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Are Alliances Across our Differences in Education Possible?

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Let me begin this essay with an honest personal statement. I have been struggling for years with the question of what role religious understandings and commitments should play in public education and in the larger society. Part of this is perhaps due to my search for my own religious roots as a secular and politically progressive “public intellectual” (Apple 2019). And part of it is connected to my strong ethical and educational disagreements with the increasingly influential role that what I have called “authoritarian populist” religious conservatives are playing in educational policy around privatization, educational finance, homeschooling, curriculum politics, teacher certification, and a number of other areas (see Apple 2006).¹

Yet at the same time as I worry about the effects of religious authoritarian populism, I also applaud and support more progressive religious groups that have served as a counter to some of the more conservative (and at times racist) religious mobilizations that have grown in influence over the past decades in the United States and elsewhere. Thus, I remain hopeful that these groups and actions can serve as a corrective to the ways in which religious groups are often portrayed in the media and in the narratives of a large number of progressive critics and critical educators. These narratives primarily focus on conservative evangelicals, while much more socially and culturally critically oriented religious groups are less often included, except perhaps in passing. I recognize that these narratives have an effect on how I try to deal with my contradictory feelings about the place of religious understandings and commitments in education in the larger society.

Of course, in saying this, there is no doubt in my mind that we must not ignore the fact that many conservative religious groups play a key role in the “hegemonic bloc” that supports much of the damaging neoliberal and neoconservative agenda in education and so much else. Indeed, this is one of the reasons I have devoted a good deal of attention to them elsewhere (see Apple 2006, 2014). However, in the United States and in many other nations, religious support for critical democracy, for anti-racist, non-homophobic, and more robust and thick participatory forms of public institutions, including schools, have been essential to building and defending more progressive policies and in cementing alliances to defend them (Apple et al. 2018). Much of the motivation behind these actions is inspired by deeply religious convictions.

Let me give another personal example. I am often asked to work in countries where authoritarian tendencies have been institutionalized. This has meant that I am faced

¹I hope that I will be forgiven for being a bit self-referential in this essay. There is a limit to what can be said in an essay of this size and I have thought and written about these issues at greater length in a number of other places. Thus, I point the readers to other places to which they might turn to get a fuller sense of my worries and my arguments.

with a choice: Either remain largely publicly “neutral” or speak out against oppressive relations. My choice has almost always been to act in solidarity with marginalized groups and to speak out publicly in support of their demands, sometimes with results that are predictable. Interestingly, these are just as often profoundly transformative experiences in challenging my presuppositions about religion and other relations. Thus, when I was arrested in South Korea for speaking out against the military dictatorship in power at that time, a number of the people who were arrested with me were also deeply religious, guided by an understanding that “Jesus spent his life working for the poor and oppressed. I will commit myself to this myself no matter what the risks.” This is a powerful sentiment, one I believe needs to be supported (see Apple 2013).

There are lessons to be learned here, both for me and for many people within the critical educational community who are suspicious of religion or who automatically assume that it is by its very nature deeply politically conservative. It raises clear questions about the tendency among some factions of the secular Left inside and outside of education to dismiss religious understandings. It raises strategic questions as well about whether religious and secular groups can find common ground, even when there are deep divisions among (and at times within) them.

In saying this, as I noted above I do not at all wish to ignore the growing power of ultra-conservative and repressive religious movements and ideologies in many nations such as Myanmar, India, Pakistan, Hungary, Poland, Israel/Palestine—and yes, in parts of the United States. Indeed, I have written very critically about them in *Educating the “Right” Way* and elsewhere (see, e.g., Apple 2006). However, I fear that many progressive activists and scholars who are struggling to build and defend more thickly democratic institutions and social relations may be pushing away a considerable number of people who are religiously motivated. This is a very real limitation of a number of the critical positions that the Left in education has taken over the years. Too often advocates for radical egalitarian positions have been overly dismissive of religious motivations and understandings. This is more than a little unwise tactically, and also forgets the historical role that a number of religious movements have played in the ongoing struggles for social justice in so many societies, especially but not only with racialized and minoritized oppressed groups (see, e.g., West 2002). Indeed, this act of historical amnesia can be a performance of “whiteness.” It is odd in another way, too. One of the guiding figures in the development of critical education internationally was Paulo Freire, someone who himself was strongly influenced by liberation theology.

In countering this overly dismissive attitude, we need to think more subtly about how we should understand the complexities of religious movements and thereby open up other possibilities. Let me take the belief that the divide that separates authoritarian populist religious advocates and secular progressive groups is so wide that it is impossible to find common ground. To begin, rather than assuming that religious conservatism is based on a totally rightist sensibility about everything we may hold dear, it would be wiser to look at what I call the elements of “good sense” as well as bad sense in people’s anger about current policies inside and outside of education and how they are convinced to follow the leadership of more neoliberal and neoconservative groups (Hochschild 2016). This is a wise position not only theoretically but strategically as well. People are not “puppets.” They have real reasons for their worries—and it is not

automatic that they move to the right rather than toward more progressive politics. It takes hard ideological work, what I have called a vast social/pedagogic project, for people to agree with rightist “solutions.” Discursive politics are crucial elements here, both in responding to religious sentiments, but also in other areas of social life (Apple 2006).

But the fact that dominant groups have been successful in moving many people to the right by connecting to people’s partly accurate understandings of their daily lives means that progressives must also work to make connections to the core meanings of their lives and to the real problems people experience (Hochschild 2016). A politics based on better attempts to understand the realities of people’s lives has a much greater chance of having conservatives listen more carefully to our arguments.

Do not misunderstand me. There is of course a very real danger here. People’s commonsense may already be articulated around racist nativist understandings, by unarticulated assumptions grounded in possessive individualism and selfishness rather than a concern for a more robust sense of the common good. Thus, while I agree that there is a definite need to listen carefully and to talk across our ideological differences, not only do *both* sides have to be willing to do this, but we must not do it in a manner that somehow legitimates anti-immigrant racism and other profoundly racist positions,² educational visions of children as simply future workers, the attacks on women’s control of their bodies, an arrogance in assuming that “God only talks to me,” and similar ethically problematic positions. This will be difficult. Obviously we need to go into these dialogs with respect for real people’s concerns and a greater knowledge of the local. But we also need to realize that respect must come from both sides and that we will have to think very carefully about what compromises are worth making in order for the dialog to go further and lead perhaps to joint understandings and joint actions.

This is something I have given a good deal of thought to and, like many readers of this journal I am certain, have tried to embody in personal and professional actions. For example, in books such as *Educating the “Right” Way* and *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple 2006, 2013), I call for “hybrid alliances” between what are usually very different ideological and religious allegiances. A prime example in education in the United States was the case of Channel One, a for-profit television station that was broadcast in many public and private schools and that, thankfully, for many economic and political reasons, is no longer in operation.

Channel One provided ten minutes of “news” accompanied by two minutes of well-designed commercials. Many schools agreed to have Channel One in their schools not only because it was slickly marketed as a “solution” to real school problems about making our students “more knowledgeable about current affairs,” but also because it gave the school equipment such as a satellite dish, TV monitors, and other things that can add up to many tens of thousands of dollars. The catch is that, as a captive audience, students were required to watch the commercials. Teachers and students were given no choice about this. Not to do this meant that Channel One would sever the contract and the equipment would be removed. This connected then and now to the growing concern about the increased uses of schools as sites of profit (Apple 2014; Burch 2009).

²There is a complex historical connection between conservative religious forms in the United States and racist understandings and positions. See, for example, Heyrman (1997), Kintz (1997), Noll (2002), and Goege (2015).

In response to this, I and others formed an alliance with conservative religious groups to remove Channel One from schools. For the conservative evangelicals, “children are created in God’s image” and it is “ungodly” for them to be bought and sold as commodities for profit in schools. For me and other progressives, we may not have agreed with the specific theological position taken by the conservative religious advocates, but we too were and continue to be deeply concerned about commodifying children as a captive audience for corporate profits. Thus, these two usually diametrically opposed ideological positions were unified around a specific educational project, to stop the selling of children for profit. This alliance enabled the removal of Channel One from a number of school districts. It also has led to the reduction of stereotypes on both sides and to keeping open a space for further dialog.

This focus on things that bind us together, not pull us apart, can also be seen outside the United States. A prime example can be found in Porto Alegre in Brazil where religiously inspired movements played a very large role in the growth of progressive mobilizations there—and of keeping them together. This was especially the case in education where critical democratic educational institutions, policies, and practices that drew on a rich combination of progressive religious understandings and equally progressive secular educational theories and politics were combined. These gains are under threat currently with the growth in power of rightist movements, including very conservative and powerful evangelical movements that receive considerable amounts of funding from similar movements in the United States. But the defense of the continued existence of such critically democratic schools, curricula, and teaching practices still stands as a remarkable achievement (Apple et al. 2018).

Of course, the United States is not Brazil. But if too many progressives in the United States tend to automatically mistrust groups who find meaning in religious understandings, in the process this risks marginalizing religious motivations and traditions that could underpin alliances over crucial elements of agreement. These alliances are visible in such growing grassroots populist movements surrounding the “Moral Monday” actions that have been stimulated by important religious leaders such as the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber and others. They are visible as well in the pro-immigrant sanctuary commitments advanced by multiple churches, mosques, synagogues, and other formal and informal religious institutions and meeting grounds found among multiple populations. They are also visible in the growing pro-environmental worries among a number of evangelical movements. It is well worth considering whether “hybrid” alliances across our differences that advance specific progressive projects inside and outside of education can be built.

But, and it is an important but, in even considering this I again do not want to minimize my original worries. It remains very important to recognize that the continuing growth of “authoritarian populist” conservative religious movements that are actively defending existing and even more radical and at times antidemocratic policies may still make this difficult in education and other areas. These movements are among the fastest growing advocates for particular kinds of educational reform throughout the nation. Take as one example the growth of homeschooling, one in which millions of children are engaged. In some ways, the homeschooling phenomenon is partly a reaction to the attention being given to the ways in which the “crisis in public schools” is portrayed in the media. Much of it is also part of a larger reaction to the perceived dominance of

secular values in schools, to the feelings that conservative religious knowledge and ways of understanding the world are not given equal weight in the curriculum. Yet, just as importantly, while the homeschooling movement is varied, in all too many cases it functions as the creation of ideological “gated communities” in which the culture and body of the “Other” are seen as forms of pollution that must be avoided at all costs (Apple 2006; see also Kintz 1997). Struggles over culture, over identities, and over whiteness and the feeling that one is part of the “new oppressed” are core parts of the emerging politics of education on the right and within the religious right in particular.

While I want to be respectful of diversity, it is important to understand that in many parts of this movement, issues of biblical authority intersect with long histories of racial fear, of the loss of “our” God-given roles as men and women, and of a government that actively takes away “liberty” (Apple 1996, 2006; MacLean 2017). It will not be easy to find dialogic space when faced with these kinds of positions.³ Thus, there will be dangers as well as possibilities and any attempts to engage cooperatively with such groups should be approached with honesty and the maintenance of a deep commitment to justifiably held anti-racist, anti-homophobic, social justice values. These are not things that should be sacrificed as we try to build a broader “we”.

There are still fundamental differences between the larger agendas of the groups involved in these debates. Dialog across ideological boundaries and a focus on the elements of good sense among people who disagree are necessary and can engender more respect and understanding. Therefore it should (cautiously) be sought after. However, let us again be honest. As I noted above, such dialog can give legitimacy to positions that we justifiably find homophobic, sexist, racist, and anti-immigrant. We need to constantly reflect on whether these dialogs, possible hybrid alliances, and the policies and practices that might evolve from them are leading in more critically democratic directions in the long term.

In the end then, the questions about religion and education with which I began this brief essay remain, as do the tensions they cause about where I can justifiably stand in relation to them. In his book *Who Is Man?* the progressive theologian Abraham Heschel (1965) reminds us that a constitutive part of being human is to always “wrestle.” We are unfinished projects ethically and politically. Indeed, who the “we” is and could be is part of what needs to be constantly wrestled with. For me, I cannot answer those very difficult questions about where I stand in the abstract. I have given a few examples of working across the boundaries that provide possibilities of partially dealing with these issues. But I am certainly not fully satisfied that they adequately solve my ethical and political worries. The wrestling continues.

Notes on contributor

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³There is a growing population of black homeschoolers, however. This is a group with whom I have a good deal of sympathy. The lamentable conditions within which large numbers of minoritized students have to somehow survive in all too many schools are too painful to recount once again.

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