

Challenging Students' Religiously Informed Truth Claims: Epistemological and Ethical Considerations for Discourse in Pluralistic Classrooms

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How do individuals and groups, with often competing interests, worldviews, beliefs, values, and ideas, come together to approximate some sort of productive, civil, pluralistic, democratic order? This question, and others like it, is central to political theory. Many thinkers have taken up this general question in wrestling with individual rights versus community rights, children's rights vs. parental rights, education vs. indoctrination, and so on. Yet, when it comes to public school classroom discourse related to religion, democracy, pluralism, and respect, treatment is far less robust and satisfying.

Many liberal political theorists have attempted to address these issues, but have focused — perhaps overly so — on the development of democratic principles that, while helpful in the political sphere generally, are less useful when applied to public school classroom discussions. For example, John Rawls, who epitomizes classic liberal political thought on these matters, argues that in order to develop rules and guidelines by which all reasonable people can live, citizens must shelve their particular moral, religious, and philosophical worldviews, relying instead on public principles to which all reasonable people can agree.¹ In a basic way this seems right. We all have to give up something so that we can move forward as a civil, pluralistic, democratic state. But in the context of public school classrooms, this only leads to further concerns. For, in this setting, we have to deal not only with students' intellectual development, but their moral, psychological, emotional, and social development as well. Telling a student to shelve his particular religious, moral, and/or philosophical worldview so that we can, in essence, all get along, is troubling and potentially beyond the scope of the public school.

Amy Gutmann comes a lot closer to helping us envision a democratic arrangement that recognizes the tensions endemic to a pluralistic state. She says that the purpose of democratic education is to cultivate democratic citizens, and through her two principles — nonrepression and nondiscrimination — we may engage in discourse and decision-making that can lead to some consensus.² Nonrepression protects individuals and groups from the state or any group using education to unnecessarily restrict rational deliberation. Nondiscrimination prevents the state and any group from denying anyone an education on grounds that are irrelevant to the good one receives from an education.

Gutmann rightly argues that constraining some choices by way of curricular or school policy decisions is acceptable as long as the constraint is not overly determinant. The rub of course is how we determine which choices ought to be constrained. Those choices that are more liberating to the individual, it would seem,

would remain largely unfettered, while those choices that are more restrictive would be open to more constraints. While this seems sensible enough, once we begin to look closely at religion, we find these principles provide us with very little guidance in how to conduct public school classroom discourse. To see this one only needs to point to most strands of evangelical Christianity where rational deliberation is inimical to the whole enterprise, which, one could argue then, is inimical to democratic and pluralistic sensibilities.

In many ways one theorist who comes closest to providing us with helpful guidance in how to conduct classroom discourse in a way that we better ensure respect, tolerance, and civility, is Rob Kunzman. Kunzman appears acutely aware of the nuances of classroom discourse around “controversial issues” and develops a principle that gives a range of views a fair hearing in the public school classroom space but does so in a way that upholds democratic principles and respect for religious views.³ He does this by effectively letting the student off the hook for having to defend her entire worldview because of a particular stance she might take on a specific issue. Thus, one can at once defend the idea of global warming and still maintain one’s allegiance to conservative Christian ideology (assuming, that is, conservative Christian ideology does not recognize the scientific view of climate change). Yet, Kunzman, like so many others, shies away from dealing head on with religious *claims*. Instead, religious assertions are lumped together as beliefs, in many cases strong beliefs, which emanate from longstanding traditions. Thus, the reason we can come to some sort of agreement or understanding in the classroom is because we all come from different traditions and so our beliefs need only be consistent with the tenets of a particular tradition. The virtue of Kunzman’s approach is that it gets kids talking and understanding the basis for the views of others; the downside is it never challenges the veracity of the claims that encompass the traditions themselves.

I

Much of the work I have done over the last many years has attended to the question of how members of a society deeply divided on religious doctrinal grounds can get along and treat each other with respect and civility.⁴ While the literature is steeped with thoughtful and reasoned arguments regarding social cohesion in a culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse state, religious diversity is a far more vexing issue. Unlike cultural, racial, or ethnic claims, religious groups make claims and assertions of truth and thus what constitutes respect for religious groups hinges in large part on what we do with these assertions of truth. To dilute these claims by considering them mere beliefs seems terribly patronizing and condescending. Yet, many of my critics have pointed out that to assess the veracity of these claims is either not possible or not appropriate for a public school and, in all cases, not wise. I have tried to argue that such assessment is possible and is very much appropriate for public schools, but have been met with much skepticism.

There have been basically three categories of critiques of my work. The first says I simply confuse claims for beliefs and since what religious adherents are really doing is asserting their beliefs, there is no obligation to assess them. The second critique says there is no way to adjudicate religious claims and, if there is, I have

failed to articulate such a standard(s). The last critique says that even if these are assertions of truth, and even if there is a way to adjudicate these claims, it is unwise to do so for moral reasons: it is wrong to undermine a child's belief system.

In this essay, we will respond to this third critique because it is the one that poses the strongest obstacle to the idea of assessing the veracity of religious claims.⁵ In order to situate the issue and frame our response to this third critique, we first summarize and contextualize the first two critiques.

EPISTEMOLOGY AND RELIGION

It is critical that religion, understood broadly, be accorded respect for its different standing with regard to its place in public schools. Religion and culture ought not to be treated synonymously. Naturally, religion is a central component to many cultures but it is different from culture. Unlike culture(s), religions make claims and assertions of truth.⁶ Of course religions are filled with examples of belief or faith statements as well, but to say that all claims made by religions and their adherents are statements of belief is patently false and wholly disrespectful.

While a student might claim that in his community people believe hard work and kindness will lead to everlasting fulfillment, a religious adherent might assert that accepting Jesus as one's savior is the only way to salvation. In the case of the former, the student is making a statement about a community value whereas in the latter case, the claimant is making an assertion of truth (at least she thinks it is). If we truly want to value the notion of respect for all in a pluralistic state then it seems we have an obligation to take these claims seriously. Yet, the requirements for respect will be different for each of the two distinct types of claims. The former, in sharing a value within a community, differs from the latter, which makes a normative assertion that if true is true for all human beings. Respect for all demands that we engage our fellow interlocutors in reasonable, respectful discourse about their claims. Cultivating democratic citizens requires not only that we understand the worldviews and beliefs of the other, but also that we respect the other enough to engage in meaningful discourse about those beliefs. Otherwise the so-called respect we are according is nothing more than a superficial sham.

Obviously, following through on this is tricky, to say the least. How do we assess the claim, Acceptance of Jesus as the savior is the only way to salvation? For that matter, how do we assess religious perceptual claims such as, "God appeared to me last night and told me to _____"? We suspect most reasonable people would prefer to ignore these claims, roll their eyes, and dismiss them as the rants or histrionics of religious zealots, fringe crazies, or something of the like. Putting aside one's own incredulity regarding these statements, it is undeniable that they may legitimately be classified as claims (as opposed to beliefs). Reducing them to beliefs is a conclusion we can only draw after submitting the claims to some sort of public assessment. The claim that "God appeared to me last night" is structurally the same as any other perceptual claim; whether the claim turns out to be warranted is another matter.

Therefore, the way forward for the person who wants to cultivate reflective, democratic, pluralistic citizens is to confront the claims head on. There are ways this

can be done. Some sort of Socratic questioning might lead the claimant to see that the assertion hinges on a belief that is particular to him or adherents of his faith. For example, “Acceptance of Jesus as the savior is the only way to salvation,” it would appear, is based on claims made in a book whose veridicality is not defensible as epistemologically true. For perceptual claims we may use a process akin to the scientific method to see if we can address the claim in some other way. For example, we might determine that God appears to this particular claimant whenever she has ingested a combination of medication and alcohol, but when sober the claimant never seems to have such experiences. Or, we may determine, as philosopher Richard Swinburne suggests, that we have reason to doubt the credibility of the claimant based on her reputation as a pathological liar.⁷

In summary, if the project of cultivating a civil, democratic, pluralistic order is important, and we believe it is, then when thinking about how we cultivate this in classrooms, we must not equate religion with culture, reducing it to a collection of preferences, tastes, and beliefs. We must show religious adherents a more robust respect by treating their claims seriously by investigating their veracity. There are mechanisms for doing so, the most successful of which are negative — providing reasons to doubt the veracity or reduce the assertions to statements of belief, which in turn removes the normativity inherent to many religious assertions.

Yet, this very brief summary highlights the thrust of the third critique, which is significant. Take, for instance, the previously mentioned normative claim about Jesus and salvation. Say we do a terrific job, through Socratic or other rational deliberation, of getting the claimant (and other like believers) to see that there is no reasonable foundation upon which to base this assertion. Have we not in the process of challenging this student’s claim and upholding some sort of epistemological integrity, caused undue harm to her psychological and emotional development, undermining the very foundation of her worldview? Yet, had we refrained from epistemological scrutiny by not challenging these claims, would we not have violated other important educational responsibilities?

This, then, becomes the central hurdle to conducting epistemologically *and* ethically defensible classroom discussions in public schools within pluralistic and democratic states. This next section attends to the question of how teachers in school settings might fulfill their dual obligations to students. In attempting to answer this question, we articulate specific principles that should prove instrumental for discourse on a wide range of controversial issues.

II

As we have alluded to above, teachers have both epistemological and ethical responsibilities. Generally speaking, epistemological duties require that teachers hold students responsible for providing evidence for their assertions, honor sources of disciplinary knowledge where relevant, and refrain from letting “nonsense go unchallenged.”⁸ The teacher’s ethical responsibilities require that he recognize the importance of cultivating students’ moral and psychological development and, when possible, refrain from harming students. This commitment also requires, in public schools, that teachers consider how their actions (or inactions) might serve

as supportive of or antagonistic toward students' claims. Adhering to both the epistemological and the ethical obligations might prove difficult at times as demanding evidence of a particular assertion might come at the expense of a student's emotional development. Thus teachers must be cognizant that when challenging students to examine and defend their claims, they need to make efforts not to undermine the students' foundational beliefs.

Yet, when it comes to classrooms in pluralistic societies, the issue becomes more complex because civil discourse is multi-dimensional. Challenges to one student might benefit another and come at the expense of still a third. How then does a commitment to epistemological and ethical responsibilities help us navigate the complex, pluralistic, and religiously varied arena of the public school classroom? The relationship between a teacher and her students is far more complex than, for instance, the doctor-patient relationship. In trying to determine the fair, responsible, or right thing to do the teacher is faced with real dilemmas: to whom does she owe her allegiance? In what cases do intellectual (epistemological) matters trump psychological and developmental considerations?

To illustrate the significance of the dilemma, consider the following vignettes. With the scenarios that follow, we focus on issues derived from Conservative Christianity, not because it is the only belief system that presents challenges to pluralism — it certainly is not — but because it is the most vocal religious movement providing challenges to pluralism in the United States:

Students in a U.S. history course at a public high school have recently learned of the atrocities committed by the communist and fascist regimes of the twentieth century. A discussion ensues, and the value of human life is brought up by one of the students. One example leads to another, and eventually the conversation is steered toward the topic of abortion. A student claims that abortion is equivalent to murder. He states that the Bible says that life begins at conception, that God knits each human being together in the womb, and that He knows every hair on each person's head. The student says that any woman who has an abortion is a murderer, just like Stalin and Hitler, and that she should be arrested.

Students are presenting poems to their classmates in a high school English class. After a student presents Walt Whitman's poem, "O Captain! My Captain!," the class begins discussing the meaning of the poem and the background of its author. When the time comes to bring up interesting facts about the author, the presenter informs the class that during his research, he learned that Whitman was gay. Several boys laugh upon learning this. One of them asks, "Why are we learning this stuff?" Another student jokes, "That's why you picked that poem, homo!" After a few more jokes, another student asks, "Who cares if he was gay, what does that have to do with anything?" A female student chimes in, "Uh, because it's disgusting?" "Yeah," says another student, "and it's a sin. The Bible says it's an abomination."

Students in a middle school art class are discussing creative works from various parts of the world. The teacher explains that certain images and symbols that appear

regularly in Hindu works of art are representations of deeply held religious beliefs of the artists. When the ideas of karma and reincarnation are discussed, a female student laughs, "That is so stupid! People don't really believe that, do they?" The sole Hindu student at the school squirms in his seat in the back row. The student continues, "Everybody knows that when you die, your soul goes to Heaven or Hell." Another student chimes in, "How do you know?" She responds, "Well, everybody knows that. My preacher says it all the time: If you accept Jesus, then you are saved and you go to Heaven. All those other people we learned about are going to Hell."

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN THE CLASSROOM

The three vignettes serve to show several important features. First, conflict regarding religion is pervasive in public schools. One need not limit these controversies to biology classes, sex education classes, or controversial issues classes. They are ubiquitous. Second, the conflicts are multidimensional, rooted in misinformation, religious conviction and, often, in ignorance. Finally, a general commitment to the intellectual and/or moral development of students will not be terribly useful to most teachers in determining how they ought to address such claims.

Naturally, the teacher brings her own framework, perspective, and worldviews to bear in addressing these situations. In examining the critiques of my work, we have identified three types of responses teachers might provide to the situations described above. The first type is the one endorsed in my earlier work; the one with which critics have taken issue.

Consider the person who is primarily concerned with the epistemological duties of an educator. This teacher takes a position we will call epistemological orthodoxy. In dealing with any of these situations this teacher suggests that epistemological integrity is the benchmark by which she accords her students respect. She puts her commitment to fostering students' critical thinking above all else and wants her students to base their beliefs and views on public evidence and to be able to defend such beliefs and views thoroughly in the face of challenges. This teacher is fairly agnostic when it comes to the substance of the claims, and is instead more concerned with fostering in her students a commitment to some public principle(s) of assessment.

If the flaw with epistemological orthodoxy is its wholesale emphasis on public principles of evidence, then we must also acknowledge that providing no attention to evidence is equally problematic. This second type of response is less concerned with the "truth of things" and far more focused on helping students learn to live respectfully with one another, regardless of difference. This teacher, who does not wish to, in any way, undermine his students' worldviews and belief systems, sidesteps any and all of the epistemological assertions that could evoke exclusivity. He instead focuses on ways that all students can get along and "respect one another." He might do this by explaining that his students' assertions are not normative claims but rather expressions of belief founded in the mythology of various religions and cultures. He might ask his students to consider these issues in their context and then provide ways for students to identify commonalities. This teacher's hope is to

circumvent any examination of the assertions as truth and avoid exclusivity in the service of fostering social cohesion and preventing undue harm to any student.

The third way a teacher might respond to these issues is total evasion. Evoking some misunderstood notion of the Establishment Clause, this teacher cuts off all discussions related to religion and deems them inadmissible in the classroom context. Whatever the reasons, the position seems to be consistent: avoid controversy at nearly all cost.

Each approach is problematic in its own way. The first two eschew either the epistemological or the ethical and the third eschews both. We have argued that teachers have both epistemological and ethical duties in their capacities as teachers. Throughout the remainder of this essay, we attempt to address the shortcomings revealed in the epistemological approach by developing three principles. Combined they allow for a revision of the epistemological orthodoxy approach described above, one that takes the ethical seriously as well.

The epistemological orthodoxy approach is a problematic way to conduct classroom discourse because ignoring students' psychological and developmental well-being might lead teachers to create a hostile classroom environment inadvertently. For example, by demanding proof for assertions of truth, teachers communicate that they expect students to be able to defend the foundations of their belief systems. This places an unreasonable burden on the students and when they fail to provide adequate evidence for such a challenge, they would likely feel defeated and humiliated by the experience with the foundations of their beliefs shaken. In a pluralistic state, this is indeed troubling.

The second approach, while considerate of students' psychological and developmental well-being, fails to develop in students a healthy sense of skepticism and an ability to discriminate between multiple, sometimes irreconcilable, points of view. This is an unacceptable side-stepping of epistemological responsibility. The "can't we all get along" attitude that is conveyed when teachers take positions such as this does not place students in an advantageous position for intelligent decision-making in life.

The third approach is probably the least helpful. Avoiding controversial issues in the public school classroom is harmful in several ways. First, the avoidance of controversy makes the classroom an extremely dull and lifeless place in which to learn. Secondly, it teaches students that their personal beliefs are not important — that they are not to be discussed because they are irrelevant to the more valuable issues discussed in schools. And thirdly, it suggests that controversy is inherently bad; that we should not engage with those whose ideas are different from our own. As Kunzman argues, the unfortunate result of avoiding this type of discussion in public schools is the development of "a citizenry with little skill in discussing ethical controversies, particularly as they relate to religion, and thus even less sense of how to make decisions about living together in respectful and reasonable disagreement."⁹

A more balanced approach, one that takes the epistemological *and* the ethical seriously, is clearly warranted. Recognizing the critic who warns against too much

emphasis on the epistemological responsibilities of the teacher we begin by articulating our first principle: *Authentic Respect*. The principle of authentic respect holds that teachers should take the claims and assertions of their students seriously. Taking claims seriously requires more than mere tolerance. It requires giving multiple perspectives a public airing in the manner we would expect from others for our own ideas.

Building on Charles Taylor's notion of recognition we suggest that authentic respect comes not from agreeing or disagreeing with a particular view or claim but by granting all claims the *presumption of worth*. Taylor argues that it is patronizing and condescending to accept or reject a belief, claim, or assertion on the face of things.¹⁰ To truly respect a person is to grant that her claim merits a presumption of worth. Whether or not it pans out is almost beside the point. Thus we see that it is through the process of granting something a presumption of worth and assessing it according to some guidelines that we show religion and religious believers respect.

What, then, are the guidelines to be used in assessing the veracity and worth of the claims? To understand the general direction of these guidelines we turn to the second principle: *Potential Harm*. The principle of potential harm requires that teachers consider the degree to which a truth claim might harm other students before deciding how to respond. Teachers must make this judgment of potential harm in determining the most responsible way to conduct classroom discourse — one that negotiates between their epistemological and ethical responsibilities. Determining the category and degree of evidence a teacher will require from her students calls for further guidance.

This brings us to our third principle: *Adequate Justification*. Simply put, this principle requires that all claims be justified appropriately. The determination of justification has to do with the degree of potential harm assigned to the claim. Justification for truth claims can be divided into two categories: external and internal. To the extent a religious claim is likely to cause harm to others, it must be assessed according to external justification — publicly accessible principles and evidence. The vignette regarding the assertion that Whitman's sexual orientation was an "abomination" to God provides a useful example here, as any teacher should rightly presume this claim would be harmful to others. The principle of adequate justification obligates the teacher to require that the student provide public evidence to support the veracity of this claim. This expectation is appropriate within the context of a pluralistic classroom.

Unlike our vignettes, there are many imaginable instances where religious assertions might be made in which the likelihood of potential harm is negligible. For example, a student claims that the word of God (her Bible) has helped her to see the goodness in all people, even those who have committed heinous crimes. A teacher committed to authentic respect is obligated to examine this claim. Yet because the claim itself is unlikely to cause harm, the teacher's ethical responsibility to refrain from harming students (in this case the claimant) trumps her commitment to epistemological orthodoxy, and therefore, internal means of justification are appropriate.

A critic might wonder why, in this case, there is any demand for justification on the part of the claimant. After all, no one is hurt by the assertion and there is no normativity to the claim. The reason is that the teacher has both epistemological and ethical duties and the principle of authentic respect demands as much. Not to consider the worth of the claim, not to examine it, is to misrecognize and disrespect the claimant. Furthermore, the epistemological obligations of the teacher demand that the student think through her beliefs and provide some justification for her claim.

CONCLUSION

To cultivate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required in an increasingly pluralistic society, teachers need to examine carefully the role they play in this process. We have attempted to articulate a rationale for taking both the epistemological and ethical duties of the teacher seriously and in so doing we have crafted three principles by which teachers might navigate the muddy waters of taking religion and religious believers seriously in a liberal, pluralistic, democratic classroom.

The endeavors of this type of classroom include fostering in our students the ability to engage in productive dialogue with others, especially with those who disagree with them over matters of deep personal significance. If we want students, parents, teachers, and others who have an interest in public schooling to value ethical dialogue in pluralist societies, we must make a convincing argument that we have their best interests at heart. Teacher adherence to both epistemological and ethical responsibility could go a long way in gaining the trust and support of valued community members. We believe that through consideration of the guiding principles of authentic respect, potential harm, and adequate justification, teachers can be better prepared for dealing with the controversy surrounding religiously informed truth claims in the public school classroom, and more importantly, for ensuring a more productive and civil democratic order.

1. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, in *The John Dewey Essays in Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

2. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

3. Rob Kunzman, *Grappling with the Good: Talking about Religion and Morality in Public Schools* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006).

4. Throughout the essay, use of the singular "I" refers to Suzanne Rosenblith's solo work whereas plural pronouns denote the collaborative work of Rosenblith and Benjamin Bindewald

5. I am grateful to Natasha Levinson for helping me to see the force of this critique.

6. Here we are thinking specifically of monotheistic traditions.

7. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

8. Nel Noddings. *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

9. Kunzman, *Grappling with the Good*, 6.

10. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).