

# Education, Religion, and the Old Left

The authors of "Education, Religion, and the New Right" are wrong in their criticisms of conservatives.

PETER M.J. STRAVINSKAS

The contribution of authors Welch, Medeiros, and Tate to the December issue<sup>1</sup> was little more than an hysterical attack of a movement that senses its end is near and is fighting for its life. Their high sounding rhetoric, their appeal to reason and the "American way," and their evangelistic tone would be amusing if one did not know they take their pronouncements seriously. Appeals to openness and dialogue, and a carefully-nuanced understanding of history and constitutional law are rarely effective in such cases; nevertheless, we live in hope.

I must aver that although I agree with New Right advocates on many issues, I disagree with them on many others. I also have my own philosophical and theological tradition. For purposes of furthering the dialogue with Welch et al., however, I will play devil's advocate and deal with the authors' criticisms as though I were a member of the New Right.

1. Welch, Medeiros, and Tate claim the New Right is "anti-separation of church and state" and that such separation is guaranteed by the First Amendment. In fact, it is an expression not to be found in the First Amendment. That metaphor was Jefferson's private interpretation of the First Amendment, and he had nothing to do with its framing. To discover the intent of the framers of the First Amendment, a glance at other versions of the debate is instructive:

<sup>1</sup>I. David Welch, Donald C. Medeiros, and George A. Tate, "Education, Religion, and the New Right," *Educational Leadership* 39 (December 1981): 203-208.

Peter M.J. Stravinskas is Regional Director of Development, Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, Trenton, New Jersey.

*Committee:* No religion shall be established by law....

*Senate:* Congress shall make no law establishing religion.

*House:* Congress shall make no law establishing articles of faith or a mode of worship.

*Madison:* ...nor shall any national religion be established.

What the founding fathers obviously wanted to avoid was precisely what the authors deny; Madison and others like him feared an established or state religion, such as the one that held sway in England. That is history pure and simple. Anything else is wishful thinking. Separation of church and state is a good principle, if properly understood. It affirms the individual competency and autonomy of both church and state for the maximum freedom of both. That does not forbid a relationship or intercourse between the two, however.

2. The liberal hand was clearly shown in the article's first paragraph as the authors spoke of the religious New Right as "dedicated to conservative political issues." Would the authors take exception to religious influence if organized religion espoused liberal viewpoints? I think not. Where would the civil rights movement of the 60s be were it not for activist clergy like Martin Luther King? What about the Vietnam protesters who were encouraged by such ministers as William Sloan Coffin and the Berrigan brothers? The media outrage against Cardinal Medeiros's pastoral letter on abortion in 1980 reached the limits of high comedy for those who realized that the media had praised him months earlier for his leadership on racism, white flight, and busing. The liberal elite establishment subscribes to a double standard in regard to religious influence, and it is this: "You may speak out only if you advocate our viewpoints."

3. In discussions of this nature, we

are frequently treated to the word "impose," as in the New Right "wishes to impose its values on America." America is a pluralistic society and a special-interest-group society, which means that all segments of the population have a right, indeed an obligation, to engage in debate leading to the formation of public policy. To silence religiously-motivated people is to turn the religion clauses of the First Amendment on their heads. To suggest that if they convince others of their stand their position cannot be enshrined in law is hypocrisy at its worst.

4. The authors blithely assert that no religious point of view can become government policy. How absurd! All kinds of theological positions have influenced the legislative process. All kinds of moral faults or sins are likewise civil crimes (stealing, murder). Even the Supreme Court in *McCrae* has disagreed with the notion expounded by the authors, who need to recall that the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion not freedom from religion.

5. The authors state that the government is prevented from using federal funds to support religious schools. I refer them to American history to discover that programs to aid parochial schools are not un-American but very much in keeping with the way things were before the government got into the school business:

—All the schools were denominational schools, and all were publicly funded (Krauschaar, 1976).

—This situation prevailed until Roman Catholics sought aid for their schools and, for reasons of bigotry, were denied that aid (Shaw, 1977).

—Even Jefferson, characterized by his chief biographer as "anti-clerical" to the point of "obsession," saw nothing unconstitutional in paying a priest's

salary to teach the Kaskaskia Indians "religion and the rudiments of literature" (Malone, 1981).

6. The controversy over aid to parochial school parents has been pursued as a church-state issue, which is to obscure the real issue, namely the question of individual human and civil rights. If parents are the primary educators of their children, as both natural law and the Supreme Court in *Pierce* teach, then they must be able to decide on the most appropriate educational environment for their children without financial penalty. As Blum (1965) observed, "a civil right penalized is a civil right suppressed."

7. Contrary to the statements of the authors, secular humanism is legally a religion entitled to First Amendment protections (*Torcaso v. Watkins*, 1961). As such, it can no more be advocated as a philosophy in public schools than Roman Catholicism or Judaism. But it is.

8. For the rest, perhaps only some telling questions will demonstrate the inconsistencies of the authors and those whose views they represent:

a. Voluntary prayer in public schools is bad because nonparticipants will be ostracized. What about voluntary sex education, the latest darling of the educational power brokers?

b. Not too long ago we spoke of "community control" of the schools. If traditional values are involved, are we not to call this process "censorship"?

c. In the case of "Evolution v. Creationism," it is well to recall that science claims to have suffered at the hands of religion. Is science now reacting to the dogmatism of theology by dogmatically suppressing theology—by censoring (to use the code word) an alternate view?

d. The authors exhibit great concern over the fact that Creation Life Studies makes "millions of dollars" each year on scientific creationism. Are they equally concerned about the millions made annually by Planned Parenthood on abortion?

e. Do the authors not realize the difficulties of values education, especially since there is no such thing as neutrality in the educational enterprise? Whose values? What about the conflict between a teacher's values and parents' values?

In the final analysis, the problems between religion and education would die if people recalled that the Constitution mandates religious neutrality, not religious hostility. The present scenario

in the government schools is something like this: Your children may not pray. They should attend sex education classes. They may not receive any religious influence, but they may have religious values undermined and ridiculed. If you don't like that situation, you may send your children to a private school that more closely approximates your desires—that is, if you have the money to pay the tuition. If you don't, you and your children must remain the economic hostages of a godless educational process, committed to the destruction of any significant role for religion in American society. Is that democracy or pluralism at work?

The New Right says that parents know what is best for their children and that government should leave childrearing to them. The New Right takes seri-

ously its obligation to participate in the democratic process. Hindsight may show us not only that they learned their lessons well from the Old Left, but also that their agenda is really quite liberal—in the best sense of the word. ■

#### References

- Blum, Virgil. *Freedom in Education*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965.  
Krauschaar, Otto. *Private Schools: From the Puritans to the Present*. Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1976.  
Malone, Dumas. *Jefferson and His Time*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1981.  
Shaw, Richard. *Dagger John: The Life of Archbishop John Hughes*. New York: Paulist Press, 1977.  
*Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 (1961), footnote at 495.

## Education, Religion, and the Old Left: A Reply to Stravinskas

I welcome the opportunity to respond to Rev. Stravinskas' article. It is apparent that we differ on matters of educational philosophy. In this short space, I will respond to a few of the exceptions I took with Rev. Stravinskas' views.

First, he asks if we would oppose a liberal religious intrusion into public affairs. The answer is yes, we would.

Second, I was confused by Rev. Stravinskas' argument in point 3. It looks as if he is arguing that because a majority of people want a law, then that law is—*ipso facto*—just, right, and legal. Certainly, "religiously-motivated" people have a right to participate in the political process. In this unique society, however, they do not have the right to pass a law that insists I be a Baptist or a Catholic or a Hare Krishna. I don't know if that is a "carefully-nuanced understanding of history and constitutional law," but it is precious to me and to the "American way."

Third, in point 5 Rev. Stravinskas refers to violations of church and state separation and would have us believe that because they have occurred they are now justified. It is a point on which we simply disagree.

Fourth, I was confused again by point 8a, in which he mentions voluntary

prayer in the public schools. What we presently have is voluntary school prayer. Anyone may pray privately in the public schools—principals, teachers, or students. What we cannot do is institute a governmentally sanctioned public prayer as a part of the school day. That is not voluntary prayer; it is mandatory prayer. And that is objected to by many persons in our society, including the major religious organizations.

Finally, I take the strongest exception to point 8d. It is nothing more than a slur and Rev. Stravinskas should be most embarrassed to have such an unsupported innuendo appear under his name. I have no connection with Planned Parenthood, but I do know it is a nonprofit organization that provides birth control information and clinics at cost.

In closing, I hope the articles and responses from the "old left" and the "new right" have revealed issues and stimulated thinking about important concerns for all of us. For that, Rev. Stravinskas and I are indebted to each other. ■

—I. DAVID WELCH  
Professor of Psychology  
University of Northern Colorado  
Greeley, Colorado

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.