

Truth, Faith, and Tolerance

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The relationship between religion and public education has long been and remains a matter for serious reflection because it is a manifestation of a key problem for education in a democratic society: the challenge to achieve a minimally necessary sense of unity while respecting the diversity of beliefs, cultures, and values that it comprises. As Dewey noted, the recognition of a problem is an invitation to think, to consider possible solutions to the problem.¹ This is what Suzanne Rosenblith's paper, "The Pluralist Predicament," has attempted to do. As such, it is to be welcomed as a thoughtful contribution to the ongoing conversation on this important topic.

Rosenblith argues that religious diversity presents the liberal educator with a dilemma: how do we reconcile our commitment to a public discourse grounded in reason and respect for evidence with tolerance for perspectives — religious in this instance — which ignore reason and evidence as the liberal educator understands them. In trying to steer between the horns of this dilemma, Rosenblith suggests, the liberal educator often falls into the fallacy of tolerance by refraining from pointing out that others' truth claims are mistaken when those claims are unsupported by the reason and evidence the liberal educator values. Rosenblith then offers for our consideration two paths between the horns of this dilemma: the concept of extended pluralism — the subjection of contradictory truth claims to testing, and the concept of degrees of belief — a determination about the weight of the evidence in support of one claim over another.

Dewey, again, reminds us that just this sort of mental rehearsal of solutions is what distinguishes the method of intelligence from mere trial and error in approaching such problems.² In the spirit of thinking together about this problem, I would like to raise several critical questions about Rosenblith's conceptions of extended pluralism and degrees of belief which, I think, clarify where Rosenblith's approach might prove useful and where it is less likely to be so.

It seems to me that the fallacy of tolerance is much less formidable than its label suggests. What is it about tolerance that prevents me from reasoning from a position that I hold to the conclusion that someone else's position is mistaken? Surely I am free to reach whatever conclusion I think reason and the evidence support. Tolerance of someone else's freedom to reach different conclusions — mistaken, perhaps, from my perspective — does not impair this freedom. A suggestion of the fallacy of tolerance, however, seems to require me to point out to those who differ with me the error in their reasoning. While this may cause some social tension, tolerance of their freedom to think and conclude differently does not prevent me from pointing out, respectfully, where I disagree. Indeed, it seems to me, this is the very substance of democracy. The rub in the fallacy of tolerance is the question of whether one side or the other of competing truth claims can be compelled to reach a conclusion

different than the one they have already reached. In a democratic society such compulsion is obviously out of bounds. But what about the public school classroom? Surely the very essence of teaching is the premise that the young should not be left to their errors.

In the classroom the fallacy of tolerance becomes the question of whether the teacher's respect for children's religious beliefs should preclude her pointing out that such beliefs are mistaken or at least unsupported by reason and evidence. Let us assume for a moment that the teacher, on the basis of sound reasoning and evidence, is in possession of the truth. Does her loyalty to reason and her profession require her to point out to the student the errors of his belief and require him, in the interest of personal transcendence, to reach correct conclusions? On many of the mundane matters of classroom instruction we expect this correctness. But on the matters most likely to generate competing secular and religious claims are there answers as definitive as the sum of two and two or the capital of Iraq? To expect correct answers to such questions is simply bad pedagogy and a violation of the goal of critical rationality. Rosenblith correctly, I think, posits as a worthy goal of liberal education. Her desire to put competing claims up for discussion and debate is a rather explicit recognition that a compulsory conclusion in such matters is an undesirable pedagogy.

Rosenblith's democratic pedagogical instincts here are betrayed into taking the fallacy of tolerance more seriously than it deserves to be taken by an implicit conception of truth as correspondence between a truth claim and an objective reality which is separable and separate from human desires and purposes. Such a conception of truth would require that contradictory claims be subjected to some sort of testing in order to see which brings us closer to the truth. Putting aside for now the variety of philosophical arguments against such a conception of truth, we make a mistake if we assume that all claims that appear to be truth claims are in fact comparable or completely comparable claims.³ For instance, to the extent that the theory of evolution and the creation story of Genesis constitute competing claims about the origins of human beings Rosenblith's notions of extended pluralism and degrees of belief might have some utility as a framework for discussing these claims. Moreover, to the extent that competing secular and religious ethical claims posit similar goals — human flourishing, for instance — they might be usefully examined by testing them against their relative success in achieving those goals. However, claims like those Rosenblith cites in her first case — whether Islam or Judaism holds the key to salvation — are not testable claims. They are statements of faith. Furthermore, and most importantly, the reason of religiously-inspired claims about the origins of life or morality, the source of the passion with which they are held and espoused, stems from their integral relationship to the faith of those who espouse them. The heat of Christian fundamentalists' opposition to evolution, for instance, is not generated so much by their desire for a correct accounting of nature as their perception of the Genesis story's role in a broader discourse about the proper relationship of mankind to the divine.

Competing religious and, say, scientific or secular claims flow from what Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology asserts are different properly basic beliefs.⁴

Both represent an effort on the part of human beings to render the world meaningful, but the underlying purposes that shape meaning are different. Rosenblith's notions of extended pluralism and degrees of belief could well be useful in sorting out where a particular claim asserts a purpose inconsistent with the general purpose within which it might normally be meaningful: offering the Genesis story as a factual account of the origins of man, for instance, or purporting to test the truth of a statement like "Islam leads to salvation." In such cases we might well examine the preponderance or the total lack of evidence to support such claims. But to subject statements of faith and the "truths" that follow from them to a test of rules of evidence and reason that follows from a different properly basic belief and different purposes is not to exercise critical rationality but to fix the game in advance. The best we can do in such cases is to acknowledge that this is how a particular community makes the world and their experience in it meaningful.

This of course raises the specter of relativism, but I am much more comfortable with that than claims to know the truth and how to get there. This is, in fact, a central feature of fundamentalism, an orientation to the truth I would argue is not necessarily confined to religion.⁵ Such claims put a stop to thinking, which Dewey reminds us, originates in doubt.⁶ However, to examine competing claims with a view, not simply to adjudicating between them, but to understanding how they function within discourses that render the world meaningful by positing purposes deemed desirable to particular communities, we introduce choices which invite thinking. We reveal meaning as something not discovered or received but created and invite students to participate in its creation. We undermine fundamentalisms and enable the critical rationality Rosenblith wants to enable, the critical rationality that is a vital source of students' freedom.

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 139-51.

2. Ibid.

3. See, for instance, Cornel West, "The Politics of American Neo-pragmatism," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Cornel West and John Rajchman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 259-72.

4. Dewey J. Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 175-202.

5. See James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

6. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 150.