

## Review Essay

Purpel, D.E. (1989). *The moral and spiritual crisis in education: A curriculum for justice and compassion in education*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 174 pp., \$12.95 (paper).

One characteristic of a good book is that it stands up and speaks its piece; it lets the readers know *where* it stands, while engaging us to locate our own positions. In his recent book, David Purpel outlines an educational praxis which originates in an attentiveness to "the pain and anguish of the human condition" (p. 139). One of a growing number of practitioners who have been "shivering from the cold breath of a reality where knowledge is power and power is knowledge" (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. xxix), Purpel proposes that the spiritual lacunae in contemporary American life is the "appropriate and meaningful departure" (p. 2) for an educational (and curricular) transformation. He clearly believes that the dull emptiness plaguing so much of contemporary social reality in the United States — something he feels as "the moral and spiritual crisis in education" — is a struggle with which educators should be involved. With simple and straightforward arguments, the book can be seen as an attempt to *sacralize* the educational process, to imbue it with a spirit of ultimate significance and meaning (p. 78). Anything else, he claims, is a trivialization.

Heralded in a historical context more ominous, more fragile, more cynical than in other hard times, the role of the educator must include "the development of a culture of social justice and compassion" (p. 121). His tone of evangelical piety and ecumenical cooperation towards what is fundamentally a social movement is not dissimilar to an earlier "social gospel" in this country, nor the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. His position is reminiscent as well of the concerns of harsher critics of modernity of the sort Hans Cornelius, mentor to both Horkheimer and Adorno, captured well:

Men have unlearned the ability to recognize the Godly in themselves and in things: nature and art, family and state have only interest for them as sensations. Therefore their lives flow meaninglessly by, and their shared culture is inwardly empty and will collapse because it is worthy of collapse. The new religion, however, which mankind needs, will first emerge from the ruins of this culture. (p. 6)

While the "crisis" of which much theory and practice speak has symptoms problematic for any ideological persuasion, the hue of Purpel's orientation is postmodernist. Until the recent, happy turn of events, the increasing proliferation of nuclear weapons and/or the capacity to wage extended "conventional" wars had exacerbated the tension of the Cold War. The existence endured by vast numbers of people whether it be in East Africa, Afghanistan, Central America, or New York City has become exceedingly impoverished. The ecocidal effects on the planet — meltdowns and runoffs, destruction of rain forests, depletion of

the ozone, increasing desertification, garbage, pollution, smog — have brought up urgent questions about who is in charge and what they're doing. Estrangement, narcissism, self-deception, arrogance, despair, and powerlessness indicate a surrender for many to the hegemonic conditioning of modernity.

Long the bane of progressive educators, the functionalization of schoolwork has provided little purpose, little value, or little preparation for active democratic participation and social empowerment. By radicalizing a progressive theme which regards schools as cultural sites where knowledge and power are immediately present and concretely felt, Purpel believes that socially responsible educators can develop imaginative strategies for interacting between the individual's need of autonomy and the responsibility for the social. According to Purpel, the transformation of educational practice in the public schools is still a possibility. However, the "hope and a faith" (p. 165) sustaining him is much more attuned to the conditions David Nasaw (1979) referred to as being "schooled to order." More than past progressives Purpel realizes that the purification of the well of uninspired, nondirected, functionalistic schooling can take nothing for granted.

While he acknowledges the structural aspects of social crisis and the concomitant deficiencies of the schooling system, the book is not a sociological critique. His main focus is to reilluminate a dimension of human be-ing that he feels has been drained, repressed, and rejected. As the concept of crisis denotes, the historical moment — dire as it may appear — is also "a time of heightened consciousness, a time when more people are more aware than perhaps at any other time in history" (p. 21). It is from this *dialectic* of crisis that he starts.

Educators — and Purpel sketches the creative potency of this polymorphous group well, almost a sense of a revolutionary class — can, indeed, must, have a greater impact during this period of crisis. The implications are profound for this reassessment of teacher autonomy and much stronger than the recent and well publicized recommendations by Ted Sizer, Ernest Boyer, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Purpel explores the Gramscian theme of teachers as intellectuals, people who think, take responsibility, are creative. This has been a theme for other critical thinkers as well (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985; Giroux, 1988). In the tensions of the philosophical — the ways in which individuals view their world — with the political — the ways in which the world has been set up — is the activity of the pedagogical. It is much more than an insightful philosophical glance or a further rendering of social crisis. It is a praxis, or in Roger Simon's terms, an integration in practice of content, strategies, purpose, and methods in the classroom:

a teacher's work within an institutional context specif[y] a particular version of what knowledge is of most worth, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment. (Simon, 1987, p. 370)

The notion of teacher as transformative intellectual includes the Freirean principle of making the pedagogical more *political* and the political more *pedagogical*. Part of this analysis involves, as Purpel explains in a later chapter, reshaping

curriculum design so as to bring light to what is “important” — in this case, the relationship between general goals and specific content of the schooling/educative process. Curriculum transformation aims not only at practices long reified by the schooling ritual, but more significantly confronts and reposes sources of authority, ideological positioning, sites of power, of social relations. Here the concern attends to creating classroom conditions “where people could go to get their questions answered, clarified, and refined” (p. 153), questions of philosophy, of the world, of self, “questions of how we can create a culture of abundance, joy, freedom, justice, and peace” (p. 154). Not easy.

Our social reality — the everyday world — has changed, yet we continue to utilize categories which yield no relief from the morass. As Purpel begins to outline a discourse for American education, he is also proposing a distinctively religious/moral jeremiad “cutting across the score of ethnicities, peoples, cultures, and traditions,” resonating “a number of transcendent values” within “a broadly held common heritage” (p. 70). The reader may detect a Deweyan touch here — unification, wholeness, clarification of dualisms, possibility, commonality, compromise — albeit one that has been filtered through a Buberian and/or Marcusian reading rather than through Dewey’s democratic idealism and scientific transcendentalism. One reads an almost Hegelian promise of a faith-infused reason unfolding, a progressive realization of “higher truth, higher meaning” (p. 60).

Though Purpel has a deep concern with the moral and spiritual consciousness of American society, he is far from the hackneyed rhetoric of the political and religious Right. Hopefully, I have conveyed enough of the book already to dismiss any associations the reader might be making with religious education. Nor is this book advocating some moralistic infusion of good old-fashioned values, moments of silence, flag-waving, or any other cosmetic gesture. The artificial imaging, the iconography of nostalgia and the retrieval of *that* moral agenda is no longer believable, undermined and discredited by its authoritarian posturing. His roots are more in line with the concerns voiced in Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart*, or C.A. Bowers’ recent *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education* in which he argues that the dichotomies of the social and the individual in American society, what Purpel refers to as the choice “between equality and justice for all and survival for me” (p. 39), share common ground. This is why religious language and values, as he refers to them, which historically have articulated the “mythos of meaning, purpose, and ultimacy” (p. 68), are fundamental to any educative task. Religiosity encompasses notions of community, of bonding, of convergence, recovery. In this sense he might remind the reader of Whitehead’s cosmological constructing in *Process and Reality*, of “the many in one” where the essential unity of human be-ing is presumed.

What is more interesting in this account, more refreshing, and considerably more helpful than either New Age spiritualism, logocentric philosophizing, or mainstream liberal reform is his understanding of “spirituality” as a *critical* rather than a functional activity: religion as criticism, a type of higher level

opposition (cf. Dewey 1934). In recognizing this quality one can see the appropriation of Gramsci rather than the harsh renunciatory tradition that agrees with Marx's view that religion is philosophy for the infancy of humanity. One of the real strengths of the book is his analysis of the "prophetic" as a conceptual framework for educators. The prophet, Purpel points out, speaks to issues of justice, compassion, righteousness; the prophet protests oppression, inequity, poverty, hunger; the prophet combines a deep devotion and determination to speak out against all forms of injustice (including the vapidness of public schooling). The prophet is a passionate social critic, one who has grasped the deeper understanding of consequences. The prophet, as Abraham Heschel has described, is angry at the lack of social responsibility and regards the task to be "wrenching one's conscience from the state of suspended animation" (p. 81), and is much closer to the Hebrew notion of *tikkun* — to mend, repair, and transform the world (as a recent journal of culture and politics has termed its own efforts). The notion of the prophetic is a powerfully dialectic concept, greatly underestimated by most on the Left, which also combines a "utopic" quality by which praxis is *redefined* and *regrounded*.

Now this opposition, identifiable in measure with Latin American liberation theology, challenges the fundamental structural fabric of American society, one that has made economic growth (and economic survival for the masses) the number one priority of the state. I agree with Purpel that a moral and spiritual framework for society has never been implemented; it has existed only in its "utopic" vision. Purpel is formulating a concrete everyday educational praxis which begins to build that framework. At those historical moments when the anger and frustration of a people are overwhelming, it is the prophet whose vision of escape and liberation also points us to "an alternative society, one with sacred dimensions" (p. 85). The prophet poses the vitality of the spiritual as "a theory of a life of meaning" (p. 79).

However, when he qualifies "religiosity" as the ideas, principles, and tenets that have to do with our relations with forces beyond the known world (p. 66), he situates the discourse as well in the "new age" holistic movement. He is groping for a language and a grounding for which modernity has little patience. The incorporation of a veritable smorgasbord of ideological positions — Eliade, Durkheim, Nisbet, Harrington — and standard heroes — Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, King, Gandhi, Socrates — drives home his point of one human condition upon which various perspectives are *philosophically* equal. Considerations of power, of structures of domination, of language (his prototypes are all male) are sometimes camouflaged. There is a tendency, which Hegel, Whitehead and Dewey also manifested, to overlook *domination* as the key structural principle of social reality, the tendency to dehistoricize spirituality. While I take issue with Purpel's projecting of certain values upon the human psyche, such as when he claims "we thirst for true community," speaks of "higher truths," refers to "our impulses to our basic commitments," or assumes that "virtually all of us" can distinguish between "natural and unnatural, sacred

and profane, good and bad, etc.” (p. 94), he nevertheless offers an aspect of a social recovery process that is potentially more transformational than the rationalistic scientific method of Dewey and most liberal reformers.

Within the polymorphous realm of postmodernism Purpel implies a new epistemology (even if he sounds, at times, a bit premodern); he writes about examining the foundation and underpinnings of reason (p. 59), of distinguishing wisdom from knowledge. Clearly he is in debt to Paulo Freire, as well, for the similarity of Purpel's “reason” with “conscientization” is apparent. The reader may wish to check, too, the philosophical work of the *Praxis* School — Mihailo, Markovic, Svetozar Stojanovic, Gajo Petrovic. Though more ideologically transparent, and significantly more secular than Purpel, they have achieved a powerful analysis of *praxis* as ideal human activity (Crocker, 1983). What is glaringly missing is a distinctive feminist viewpoint, someone in the tradition of Nel Noddings, Dale Spender, Sandra Harding. To his credit, however, Purpel does strongly emphasize “care” as a necessary component for *thinking* in the world. And I think the reader can see that the author is concerned with drawing upon a pluralistic counter discourse of pacifism, ecologism, nonviolence, and spirituality to restructure the traditional logic of power.

There are widespread and diverse movements of religious socialism which are the background for his “education in a prophetic voice.” Models already exist and the growing number of educators who find social justice issues to be the basis for educational study and empowerment are being heard. Purpel's message, however, is clearly directed to the transformation of the public schools and the educational process, a project he shares with the more secular Henry Giroux. Schools indeed are sites of cultural reproduction and as socially viable sources for “growth and learning” (p. 123) require a transformational perspective. It is significant too that Purpel sketches the risks (what I call in my teacher training classes the “intimidation factor”) of the prophetic, not unlike Ira Shor and Freire have done in *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, where the risks are put out on the table. There is nothing naive about this book; he is offering a much different vision than typical liberal tendencies towards scientific management. With this recognizable moral perspective, Purpel, I think, is attempting to bridge with those populations and teachers in this country who may find ironic the thrust of much of the school reform in this country. The concrete situation is no longer how more people can be served from the economic pie, but how to serve those with fork in hand a pie diminishing in its capacity to satisfy the country. The issue, however, entails a good deal more than economics.

From this orientation the book becomes accessible to a number of different perspectives — the teacher (certainly), community leaders, parents, activists, students, administrators, politicians. Among an increasing minority in this country a nascent awareness of the pedagogical dimension in the political understanding and organization of social reality exists that as it expands and develops becomes more and more sophisticated. I think that Purpel is riding the crest of this wave. He is trying to situate himself more hopefully in a situation which 70 years ago

Horkheimer had already described pessimistically: if the way to peace is forgiveness, suffering, spirit and love, it is the way of the world to roar eternally past these. As part of a critical perspective among recent educational reformers who take their context (and hope) from the 1960s, Purpel offers a compelling challenge not only to the ideology-is-dead crowd yapping in the administrative halls, but to the despair and cynicism felt by so many.

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