Educating for More (and Less) Than Intelligent Belief or Unbelief: A Critique of Noddings's Vision of Religion in Public Schools

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In a landmark 1963 ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court distinguished between the teaching *of* religion and teaching *about* religion in public schools. While the former involved an unconstitutional advocacy of religious belief, a curriculum that explored the historical and literary influences of religion — "when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education" — was both permissible and desirable.[1]

From this ruling, a general consensus has emerged (at least in intention) that religion has a place in the public school curriculum, at least as it informs our understanding of history and past cultures. But this distinction between the teaching *of* and *about* religion often becomes oversimplified in practice. Certainly, there is no place for teachers or curricula to proselytize in our public schools, but understanding the rich complexity of religion involves more than the mere propositional knowledge students might encounter in the antiseptic pages of a state-approved textbook. For example, if we ask the question, Is a curriculum that explores and compares the religious beliefs of ancient Aztecs, Mayans, and Babylonians any different from one that does so with Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, then the realization should emerge that the latter religions are more than static historical markers. Rather, they are vibrant, deeply influential ethical and cultural forces in our society, and any education claiming the label "liberal" or "multicultural" must engage imaginatively with them and other living religions.

Perhaps the most prominent philosophical voice to encourage deeper curricular engagement with religion has been Nel Noddings, particularly in her 1993 book *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*, but in more recent work as well. While I appreciate Noddings's advocacy of robust exploration of religion in the classroom, I contend that her guiding rationale and approach are misplaced and are ultimately detrimental to a basic vision of public education we both uphold.

I begin by arguing that Noddings characterizes religious commitment as something readily — and unproblematically — subject to customization and revision. This approach to religious exploration is based on a rationale that cannot be defended successfully in public schools. Instead, a civic rationale based on the need to grapple with issues of deep public disagreement is necessary if our schools are to survive as places where religious diversity is broadly welcomed in the civic conversation. With the focus shifted to the implications for our lives together — rather than on the question of religious truth itself — the vital role of critical thinking and the need for fallibilism may be less problematic for many religious adherents.

Customized Religion

In his aptly titled article, "America's Ever-Changing Religious Landscape," Richard Ostling claims that the United States is noteworthy for its high level of

religiosity, defying sociologist Peter Berger's "secularization thesis" that increasingly advanced, technologized societies would become more secular (a thesis Berger himself disowned in 1998). But equally noteworthy is Ostling's observation that "more than any previous generation, Americans age 18 and under are thoroughly detached from traditional Christian concepts. By and large they do not believe Jesus is the unique savior of mankind, do not read the Bible as God's word, and do not accept the idea of moral absolutes.…It is certainly another revolution in our time."[2]

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes this revolution as a shift from a spirituality of place (that is, church and community) to a spirituality of (usually eclectic) seeking. Drawing on numerous research studies, opinion surveys, and in-depth interviews, Wuthnow asserts, "People have been losing faith in a metaphysics that can make them feel at home in the universe and…they increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom."[3] This orientation may even take on a consumerist mentality — religion as a commodity or experience subject to comparison shopping — and has been widely documented by secular media, scholars of religion, and religious leaders alike.[4]

While Wuthnow's research is primarily descriptive in nature, others view this sociological shift more negatively. A spirituality of seeking is similar to what Charles Taylor criticizes as "expressivism," which he describes as "this notion of an inner voice or impulse, the idea that we find the truth within us, and in particular in our feelings."[5] This inner voice takes precedence over doctrinal details or legacy of tradition. The conception of religious believer as seeker, freely choosing from various perspectives and experiences, playing the role of spiritual consumer, has fed the image of religious identity as a kind of optional garment: often useful, handily accessorized, and readily changed to suit one's personal tastes.

Regardless of whether one views the emergence of this seeker mentality negatively, it seems an accurate approximation of many Americans' spiritual orientation. But this hardly describes all religious commitment, of course. For many adherents, a particular religious commitment is inextricably linked with one's very self, and the roots extend deep within a community of belief and practice. One is raised within such a community, and one's ethical framework and interpretive horizon are largely dependent upon this pervasive and comprehensive way of life. The metaphor of religious identity as clothing — however prized the apparel may be — is a fundamentally insufficient conception of how many people experience and practice their religion.

While I will not speculate on Noddings's personal view of religion, much of her writing on this issue suggests a "pick and choose" orientation as far as the educational process is concerned. The approach she develops most fully in *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* involves a process of examining the advantages and disadvantages of an assortment of religions and other ethical frameworks, and then choosing the best fit for oneself. She contends, "To be an intelligent believer one needs to know the weak points as well as the strong points of a religion, the insights

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and the nonsense, the political and the spiritual."[6] But in the context of religious faith and tradition, the terms "weak points" and "strong points" make much less sense, or at least look quite different depending upon one's location inside or outside a particular tradition. Does the Muslim whose job prospects are unfortunately limited by daily prayer commitments see these obligations as "weak points" when asked to intelligently examine his religion? Should teachers who perceive what Noddings terms the "logical strengths" of polytheism encourage their monotheist students to reconsider their beliefs in hopes of "real spiritual progress" (*IB*, 35)?

Whether a particular religious belief makes sense would seem to depend at least in part on one's location relative to the broader religious tradition in question. In a discussion of the educational value of religious stories, for example, Noddings points out that believers need not interpret their texts literally in order for them to hold meaning. But her further implication that intelligent believers will in fact recognize the need to avoid such literalism is troubling. Should the Christian who believes Jesus literally and miraculously healed physical ailments be encouraged to reject this as "charming nonsense"? Noddings employs this patronizing phrase when relating with approval how a committed theist rejects the biblical miracle stories. But why should teachers feel impelled to embark on "sensitive, appreciative debunking" of such religious stories? Why must our view of intelligent belief necessarily exclude the possibility of supernatural intervention, of the permeability of our ordinary world?[7]

Noddings's repeated references to psychological health when considering matters of belief also seem to misconstrue the role religion plays in the lives of many adherents. For example, she contends that "psychologically, it is healthier to attribute both good and evil to God, as Jews often do, than to insist on the all-goodness of God" (*IB*, 55). Psychologically, it might also be healthier not to have public school teachers encouraging some deeply religious students to reject an understanding of God that is central to their faith, but psychological health is beside my point. If intelligent belief requires the avoidance of paradox and mystery, then most religions will be in for devastating critique in our classrooms. Even for those educators who might find this appealing, it can hardly be seen as a live option for public schools.

Even the very notion of "belief" functions as a secondary element of religious identity for many adherents. The terrain of religion also generally includes communities, cultures, and practices that are not adequately addressed when religious doctrines and their relation to metaphysical questions are the sole focus. Noddings acknowledges that "few religions besides Christianity use belief as a basic test," but claims that belief still provides meaning for the rituals and practices often more central to religious adherence (*IB*, xv). But her proposed curriculum focuses largely on the philosophical level of doctrine and theology. Elsewhere, Noddings has been criticized for being suspicious of personal, intense religious feeling (and seeming to equate this with religious fundamentalism).[8] Yet for many adherents this experiential dimension plays a central role in the complex texture of their religious life. The problems inherent in directly evaluating the "strong" and "weak" points, the

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"insights" and the "nonsense," of religion are immense. A different approach is needed.

The Need for a Civic Rationale

Noddings contends that public schools should play a major role in helping students to explore "the great existential questions" regarding life's meaning, and that critical exploration of students' religious commitments (or lack thereof) is an essential facet of this process (*IB*, xv).[9] But when Noddings acknowledges that salvation "is, perhaps, the hardest topic for teachers to discuss with public school students," it would be hard to fault deeply religious parents for labeling this a substantial understatement (*IB*, 87). And we can only imagine what some Christian parents might think of Noddings's suggestion that students consider "the hamstringing of life with a doctrine of sin" as a possible "moral objection" to Christianity (*IB*, 98). While Noddings is clearly not insisting that students agree with these notions, many parents might understandably feel that the public school curriculum is hardly the place to suggest that sin is an immoral concept.

With these concerns in mind, public school curricular engagement with religion requires a strong civic — rather than existential — rationale.[10] In more recent work, Noddings alludes to this civic function: "Public schooling serves the best interests of a liberal democracy and its individual members. It provides the sites for demonstration of democratic life in miniature; it brings together people and views that might otherwise remain outside the domain of public communication."[11] Two central contentions of liberal democratic theory are that reasonable people will disagree about questions of justice and the good life, and that social cooperation must be grounded in terms of mutual respect, despite the conflict that disagreement about justice and the good life generates. If the role of civic education is to prepare students to function as thoughtfully engaged citizens, public school curricula should help foster understanding of ethical diversity and, with it, the capacity for recognizing reasonable disagreement and deliberating respectfully when conflicts arise.

Clearly, much of this ethical diversity and disagreement is informed by religion. In light of this, public schools should provide ample opportunities for students to explore the various influences of religion on how we decide to live together. Part of this education should include an appreciation for the difference between making private choices about our religious commitments and seeking to extend those convictions to our broader society. This is not to argue that there is no place for the expression and advocacy of religious beliefs in the public square; on the contrary, the centrality of such convictions in many citizens' lives means they will undoubtedly surface in public deliberation. Public schools can and should play a vital role in helping prepare all of us for those conversations, so we can engage thoughtfully and respectfully in spite of our differences.

Critical Thinking and Fallibilism

If our goal is to infuse public education with a robust exploration of religion while maintaining an atmosphere that welcomes many diverse religious (and other ethical) perspectives, then the issues of critical thinking and fallibilism pose a central

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challenge. Noddings's observation that "critical thinking is induced by tackling critical issues — issues that matter deeply to us" is a compelling one (*IB*, 11); yet it reminds us why critical thinking involving religion is so fraught with controversy — because religion matters so deeply to many of us.

Here is where a rationale for curricular exploration of religion that is based on civic virtue is better suited to address the challenges of critical thinking and fallibilism. This notion of civic virtue requires what John Rawls terms "acceptance of the burdens of judgment" — that is, the acknowledgement that my version of the good life is one of multiple reasonable possibilities.[12] Even though my recognition of the reasonableness of different perspectives does not mean that I concede their rightness, it does imply a certain degree of fallibilism about my own convictions.

But here it is vital to distinguish the nature and degree of fallibilism required for acceptance of the burdens of judgment. If by fallibilism we mean an approach that continually calls into question one's most fundamental metaphysical beliefs, such a "strong" fallibilism is not necessary for civic virtue. Rather, students should be willing — in light of reasonable disagreement — to revisit their *application* of core ethical beliefs to civic matters. This willingness does not preclude acting upon their convictions for fear that their civic judgments might possibly change, nor does it mean insisting that all such perspectives are held only provisionally. It means recognizing the interpretive distance between their central metaphysical convictions and the way they seek to have those commitments manifest in our civic life together. Such a "weak" fallibilism will not satisfy all religious adherents, of course, but it does provide much more leeway than the type of religious self-critique Noddings advocates.

To begin with, a student who recognizes the reasonableness of ethical perspectives different from her own is not thereby compelled to withdraw (or even soften) her assertions and convictions about the truth of her own framework. In accepting the burdens of judgment, Charles Larmore contends,

> We need not suspend judgment about the correctness of our own views. We may still rightfully believe that, despite being controversial, they are better supported by experience and reflection than those of our opponents. This is because we can recognize that a view is reasonable, yet false: it may have been arrived at sincerely and in accord with generally accepted forms of reasoning, yet against the background of existing beliefs that our own viewpoints judge as false.[13]

If we neglect to make this distinction between reasonableness and truth, we are faced with a version of fallibilism that requires us to view even our deepest convictions as tentative. This is asking too much, and not only of fundamentalist religious adherents; it seems more than a little deceptive (perhaps toward oneself, but certainly toward others) to claim that I am willing to call into question even my deepest ethical convictions whenever I am presented with differing perspectives. In this sense, I depart significantly from David Tracy, and many other advocates of inter-religious dialogue, in the contention that "there is no genuine dialogue without the willingness to risk all one's present self-understanding in the presence of the other."[14] Teachers need not — and should not — endorse Tracy's vision of risk-all

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dialogue, or cultivate the impression in their students that all their beliefs should be continually "up for grabs."

At the same time, we should not conclude that fallibilism has no relevance to recognizing reasonable disagreement. Acceptance of the burdens of judgment involves recognizing not only the *limits* of human reason but also its *value*. To the extent that we recognize the value and importance of human reason, we cannot be content with an attitude that says, "I know I have the truth and — in spite of your admittedly reasonable arguments to the contrary — I know my application of it to how we live together is without error." Acceptance of the burdens of judgment requires us to pay greater heed to reasonable disagreement than that. To the extent that some citizens view human reason as a fruitless search for answers in contrast to their own divinely informed certainty, they have rejected the civic virtue that both Noddings and I would seek to cultivate.

So while the fallibilism necessary for reasonable disagreement may not prove amenable to certain extreme versions of fundamentalism, it is also important to understand that it need not threaten students' core metaphysical beliefs. Acceptance of the burdens of judgment, we should keep in mind, is a *civic* virtue. This realm is not directly concerned with private metaphysical or creedal beliefs in and of themselves (for example, the existence of God), but rather with the *implications* of those beliefs for public policy. In this regard, students need to have a sense of fallibilism to the extent that they recognize the interpretive distance between their source(s) of truth and the application of these to how we live together in society. There is no inherent contradiction between adherence to a particular ethical framework and open dialogue about the implications of that framework for the political realm. A significant difference exists between requiring a fallibilism about John's core metaphysical beliefs and encouraging John to recognize that others reasonably believe otherwise and thus will critique his perspective. It should not be the role of the public schools to encourage students to question their most basic metaphysical beliefs, but, at the same time, students need to learn how to analyze the *implications* of their beliefs and how they appear to and affect other members of the polity.

Acceptance of the burdens of judgment requires us to acknowledge the reasonableness of other ethical stances and to modulate our political arguments and decisions accordingly, but this requirement of proportionality does not extend to our ethical frameworks themselves. By this I mean that Maria's acknowledgment of the political reasonableness of Jason's "pro-choice" position on abortion in no way requires her to lessen her conviction that God exists and knits us together in the womb. It is still entirely rational — and civically virtuous — for Maria to maintain a completely committed faith in God.[15]

It is worth acknowledging that integrating the notion of reasonable disagreement and fallibilism into students' deliberative practice is a developmental achievement. The capacity to recognize the reasonableness of multiple viewpoints first requires the ability to see an issue from multiple perspectives. At least some research

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indicates that the capacity to adopt another's perspective while maintaining one's own generally develops around age seven or eight.[16] This suggests that some children in primary grades may have difficulty with the full exercise of reasonable disagreement, although some degree of understanding other perspectives seems possible even for them, as the writings of early educators such as Vivian Paley so compellingly illustrate.[17]

It is also important for teachers — and, by extension, their students — to recognize that fallibilism does not require a constant revising of one's ethical framework. In fact, it does not necessarily require revision at all; deliberation can also quite reasonably result in ethical *adherence*. "Autonomous revision and adherence are twin facets of the one virtue," Eamonn Callan contends, "and neither is inherently more laudable than the other."[18] The value of holding fast to one's ethical commitments amid doubt and tribulation, while certainly not absolute, should not be discounted. Teachers who recognize and respect this facet of fallibilism will help ensure that a civic education for our liberal democracy remains as hospitable as possible for religious adherents while still holding firm to liberal democratic principles.

The High Stakes of Religion in the Curriculum

While I am obviously critical of how Noddings conceives of religious belief and commitment in the context of public school curricula, my words should not be taken as a rejection of her broader mission of making schools places where we discuss issues of great ethical and social significance. Noddings has been a constant and inspiring voice over the years, calling upon educators to provide an environment of care and thoughtful engagement, and the vision of education she holds forth is a welcome correction to our current mania with testing and surface-level curricula.

In a relatively recent essay titled "Education as a Public Good," Noddings addresses the mounting challenges to public schooling. She worries that growing extremism threatens the social fabric that our schools seek to weave, which in turn puts the public good of education at great risk. Schools need to be responsive to the concerns of the public, she acknowledges, for "the alternative to increased responsiveness is deepening distrust and separation. At its worst, growing distrust and dissatisfaction may destroy the public schools entirely."[19] As perhaps an indication of this distrust and separation, the Department of Education recently reported a twenty-nine percent increase in homeschooling over the past five years.[20] While certainly not all homeschoolers are disaffected conservative religious families, it would not be unreasonable to assume that many find schools inhospitable to the ways they understand their religious commitments.

My main concern in this essay is that Noddings's particular orientation toward religious faith and commitment needlessly narrows our common ground. This is ground that our public schools — particularly those engaged in the hard but vital work of ethical exploration and deliberation — need to have, if the widest possible swath of our citizenry is to feel welcomed and honored.

Granted, this welcome is not boundless. Our public schools should certainly not abandon the civic mission I describe here, nor should they shy away from helping

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students talk respectfully across religious and other ethical differences. At the same time, we should be very cautious in the evaluative labels we affix to religious beliefs and commitments, instead focusing on the ways in which those commitments must be communicated, negotiated, and respected in our lives together.

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1. *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp,* 374 US 203 (1963), 225.

2. Richard N. Ostling, "America's Ever-Changing Religious Landscape," *Brookings Review* 17, no. 2 (1999): 11, 13.

3. Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

4. For examples of such work, see Richard Higgins, "Sold on Spirituality," *Boston Globe Magazine,* December 3, 2000, 19–24; and Mark Mittelburg and Bill Hybels, *Building Contagious Churches* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000).

5. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 368–369.

6. Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 39. This work will be cited as *IB* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. Nel Noddings, "Dialogue Between Believers and Unbelievers," *Religious Education* 92, no. 2 (1997): 247.

8. Carol K. Ingall, "Critique: The Challenge to Believe in Schools," *Religious Education* 92, no. 4 (1997): 555.

9. Noddings also addresses this issue in her book *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 235.

10. I use the term "existential" in this essay as Noddings does in *Happiness and Education* and elsewhere; it pertains to questions of purpose and meaning in life (and death), such as "How should I live? Is there meaning in life? What does it mean to be good? To be happy?" (*Happiness and Education*, 235).

11. Nel Noddings, "Education as a Public Good," in *Not for Sale: In Defense of Public Goods,* ed. Anatole Anton, Milton Fisk, and Nancy Holmstrom (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), 290. In her later work, Noddings seems to support this central civic rationale, although she still maintains that exploration of religion also serves important existential purposes (see *Happiness and Education*, 234). But her detailed descriptions of such exploration focus almost entirely on its existential value for students.

12. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 49–50.

13. Charles Larmore, "Pluralism and Reasonable Disagreement," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11, no. 1 (1994): 77.

14. David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 73.

15. For a more developed critique of this "proportionality doctrine," see George I. Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God,* ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 216; and Robert Merrihew Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 18.

16. Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

17. See, for example, Vivian Paley's *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

18. Eamonn Callan, "Autonomy, Child Rearing, and Good Lives," in *The Political and Moral Status of Children,* ed. David Archard and Colin Macleod (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 127.

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19. Noddings, "Education as a Public Good," 292, 284.

20. National Center for Education Statistics, *1.1 Million Homeschooled Students in the United States in 2003* (Washington, D.C.: NCES Publication No. 2004115, 2004), http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2004115.

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