

Response to Lisa Stenmark

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Despite some differences there are many similarities between Lisa Stenmark's *Religion, Science, and Democracy* and our *For the Civic Good*. Both books favor greater dialogue across the religious divide, both hold that such dialogue can be good for democracy, and both believe that such dialogue can promote respectful disagreement (or, as Stenmark refer to it, "disputational friendship"). In addition, both recognize that such benefit comes only when the dialogue is voluntary and not coerced, both promote reflection about fundamental beliefs, both have the aim of bridging the divide that often separates people of different faiths from one another and from people of no faith, and both allow that the aim of discourse is not to change belief but to change the quality of public engagement. This is the point of Stenmark's subtle, "A Disputational Friendship," as well as of our claim that the aim of teaching religion in public schools is not to change belief, but rather to improve the process of believing. We share the aim of advancing the quality of public discussion about fundamental commitment. Layton and I focus on the discussion in public schools while Stenmark is more concerned with the divide between religion and science and she does not specify any one particular setting where discussions about this divide might take place.

This difference is important given the fact that there are legal and constitutional constraints that are imposed on public schools that would not be relevant in other settings. Another difference is that Stenmark is largely concerned with the divide between religion and science on certain issues such as the inclusion of gays and lesbians in religious dialogue, whereas our concern is to provide students with the information and skills required to talk intelligently about religion and, ideally, to thoughtfully reflects on their own beliefs, which may or may not include beliefs about sexual orientation. Finally, there is a contrast in our goals. Stenmark is clearly advancing the case for greater connection between religion and science whereas we are more agnostic about whether religion should be taught in public schools, whether it can improve the quality of civic

engagement and reflective critical thinking. Our point is that if schools do choose to teach religion — a decision we leave to administrators and teachers — some ways are more consistent with the basic aims of public education than are others.

The stance of the two books is also somewhat different. We write largely as critical observers, describing what we see and commenting on its merits or problems according to certain internal standards for public education. These include the promotion of critical engagement and self-reflection, as well as the disposition to listen to alternative views. Stenmark stands more as an advocate, but what she advocates — a respect for difference — is certainly compatible with our point of view.

Stenmark's comments about the individualism of her students and their disconnection from religion and communal tradition is an important reminder that our book is limited in its focus on teachers and curriculum, and that a more complete account would explore the world of the students and the impact that religion courses have on them. Her observation that many of her students lack a connection to any tradition other than individualism is an important claim, and it would be interesting to probe that "individualism" to see just what functions it serves for students. One possibility is that it represents a public language that allows them to connect with one another in spite of their different commitments; another possibility is that the utilitarian emphasis of modern universities fosters a kind of materialism that leads to a neglect of communal commitment. I do not know what such a probe might find but Stenmark has clearly identified an important topic for investigation.

Response to Walter Feinberg

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Walter Feinberg correctly summarizes my position as advocating a more equal relationship between religion and science in public discourse. But I want to emphasize the word *public*, because scientific and religious statements need not be given equal weight in all discourse, merely in *public* discourse where the goal is to exchange a plurality of perspectives in