

Spiritual Values and Public Languages

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INTRODUCTION

Let us begin with two points of general perspective that for years I have thought accurately describe certain features of the public school system. First is a pair of curricular principles. Then comes a more familiar philosophical affirmation.

The curricular principles I call the principle of indifference and the principle of concern. The principle of indifference states that we are allowed to teach anything in the public schools if it is widely agreed that nothing serious is at stake in doing so. In other words, we can teach just about anything provided the public is sufficiently indifferent to our doing so. The way is clear to offer instruction about Zeus since there are not many followers of Zeus around. But include instruction on the deeds of Jehovah or the announcements of Allah, and things will become complex pretty quickly. We are, on the whole, indifferent toward Zeus and his quarrelsome court, and so instruction about them is allowed. We are far from indifferent toward teaching about Jehovah and Allah, however, and so it is mandated that we either include such instruction or banish the matter altogether from the public schools.

Indifference permits almost anything, but it mandates nothing. Concern, on the other hand, will mandate everything. It will either mandate instruction or mandate the forms of a kind of mock indifference. In the mid-fifties, when it first occurred to me that things might be formulated along these lines, driver education, I thought, was the easy example of something that crept into the curriculum in consequence of indifference. It is nice to have, but not really all that important. And as religious pluralism became more apparent to everyone, as the Protestant hegemony began to crumble, then the terms of a kind of religious truce became strained. A shared concern on which we could agree became a settled truce that we do not have to agree, and a mandated inclusion was transformed into an essential banishment. Religious homilies and practices offered a ready example of something passing out of the curriculum in consequence of the principle of concern.

So much for curricular principles. Attend now to an adage of more substantial pedigree, namely, what tradition has called “the hedonistic paradox,” the proposition that if you aim to capture happiness by chasing after it, you will only have chased it away. Happiness is a shy thing. It does not want to be pursued directly. On the other hand, if you go about doing other things — good things, satisfying things — and if you do them well, then happiness is likely to appear. It will simply pop-up, come upon you like angels unawares. Happiness, in short, comes to us coincidentally upon pursuing something else, and pursued directly will elude us.

QUESTIONS

These, of course, are perfectly general proclamations. Keeping them in mind, I aim now to try casting Zigler’s argument in a manner equally general. I think that

the underlying principle of his remarks might go something like this. Anything good can be made palatable as a program of the public schools if it captures a widespread concern or set of concerns and can be “objectified” in a “public” language of inquiry. The consequence of this, especially in the case of religion, is to free those concerns from their “historic encumbrances.” Such liberation, as he sees it, is essential because it means freedom from the primary source of that public division which produces, nay mandates, a banishment of all matters spiritual from the affairs of the public school.

This formulation needs a step by step restatement in order to be firmly grasped. Before turning to that, however, I want to make clear that I approach these matters with a particular bias. For most of my life, it has been a major project to understand life from a Biblical vantage and to shape that life within practices of piety familiar to many who actually announce that they are Christian. I have always recoiled from any such announcement because I believe that the name “Christian,” like the names “theologian” and “friend,” is not a name that one claims for one’s self, but one that can only be awarded by others. I have no such reluctance, on the other hand, to announce myself as a philosopher since that seems a simple matter of fact — a fact about which, by the way, anyone I meet is entitled to be forewarned. Thus, I want it understood that I do not approach this task of remarking on Zigler’s project in a spirit either hostile or indifferent to his interests insofar as I grasp those interests.

Zigler aims to offer a basis upon which “spiritual values” can receive their just treatment within the public schools. He argues, I believe, that if we can “objectify” what is known about so-called “spiritual values,” that is, frame them in languages of knowledge attained by public procedures, that is, by science, then they can be discussed calmly and hence enter into the affairs of the public schools without suffering the exile that currently flows from the principle of concern. Fevered souls, he thinks, will be cooled when the goods that inhere in the presence of the spirit are made known to all and are expressed in the calm, deliberate, languages of public discovery. The way will be opened for their discussion and spread.

Despite my confessed religious passions and practices, however, I suffer from a nagging doubt that the notion of “spiritual values” is anything with which I am familiar. I too would like to broaden the scope and deepen the quality of what can be discussed in schools. Yet I have no confidence that I understand what sorts of things are meant by “spiritual values.” This uncertainty is only one of many that invariably remain for me when such discussions are concluded.

Among other difficulties are some arising from the fact that faith, for example, is not an idea equally prominent in all religions. Indeed, in some, it is hardly stressed at all. Faith, as a category of understanding, is probably least prominent among just those religions that tend to focus most upon things spiritual; and spirituality is probably least central precisely in those traditions where faith is believed to be most important. Where faith looms large, it is sometimes likened to a body of belief capable of creedal rendering, in which case the opposite of faith becomes something like unbelief or doubt or skepticism, as though the acquisition of faith were a matter of having a well-grounded belief. But this is not a particularly spiritual problem. On

the other hand, in traditions where “faith” enters prominently, but spirituality much less, the opposite of faith is sometimes best understood not as unbelief, but as fear, not as a lack of creedal conviction, or epistemic validation, but as a lack of trust or confidence in the terms on which life has been offered. Here, spirituality is more closely related to faith. By such a tradition, quite apart from any epistemological fault, the strongest clue to a lack of faith would be a failed capacity for amazement, astonishment, and hilarity, and thus, a failed capacity for pain and indignation.

So we cannot presume that there is any reliable relation between religious traditions and spiritual values. In speaking of spiritual values, it does not follow that we are saying anything, or at least anything very definite, about the divisions among religious communities that invoke the principle of concern and lead to the banishment of such matters from the schools. However, in this somewhat opaque reference to astonishment, amazement, hilarity, and pain, we may discover a lead to what Zigler means by “spiritual values.” Surely the atrophy of these human capacities can be construed as a kind of spiritual malaise.

But now I wish to cut through all these uncertainties and, in a single example, advance what I believe to be the central unifying thought in Zigler’s interesting essay. I think that what he really means by “spiritual values” is the evident spiritual *consequences* for human beings that seem to flow from engaging in the practices of what, in our unguarded moments, we think of as religious life. It is essentially these *consequences* that are studied in the body of research to which Zigler points, a body of research that can be and usually is undertaken quite independently of the “historic encumbrances” with which those practices originally arrive. In speaking of a “taxonomy of spiritual values,” for example, Zigler refers to the evident capacity of such practices to cultivate a kind of stoic equanimity in a stress-filled world. This is a matter that can be studied quite independently of any particular religious or creedal tradition. But where would this lead us? I want to suggest that what is thus produced is a kind of functional account of a spiritual acquisition.

In order to give the point its most vivid formulation, I must resort to an example shamefully trivial, with a mere hope that its triviality will not detract from the point itself. Suppose we discover that practices of prayer tend to cultivate that stoic equanimity that is so important a spiritual asset. Or, to put it even more outrageously, suppose we discover that those who engage in evening prayers sleep better, and that these consequences contribute to becoming a more healthy, calm, patient, and deliberative person. That is to say, we discover that prayer works, in promoting a particular, desirable, and complex set of human capacities. Unless we take the next step, however, and incorporate this discovery into education or medicine as a useful tool, I do not see that there are any implications, either for religious, educational, or medical practice at all.

From the fact that it is a helpful aid to well-being, prayer is then turned into a treatment for the support of well-being. But one wonders, having done that, whether it is any longer prayer. I may sleep better if I pray, but I cannot pray for that reason, or at least in most traditions, it is no longer prayer that engages me. This public warrant to replace my prozac or St. Johnswort with bedside prayer means that I have

come to view prayer as a kind of celestial sleeping pill, and that is precisely what prayer — at least within all traditions familiar to me — is not. Remove the practices of prayer from their quite specific “historical encumbrances,” and you are no longer addressing anything that would be recognizable to anyone who stands within that tradition. In short, it is not the *consequences* of prayer that give expression to matters spiritual, but precisely the historical practices within which those consequences are produced. And now, I hope, the parallel to the hedonistic paradox is apparent.

What I wait upon is Ronald Zigler’s response to these remarks.