

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
AND SPIRITUAL VALUES

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## PREFACE

The Second World War, far more than the First, has been a crisis in spiritual values. In a life-and-death struggle over spiritual values it is necessary to mobilize every resource both for the winning of the war and no less for the winning and maintenance of a just peace. Not least among these resources should be the public school. Society should be able to depend upon its schools above any other agency to inspire youth with the abiding loyalties necessary to carry it through the trials of war and through the perhaps even greater trials of peace.

Yet, at this critical moment in which our spiritual values stand in dire need of support from the public school, doubt seems to have arisen in a portion of the public mind whether the school is fulfilling—or even can fulfill—this social function. The stumblingblock leading to doubt seems to center on the conception of “spiritual” values. The term “spiritual” is frequently, if not commonly, associated with religion. By long tradition religion is barred from our public school curriculum. Therefore, a portion of the public reasons, the public school is not supposed to nor able to teach spiritual values. Even worse, these people infer its refraining from teaching spiritual values is partially responsible for the jeopardy in which our spiritual values are now placed.

This logic was examined at a meeting of the executive board of the John Dewey Society in the spring of 1943. After due deliberation, it seemed to the board and their advisers that the public school does in fact and as a matter of duty should teach spiritual values. This positive conviction seemed moreover so important to them that they decided to devote one of the Society's yearbooks to its exposition.

Thereupon the board proceeded to the discussion of a suitable membership to compose a committee for such a yearbook. At once it became apparent that the character of the membership would depend to a large extent on the kind of yearbook to be undertaken. Should it be one in which the committee would endeavor to set forth a point of view that would be common and acceptable to as large a number of the public as possible? Or should it frankly and avowedly accept some particular point of view, like secularism or supernaturalism, and crusade in behalf of that as the most promising long-run policy? To follow the latter policy might guarantee a cutting edge and integration of viewpoint, but it guaranteed almost as surely the alienation of large numbers of supporters of public schools. To seek a premise that would invite the largest possible support for the public school might risk the statement of inoffensive and tepid generalities. But it also would give the best earnest of a point of view which could be the basis of immediate action during and after this war crisis in spiritual values.

The board decided upon the first alternative, a yearbook which would seek as much unity of action and opinion as it was possible to get under present circumstances. It considered the possible racial, religious, and professional interests that should be represented in such a yearbook committee. Difficulties at once presented themselves. Since the yearbook was to aim at a statement promising a maximum of agreement, it seemed desirable to select committee members for more than their outstanding advocacy of a particular point of view. It seemed desirable to pick them also for their ability to co-operate with people of opposite views. To find members possessing this rare combination of qualities was not always easy. Those desired were not always available. Selection was further complicated by the war and the difficulties of transportation. Hence, it became necessary to select people within a limited radius so

that meetings of the committee might be held with as little tax on public transportation as possible.

The present yearbook committee was finally composed of the following members: Samuel M. Brownell, Professor of Education at Yale University; John L. Childs, Professor of Education at Columbia University; Ruth Cunningham, Secretary of the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Education Association; William H. Kilpatrick, Professor Emeritus of Education at Columbia University; Professor Marion Y. Ostrander of Adelphi College; William J. Sanders, Professor of Education in the New Haven State Teachers College; A. L. Threlkeld, Superintendent of Public Schools, Montclair, N.J.; and John S. Brubacher, Associate Professor of Education at Yale University, serving as chairman.

The initial plan of the yearbook, as already stated, was to make a statement about public schools and spiritual values which would win a maximum of support from both the laity and the educational profession. On the whole this plan was achieved. The first three and the last four chapters are a minimum statement in which each one on the yearbook committee finds himself in agreement. Each might wish at points to add more but that more would probably cause division of opinion among the committee.

For a while it was the thought of the committee to close the book at the point where differences set in. But the more they thought about stopping there, the more it seemed desirable to do more. As much common support as the first three and last four chapters represented, there was no doubt more that could be said on behalf of teaching spiritual values in the public schools. Why not indicate these other supporting arguments, though controversial and though only limited numbers would rally to them? And why not let each side know and understand the other's position better? The advantages of such an extension appearing to outweigh its disadvantages, two further

chapters, Chapters IV and V, were agreed upon. One was planned to indicate the manner in which a secularist would wish to supplement the common statement and the other the manner in which a supernaturalist would wish to supplement it.

Except for these two chapters the yearbook committee has tried to write this book as a joint enterprise. In the first instance, each chapter was assigned to some member for an initial draft. This draft was later subjected to criticism of the whole committee. In an important sense, therefore, the first three and last four chapters are the joint opinion of the whole committee. In some cases redrafts were criticized and redrafted again and again till they met the approval of the entire committee. Indeed, even Chapters IV and V came in for their share of criticism although naturally less pressure was brought to bear on their respective authors to make statements agreeable to the rest of the committee. Because of this joint nature of the yearbook enterprise, the authorship of individual chapters is not credited to specific members of the committee except in the case of Chapters IV and V. Chapter IV was written by Professor Childs and Chapter V by Professor Sanders. Perhaps the absence of individual names will help to reinforce the notion that spiritual values are and can be taught in a public school whose clientele is composed of people of diverse philosophies and religions.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

**T**HE need to support and defend spiritual values is most seriously urgent upon the world today. Our times are troubled and we in them. Science and its offspring, rapid change, have so upset many long-existing customs and beliefs and thus brought such difficult social problems that many among us stand uneasy and fearful, perplexed as to what to think, what to believe, what standards to uphold, what values to seek. Meanwhile, an inadequate economic outlook had too much enthroned individualistic selfishness and a calculating disregard of the common good. On top of all this, a selfish aggressive war threatened civilization by seeking to overthrow democracy and enthrone despotism. With civilization thus assailed within and without we find many people losing their faith in human effort, questioning man's ability to manage the world his science has produced. It is this total situation of callous selfishness, undigested social change, disturbed culture, weakened authority of custom, social perplexity—with the resulting lessening of man's faith in himself—it is this situation which calls so urgently upon us to uphold and strengthen our spiritual values. Indeed the essential quality of civilization itself seems herein at stake.

The particular concern of this book is the public school and the part it can and should play in the support and defense of the spiritual values necessary to a desirable civilization.

If our democracy is to prosper, it must be in the quality of the people themselves; for these both effect and constitute such a prosperity. It is to this end that the public school exists. Its peculiar duty and opportunity is to work with the young of

all the people, along all feasible lines of consciously directed educational effort, to nurture them to effective life and citizenship. As over against the loss of faith, the perplexity, the spiritual unrest of many older people, the public school must upbuild in the young the spiritual values needed for a just and wholesome civilization. Instead of division and conflict, it must build unity. In place of doubt and fear it must build faith, faith in right and good, faith that effort wisely directed can in the long run prevail at least reasonably against the troubles that assail. Such a public service we of this book count the chief task and aim of the public school. It is to help the public school discharge this particular spiritual task and duty that this book has been undertaken.

That certain spiritual values are necessary to any proper civilization we count beyond question. Man cannot live by bread alone, more is essential. And no man liveth to himself; man as more than mere animal is inherently social and must live in company. Moreover, man has, since his first appearance on earth, perhaps a million years ago, been selectively accumulating, very, very slowly at first but more rapidly in recent times, all those human contrivances and discoveries whereby he might the better exploit his varied resources, both inner and outer, to more satisfactory living. This accumulation, the culture we call it, consists chiefly of language, tools, customs, knowledge, institutions, distinctions, standards. Each group lives its culture and the result is its civilization. No civilization, however, could we of this book approve which does not embody and make manifest certain essential spiritual values: moral insight, integrity of thought and act; equal regard for human personality wherever found; faith in the free play of intelligence both to guide study and to direct action; and, finally, those further values of refined thought and feeling requisite to bring life to its finest quality. These essential spiritual values are not born in us; they come to each indi-

vidual only as he constructively acquires them from his youth up; and it is to this end that the school mainly exists.

As we thus desire to help the public school discharge its duty of teaching these needed spiritual values, certain objectors come forward to deny either the right or the possibility of so doing. Some assert that the teaching of spiritual values is the exclusive right and duty of the church and the home; others count that the proper exercise and very being of spiritual values is so enmeshed in religion that only an explicitly religious school can adequately teach them. These objectors claim that, on either basis, so long as the public school consistently maintains the historic American doctrine of the separation of church and state, so long must it remain inadequate to a proper teaching of the spiritual values necessary to our civilization.

Any such denial to the public school of either the right or the possibility of teaching the needed spiritual values we reject. Instead we propose to maintain both the logical possibility and the practical potential adequacy of the public school to teach such spiritual values as those named above and this on the basis of human reason and experience and without necessary recourse to religious authority. We propose further not only to uphold—under existing conditions of religious thought—the historic separation of church and state, but also to defend the moral and legal right of the public school to maintain and observe this separation consistently. It is the American way and we believe in it.

It may be well to emphasize the word *potential* in the phrase “potential practical adequacy.” We do not claim that the current teaching practice in the public school is adequate to the developing of the spiritual quality needed in these spiritual values. We think, on the contrary, that the school tradition has in it too much of assigned tasks, rote memory, authoritarian control, and lack of actual social contact to develop the needed spiritual quality. The verb *to teach* itself needs to take on a

more spiritual quality before it can fulfill its duty here. To help in these matters is a definite part of our program.

It may better define the problem and task of the book if we look closer into the character of our troubled times and see how out of them has come, on the one hand, a greater need for cultivating the spiritual values and, on the other, this hurtful distrust of our historic school procedure.

Even before World War II had come among us to threaten our civilization, things were not right in the world. A mistaken economic theory had tended to make men callously selfish. A misleading ethical theory had further encouraged the same selfishness. Meanwhile, the rate of modern discovery and invention had become so rapid that the social problems resulting from these changes had increased beyond our immediate ability to solve them. Each such unsolved social problem entails its social strain; and in many countries this mounting strain proved too great for the social structure to withstand. This, we may well believe, led many troubled souls to give up faith in themselves and seek instead some external authority upon which they might lean for guidance and support. Hogben in a striking phrase referred to this tendency as a "retreat from reason."<sup>1</sup> It seems highly probable that this tendency, working in countries where democracy had not been deeply grounded, helped to bring on fascism in its various forms and so helped to bring on the war. If the nineteenth century showed overconfidence in the easy effecting of human progress, this "retreat" marks a contrary reaction, specifically a widespread lessening of faith in man and in the processes

<sup>1</sup> Lancelot Hogben, *A Retreat from Reason* (New York: Random House, 1937).

In this little book Hogben makes clear that he is striking at a real phenomenon, a significant element in our current scene. But because the term "reason" was earlier used to imply primarily a reliance upon *a priori* reasoning from assumedly self-evident principles, the phrase is now open to possible misinterpretation. It is the use of intelligence in the inductive study of affairs that we herein wish especially to uphold.

of man's thought and discussion to deal with the practical affairs of life.

As this loss of faith became apparent, various groups sought to exploit it to their several ends. Certain social-political groups used it to make preparation for a day of desired violent revolution. To their program flocked many, especially the unemployed young people, both of our own country and elsewhere. As suggested, Mussolini and Hitler profited from this general breakdown of faith in ordinary human intelligence to build up their cult of dictatorship. Still other groups, religious in outlook, welcomed the loss of faith in man and sought to increase it by stressing anew such older doctrines as the inherent weakness and sinfulness of man, the hopelessness of any gospel of social improvement, and the inherent impotence of human reason against an element of irrationality said by them to be inherent in the nature of the universe. Thus, in part, it appears, arose Barthianism in Germany and neo-orthodoxy elsewhere.

Many who have accepted this "retreat from reason" as a movement to foster have especially attacked any consistently democratic education. Democratic teaching processes have been decried as soft and weakening, and a return has been advocated to older practices of "discipline" and indoctrination. It would not be true to say that all who have lost faith in man have cultivated their loss selfishly; the contrary in fact is true for many. But some long troubled at the unpopularity of certain of their doctrines have hailed this period of confusion and doubt as a long-sought opportunity and have endeavored to exploit it for the re-establishment of those losing doctrines. It is these last-named groups, it appears, who have been most active in spreading the doubt that the public school as thus far conducted is adequate to its spiritual task. And these have seized on the exclusion of religion from the public school as the particular point of alleged weakness, asserting that as long as this exclusion holds, the sole and necessary basis is lacking for

the teaching of the spiritual values necessary for a proper civilization.

In our defense of the public school we wish it clearly understood that we intend no attack on religion. We do, however, assert our strong belief that all the youth of all the people should be educated together in the common public school and that the combined concern of all the people should foster and support this common school. We admit the legal right of any local group to organize a private school of its own; and it is possible that, under exceptional conditions, such a step might be wise and proper, especially where the aim is to initiate some worthy educational experiment or even perhaps to stage a needed public protest. But even so we wish to point to the attendant and inherent threat to the democratic process if such non-public schools should become so numerous or so permanent as to constitute an institutionalized rival to the common public school. The divisive effect of such rival systems within the body politic we believe to be hurtful, and this we hold whatever be the faith or cult or economic status or other divisive motive which supports the separation.

To clear up initial uncertainties, it may be well to give explicit consideration to the meanings herein to be given the key terms *civilization*, *spiritual values*, *public school*, and *separation of church and state*.

The term *civilization* is used, we find, in two senses that here concern us. In the one sense it is, as earlier suggested, the correlative of any culture. Each group, whether ancient Hittite or modern Swiss, lives its own culture, and the result is its civilization. In the other sense, the term is reserved for those groups whose cultural attainments if not admittedly higher in the scale are at any rate preferred to others. Many anthropologists question whether it is scientifically possible to prove the differences of value involved in assumed differences of level. We do not here enter upon an argument on the point, but say that when we of this book speak of the spiritual values necessary

to an acceptable civilization we are following the second sense at least in preferring certain civilizations to others. And, it may be added, we shall later count it necessary to show how the necessary spiritual values are essential to the more desirable civilization.

The term *spiritual values* was implicitly defined earlier in this chapter where certain of these values were named as necessary to any satisfactory civilization. The same values have through the years been frequently discussed under the inclusive heading of "the true, the beautiful, and the good."

It is possible here to define the conception of spiritual values from an experiential point of view. To begin at the bottom, in all animal life there arise *wants*, hunger for example; and corresponding to any such want something may be found to satisfy it, as food satisfies hunger. Anything so answering a want we may call a *good*. This level of choosing, if we may so use the term, is shared by man with the brutes. We may accordingly call this the first or lowest level of evaluation.

But man goes higher. He finds that wants may thwart each other and that it pays—in the quality of life lived—to think before acting, to stop and think to choose in order to make life as good as possible, or more surely good, or at least to bring the fewest regrets. So to weigh goods against each other before choosing is to *evaluate* in the proper sense of the term. Man alone is capable of this valuing effort. To live a life characterized by such thoughtful choosing is to live on what we may call a higher or second level of evaluation.

But man can go still higher. Since the time of the Greeks, men have engaged in critical thinking. We can study critically the life process, how it proceeds, and what constitutes the good life seen at its best. For this we must study critically the terms we use in thinking and the principles involved in judging all the various parts and aspects of experience—right and wrong, truth, beauty. The values which emerge from such critical study constitute what we may call the third level of

evaluation, the level of spiritual values in the full and proper sense. And we can say further of any step taken to move toward a higher level of thought and act, even from the lowest, that in so far as one moves consciously upward (as upward is here defined), doing this on the basis of consideration for fuller fitness, in that degree does he manifest true spiritual quality. We shall later return to a further elaboration of the definition of spiritual values—the whole book is in a sense such an exposition—but this preliminary discussion will, it is hoped, at least indicate the sense in which we are using the term *spiritual values*.

If anyone should object that we have in our usage deflected the term *spiritual* from what he calls its true and necessary meaning, in that our usage carries no explicit or necessary reference to religious or divine authority or sanction, our reply would be that recognized usage gives no such necessary reference. On the contrary, there are various recognized meanings, among them one which to be sure does carry this religious implication; but there are other meanings which amply support the usage we have adopted. Some might prefer another term than spiritual values for expressing what we here have in mind, possibly higher values or, simply, values. We grant to these, of course, full right to their judgment, but we think the term spiritual more adequately implies the richer content we are thinking of than does any alternative. In fact, we feel that if our book can help spread this usage of the term spiritual, it will be better all round; specifically, that it may make for better agreement among diverse groups. It may be added finally that we mean in adopting the term no commitment to any dualism but rather the contrary; and just as truly we mean no asceticism. As we thus uphold the spiritual values in experience, it is the good life we seek, the life good to live; and we seek it for all and as far as is humanly possible to effect it on terms of equality for all.

The term *public school* as here used is of course easily defined. By it we mean specifically the American type of public



school—publicly controlled and publicly supported—and, especially for present purposes, one run consistently on the American doctrine of the separation of church and state.

The term *separation of church and state* is likewise easily defined for the purposes here under consideration. We understand by this term the doctrine that the state shall not appropriate money to religious institutions and shall not prefer one religious outlook as such to another; and that the state will protect its citizens in the equal free exercise of thought and choice in matters religious and will require of its schools that they not teach or act in any way to contravene these principles.

In the matter of teaching, we believe specifically that there is a large area of ground common for both public school teachers and religious teachers to the end that they should have common concern for the spiritual values herein upheld and can likewise find a common support for those values. Outside of this common ground, into the area of religious authority, the public school teacher as such may not go, while therein the religious teacher is free to teach as to him seems right. We then, explicitly, affirm the full right of any religious group to add, under its separate teaching auspices, any religious authority or any non-socially-hurtful religious considerations it may choose. But we do pointedly reject and oppose any denial by such religious groups of the full right of the public school to teach the named spiritual values and their like on any grounds of validity which human reason can with due critical care choose to defend.