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Reviews

The Religion of Narcissism

When the Secular Becomes Sacred, Ernest J. Zarra III, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, pp. 218, $37.00 paperback.

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The central observations of Ernest J. Zarra's *When the Secular Becomes Sacred* are of great moment; they are of immense philosophical, cultural, and public policy significance. According to Zarra, there once was a time when most Americans could trust teachers and educational institutions to offer children a "secular" education. By this, he means that parents could reasonably depend on schools to form children in a way compatible with their upbringing at home, in their communities, and in their churches. Public education consisted of a basic education in the familiar subjects and one which did not explicitly impinge on the other, deeper ways in which the young must be formed, if they are to become virtuous persons, responsible citizens, and faithful subjects of the City of God.

In recent years, however, these institutions have been corrupted. Parents can no longer justly extend this trust. Schools, their personnel, policy, and administrations, have changed and in at least two ways. First, they now offer a "secular" education in the sense of absolutizing the concerns of this world and dismissing as idle "myth" anything that speaks of what transcends it. This specifically means that the self becomes the sole concern and the actualization of one's "identity" the final cause that all education must serve. Second, schools take this "secular" concern with identity and sacralize it. Whereas the earlier kind of "secular" education had tread softly around matters of absolute concern, the newly sacralized form of secular education indoctrinates students to absolutize identity politics and does so with a religious zeal. As Etienne Gilson once observed, the self becomes

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a new god to be worshipped and contemporary education seeks to change children, to send them home so that they will appear to their parents as converted creatures, alienated from and contemptuous of their family's competing, more traditional, religious commitments.

Zarra contends that this ostensibly shocking corruption of our institutions is, in at least one sense, not so complete a transformation as it may appear to the parents who are now attending school board meetings trying to get "Critical Race Theory" booted from curricula. For education is necessarily religious in the broad, loose sense in which Zarra uses the term. Religion in this sense means any absolute commitment to the order of reality and the ordination of human life within it. Education broadly understood is the formation of young people to assume their place in that order. There is no education that is not also religious formation and never has been. American schools in the nineteenth century were direct in their formation of the young as virtuous Christians and patriotic citizens of the republic. Many European schools at this same time were explicitly secular in the sense of being openly hostile to Christianity and seeking to form the young as subjects who consciously rejected all transcendent religious belief and viewed the state and citizenship as the highest goods for the human person.

What has changed, observes Zarra, is not the corruption of previously secular public schools into religious academies; we have not simply traveled from the "3 R's" to a new pedagogy of the godless "woke" whose explicit and sole good is the "identity" of the self. Rather, the inevitably if quietly religious form of American schools, educating for virtue and citizenship, have explicitly declared a new aim: the conversion of all to principles of equity and identity "actualization." Further, as he rightly notes, the old quiet and ecumenical Protestant Christianity that subtended American education for many generations has been replaced by a new religion without God, a worship of the self and its "identity" as a good so primary, so uncompromising, so illiberal that every child must

be converted and every aspect of education subordinated to its realization.

Zarra alternately refers to this new church of the self as secular humanism and religious humanism. In this apparent contradiction in terms lies his point: secular humanism is a religious doctrine like any other religious doctrine. Its capacity to portray itself as "secular" has, until recently, allowed it to be the one religious doctrine taught in public schools. The salvation of the soul can be dismissed as sectarian and private, but the establishment of preferred pronouns becomes an urgent matter of public health.

This change has been so drastic that, though Zarra is proud to have spent more than four decades in different facets of public and private education, he has been led to conclude that public schools are now "too far gone" for any parent to trust. Among the evidence he adduces are these: the intellectual hegemony of the internet; "racial and gender programs"; the influence of BLM and the #MeToo and other campaigns of victimology; the programs that have insinuated themselves into schools under the euphemism of "educating the whole student"; the rise of revisionist history, from the Zinn Educational Project to the 1619 Project; and on to the politicization of medical education. This may seem an odd, uneven list—a matter I shall address shortly.

Zarra's major claims are all correct. Education necessarily entails the formation of the "whole student" because education is, in this general sense, intrinsically religious. What we teach children will be an expression of what we think is the *telos* of a human life, and this always involves the kind of ultimacy that we define as religious. For an education to be good it has to aim at the human good. As the poet T.S. Eliot and the philosopher Jacques Maritain repeated again and again in their several writings on education and culture, before one can teach a child one has first to answer the question "What is man?" and "What is his purpose?"

The longstanding consensus that public schools could teach students what they needed to learn all the while remaining agnostic about the end for which they need it was, at best, a pragmatic play at naiveté.

Behind that naiveté lay a series of assumptions that were what we might call "vague but thick." They were vague in the sense of largely unexpressed and the product of an earlier Protestant America's tendency to be ecumenical and irenic by simply defining essential truth claims as those that are most general and easily agreed upon by a broad range of Christian denominations. They were thick in the sense that the end envisioned, the student to be formed, would be one whose cultivation of the moral and intellectual virtues would serve to make a patriotic and loyal citizen who recognized that religious piety at once aided the good of the republic and yet transcended it. Education really set about building up and shaping a young person's character. We might contrast it with the "precise but thin" formation of the new religion that has entered schools: the new doctrine knows precisely what it wants to form: an "expressive individualist" or "authentic self," but such a self is "thin" in the sense of amounting to nothing more than some kind of sexual or racial identity.

It may well be that for many decades, even until the last two or three years, parents trusted that this vague but thick civil religion still underlay, and was still served by, our public schools and public and private universities. If they did so trust, they were naïve to do so. The zealous religious rage of the woke that has been on display since at least 2016 had a long germination period dating back at least to the cultural revolution of the 1960s. And that earlier cultural revolution was rooted in the rise of ideology that began with the entrance of Marxist historical materialism into nearly every facet of modern intellectual life. And, if I may go on, the penetration and influence of Marxist thought was made possible by centuries of general intellectual decline fostered by the rationalism, empiricism, and mechanistic theory that was characteristic of late-Renaissance, or early-modern, thought. It is only because of this general impoverishment of our intellectual life over the course of centuries that one might be misled into thinking that public education at any point in the history of our country was truly adequate to the full destiny of the human person properly understood. Those who believed as much

were confusing technological triumphs with the cultivation of the life of the mind.

If one has even a passing familiarity with the intellectual history of the modern West, then the rise of the godless church of "woke" "identity" will come to appear not a striking and recent turn but the logical outcome of long decline. Zarra sometimes seems afraid that Christianity will not survive the twenty-first century; there were many among our distant ancestors who did not expect it to endure beyond the eighteenth. If one thinks Antifa a novel and horrendous menace, then may I propose reviewing the career of the Weather Underground, the Bolsheviks, the Spanish anarchists, or the French Jacobins?

Once again, Zarra's general claims seem to me unimpeachable. But his book should not have been published, or at least not the way he has written it. He attempts to define secular humanism and in doing so relies chiefly on a little-known series of humanist manifestos that, on the one hand, are explicitly dogmatic in content, but, on the other, have little bearing on the overall history of humanism. The last five hundred years have known various species of humanism, including Soviet humanism, Christian humanism, integral humanism, and so on. His historical account of humanism ends up being shallow and eccentric; it takes obscure documents from a century ago and treats them as representative of the current madness (which is, if anything, post-humanistic).

He might have drawn on Christopher Dawson, whose writings on the history of education and religion popularized the term "secular humanism." He might have looked at Charles Taylor's recent *A Secular Age* (2007) to get a more nuanced account of secularity not as the absence of religion but as the decentering of specific creedal commitments in society. He might have consulted David Walsh's many books on the human person to consider the way in which different humanisms strive and fail to do justice to the dignity of the person. He might have read Alasdair MacIntyre and John Milbank on the way in which the social sciences and modern scientific rationality are in many ways self-refuting dogmata that try to render invisible

the absolute concerns that every human life must confront. He might, finally, have read Carl Trueman's acclaimed book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (2020) which is a comprehensive history of the early-modern and romantic origins of the new cult of the self that has made it possible for a man to say aloud and in all, legally punitive seriousness, "I am now a woman. Call me Alice." We find none of these figures in his notes and in fact nearly all his sources seem to be blog posts or diatribes rather than the kinds of arguments that would help establish his—again, by and large just—observations.

His major claims strike me as true, but Zarra never actually establishes them. The text wanders around from idea to idea, sometimes taking them up and setting them down again at random with interesting but unhelpful digressions intruding sometimes for pages at a time. An obscure article on the Peace of Westphalia is supposed to explain the whole rise of modern secularism, but that is at best an inadequate foundation for his thesis and seems to have been hit upon by a lucky Google search. Elsewhere, he says arguments have already been "established," when they in fact have not yet even been discussed. We begin hearing about "manifestos" early in the book, but what he's talking about does not become clear until page forty.

An evangelical Christian, Zarra repeatedly mentions the teaching of evolution in schools as if it were of a piece with the new "woke" indoctrination, even though this poses several problems, not least of which is his chronology of when schools went bad. At one point he realizes, quite rightly, that the change in our schools has not happened in a vacuum, and so he digresses to lament the leftward and social tilt of American Protestantism, old and new. The narrative he wants to tell is of the corruption of educational institutions and their corruption of our children, but, a teacher all too familiar with the demands of parents, he early-on contradicts his major claim. What began to exhaust him in his teaching career, he notes, are the ways in which parents' leveling of accusations of "microaggressions," racial and sexual, undermine the valiant efforts of teachers to educate. Could it be the case that this is indicative of a broader cultural

decline? Yes, I think so, but it doesn't seem compatible with Zarra's book, which is pitched as an effort to support parents and warn them against schools that are "too far gone."

Finally, the style of composition seems as if it were one-half of a phone conversation, often disintegrating into a series of sentence fragments and echoes of ideas that will leave those not already familiar with the subject baffled. Block quotations are left to stand without commentary and at times it is not clear that Zarra understands their meaning. In places, we find complete sentences like this one: "It makes a difference how one views the world because it affects how a person views reality." This is a tautology and, by the end, the whole book feels like a tautology, making assertions that are "backed up" merely by the repetition of the same assertions. Zarra's aim is a just one, his basic observations true and frightening, but the gravity of the situation—the wholesale self-destruction of American culture in the name of a boundless, politicized, and zealous narcissism—deserved a more serious effort than this one.