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Public Education: Institutionalized Secularism or School for the Virtues?

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Public education, funded by state governments through taxation and understood as functioning for the good of the state by ensuring that voters in modern democracies are better prepared to be responsible citizens, is a central facet of secular modernity. An important challenge for Christians is to refine their theological perspectives relative to public education and determine the degree of public engagement appropriate for communicating and debating the relevant issues. This paper is a response to two books (*Ethics After Babel; Democracy and Tradition*) by Jeffrey Stout, who works at the interface of what he calls the "new traditionalism" of MacIntyre and Hauerwas and the pragmatism which Stout himself defends, with themes drawn from Hegel, Emerson, Dewey, and Rorty. Stout claims that ". . . pragmatism is the philosophical space in which democratic rebellion against hierarchy combines with traditionalist love of virtue to form a new intellectual tradition that is indebted to both" (*Democracy and Tradition*, page 13). Although his primary interest is about the role of religious beliefs in political debate, this paper focuses on the school systems which are intended to prepare youth to enter those debates. The relevant question is whether modern democracies have the philosophical resources to conceive schools able to instill intellectual and moral virtues, as conceived in the Aristotelian tradition. While the schools are local, the pluralism within the geographically defined neighborhoods usually falls short of communitarian ideals of common ends and narratives. Stout nevertheless argues that civic engagement of certain kinds does not necessarily conflict with traditional theology.