

Beyond Belief?

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The idea of using a civic rationale to teach about religion in public schools is appealing, and it is well argued in Rob Kunzman's essay. The civic rationale is, in several ways, more practical than my emphasis on existential questions. For one thing, it fits with a basic aim of public schooling — to prepare students for effective citizenship in a liberal democracy. For another, it is almost certainly less threatening than an approach that exposes students to views that challenge their deepest beliefs. But Kunzman himself has noted that exposure and reflection need not culminate in revision — “deliberation can also quite reasonably result in ethical *adherence*.” I agree, and carefully considered adherence is characteristic of intelligent belief.

My question is whether the civic rationale can be successful without attention to the underlying existential beliefs. The civic approach is associated with a “functional” conception of religion, whereas my approach more closely fits with a “substantive” conception.¹ This distinction is important because the substantive conception must define what religion *is*, whereas the functional conception studies what religion *does*. If, in agreement with many of today's scholars, we posit that “religions involve some conception of a supernatural being, world, or force, and the notion that the supernatural is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural,” we eliminate the confusion caused by Emile Durkheim's functionalism.² Marxism, for example, cannot be construed as a religion simply because it has an “eschatology.” Certainly, some naturalistic conceptions are held “like a religion,” but that does not, from the substantive perspective, make them religions. John Dewey's *A Common Faith* is not really about religion, but it attempts to capture and redirect the language of religion.³ This has led to the unwarranted charge, sometimes heard today, that the schools, when they eliminate prayer and overt recognition of religion, have actually established a religion — secular humanism. But Kunzman has not rejected a substantive approach overall, and he need not do so to advocate a functional approach in schools. My main point is that it may not be possible to follow a civic rationale without discussing existential or substantive issues.

Perhaps we can relieve some of the antagonism by moving back and forth between functional and substantive issues. Consider, for example, the present determination of the U.S. president to spread freedom and democracy over the whole world. Can this be understood apart from the underlying Christian evangelical belief in freedom as God's gift or the equally powerful belief that “true selves” (the inner beings created by God) all seek what believers have already achieved in democracy?⁴ As we examine the political history of religion — what religion has done, not what it is — we invariably run into this notion of “true” selves and “true” doctrines. The bad things done by, say, Christian groups are not manifestations of “true”

Christianity. This response may be “true,” but it begs for an answer to the question, What is true Christianity?

Kunzman asks why our view of intelligent belief must exclude the possibility of supernatural intervention, and my answer is that it need not do so. However, students should be aware that scholars do not agree on the historical evidence for miracles.⁵ So there is reason to doubt at least some claims of supernatural intervention. Why do people find this so upsetting?

If we take an anthropological look at religion, we find it universal, and we come across the idea (now questioned) that monotheism represents progress over earlier pagan religions, largely because it is more complex.⁶ If the claim of greater complexity is discredited, in what does the progress consist? In ethics perhaps? But many scholars claim that religious morality is as often corrected by secular ethics as the other way round, and science has sometimes forced a revision of religious belief.

Consider the problem of animal pain. Why would a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good create a world in which its creatures must eat one another to survive? The problem of animal pain has challenged the best philosophical and theological thinking — consider, for example, Descartes’s contention that nonhuman animals are mere machines, Augustine’s dismissal of pain as necessitated by the principle of plenitude, and Alvin Plantinga’s complicated explanation in terms of free will and fallen angels.⁷ C.S. Lewis has admitted that the earlier explanation that animal pain entered the world because of Adam’s Fall had to be revised when scientists showed that animal life preceded human life by centuries.⁸ Hence fallen angels.

But what are we dealing with when we introduce angels into an argument? Whether or not Plantinga’s angels are considered a myth, a civic program has to include a discussion of myths because they affect our civic life. The Adam and Eve story is especially important for students to study. Many students get upset when we refer to it as a myth. They do not understand that myths are not mere falsehoods but, rather, powerful stories embodying assumptions and customs that a culture wants to maintain.⁹ J.A. Phillips argues that the story of Eve is still deeply embedded and active in Western culture, affecting our psychology, law, politics, and religion.¹⁰

How about the concept of hell? Is that a myth? I admit that I would like to protect all children from this horrible, unnecessary, and illogical concept — illogical because it is incompatible with an all-loving God, and unnecessary because people are better motivated toward the good by love than by fear. One has to have a cruel heart or a twisted mind to believe that unbelievers, heretics, unbaptized adolescents, women who have had abortions, active homosexuals, and Adolf Hitler all belong together in hell. Bertrand Russell noted that hell was eliminated as an essential element of Christian belief by the Privy Council over the objections of two powerful Archbishops.¹¹ It is worth mentioning, too, that Charles Darwin’s agnosticism was prompted not only by the cruelty he observed in nature but also by what he called the “damnable doctrine” that reflective nonbelievers should be condemned to hell.¹² The concept does not have the universal force it once enjoyed, but it is still around,

and many children live in fear of eternal punishment. An education worthy of the name would at least introduce them to literature that might relieve them of this fear.

There is far too much to consider in this short response. Of course, students should be introduced to personal, intense religious (spiritual) feeling — Emerson's identification of miracles with "the blowing clover and the fallen rain,"¹³ Buber's encounter with the eternal Thou,¹⁴ the experience of gardeners entranced by the variety and beauty of plants,¹⁵ the sense of soul-soaring that arises in some of us as we listen to Beethoven. And, too, students should study the accounts of sacred places, ranging from Socrates's encounter in *Phaedrus* to Native American nature tales to moments in great cathedrals. All of these experiences should be part of a genuine education.

I would like all students to have a taste of the experience we provide to students in fine liberal arts colleges. We do not suppose that we are trying to convert them to atheism when we have them read Marx, Freud, Russell, Darwin, or Dewey. Nor do we suppose that we are converting them to Christianity when we introduce them to Augustine, Cardinal Newman, G.K. Chesterton, or C.S. Lewis. We are introducing them to a vast and beautiful literature that should help them think and feel more deeply.

1. See Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Rodney R. Stark and William S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

2. Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 5.

3. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).

4. See Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

5. See D.G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

6. For the older view, see James Fraser, *The Golden Bough* (1922; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1951); for the newer, see D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

7. For an overview of the problem, see John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); see also Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974).

8. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

9. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor, 1991); and Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

10. J.A. Phillips, *Eve: The History of an Idea* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984).

11. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 5.

12. Darwin, quoted in Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 432.

13. Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 24.

14. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

15. Celia Thaxter, *An Island Garden* (1894; repr., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).