional. He describes his schooling as a "two world" experience: one world comprising religious studies of the sacred texts, Hebrew language, codes, moral discourse and liturgy; the other, the secular studies of the general public school curriculum. From about age six through to college-level, at least, he was a student in both worlds -- one offering him what his parents believed to be entry into American life, the other immersing him in Jewish tradition. Both

educations were a part of every week, sometimes taking place in the same school or the same room, but often in different schools and always with different teachers, at different times of the day, and in a different language. But, between the two, lay "deeper divisions" than these. In his words:

These worlds presented multiple oppositions -- between the religious and the secular, the old and the new, the heritage of our people and the heritage of others, the loyalties due our past and the challenge of our future, the ideals of community and the ideology of individualism, Jewish belonging and life in a multi-national America.⁹

Other than the different visions and purposes exhibited by these two worlds, they are further characterized by different hermeneutical strategies and scholarly traditions. As Professor Scheffler suggests, he developed a kind of "intellectual bilingualism."¹⁰ Religions have tended to be retrospective -- looking back to past constructions, past inspirations, past authorities; science, in the broad Deweyan sense of the word, is prospective -- looking forward to new developments, opening up new frontiers of understanding, reaching out towards ever expanding horizons. So religions tend to be conservative, preserving inherited verities; the sciences tend to be progressive, building on inherited understandings to discover new truths, however transient these may be.

These divisions are often part of the lived reality of all those involved in religious education -- whether it is undertaken in parochial schools, temple, mosque or church, or the homes of the devout. The problem these divisions pose is how one can occupy both worlds with integrity and intellectual honesty. Implicit in Professor Scheffler's recollections are at least three responses to this problem, each one of which raises new difficulties or questions worth exploring.

One solution to the problem is to allow the two worlds to co-exist, each independent, each operating within its own traditions and methodologies, each espousing its own forms of knowledge and value. This in essence is the way Scheffler's earliest years of schooling were conducted. Both his secular and religious studies were undertaken with a view to excellence, and both were considered "indispensable for an effective and full life." The school simply incorporated these two worlds within itself, and, "by offering them both to us as our daily fare," he explains, "it built them both into our consciousness."¹¹

A simplistic reading of Nelson Goodman's work may seem to support this approach. A close associate of Professor Scheffler over their long careers at Harvard, Goodman has worked more than anybody else with the metaphor of "worlds" of understanding, arguing for a "diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making."¹² At first glance it may appear that we have support for the notion that secular studies will have one "take" on what we perceive and believe, and religious studies will have another, and both should be left free to do their own thing in their own way for their own purposes. After all, a life understood in terms of a variety of versions will be a richer life.

This interpretation, however, overlooks something that Goodman gives considerable attention to: the relationships between different worlds. Worlds are made, he suggests, by re-composing and decomposing former worlds, by giving new weightings within them, by reordering their elements, by deleting or supplementing their parts, or by correcting or distorting their perspectives.¹³ But a world totally disconnected from other worlds is foreign to his thinking. And worlds in isolation from each other became a growing discomfort in young Scheffler's educational experience. While the schools were building both into the consciousness of their students, they were, he confesses, "bequeathing to us at the same time the ragged boundaries and the gnawing conflicts between them."¹⁴ And when these conflicts are ignored by the institution, the school runs the risk, as it did at Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, for instance, of losing credibility in the estimation of its most thoughtful students, and may eventually alienate those students from the religion for which it exists.

Another solution to the problem of dual worlds is to allow one of the worlds to assume preeminence. This may have been Mother Scheffler's personal choice for she felt they occupied

"different levels on an absolute scale of value." Secular studies were not, "after all, aimed at what they deemed of ultimate and supreme value, that is, a life of righteousness and charity, of study and worship in accord with the Divine commandments of the Torah."¹⁵ It was her son who directed me to Michael Polanyi's reflection on a question something like: What would he teach his son about the origin of the world if he had time and opportunity to teach only one version? Would he pass on his knowledge of the evolutionary accounts which informed scientific studies or the Biblical story of creation which was part of his Christian faith? His answer was along the lines, "The creation story, because from it he will learn more about how to live!"

Obviously, one world may serve particular purposes better than any other, but if religion becomes the final arbiter of truth in all the "gnawing conflicts" at the "ragged boundaries" between ways of understanding -- and this is not Professor Scheffler's solution -- the integrity of secular studies is jeopardized and their range of contributions limited. That is, where religious criteria are permitted to override the criteria inherent in those fields, the net result is a curriculum reduced to pseudo-science, pseudo-art, pseudo-history, and so on. Of course, the same holds true in the reverse case. Many schools founded as religious institutions have been dominated by secular studies to the extent that they are now religious in name only. The danger is that when one way of understanding is relegated to second place as a general rule, it may soon find it has no place at all.

While some opposition between "worlds" is inevitable, even provocative, other points of conflict are not -- in particular, those conflicts that are the result of poor habits of thinking. And herein lies a clue to another way of reconciling different worlds. What remains intolerable for Professor Scheffler is that any world of understanding is made and maintained by faulty logic and irrational justifications. He reminds us that while religions have much to offer that is unique and enriching,¹⁶ their contributions are diminished to the extent they depend on an unwillingness to examine the presuppositions from which they are derived, or on mindless deference to supposed authorities of the distant past, or on denial of what is reasonably derived from other studies, or on the assumption of covert sources of truth. In other words, I would suggest that religion may have different tasks, but it should not go about them irrationally. In confrontation with other world views, a religion which does not adopt the methods of "critical thinking" is in danger of finding its verities "false or repugnant,"¹⁷ as Scheffler himself once painfully discovered.

Recognizing that sacred texts are the product of particular historical, cultural, linguistic, pre-scientific contexts, admitting the deep contradictions between ancient and modern cosmologies, anthropologies, theologies, psychologies, and moral understandings, and accepting the general principle that human knowledge expands and changes, gives religious studies a different character. They become less a study of static verities and more an intellectual and spiritual quest for present truth. In the closing chapter, Professor Scheffler explores the significance and some of the implications of this approach. Religious studies can profit from the findings of comparative religion, astronomy, archeology, history, linguistic studies, rational philosophy, and scientific research. In the process, as represented at last by his study with Mordecai Kaplan at City College, he was able to develop, he reports, "a new and freer sense of the value of [his] Jewish heritage...appreciating its achievements while recognizing its inadequacies to the present." At last, for him the two worlds, the "two attitudes were no longer incompatible."¹⁸

This solution to the problem of "ragged boundaries," in which religion is governed by the same philosophical rigor and logical reasonableness as any other intellectual pursuit, raises a number of compelling questions, which I carry with me from reading *Teachers of My Youth*.

One question that comes to mind is this: Just as the sciences have brought their findings and methodologies to the religions, do the religions have anything to offer in the way of insights and approaches to scientific studies? Perhaps we find an answer in the affirmative when we admit the role of figurative models in science, (once considered religions' greatest handicap),¹⁹ or the a-rational (the emotional, intuitive) origins of many breakthroughs in scientific insight, or the response

of awe, wonder and humility in the face of mystery and possibility, or the need for non-discursive languages to express the deeper significance of our discoveries. Perhaps religions enrich our understanding of excellence with their appreciation for its spiritual, moral, and aesthetic dimensions. Or, perhaps religion has a contribution to make to our understanding of mentation when we take into account (to suggest an extreme example), instances of altered states of consciousness, including yogic and Buddhist trances, (which, incidentally, are institutionalized in ninety percent of the world's cultures; have so far defied pathological classification; and are said to contribute to religious insights).²⁰

All this provokes another question: If religious studies can bring something to the dialogue with secular studies, especially at those "ragged boundaries," would not our school curricula be enriched by religious studies, especially when that study is both sensitized to and critical of religious symbolisms? Reading *Teachers of My Youth* makes one wish that every child could undertake a serious study of religion as Professor Scheffler did. With the pressures currently being brought to bear on public schooling by the religious right, when our classrooms exemplify more than ever before a world of different living faiths, and when our vision of the purpose for public schooling is in danger of being limited to images of jingoistic materialism, it may be a good time to consider these questions.

1. Israel Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth: An American Jewish Experience* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995).

2. For example, Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1960); "Philosophical Models of Teaching," in *Reason and Teaching* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co, 1973), 67-68; and *Beyond the Letter* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

3. Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth*, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 170.

5. *Ibid.*, 33.

6. *Ibid.*, 34.

7. *Ibid.*, 55.

8. *Ibid.*, 138.

9. *Ibid.*, 86.

10. *Ibid.*, 15.

11. *Ibid.*, 85, 86.

12. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), x.

13. *Ibid.*, 7-17.

14. Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth*, 11

15. *Ibid.*, 60.

16. *Ibid.*, 178.

17. *Ibid.*, 136.

18. *Ibid.*, 137.

19. See for instance, Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), especially, 31-65; Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

20. See, for example, Roger Walsh, "Phenomenological Mapping and Comparisons of Shamanic, Buddhist, Yogic, and Schizophrenic Experiences," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXI, no. 4 (Winter, 1993): 739-69.

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