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## The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School, by Neil Postman

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“Religion that does not nurture people’s spirituality is as dead as a doornail” (p. 273). Nevertheless, the Church, though flawed, has usually been able to support and guide people as they search for a deeper spirituality in their lives.

Groome’s style is engaging and personal. A story begins each chapter to introduce the reader to the central question he addresses. Groome also includes reflection questions as well as spiritual practices, which make the book more than just an essay on Catholicism. This format encourages people to bring their life to their faith and their faith to their life. Groome writes for the devout, the alienated, the radicals, and the reformers of our Church, but also believes that Catholic spirituality has something to offer other faith traditions. Those readers who have left the Church might not recognize Groome’s positive vision of the Church as the same institution that hurt or disappointed them. However, as one of his storytellers points out, “the greater good here outweighs the sinfulness” (p. xv). Groome maintains he is talking about the Church at its best. For those who love the Church, with all its flaws and failings, this book will affirm the beauty of Catholic spirituality and the gifts for life that make us Catholic.

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## **THE END OF EDUCATION: REDEFINING THE VALUE OF SCHOOL**

NEIL POSTMAN, VINTAGE BOOKS, 1996.

*Reviewed by Molly Welzbacher*

Neil Postman, social critic and former elementary and secondary school teacher, poses a possible explanation for the current crisis in the American public school system in *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. According to Postman, schooling should be about “how to make a life, not how to make a living” (p. x); therefore, conversations about schooling should be about ends and not means. Educators tend to focus on the means, or the “engineering” of learning. Because there are many valid ways to engineer learning, the attention of educators should instead be on the “metaphysics” of schooling: “For school to make sense, the young, their parents, and their teachers must have a god to serve, or, even better, several gods” (p. 4). Postman is quick to point out that this does not necessarily mean the God. Instead, the word god is a synonym for narrative, defined as a story that “tells the origins and envisions a future...constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose” (p. 6). Without such narratives around which to organize life

and learning, schools become “houses of detention, not attention” (p. 7).

In evaluating the narratives that give metaphysical meaning to education, it is important to look at their consequences – whether or not the narrative provides people with “a sense of personal identity, a sense of community life, a basis for moral conduct, and explanations of that which cannot be known” (p. 7). In these terms, the theory of narrative sounds reminiscent of Catholic education. Although Postman briefly acknowledges that the most comprehensive narratives do come from the Old Testament, the New Testament, the *Koran*, and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, he stops short of suggesting such narratives as a higher purpose for education. Instead, in Part I of the book, a cogent analysis of several gods that students of public education are presently asked to serve is presented. Then, in Part II, the reader discovers several alternative gods, or narratives, that might serve to knit together a higher purpose for public education.

The analysis of the current gods of public schooling begins with the god of Economic Utility. This god demands that the purpose of schooling is to prepare students to contribute to the economy of their community. In this narrative, human worth is measured by ability to secure material benefits, and the overarching theme is “you are what you do for a living” (p. 28). It is closely connected to the god of Consumership which postulates that “you are what you accumulate” (p. 33). The purpose of school, then, is to do well in order to get a good job and buy things. Accordingly, schools today have high standards of achievement and rigorous guidelines for academic discipline. Postman rightly argues that “any education that is mainly about economic utility is far too limited to be useful, and ... so diminishes the world that it mocks one’s humanity” (p. 31).

Another false god of public schooling is the god of Technology. Postman cites widespread instances of “technological adoration” (p. 38) among educators, some of whom even believe that technology will someday make school irrelevant. If this is true, a future in which children will learn in isolation, where the rift between rich and poor will widen, and where education will only be about getting students information seems likely. Technology, therefore, is a panacea and a too-easy solution to a complex problem.

Last, the god of Multiculturalism and Separatism is introduced, and a distinction is made between cultural pluralism and multiculturalism. While cultural pluralism strives to “show the young how their tribal identities and narratives fit into a more inclusive and comprehensive American story” (p. 50), multiculturalism focuses on the past and present oppression of nonWhites and rejects White cultural hegemony in favor of the construction of new narratives of history, art, religion, and literature. Postman feels that it is dangerous to base the foundation of schooling on the story of America as a place of racism, inequity, and violence because it separates instead of unites, breeds hate, and focuses on divisiveness instead of sameness.

This analysis of the narratives of experience that shape education highlights some areas that should cause concern to educators today. It is interesting, however, that the word narrative is equated with god, a word with a clear

religious connotation, yet the success of the narrative of religion as a solution to the problems of education today is not seriously acknowledged or even addressed. The consequences of this failure to do so are especially evident in Part II of the book, where alternative narratives for the reshaping of education are offered. In these narratives, Postman attempts to walk a fine line between offering practical solutions and avoiding conflict with any religious beliefs. The result is five secularized Christian principles that seem far fetched, impractical, and sometimes even comical in their suggested application.

For example, the proposed narrative of “Spaceship Earth” would organize schools around a sense of responsibility for the planet and their home communities based on the teaching of archaeology and astronomy. Archaeology would help students develop “an earthly perspective” (p. 106), and astronomy would help students think about the implications of the question “are we alone in the universe?” (p. 111). This would purportedly cultivate a sense of awe and global responsibility in students. In the narrative called “The Fallen Angel,” schools would be organized around the principle of “whatever ideas we have, we are in some sense wrong” (p. 119). By emphasizing the fallibility of humans, educators can foster healthy and creative skepticism in students. In the narrative of “The Law of Diversity,” schools would cultivate ethnic pride instead of narratives of inclusivity; whole schools would be organized around studying human interactions throughout history that have made us who we are as a culture. According to Postman, “the lesson here is that sameness is the enemy of vitality and creativity” (p. 78).

The narrative of “The American Experiment” would focus on the story of America as a “great experiment and as a center of continuous argument” (p. 132). Students would study the arguments about freedom of expression, a melting-pot culture, the meaning of education for society, and the effects of technology. Although Postman claims that this is truly a narrative, not a theme around which to organize curriculum, it is difficult to see how studying these arguments would provide a reason for schools and not just subject material to examine. Indeed the list of topics sounds like the objectives for a high school or college civics class. It is not clear if this is a true narrative or some national curriculum that every child should know, reminiscent of E. D. Hirsch’s cultural literacy list.

While the argument that schools lack a transcendent narrative giving them a higher purpose for existence rings true, it is not clear that any of the suggested alternatives are practical or realistic solutions to the problem. The analysis fails in its repeated acknowledgment and subsequent dismissal of religion as a higher purpose for education. Catholic school teachers and leaders know that these gods already exist in Catholic schools as important tenets of our faith. Because we already see ourselves as stewards of God’s creation, the narrative of Spaceship Earth is moot. Because we accept the fallibility of human experience and our inability to achieve perfect knowledge, the narrative of the Fallen Angel is similarly irrelevant. Because we see ourselves as diverse members of the Body of Christ, the narrative of the Law of Diversity is already

applied in our schools. Catholic schools, then, are shaped around all of these narratives and more, providing a strong, transcendent, and unifying narrative to inspire their students and give meaning and purpose to education.

*The End of Education* fails in its attempt to provide alternative strategies to revamp the public school system today. However, it does offer keen criticism on the current values and ideals that shape education. It is important for schools, even Catholic ones, to avoid worshipping the gods of Economics, Consumerism, and Technology; it will be up to them, however, to replace these false gods with worthier ones. Postman succeeds in starting a conversation about how to restore a spiritual dimension to learning in our schools and to give a meaningful purpose to education today.

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