

Morality and Education

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The election of Ronald Reagan brings to the center of national life a conflict that originated in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. However, the conflict is not expressed in the language of white against black, but in the rhetoric of religion. The enemy is not a race but a way of thinking called "secular humanism." Nationally, the battle has acquired the specific form of abortion rights vs. the right to life of the unborn. However, in towns and cities across the country, the battlefield is the public schools.

Numerous parent groups are demanding "a return to many of the teaching practices and textbooks of 30 years ago, as well as the Christian values and principles upon which, they argue, the country was founded."¹ Such groups are succeeding in efforts to ban "objectionable" books from schools, to eliminate sex education, new math, and creative writing courses, and to teach the Biblical story of creation in science classes. At this level the battle is over "the very nature of public education itself,"² and what is to be decided, we are told, is whether America is a nation that believes in "the supremacy of man rather than the supremacy of God."³

It is too simple to maintain, as some do, that "secular humanism is a straw man. They are looking for someone to blame."⁴ Neither is it particularly illumi-

¹ *New York Times*, May 17, 1981, p. 52.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³ *New York Times*, February 10, 1981, p. C4.

⁴ Paul Kurtz, quoted in *New York Times*, May 17, 1981, p. 52.

nating to define the attacks on secular humanism as a new McCarthyism which is substituting humanists for "reds." It is not so simple because the underlying issue, first raised unintentionally by the *Brown* decision, is the all-important one of collective identity, i.e., what does it mean to be American?

The Court thought it knew that spring of 1954 when it decreed that the "equal protection of the law" enjoyed by the children of the white majority must be extended to the children of the black minority. This seems obvious, but in 1954 the white majority did not find it so. Didn't the black minority enjoy equal protection in its "separate but equal schools"? The Court had to convince the white majority what blacks had known since 1896: No.

The Court posed itself a simple question, or so it seemed: Were two schools, one white, one black, comparable in physical facilities and quality of teaching, unequal? The Court argued that this was not sufficient grounds for judgment.

Our decision . . . cannot turn on merely a comparison of these tangible factors in the negro and white schools involved. . . . We must look instead to the effect of segregation itself on public education.

We must consider public education in the light of its full development and its present place in American life throughout the nation. Only in this way can it be determined if segregation in public schools deprives these plaintiffs of the equal protection of the laws.⁵

To do this the Court found it necessary to define the role and function of education.

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

⁵ Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the American Negro: A Documentary History* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), p. 435.

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal education opportunities?" We believe that it does.⁶

There was nothing revolutionary or startling in the Court's definition of education. It merely reiterated what already existed and used a philosophical context to demonstrate that the inclusion of black children was crucial. Why, then, was there such massive white resistance to the decision, a resistance and antagonism that would extend from the steps of Central High in Little Rock to the streets of South Boston two decades later?

In its decision, the Court decreed a major change in the nation's moral values without recognizing this was what it was doing. By ending segregation in the schools, the Court could not destroy the underlying moral value of white supremacy, a value which it was not only oblivious to but also unintentionally upheld.

A revolutionary decision was placed precariously on the wrong premise, that "the children of the minority group" were deprived "of equal education opportunities." By making black "inferiority" the focus, the Court reinforced white "superiority."

To segregate them [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.⁷

This statement of paternalistic concern and melodramatic excess confers the status and identity of generous benefactor on the white majority. Instead of attacking white supremacy, the Court confirms it.

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the laws; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of the child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard]

⁶ Ibid., p. 436.

⁷ Ibid.

the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.⁸

How different the course of recent American race relations and history would be if the above passage had read thus:

To separate white children from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of superiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to be undone.

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the white children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the superiority of the white group. A sense of superiority affects the motivation of the child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of white children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.

The Court's decision did not provide a new context in which the white majority could have made sense of this revolutionary decree. Segregation had been accepted as a legal and moral truth since *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. *Brown* established a new legal truth, but the moral truth extant since America's inception remained.

The white majority was placed in a quandary. Either they discovered for themselves a new moral truth by which to accept the revolution, or they resisted and refused to obey the "law of the land." Realistically, there was no course but the latter.

White resistance to school desegregation received official sanction on March 12, 1956, when 101 members of Congress issued a "Declaration of Constitutional Principles," reasserting segregation on legal and moral grounds.

The Supreme Court... unanimously declared, in 1927... that the "separate-but-equal" principle is "within the discretion of the state in regulating its public schools and does not conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment."

This interpretation, restated time and again, became a part of the life of the people of many of the states and confirmed their habits,

⁸ Ibid., p. 436-7.

customs, traditions, and way of life. It is founded on elemental humanity and common sense, for *parents should not be deprived by government of the right to direct the lives and education of their own children.*⁹ [Italics added.]

Suddenly, the issue was not solely desegregation. A new one was introduced, which was inadequately characterized as states rights vs. federalism. The issue was more profound than that and it involved a fundamental question of democracy: What was the legal and moral power of the people “to direct the lives and education of their own children”? The white majority would answer the question in 1980 by electing Ronald Reagan, who had pledged himself to “curb big government.”

The *Brown* decision represented the white majority’s first experience with the power of government functioning in a manner inimical to their perceived best interests. The Warren Court had done something inconceivable: it had spoken as an advocate for the black minority and not on behalf of the white majority. And while cries of “Impeach Earl Warren” became a way of life for a segment of the white majority, the Supreme Court acquired a place in black lives almost comparable to Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson.

If the Court had been prescient enough to speak about the effects of white supremacy on whites as well as blacks, then it would have spoken for all the people. By speaking on behalf of the black minority, the white majority was threatened, not only in its identity but in its perceived right of self-determination.

White supremacy was, to use Frances FitzGerald’s phrase, a “public truth,”¹⁰ and one the white majority was not prepared to relinquish. When whites bombed desegregated schools, when mobs gathered outside schools to curse and spit on black children, when the governor of Arkansas closed Central High in Little Rock to keep out nine black children, when Southern congressmen commended “the motives of those states which have declared the intention to resist forced integration by any lawful means,”¹¹ they were expressing not only the moral power of white supremacy; they were expressing their resistance to an attack on their identities as Americans and their right to define their lives.

The white majority resisted the Court decree—by violence, legal maneuvering, and the establishment of private schools. (In the sixties and seventies, when school desegregation became an issue in the North and busing was implemented,

9 Ibid., p. 451-2.

10 Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1979), p. 10.

11 *The Annals of America*, 17, 1950-1960, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1968), p. 372.

white resistance took the forms of the "white flight to the suburbs," and finally, in 1981, a congressional prohibition against Justice Department involvement in busing as a solution to alleviate *de facto* segregation.) Instead of affirming the supremacy of the law, the white majority asserted that it would obey a morality higher than the law.

It is not usual to think of white supremacy as being moral. However, it has been considered so by most of the white majority throughout American history. Morality defines and enforces collective standards of good and evil as well as what constitutes acceptable collective behavior. Morality can be subjective or objective, but for a society to be stable, subjective morality must correspond to objective morality. When the two deviate significantly, as happened in the sixties, the national identity is threatened. When a group of conservatives organizes and designates itself as a "Moral Majority," it is saying, in effect, that its subjective morality is no longer sufficiently reflected in the objective world. Significantly, the root of the word moral is "me, myself."

If one can recognize that moral does not necessarily mean good but only what a majority has agreed upon as good, then it is evident that white supremacy is moral, and until the *Brown* decision the morality of the white majority had been reflected in the federal government. White supremacy is an integral part of America's structure and essential to American identity. The *Brown* decision attacked that structure and identity. The white majority retaliated by disobeying the "law of the land" and reasserting the only morality it had.

White resistance to *Brown* had an effect no one could have foreseen: it helped create the civil rights movement. The black minority was stunned by the white refusal to obey the Supreme Court and institute the desegregation of schools with "all deliberate speed." If the white majority would break a law it considered unjust, then the black minority was free to break those laws it considered unjust. Civil disobedience and the breakdown in "law and order" decried by conservatives and placed at the doorsteps of blacks was the legacy of the same conservatives who fulminated against its breakdown.

There was a difference, however, in the two kinds of law-breaking. One sought to abrogate the law; the other sought to uphold democracy and its promise of equality before the law. One reaffirmed the national identity as it had always been; the other sought to create a new national identity. (It is impossible for blacks and other racial and religious minorities to have a cohesive national identity which has white supremacy as one of its components.) One resisted the power of the federal government to dictate to local communities; the other had no alternative but to pressure the federal government to intervene more. Thus, the national identity became divided into conflicting moralities.

For a brief period the morality of the black minority prevailed, with the indispensable support of a significant segment of the white majority. The desegregating of America and making blacks a part of the national identity which began with *Brown* continued with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The conflicting moralities were not reconciled, however.

Indeed, the gulf between them intensified and widened, because a new generation of youth from the white majority found itself facing conscription to fight a war in Vietnam, a war for which the rationales of patriotism and the communist menace were not convincing. The refusal to obey the law of the land that began with white resistance to *Brown* and found new form in the civil rights movement now acquired a life in a wholly different area—draft and war resistance.

Objective morality (patriotism, obedience to the state) was supplanted in the sixties by a wholly subjective morality of personal responsibility and personal expression. "I'm doing my thing" was a moral call to arms, and new forms of cultural expression proliferated like dandelions on a poorly-seeded lawn. From the mid-sixties through the seventies, subjective moralities gave the illusion of becoming the national identity. A hundred flowers bloomed in the usage of mind-altering drugs, sexual freedom, the human potential movement, crafts cooperatives, women's liberation, gay liberation, abortion rights, and educational reforms.

Traditional morality had not disappeared, however. For almost a decade it was submerged, but it has since resurfaced in many guises: the Right-to-Life movement, legal challenges to affirmative action, and, not to be overlooked, the arena where the battle began in 1954—the schools.

The subjective morality which dominated the sixties had a great impact on education. Textbooks were rewritten to show that America was not all white and not always right. The new math replaced the traditional arithmetic. The very process of learning was reconceptualized to reflect the subjective morality whose slogan was best expressed on a bumper sticker: "Question Authority." The classroom was reorganized and the teacher was no longer the authority but just another participant in "open classrooms," where all opinions were equal. And the school day no longer began with prayer.

Objective moralists had lost control of their schools when they were ordered to desegregate them. The educational reforms of the sixties and seventies had taken ideological control from them. The schools had become a Roman Colosseum in which objective and subjective moralists were pitted against each other, each with their own version of the universe.

Where the objective moralist believed in patriotism, Christianity of the fundamentalist Protestant variety, and children as Lockean blank slates, the new moralist emphasized the child-as-individual, personal relationships characterized by caring, and the world-as-village. Neither recognized how much at home they both were in an America growing from Puritan roots, for both believed that morality should be the basis for education. Both yearned for theocracy, but only one would admit it. Cotton Mather is Billy Graham is "I'm O.K., You're O.K." because a rose is a rose is a rose. The issue was which side would be forced to wear a scarlet letter. Who would prevail when each had right on its side?

Where objective morality relies on Christianity to determine good and evil, the subjective morality seeks sanction from a new religion—psychology. This is evident in the teacher's edition of the Houghton Mifflin social studies series which claims to teach "strategies designed to increase empathy and decrease inclinations toward egocentrism, ethnocentrism, and stereotyping," while helping children make "valid judgments about problems facing our global society."¹² (It is assumed that these are valid goals for children who are still trying to establish the existence of egos and group identities, and who may need stereotypes, for a while, to secure their own places in a world that is overwhelming. "Empathy" is assumed as a socialization value, without considering that empathy can lead to stasis. As in objective morality, the child here is treated as an object. A change in ideology does not make for a change in substance.)

In its use of psychology, the subjective morality in education is insidious, because it seeks social change. It wants to create persons. But, as Frances FitzGerald observes, "Until the twentieth century, few American educators believed that textbooks—or schooling in general—could or should be an instrument for changing the culture."¹³

The Court could not have foreseen this effect of the *Brown* decision. *Brown* had targeted the schools as agents for social change. Children were asked to do what adults had shown little desire to do—create an integrated nation.

Subjective morality wants to use the schools to create "decent" human beings, and despite the differences in style, philosophy and rhetoric, this is also the goal of objective morality. For one, the way is secular humanism. For the other, the way is Christian beliefs. Both moralities are asking the schools to assume the responsibility of parents. In the process, both are doing what each would vigorously deny: they are increasing the power of the state and making it

¹² FitzGerald, *America Revised*, p. 211.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Big Parent. Each is demanding that the state reflect its image and its image only. Each finds its moral version of the universe inadequate without state sanction.

The national identity is no longer in sharp relief. Unsure about the present and frightened by prospects for the future, Americans are asking the schools to embody that identity no longer extant in their lives or the society. They want the schools to do what should be done by the family, church, synagogue, or mosque. Despite the strength objective moralists claim to have demonstrated in the 1980 elections, they are now unconsciously admitting moral impotence. The national identity has fragmented to such an extent since the *Brown* decision that the white majority cannot face with equanimity that it is only one element in a democratic society. It insists that it must be the sole element, the moral majority.

Now that the objective moralists have achieved a degree of political power, they are seeking to have their moral grievances redressed through the law. The "Family Protection Act" proposed by Nevada Senator Paul Laxalt, the proposed Constitutional amendment or federal law against abortion, laws requiring the teaching of the biblical story of creation, laws restricting the employment opportunities of homosexuals all seek to institutionalize morality. The central question of the decade may be: Is the purpose of law the codification of morality? Or, does a redefinition of the national identity require a clear distinction in law between citizen and person?

A Roman citizen . . . had a *persona*, a legal personality. . . . The law had affixed to him the part he was expected play on the public scene, with the provision, however, that his own voice would be able to sound through. The point was that "it is not the natural Ego which enters a court of law. It is a right-and-duty bearing person, created by the law, which appears before the law."¹⁴

Both the traditional and subjective moralists, however, cannot differentiate themselves as persons from themselves as citizens. Without such differentiation, law and morality become synonymous.

Thus, when the objective moralist cannot use the law, group pressure is exerted to achieve the desired moral end. "We have to get rid of secular humanism," a superintendent of schools in South Dakota is quoted as saying,

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), p. 102-3.

and that can be achieved by getting rid of "liberal, real liberal, personnel."¹⁵ Or books: the American Library Association received between three and five reports a day in 1980 of attempts to ban books from public school libraries.¹⁶

Public education has become the object of a holy war. The educational process itself has had a sacred aura conferred upon it. Such an aura is misplaced, because education cannot create the ideal society or restore the national identity. As the Warren Court made clear, education is a limited tool, a function of the state. Education is political; its aim is the creation of citizens.

Morality belongs to the sphere of religion or the individual. It confers group and/or individual identity. When morality is used to confer national identity, the fabric of democracy is threatened; democracy's vitality and strength lies in its diversity of belief, opinion, and practice contained within a legal framework that protects the citizen from the state and from the morality of the majority.

Education must be separated from morality, objective and subjective, and narrowed to its most basic function—the transmission of the political values the state finds necessary for its continuation. It is naïve to expect any state, democratic or totalitarian, to do other than require public education to transmit a glorified image of the nation: its history, culture, the fundamental principles of the political and economic system on which the state rests, and the necessary skills to be a useful and accepted member of the society. However, to so define education confines the power of the state to its rightful place as the trainer of citizens. Education is thereby demystified as the creator of persons. Does not the concept of democracy include not only separation of church and state but separation of state and person? The citizen belongs to the state; the person belongs to God or the Void, or both.

If education is narrowed to the role of creating citizens, it can be divided then into two parts: knowledge and understanding. Knowledge is comprised of the skills and information needed to subsist and maintain the status quo. Such skills are intellectual, technical, and mechanical. Knowledge is concerned with the tangible: thus it can be taught.

Understanding belongs to the realm of the sacred. It comes, wrote Aldous Huxley, "when we liberate ourselves from the old and so make possible a direct, unmediated contact with the new, the mystery, moment by moment, of our

¹⁵ *New York Times*, May 17, 1981, p. 52.

¹⁶ *Time*, January 19, 1981.

existence.”¹⁷ Understanding cannot be taught, because it comes, slowly and painfully, when knowledge has reached its limits and there is still a compelling reason to know. Understanding comes when knowledge intersects experience and is found inadequate.

Understanding provides what mere knowledge cannot—the courage to meet, as adults, the problems of the society. And to meet is not to solve. (The Old English root of meet is “conversation.”) Knowledge leads to the error of trying to solve problems, and it is an American disease to believe that all problems have solutions. They do not.

The faculty of understanding is all we have to converse with the insoluble. It is sufficient for the task.

In 1954 the Supreme Court, through no fault of its own, was unable to meet the problem of white supremacy. However, it had the wisdom and courage to dismantle the major institution in the apparatus of white supremacy. Since then, the white majority has continued to amaze us by its ability to avoid the contradiction that remains at democracy’s core—white supremacy. Although it is not fashionable now to use the rhetoric of racial superiority, the rhetoric of moral superiority is seeking to become the law of the land.

As long as the white majority willfully refuses to meet the profound implications of the *Brown* decision, as long as the white majority refuses to learn to live as merely one element in a multiracial, multicultural society, the national identity remains bound to white supremacy. As long as it does, the nation will be threatened by a majority which considers itself morally superior, because it was a sense of moral superiority that created white supremacy.

¹⁷ Aldous Huxley, “Knowledge and Understanding,” *Collected Essays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), p. 377-8.