Deliberative Religiosity:
Practicing a Postsecular Philosophy of Education

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Despite some reservations, I take the term *postsecular* to usefully describe efforts to break out of the current framings of religion and education. On a recent visit to University College Dublin, however, I was reminded how much context determines interpretation. It was pointed out to me that, because all Irish schools were denominational (nearly 93% Catholic), "we are not yet secular," never mind postsecular. Point taken. Recent research in the UK reveals that the category of the *non-religious* (not the same as secular or atheist) is the fastest growing group,[1] and North America has also seen some growth in non-religious identification.[2] So querying the *post*secular is a natural reaction. My response is normally along the lines that a global perspective on religion shows growth in religious commitment across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, demonstrating the "return of religion," though in varied and complex forms, from the reductive and reactionary, to the hermeneutical and spiritually charged. "Call it what you like," said former Archbishop Rowan Williams recently, "but 'secular' does not quite capture where we are."[3] So David Wolken's movement towards a postsecular philosophy of education is pertinent.

Wolken's article seems to boil down to the idea that the "postscientific" contradictions, transgressions, and boundaries found, in particular, in the writings of Hannah Arendt can be brought into dialogue with the creative ambiguities around the postsecular. Wolken is right to argue that, central to the postsecular is a complication, or "breakdown,"[4] as he puts it, of the dichotomy of the religious and the secular. Much of Wolken's account draws attention to the cracks within positivist accounts of the world. We must, then, *mind the gaps* between the secular and the confessional. Wolken draws Arendt's largely political concerns into the realm of the spiritual by showing that her thinking is as much a practice or performance as it is a process of understanding the world. Although I like Wolken's emphasis on Arendt's style and the way in which theory is put into practice through discourse, his argument raises the spectre of a dichotomy between style and substance that could be clarified. Is the use of contradiction and self-subversion the abandonment of reasoned argument, or its fulfilment? The former seems implausible; the latter, hopeful. I believe that the contradictions and subversions of discourse highlighted by Wolken are important tools for speaking against grand narratives of social theory, evident in, for example, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, in which social development, disenchantment, secularization, and education are too readily aligned. I accept that this alignment is still evident in much educational theory and concepts of development today, and so appreciate the efforts to undermine what I perceive as the complacency therein. Wolken is right that there is no sense in "figuring it out"[5] through a clear systematic understanding, but rather we need to learn to live with "contradictions, ambiguity, paradoxes, and uncertainty while simultaneously permitting such dynamics to persist,"[6] which for

John Keats meant the development of a *negative capability*. But many questions remain. Are religions the right vehicles for developing this negative capability, or are they too dogmatic and historically bounded? Does Arendt's apparent disavowal of, or at least distance from, theological tradition render her unable to contribute to a theological recovery, even if that theology is framed negatively? And what happens to the political bodies of the religious (the religious institutions) when the *religious quality* is separated from the *religious tradition*?

While sympathetic to drawing out an implicit theology from within political or philosophical discourse, my concern in the case of Arendt is that, following a youthful flirtation with and then distancing from theology, she turns to secular moral philosophy for a reason.[7] Our experience of totalitarianism over the last century surely suggests that, for Arendt, religion must, in some sense, come to an end. What can justify Wolken's attempts to shape a theological turn in Arendt? Employing Dewey and Eliade, Wolken seems to be suggesting that even after the rejection of the supernatural, a religious quality can remain beyond the institutional forces that reify it. To argue that the religious can be a quality dissociated from the supernatural and the institutional has long appealed to certain liberal theologies, which recognise the existential struggles in finding an authentic way of being religious.

Unsurprisingly, Dewey's ideas about the religious have been translated into the more modern interest in the spiritual,[8] which has indeed seen a general surge of interest.[9] But Dewey's discomfort with the institutions of religion seems oddly inconsistent with his wider commitment to social and democratic principles within education. Indeed, in the closing statements of "My Pedagogic Creed," Dewey seems to bring the formation of social life and order into close contact with the Kingdom of God. I would argue that it is possible to have one's institutional cake and eat it, if one recognizes that institutions are not the objects they are often taken to be: fixed reifying authorities that stand for doctrinal positions. Rather, institutions can be seen as political and deliberative communities supportive of what I call *deliberative religiosity*.[10] If deliberation is to be discovered within religious institutions, it is because it was always already there, a point that secular framings of religion tend to overlook.

Secular framings of religion have tended to encourage a propositional view of religion and belief, as though religions boil down to competing worldviews. This propositional view distorts educational theory, and often leads philosophers to engage in questions around indoctrination, and the competing rights of children, parents, and the state concerning the inculcation of values. I appreciate Wolken's account, therefore, as it shifts us away from this rather narrow framing of religion. The emphasis on the religious/spiritual, however, might reinforce some other unhelpful assumptions about the nature of institutions. And, if the argument is that the religious (or spiritual), devoid of institution is the path to a theological recovery of Arendt, then I suspect we are in hot water. This is partly because non-institutional religiosity has less deliberative and communal resources. Furthermore, I am left to wonder how Arendt's view that the only place for authority is the private sphere, as the political space is one of absolute equality, sits with certain postsecularities that challenge the public/private distinction.

Despite these questions, Wolken's identification of the movements and moments is compelling. The movements of thought in Arendt offer a model of deliberative religiosity that resists the reification of religion to propositional truth claims. The postsecular is not so much a proposition about the historical return to religion after the secular, as a practice to be performed, an interruption of the linearity or continuity of propositional framings. Signalling this interruption, Wolken refers to the postsecular *moment*[11] to draw attention to, among other things, Arendt's interruption of linear time. Developing this theme, I would suggest that the term "postsecular" is self-subverting: it is clearly not what it directly states. It is not simply *after* the secular. Wolken is right, therefore, to argue, with Charles Taylor, that the postsecular is not a negation of the secularization thesis, but a moment within the secular. It has been said that there can be no post-secular in Taylor's sense of the term as what characterizes secularization for Taylor is the conditions of belief.[12] But perhaps Taylor remains rather too conceptually rigorous in his account, unable to take the necessary risks to encounter the conceptual breakdown or interruption suggested by Wolken. Taylor's conceptual edifice may concede too much to the product rather than the process of thinking, and thereby may undo a central insight brought out by Wolken but argued by philosophers of religion for some time; namely, that religions are there to be practiced rather than believed, or better, that belief concerns orthopraxy (a practice or exercise) more than orthodoxy (affirming a proposition or worldview).

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1. Lois Lee, *Recognising the Non-religious: Re-imagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2. Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, "'Nones' on the Rise," (October 2012) http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/.

3. Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 11.

4. David Wolken, this volume.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. See Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), esp. Ch. 2; Samuel Moyn, "Hannah Arendt on the Secular," *New German Critique* 35, no. 3, 105 (2008): 71-96.

8. Bradley Baurain, "Common Ground With A Common Faith: Dewey's Idea of the 'Religious'," *Education and Culture* 27, no. 2, Article 6 (2011), http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/eandc/vol27/iss2/art6.

9. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

10. David Lewin, *Educational Philosophy for a Post-secular Age* (London: Routledge, 2016).

11. Wolken, this volume.

12. Michael Warner, John VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 22.