

Liberal Education, Public Schools, and the Embarrassment of Teaching for Commitment

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Brenda Watson has suggested that a consideration of commitment as an aspect of education has been much neglected.¹ While this may be somewhat of an overstatement, I believe the topic deserves more attention. Suspicions about commitment abound in contemporary society, particularly within the context of discussions of liberal education in public schools. In this paper I begin with some illustrations of contemporary suspicions about teaching for commitment. Consideration will then be given to explaining the origins of such suspicion. The main section of this paper critiques our embarrassment over teaching for commitment. I conclude with a brief examination of some practical implications of my critique.

SUSPICIONS ABOUT TEACHING FOR COMMITMENT

One does not have to look far to uncover expressions of suspicion about commitment and teaching for commitment in educational writings. This is at the heart of concern about indoctrination. Listen to this description of a paradigm case of indoctrination in a popular text in the philosophy of education by Barrow and Woods:

Imagine a Catholic school in which all the teachers are *committed* Catholics and where all the children come from Catholic homes and have parents *who want them to be brought up as Catholics*. Imagine also that the teachers are *determined to try to bring up the children as devout Catholics*. They deliberately attempt to inculcate in their pupils an unshakable *commitment* to the truth of Catholicism.²

Today, indoctrination is generally understood to be a very bad thing. Hence, we are led to believe that homes and schools that teach for commitment are bad.

By contrast, it is generally assumed that public schools (that is, state-maintained common schools) are providing, or at least should provide, a liberal education. And liberal education, it is thought, liberates. It moves a person "beyond the present and the particular," to employ a phrase that Bailey uses in the title of his book which attempts to provide a theory of liberal education.³ Clearly, on this view, there is a tension between liberal education and commitment. Liberal education views, with some suspicion, the commitment of a society or a person to a particular set of beliefs. To quote Bailey once again, "A general liberal education is characterized most centrally by its liberating aspect indicated by the word 'liberal'...What it liberates the person from is the limitations of the present and the particular."⁴ Note that commitment to a present and a particular is here viewed as a limitation.

Paul Hirst gives expression to a distinction often made between two concepts of education -- traditionalist versus liberal. Suspicion about teaching for commitment is very evident when he applies this distinction to the area of religious instruction.⁵ He argues that Christian nurture or catechesis must be distinguished from liberal religious education in terms of its starting point and its aim. In religious education that is truly liberal, the educator seeks "from the stance of reason the development of reason in matters concerning religion," whereas in Christian catechesis "the aim is from the stance of faith, the development of faith." Commitment is clearly one essential element of faith. Hence, Christian nurture can be described as beginning from a position of commitment and

aiming to foster commitment to the Christian faith. Hirst associates such teaching with indoctrination and with a ghetto mentality; it is opposed to rationality and autonomy and, hence, must be viewed as "inadequate" -- committed to goals that can only be described as "improper, even sub-human." Liberal education, by contrast seeks to liberate students from the narrowness of religious commitments.

There is one final way in which to highlight suspicion about commitment among modern day educationalists. Neutrality would seem to be the opposite of commitment. Again and again it is maintained that liberal education, and schools which seek to provide a liberal education, must be neutral with regard to substantive judgments about matters which are controversial, or about which there is significant value diversity.⁶ This has both negative and positive implications. On the negative side, individuals or schools engaged in offering a liberal education must avoid teaching for commitment. On the positive side, there must be a promotion of the pupils' understanding of the issues and a development of their capacity for personal reflective judgment in relation to them.

ORIGINS OF SUSPICION ABOUT TEACHING FOR COMMITMENT

We turn now to an examination of the roots of contemporary suspicions about teaching from, and for, commitment. Has this suspicion always existed? If not, when did it arise? I want to suggest that the Enlightenment figures significantly in providing answers to these questions. I will focus, first of all, on the history of the ideal of liberal education, drawing on the work of Bruce Kimball.⁷

Kimball suggests that, historically, there have been two central ideas of liberal education. The first is an oratorical conception of liberal education which became dominant in Roman times under the influence of such Roman orators as Cicero and Quintilian.⁸ The orators were critical of speculation and the endless pursuit of truth, and stressed, instead, the need to pass on traditions to the uninitiated -- to express the truth for all to hear and judge. The curriculum of the oratorical ideal of liberal education was well defined; it included the seven liberal arts and a study of the great classical texts. One important feature of the oratorical ideal of liberal education was its "belief that truth can be known and expressed." In other words, the oratorical ideal of liberal education was unashamedly committed. This ideal was, according to Kimball, adapted to Christian aims during the Middle Ages and persisted in Renaissance humanism and the Reformation.

The second conception of liberal education has its roots in Socrates, with his uncompromising, never-ending search for truth. With the rise of experimental science and the dawning of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a renewal of philosophical activity, leading to the development of the more recent ideal of liberal education -- what Kimball calls the "liberal-free ideal" of liberal education.⁹ The word "liberal" underwent significant transformation from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century, taking on the connotation of "free from narrow prejudice, open-minded." Here we see the beginnings of modern skepticism about commitment.

The foremost characteristic of this modern, liberal-free ideal of liberal education is an emphasis on freedom, especially freedom from tradition and a priori strictures and standards -- hence, the widespread use of language about "liberation," "liberalism," and "freeing" in connection with the more recent ideal of liberal education. There is also an emphasis on rationality, critical skepticism and individualism. There is further a concern for growth. Not truth, itself, but the search for truth is viewed as desirable.

One value deserves to be highlighted. Special importance is given to the value of tolerance in the liberal-free ideal of liberal education. Kimball points out that this was "a new virtue," appearing at the turn of the eighteenth century. Previously, the notion of tolerance implied weakness or cowardice, that is, a lack of commitment to one's professed beliefs. But now, certainty was viewed as "the mother of intolerance."¹⁰

Kimball goes on to suggest that what has happened to liberal education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a series of "accommodations" to these earlier ideals, though tensions between these two ideals persist. It would seem that the liberal-free ideal of liberal education is by far the predominant ideal in modern and contemporary educational thought and practice.¹¹

Stephen Toulmin, in his study of the origins of modernity, puts Kimball's analysis into an even broader historical context.¹² There is obviously considerable overlap between the values of modernity and the values inherent in the liberal-free ideal of liberal education. Toulmin highlights the seventeenth century philosophers' desperate "quest for certainty." Why this quest? It was, in fact, "a timely response to a specific historical challenge -- the political, social, and theological chaos embodied in the Thirty Years' War."¹³ It was within this context of turmoil and crisis in Europe that intellectuals rejected religious authority and tradition which were blamed for the problems of society. This also prompted them to search for a solid foundation upon which to base society so it could become a "cosmopolis" -- a society which was as rationally ordered as the Newtonian view of nature.

It was also within this context that the ideal of liberal education came to be reshaped in accordance with the agenda of modernity. Descartes's methodology of doubt was seen as an ideal. Hence, liberal education emphasized the importance of subjecting our inherited systems of belief to doubt -- starting with a clean slate, and searching for truth apart from tradition and authority. The oral, the particular, the local, and the timely were all viewed with suspicion.¹⁴ Liberal education therefore came to be seen as bringing about a transformation from the particular to the universal, from the local to the general, and from the timely to the timeless.

Let me conclude my historical analysis by referring briefly to liberalism. There would seem to be some relation between the modern ideal of liberal education and the principles of modern liberalism, as has been argued by Kimball.¹⁵ Modern liberalism also emerged during the Enlightenment and was a response to the social and political turmoil of the times. Particularly important was liberalism's stress on tolerance. In order to overcome conflicts that arose because of religious differences and differing conceptions about the good life, modern liberalism assumed an agnosticism about the good life, relegated religion to the private domain, and emphasized the importance of not imposing one's values and one's way of life on anyone else -- hence the frequent reference to neutrality as a defining characteristic of liberalism.¹⁶

CRITIQUE

I believe contemporary suspicions about teaching for commitment are unwarranted. In this section I can only outline some of my reasons for this assessment.

Ideological Commitment: My first criticism draws on Kimball's and Toulmin's discussions about the origins of our suspicions about commitment. They maintain that these suspicions emerged as part of the hidden agenda of modernity. It was the Enlightenment and the modern liberal-free ideal of liberal education that brought about a major shift in values, including suspicion about the present and the particular.

What this excursion into history shows rather clearly is that the ideology and the values underlying suspicions about commitment are not universally shared in that there was a time when quite another ideology, and quite another paradigm of liberal education were broadly accepted. Indeed, there are many today who object rather strongly to the values inherent in the liberal-free ideal of liberal education, in liberalism, and underlying "the hidden agenda of modernity," to use the subtitle of Toulmin's book. There are, for example, the communitarian critics of modernism/liberalism.¹⁷ It is increasingly acknowledged that ideological commitment is, in fact, inescapable. There is "no innocent tradition," including that of modernity.¹⁸ All seeing and all thinking takes place from a

particular place and in a certain time. The notion of ideological neutrality is a gigantic piece of bad faith.

Some writers go so far as to suggest that the intellectual scaffolding of modernity is systematically being dismantled. Others maintain that liberalism is crumbling and in disarray, and that we are living in a postmodern and post-liberal era.¹⁹ All this suggests is that it is, perhaps, time to reinstate the older oratorical ideal of liberal education with its more positive orientation towards teaching for commitment.

Here we must be careful not to go too far in reacting to the ideological commitments of the past. We must acknowledge, with Toulmin, that the problem with the agenda of modernity is that it went too far. Here, I can only point out that I believe the same problem exists with postmodern and post-liberal thought. We must beware of extremes and seek, instead, a reconciliation between the ideologies of modernism and post-modernism.²⁰

Methodological Commitment: We have seen that liberal education is frequently associated with neutrality, having its roots in a kind of agnosticism about the good life inherent in modern liberalism. It is therefore argued that liberal education is neutral with respect to substantive judgments about matters that are controversial. The problem here is that the notion of controversiality is itself controversial. There are also a host of practical and theoretical problems with the ideal of neutral teaching.²¹ For example, neutrality on the part of the teacher is a betrayal of the teacher's own personhood. Teachers are also situated within a present and a particular, and to deny this entails a level of hypocrisy. I would suggest that honesty about our own commitments is the highest level of objectivity that we can achieve in our teaching. The commitments of teachers are further a valuable resource in the classroom. Honesty in teaching allows students to observe how mature individuals grapple with commitments that are not shared by everyone.

Here, again, we need to be careful not to carry our argument to the extreme. Although I have difficulty with the liberal distinction between private/public values, there is still something right about what is being attempted in making the distinction. In order to be able to live together, in a pluralistic society, we need to come to a pragmatic consensus concerning some values, while recognizing that these common values will be justified in a variety of ways through very different ideological/religious commitments.²²

What this entails practically is that a liberal education must be committed to teaching those values that are, or should be, shared within a truly liberal/democratic society. But we must allow for the fact that these values will be justified in different ways, and will therefore need to be taught in such a way as to reflect the differing ideological commitments of different communities. A liberal education will also include teaching for commitment in areas where there is no agreement, because, as we have seen, ideological and methodological neutrality are impossible. Such teaching might call for a different institutional structure for a liberal education, a point that I will consider in the last section.

Commitment to the Present and the Particular: One of the basic problems with the liberal-free ideal of liberal education which emerged during the Enlightenment has to do with its attitude towards tradition and authority. We have seen, for example, that Bailey describes liberal education in terms of liberation from the limitations of the present and the particular. The word "limitations" is important. A commitment to the present and the particular is viewed as a limitation, a restriction, and an impediment from which one must be liberated.

Bailey's basic error is that he fails to address adequately the question as to how we acquire that from which we need to be liberated. It should be rather obvious that children must first of all be initiated into a particular home, a particular language, a particular culture, a particular set of beliefs, etc., before they can begin to expand their horizons beyond the present and the particular. Critical thinking is only possible if you first have something to be critical about. Doubt can only come after

belief. Liberal education, as traditionally understood, is therefore necessarily parasitic on something else -- namely, initiation into a present and a particular. Or, to use a metaphor of Brenda Watson's, nurture is the necessary "cradle" of liberal education.²³

Watson, among others, also stresses the psychological need of children to be initiated into a "primary culture" as a way of achieving identity and self-esteem and as a basis for further development towards autonomy.²⁴ What this entails is that teaching for commitment is essential for one's mental health. It also needs to be seen as an essential ingredient in liberal education.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

Teaching for Commitment: Jay Newman, in his study of fanaticism and hypocrisy concedes that healthy commitment is very necessary for human existence. For the individual, healthy commitment is "a *sine qua non* of happiness, self-realization and peace of mind." Healthy commitments are also a key to fostering the well-being of a society. "A civilized society," according to Newman,

is dominated by people who have a healthy and socially constructive commitment to some reasonably plausible and morally efficacious world view. A society in which such people gradually lose influence drifts towards a condition of barbarity.²⁵

Indeed, as is being increasingly argued by both serious social critics and casual observers of the contemporary scene, we are facing a crisis of commitment in some Western societies.

For example, Allan Bloom, in his *The Closing of the American Mind*, which he calls a "meditation on the state of our souls," talks of various crises: "an intellectual crisis," "the crisis of liberal education," and "the crisis of our civilization." And at bottom, the concern of this popular and oft-reviewed book is a crisis of commitment.²⁶

The president of a Canadian university has this to say about Bloom's book: "Its enormous and surprising popularity suggests that there is a deeper longing for lost ideals among Americans -- and Canadians too, I suspect -- than we in the academy are comfortable acknowledging." Agreeing with Bloom, this president goes on to say that "there is too much joyless, convictionless teaching and learning in our universities."²⁷

We need to restore the dignity of teaching from and for commitment, not only in our universities, but in all our schools, . Healthy commitment should be the goal of liberal education.

A New Paradigm of Liberal Education: Educational practice is ultimately rooted in theory. My defense of teaching for commitment will, therefore, entail some revisions to the way in which we typically think about liberal education.

What is needed is a new paradigm of liberal education. We need to acknowledge that liberal education necessarily begins from a committed perspective and will necessarily involve teaching for commitment. The liberating phase of liberal education must begin from a commitment to a present and a particular. What I am proposing is a balance between a commitment to the present and the particular, and a commitment to liberation from the present and the particular. Yes, there needs to be some opening up of horizons, but open-mindedness does not mean empty-mindedness. Yes, there needs to be criticism of the traditions into which one has been initiated, but first one has to be given something to be critical about. Also, we need to be more positive about criticism. The object of criticism is not criticism for the sake of criticism, but "critical affirmation," to use a term that Brenda Watson introduces, to correct the negative overtones of critical openness inherent in the old paradigm of liberal education.²⁸

This new paradigm of liberal education acknowledges that there is necessarily a transmissionist phase involved, and it is an error to label this indoctrinatory as has been so commonly done in the

past. Teaching from a committed perspective and teaching for commitment are not in themselves indoctrinatory. I believe teaching for commitment can be taken to extremes in which case we should make the charge of indoctrination, but much more would need to be done to define the distinction between "normal" commitment, and indoctrinatory commitment in teaching.²⁹

Towards Educational Pluralism: Finally, my argument, I believe, entails a radical restructuring of the typical institutional context of liberal education. There is, of course, always a lag between theory and practice. What I find curious is that despite the profound shift that we are experiencing in intellectual thought in the recent past, there seems to be an unwillingness or an inability to deduce the logical implications of this shift for educational practice. If all education arises from a committed perspective, and involves teaching from commitment, and if we live in a society characterized by ideological pluralism, then it surely follows that we should have a plurality of educational institutions, each openly committed and teaching for commitment. A truly liberal society will have a system of educational pluralism, a point that John Stuart Mill clearly recognized long ago.³⁰

I would suggest that a state-maintained system of education is just one further expression of the oppression of the master narrative of the Enlightenment. And given the advent of post-modernism and post-liberalism, it is high time that this expression of the master narrative be problematized.

In my proposed liberal structure for education, each school will openly teach for commitment based on its own faith stance. Clearly, the values that are shared by way of pragmatic consensus will still be taught in such schools. Students will also be gradually encouraged to reflect critically on the committed perspective into which they have been nurtured. There will also be an opening up of horizons as students are exposed to other belief systems. But all this will be done within the context of a school environment which is confessionally committed.

The implications of my argument will, no doubt, be considered rather unorthodox by many educationalists. I would remind those who respond to the overall conclusion of this paper with a degree of skepticism that I do not want to reject, entirely, the basic values that underlie modernism and democratic liberalism. Indeed, what I am proposing is what I would consider to be a more genuine form of liberalism and pluralism that should characterize liberal democracies. And I would further urge us to pay heed to one conclusion of an important recent empirical study of schools which teach from and for commitment -- it is precisely their inspirational ideology which was found to be a contributing factor to their overall effectiveness, and which prompted the authors to conclude that such schools can, indeed, contribute to the common good, perhaps even better than our public schools.³¹

1. Brenda Watson, *Education and Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 46.

2. Robin Barrow and Ronald Woods, *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education* 3rd. ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 70, (my emphasis).

3. Charles Bailey, *Beyond the Present and the Particular: A Theory of Liberal Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

4. *Ibid.*, 20.

5. Paul Hirst, *Moral Education in a Secular Society* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974). See also his "Education, Catechesis and the Church School," *British Journal of Religious Education* 3, no. 3 (1981): 85-93; "Education and Diversity of Belief," in *Religious Education in a Pluralistic Society*, ed. M.C. Felderhof (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 5-17.

6. See D.F. Dearden, *Theory and Practice in Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), ch. 7; Peter Gardner, "Neutrality in Education," in *Liberal Neutrality*, ed. R. E. Goodin and A. Reeve, (London & New York: Routledge, 1989),

106-29; Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 34-43, 54-6. Terry McLaughlin, "Fairness, Controversiality and the Common School," *Spectrum* 24, no. 2 (1992): 105-118.

7. Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).

8. *Ibid.*, ch. 2, especially 37-8.

9. *Ibid.*, ch. 5, especially 119-23.

10. *Ibid.*, 121.

11. *Ibid.*, 218. In 1944, John Dewey, for example, noted, "Nothing is more striking in recent discussions of liberal education than the widespread and seemingly spontaneous use of *liberating* as a synonym for *liberal*" (Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, 158). This emphasis clearly continues to the present day.

12. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

13. *Ibid.*, 70.

14. *Ibid.*, 30-5.

15. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, 255-9; compare McLaughlin, "Fairness, Controversiality and the Common School," 108-110.

16. See for example, R.E. Goodin and A. Reeve, eds., *Liberal Neutrality* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989).

17. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981/1984); M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

18. David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Peeters Press/Eerdmans, 1990), 5-6. Alasdair MacIntyre has aptly raised the questions, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). Or, in Richard Rorty's words, it is simply futile "to step outside our skins and compare ourselves with something absolute...to escape from the finitude of one's time and place, the 'merely conventional' and contingent aspects of one's life." *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

19. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, ch. 4; C.A. Bowers, *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1987), ch. 1.

20. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, 175. I also share Amy Gutmann's major criticism of communitarian critics of liberalism when she maintains that they fall prey to "the tyranny of dualism." "Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 316-18. One does not have to choose between adopting *either* liberal *or* communitarian values, because liberal values can be reconstructed so as to accommodate the important insights of the communitarian critics. My reconciliatory approach is also similar to Bowers's (1987). Bowers very deliberately uses the word "post-liberal" to show that his theory has some connection with the past (vii).

21. Watson, *Education and Belief*, 38f.

22. See Trevor Cooling, *A Christian Vision for State Education* (London: SPCK, 1994) 115-17, 170-72.

23. Watson, *Education and Belief*, 9.

24. *Ibid.*, 58f.

25. Jay Newman, *Foundations of Religious Tolerance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 9.

26. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 346.

27. James Downey, "Review of Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*," *University Affairs* 29, no. 2 (1988): 15-16.

28. Watson, *Education and Belief*, 54f.

29. For a definition of this distinction and a more detailed description of this new paradigm of liberal education, see my *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination and Christian Nurture* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press; Leominster, U.K.: Gracewing, 1993).

30. J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1859/1978), 104f.

31. Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, & Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11, 301-4.

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