

CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND PUBLIC WITNESS

by Stephen Richard Turley, Tall Oaks Classical School

This article was originally published in The Imaginative Conservative.

On Thursday, February 28, 2013, two school districts in Delaware voted on whether to approve a significant increase in property taxes to make up for state shortfalls in school funding. While both referenda were rejected soundly, the weeks leading up to the vote threw into relief the question of the relationship between public education and Christian witness. With 90% of children in the U.S. attending public schools, the modern pulpit appears generally indifferent on the issue of private vs. public education for its parishioners; indeed, one might say pastors are generally supportive of public education. However, I believe that this affirming orientation is indicative of a much larger problem facing the church today. In what follows, I want to explore the nature of faithful Christian witness in public life in order to determine the extent to which that witness has been compromised in our modern context.

First, it is essential to understand that the public/private school dichotomy which prevails in our social arrangements and discourse is extremely misleading. This is because *all education is public*: all education seeks to cultivate within students an appreciation of shared values that constitute the common good of a community. There is simply no such thing as an education that is

entirely private. There is, however, education that is coercively funded and non-coercively funded; there is an education system that depends on the compulsory nature of the state versus one that depends on the voluntary tuition paid by willing participants. Leaving aside the moral dilemma such a distinction potentially poses, the question that emerges is not whether we are going to support public education, but whether we are going to support the kind of public promoted by state-financed education.

In a word, the defining attribute of that public order perpetuated by state-funded education is *secular*. It is claimed that a secular society is one that neither favors nor discriminates against any particular religion. Religion and politics simply do not mix in a modern secular society. While variant religions remain highly significant for people, this significance is maintained and expressed in the private sphere of life. By privatizing faith, it is suggested that all peoples are able to participate equally in economic, political, and sociological life without religious discrimination. And tax-funded schools, as an extension of this vision of the public, have carved out neutral space so as to allow people of all religions to come together and learn facts and data

Stephen Richard Turley (PhD, Durham University) is a faculty member at Tall Oaks Classical School in New Castle, DE, where he teaches theology, Greek, and rhetoric, and is adjunct professor of Fine Arts at Eastern University in St. Davids, PA. He has contributed a number of articles published in scholarly journals on education, aesthetics, theology, and ritual. Steve and his wife, Akiko, have four children, all of whom attend Tall Oaks Classical School.

common to everyone.

Now, this certainly sounds reasonable. The public promoted and perpetuated by the secular state neither favors nor discriminates against any particular religion. But what if it turns out that it was in fact the secular state that *redefined* religion this way? What if our understanding of faith and religion as that which belongs in one's private life rather than in the public square is itself the social invention of the secular state? What if religion has been redefined by the very institution that claims to "protect" it?

In contrast to our modern religious sensibilities, classical Christianity understood the church as offering to the world an alternative public distinct from that offered by the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds. The church was a civilization, the city-state of the New Jerusalem. In fact, Augustine goes so far as to call the church a "republic" in his *City of God*. Indeed, the term *ekklesia*, the Greek word for "church," was not what we would call today a "religious term" such as *thiasos* (worship of a particular deity); *ekklesia* was in fact a political term that designated the assembly of adult citizen males who had the ultimate decision making power in a city-state. Hence, the gospel was not a promise of personal and private salvation; the gospel was instead a declaration announcing that the entire cosmos had been incorporated into Christ's transformative life, death, and resurrection, which was expressed in shared life-worlds of mutuality, self-giving, and fellowship. As such, the "truth of the gospel" was considered a thoroughly public truth. Truth was not merely personal persuasion; truth was, in fact, a revelation of reality which was socially recognized as absolute and unquestionable.

By the third century, educational institutions were considered integral to this public witness of the church. In cities such as Alexandria and Antioch, Christian education adopted the frames of reference of classical education which sought to cultivate within the student a

sense of what classical scholars call "cosmic piety": every person born into the world is born into a world of divine obligation. Classical education thus sought to instill within students the transcendent values embedded in the created order, namely, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful as they configured around Christ the Logos. It was believed that by embodying these cosmic values, students cultivated a virtuous soul. Classical Christian education was therefore a project by which the student was initiated into a public order that materialized or substantiated a cosmic piety, which in turn enabled the student to fulfill his or her divine purpose and thereby become truly human. And this vision of education remained normative up to the end of the nineteenth century.

However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, things had changed rather dramatically. A few centuries earlier, the Treaty of Westphalia in effect consigned the church to an organ of the state, which concentrated unprecedented power around local regents. As nation-states started to emerge in Europe, the burden on universities was to produce more civil servants than clergy, a process that Perry Glanzer has labeled the "nationalization of the universities¹." This transformation of the university into a servant of the nation-state led to the reconception of knowledge that foregrounded science at the exclusion of the church. Consequently, there emerged a whole new definition of *religion*: religion was no longer a public expression of cosmic piety and social obligation; instead, religion was simply something that one personally believed but could not know, it was that by which one cultivated a sense of private meaning and existential satisfaction. But religion had no public—that is objective—value *at all*.

With the advent of liberal democracies throughout Europe after World War I, there was in effect a massive recalibration of the totality of social and economic life around the state. And it is here that secularism plays a key role, for it is through secularization that the state is

able to perpetuate and protect its monopolization over the public square. And the primary mechanism by which such monopolization is maintained is the redefinition of religion and the consequent marginalization of the church to the private sphere of life. The state effectively marginalizes the church (or any other competing vision of the public) by *reinventing our conception of faith and religion* in accordance with secular norms: faith and religion are little more than instrumental means by which individuals find personal meaning and purpose for their lives.

Hence, the role of education in a public defined by secular norms is to maintain the state's monopolization over the public square by perpetuating a dichotomy between the public and the private, science and religion, fact and faith, knowledge and belief; in short, state-funded education perpetuates and promotes the secularization of society. It is this public/private dichotomy that is profoundly detrimental to the witness of the church, for it in effect denies the church its distinctly *public* witness. The church's unique vision for a humane society is reduced to merely one of innumerable options for private recreation: yoga class on Saturday, youth group on Sunday. Because the church has been consigned to private belief rather than public knowledge, it has been stripped of the distinctly public frames of reference by which its truth claims are demonstrated to be more trustworthy than any other competing private belief. Consequentially, objective Christian commitments embodied in the shared life of the church collapse, and the integrity of the gospel is inexorably compromised.

Moreover, by insisting upon this dichotomy between science and religion, modern education must *by definition* turn students away from the classical vision of cosmic piety, cutting them off from encountering the cosmic values of the True, Good, and Beautiful. Indeed, today, both in our schools and wider society, the True, Good, and Beautiful are now whatever one

wants them to be. There is simply no divine obligation apart from that which each person chooses to impose upon him or herself.

If Christians are to remain faithful to the biblical gospel, we must once again affirm the public witness of the church, particularly in the field of education. For such an affirmation not only awakens the soul to the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, but in embodying the Truth, it exposes the state-financed educational system which denies Truth for what it is: *a lie*. We cannot teach our students that Truth is relative and expect our politicians to be honest; we can't claim that the Good has been replaced by situational ethics and expect Wall Street executives to ground their business decisions in anything other than profit, greed, and expediency; and we cannot relegate Beauty to personal preference and then feign shock when we encounter a urinal as part of an art exhibit.

Christians will never expose this lie as long as they support and fund it. Classical Christian education offers nothing less than a parallel public, a revelation of Truth that in its social splendor awakens wonder and awe in teacher and student alike, as together they fellowship in Him who is the divine renewal of all things.

NOTES

1. Perry L. Glanzer, "The Role of the State in the Secularization of Christian Higher Education: A Case Study of Eastern Europe," *Journal of Church and State* 53, 2 (2011): 161-82.