

BOOK REVIEW

**Educational philosophy for a post-secular age**, by D. Lewin, New York, Routledge, 2017, 168p., £88 (Hardback), ISBN: 978-1-138-92366-9

David Lewin's *Educational Philosophy for a Post-Secular Age* is a book that fulfills the promise that is conveyed in its title. In a post 9/11 world, stricken by religious fundamentalism, there is a temptation to think education in purely 'secular' terms, and associate it with critical reason as sanity, almost continuing the project of modernism within a (post) postmodern world. Such temptation reflects what some have referred to as 'the narrative of secularization;' namely, the thesis that despite fundamentalism, religion is in decline, and perhaps it is a phase from which we are emerging or even 'advancing.' Lewin's book poses a stark challenge to the various assumptions involved in such temptations and ideas, or following his path, ought I say – such *sentiments*. They may 'work' only if we allow a neoliberal economic ethos to silently take over education as a substitute for serious educational deliberations, or if we fail to acknowledge that the colloquial terms 'secular' and 'religious,' have lost the ability to describe the world in which we live (and perhaps they never were appropriate for that matter). Very roughly stated, Lewin's theses are that: (a) what we call the 'secular' is hardly obvious as a label for human experience, for the religious is entangled with our lives in ways that are far more subtle and complex, (b) thinking of religions as worldviews that can be reduced to propositions creates misunderstandings both for religion and for education, (c) the attempt to propose a 'neutrally' secular education is implausible, finally (d) religion is hardly something to overcome or progress from; it is a way to acknowledge reality and engage in a deeper critical understanding of education that we ought to celebrate rather than negate.

Lewin's normative argument in terms of educational philosophy is that '[T]he time has come to open up a renewed, post-critical dialog: *towards shared transcendence*' (p. 4). Perhaps in tune with Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski (in press) recent work, post-criticality is construed here as a positive normative orientation for education. For Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski 'post'-criticality is a turn from the negative valence of critical discourse toward a 'love of the world.' For Lewin it is a turn from an alleged 'secularity' associated with education, toward making explicit a reality that is saturated with notions that are more appropriately described based on religious terms. Throughout the first part of the book, Lewin carves the blurriness of the post-secular. For Lewin, however, this blurriness is exactly the opportunity to be seized for education in our times, rather than a predicament to avoid. If we seek to position education in alignment with a reality, which does not 'behave' according to those neat categories of 'secular' vs. 'religious,' then a serious engagement with the critical space of the post-secular, is not an option. It is an educational and philosophical commitment that responds to a candid gaze at reality and no-less, at our selves.

The post-secular emerges as we follow Lewin's methodical analysis, which reflects a constant avoidance of too final definitions that risk betraying his commitment to the hermeneutic nature of being human. Post-secularity is neither secularity nor religiosity in any simple sense, but rather, the entanglement of one with the other that seems to be far more in tune with East Asian non-dualist approaches. Religion for Lewin is not a weak 'belief without evidence,' nor is science a neat description of the factual world that can avoid metaphysical assumptions (pp. 38–40). The question for Lewin then, is not whether religion should or should not have a place in education. Such question stems from misinterpretations of everyday life. Human beings express beliefs and commitments not only by articulating propositions about God or the Church, but also in what they eat and wear (ch. 3). Religion keeps appearing in the cracks of even those most explicit attempts (as in the US) to separate Church and State (ch. 2), whether in its conventional sense or within civic rituals as

interpreted by Robert Bellah. The question then for Lewin, is how to articulate and learn from the ongoing presence of religion in contemporary life, which 'is too readily disregarded by educationalists who see it either as a foreign invader, a problem to be solved, or as a mechanism by which to reinforce particular religious, cultural or national identities' (p. 10). When religions are construed as competing worldviews that are supposedly summed by 'rational' propositions, education becomes stuck within the polarities of the secular and the confessional, the allegedly 'serious-scientific and critical' and the resulting 'religious and hence naïve and uncritical.' For Lewin, these associations are too simplistic. Failing to critique their inappropriateness as descriptions of what we do in educational practice, is succumbing to various forms of indoctrination and dogmatism. It matters less whether we then call them 'secular' or 'religious.' The first part of the book exposes the post-secular space based on this critical lens.

The final chapter of the first part of the book is a nuanced reading of Heidegger's attempt to overcome Western metaphysics. Heidegger's pedagogical method denies conventional 'thinking' as a progression towards more accurate representations of the world, a conception that reflects customary curricular–pedagogical understandings. Lewin interprets Heidegger's 'thinking' with the aid of Buddhism and Taoism, and reveals it to be far more a mode of attending. While here, Lewin does not explicitly tie this to the notion of post-secularity his argument is well served for: 'Religions cannot be fundamentally propositional in a context where thinking cannot be simply representational' (p. 80).

In tune with Philip Wexler (2000), Yotam Hotam (2016) and others, the second part of the book reveals the way in which religions offer different symbolic systems and rich narratives for meaning making, critiquing, understanding, and renewing education. Lewin demonstrates this as he draws us to the post-secular pedagogical space, by applying the 'religious'/post-secular concepts of submission, attention, and union. He turns to various traditions and their interpreters, and deploys diverse methodologies in order to offer a phenomenology of the educative pedagogical moment. This includes a lovely autoethnographical section in which Lewin demonstrates the act of submission in his own Tai Chi Chuan training with a Master (ch. 5), as well as an elaborate account of Jacques Ranciere's emancipatory pedagogy as conveyed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (ch. 7).

Acknowledging that the notion of submission within education in contemporary times, can seem out of place, Lewin reminds us that there is 'no neutral vantage point in education from which to teach the facts' (p. 102). No less, the mere act of attending must presuppose some form of submission. However, as chapter six demonstrates, attention itself, is hardly as obvious as the injunction applied by teachers – 'pay attention' – discloses. Lewin ties it to the post-secular space by exploring its relation to the Biblical *Beholding*, to questions of human agency, as well as to the recent attempts to train attention within mindfulness interventions. The latter are more likely conceived as aligning with the neoliberal orientation, than satisfying Lewin's nuanced approach (p. 114).

The chapter on *union* further articulates the similarities between education and religion and the tensions between them. Both entail the possibility of viewing the subject as lacking or conversely, as holding a profound truth within. Whichever the case, the subject is supposedly in need for a teacher/ guru and a practice, who supposedly 'already knows,' and supposedly can lead the way. Yet, as Lewin demonstrates, both the practices and the 'curricular' image of progress and assent that they bring forth are unfulfilling. The post-secular pedagogical moment remains *aporetic*, if like Lewin; we acknowledge the unsolvable tensions that are its makings.

I find one of the most compelling accomplishments of this book, in Lewin's successful counter-movement of applying religion as a medium for critical thinking for education, while at the same time insisting on the normative and transcendent nature of education (see for example, it 'cannot be denied that something meaningful is at stake in how we bring children and young people into the world: a set of commitments of values is implied that cannot be bracketed out'(p. 148)). Education cannot really be a secular practice, in as far as 'secular' is somehow associated with neutrality or with 'sticking with facts.' If we acknowledge this inevitable orientation toward the

'good,' then even beyond the most economistic educational model (see ch. 8), the question 'why?' will lurk to haunt such naivety, leading to a place beyond 'fact' that can only mean *belief*. Ignoring this means hiding from the indoctrinatory nature of education, which can only be ameliorated through a serious discussion of the sources from which our curricular deliberations emerge. Lewin's book is hence an acknowledgement of the ever-present educational deliberative act that is imbued with this transcendent nature, perhaps reminding us of Dwayne Huebner's *Lure of the Transcendent*. It is a call for us to celebrate this deliberation rather than attempt to overcome it, for this is the nature of education.

*Educational Philosophy for a Secular Age* is an interpretation of the present that calls us to think the future of education, but it is also grounded clearly in the Socratic tradition. Reading this book is a blend of the clarity of words and what they can articulate, yet that which is being clarified is how wide the *aporia* of education as a human practice. The sources of the educational *aporia* emerge from those places that mortal humans only imagine, and to which mystics can only point. It is clearly a dense and sophisticated book, yet one who spends time with it, will also feel the reward of knowing that one does not know.

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