

Migration in Liberal Democracies: The Limits to Liberal Tolerance

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Joseph Carens's essay, although arriving too late to address directly, was well worth waiting for.¹ This response complements many of the views that it represents, while focusing on the schooling of different communities of children, many of them immigrants, in which a separate education has some benefits and some costs. I pick up here on the intergenerational themes in Carens's essay and address the only institution, schools, which have the deliberate and collective goal of producing and reproducing patterns of thought and behavior. The question for immigrant children is, "Whose patterns of thought and behavior are to be reproduced and how?" This response draws on an essay that Carens's sent me earlier, on Muslim immigrants, and I apologize for references that may seem oblique in the present context.

There are many reasons why immigrants might prefer to be educated in their own private cultural or religious schools. Often they are the only trusted point of contact between the family and the larger society, and the only familiar institution. They can serve as sources of marriage, vocational and health counseling, and cultural and religious continuity. Some set up neighborhood vaccination days and health fairs, and they provide a source of identity continuous with their lives in another place. Some serve as sources of advocacy or as a first step to economic independence. Moreover, in liberal pluralist societies there seems to be good reasons to allow and, in some cases, even support these schools. Freedom of association and freedom of religion are important liberal planks, and to support non-religious public schools while refusing to support religious schools seems discriminatory. Moreover, as Carens points out, sometimes this refusal may result from stereotypes about the incompatibility of Islam with liberal democracy. Nevertheless, liberal democracies ought, every thing else being equal, to give preference to public non-sectarian schools. If support for sectarian religious schools is allowed, which I believe it should be, it should be allowed under considerable state supervision. There are certain forms of intersubjective understandings that are critical to democracies and the liberal state has an obligation to see to it that these are maintained even as they evolve as the result of context and history. I believe that, as a result, liberal states have an obligation to supervise certain activities that occur in schools — whether they are public, private, or religious — and that all education is eventually accountable to a larger public regardless of its source of support. The mechanism for doing this must be as non intrusive as possible if cherished religious freedom is to be maintained, but it must be done if liberal pluralism is to be sustained.

As some of you know I have spent the good part of the last few years in religious school classrooms exploring the connections between religious instruction and moral education. Much of what I saw was quite commendable from a liberal progressive point of view — students in a Catholic school organizing themselves to

protest the School of the Americas in Georgia on the grounds that it trained dictators and torturers, a teacher in a Catholic school exploring the origins of sexism in the Church, and another teacher in a Jewish school describing how Jews flourished in Spain under Moslem rule. Yet there were other features of some of these schools that raise considerable problems for the ideals of liberal pluralism. Here are a three of them.

First, one of my Islamic students who taught in a Muslim school reported on an incident when a teacher told an inquiring parent that the Imam had deemed it a *haram*, or sin to buy a turkey during the months of October and November, even if prices were cheaper, while it was acceptable to buy them during the rest of the year. It was hard not to wonder whether the timing of the prohibition, one that is not shared by all Moslem schools, fell at the time of year when eating turkey is synonymous to many people with being American. It seems to me that the issue here is not about individual autonomy or religious freedom, since I do not know of any general prohibition regarding eating turkey in November, but rather whether a school is actively discouraging empathetic identification with the members of the larger society, and whether such separation has a strong justification, as it might say with native American or indigenous Canadians. To my student other aspects of the schools program, such as its very strict prohibition against communication between the sexes, were extremely problematic, and seemed to support an isolationist standpoint. I think that Carens's essay provides the reason for this unease. It appears that the school is discouraging students from active participation in the larger society and possibly encouraging them to become passive citizens. To the extent that this example is representative of a larger program to inhibit a reasonable appropriation of the norms of the larger society and to engage with others on an equal basis it is problematic from a liberal point of view.

The second example comes from a Jewish Day school, one with few immigrants. The students in this school come from high income, well-educated homes and are in many ways integrated into American society. Except for the Yarmulkes worn by the boys and the classes in Hebrew, the school feels very familiar. A picture of Martin Luther King hangs on the wall outside of the principal's office. Near King's picture stands an American Flag, and then along is the Flag of the state of Israel.

The identification with Israel constitutes an important feature of the hidden curriculum. Each corridor is named after a street in Jerusalem, films depicting the Israeli victory over the Egyptians in the six day war are shown during school assembly and members of the Israeli defense force visit the school on the days leading up to Israeli independence day to help the students construct murals for the school. This identification is generally unconscious and built into the very habits of the school. One may or may not agree with these commitments, but, much like the Islamic school, these commitments are being shaped, at least for the students, uncritically and the practices of doing so are shielded from the eyes of the larger community.

The third example comes from a Catholic school, where a lovely Chapel has five beautifully stained glass windows, each depicting a separate saint. The first is of St. Albert standing with each foot planted victoriously on a book. The spine of the second had only recently been blacked out, in a gesture toward ecumenicalism, but the teacher who was escorting me told me that, until recently, it had read "Jew," indicating Albert's victory over the Jews. Since the school was founded in 1928, and had a graduating class of over five hundred a year, about thirty-five thousand students had passed with Saint Albert looking over their shoulders.

These examples suggest a sense of cultural isolation and show how children can be programmed uncritically into cultural formations, political commitments, and religious chauvinism. They also suggest that isolation is not only an Islamic concern, nor only an exclusive fundamentalist or orthodox one. And most importantly, they suggest that there is more to pluralism than the existence of pluralities. At the very least they require a shared, intersubjective understanding regarding the political and educational conditions required to sustain pluralism. These conditions include respect for people's rights to choose and to change their affiliations, a general awareness that, while one chooses from a particular religious or cultural standpoint, and must prefer the horizon of that standpoint in the process of choice, one may choose to live a different kind of life than one's parents or community. And they require, as Kymlicka suggests, an assessment of the benefits of cultural and religious reproduction in any given case from the standpoint of the benefits to a given individual and not the benefits to the religion or culture as such.

Pluralism also requires that one race, one sex, one religion cannot dominate over others. This lesson is easier to learn in the abstract than it may be in the concrete cases where cultural, racial, religious, or ideological separation is imposed from within, and where students are inoculated against opposing standpoints. While this need not require that every one be able to step outside of their own shoes and to self-consciously choose their identity, it does require that everyone respect the conditions that enable such choices to be made.

Nothing that I have said here should, I believe, place Carens's thesis, expressed in a different essay, in doubt. He is correct, I believe, in questioning the ideal of the capacity to distance one's self from one's identity as a meaningful educational aim. Indeed, I would argue that even those who do so distance themselves always do it from a central point of identity. If I am unhappy with my Jewishness, I do not just throw it into the air and see where it falls among all the other possible identities that I might decide to take up. Rather, if I do this with any modicum of rationality and calculated efficiency I do it with my present identity centrally in mind. How would Catholicism work for me as a Jew? And then how would Buddhism work for me as a Jew, and Islam, and so on. It is from that center that other identities are considered and part of that center is very concrete; if I marry this Catholic girl and choose to convert, how will it affect my parents, my friends, my connections, my spiritual commitment. The more realistic goal, since most people still do not even consider converting, as Carens notes, is to simply "require that people listen and engage with

each other. To treat people with respect does not necessarily require that one suspend one's own commitments or distance oneself from their own identity. Indeed conversations are most fruitful when people speak from their deepest selves." Yet while adults may or may not engage in such conversations and certainly need not be prodded to do so, liberal democracies do have a special interest in the education of the young and in developing the dispositions and capacities for such engagements. We may question whether anything like this occurs in non-religious secular schools, or whether, if it does it should be instituted as part of the formal curriculum. However, whatever the answer may be to this puzzle we cannot just assume that religious schools may or may not engage these students in similar conversations and at their own choosing. Education for democracy must keep the need for such conversations in mind regardless of whether the location is a public, private, or religious school.

In conclusion: Isolated religious and cultural schools may present a number of advantages for children from immigrant and minority groups, and those advantages are an important reason why liberal society should allow such groups to develop and to flourish. However, there are also challenges to the intersubjective understandings, the attitudes, dispositions, and skills that pluralism, in distinction from plurality, needs to survive in a robust way. These challenges suggest the need for a wider window for public engagement with the practices and children in these schools. At the very least the norms of intercultural engagement and intergenerational development that Carens develops so well need educational settings where they will be encouraged and shaped.

1. Editor's note: Due to circumstances beyond the control of PES, the invitation to Joseph Carens to present the 2006 Kneller Lecture was extended much later in the year than usual, with the consequence that his respondents, Walter Feinberg and Shirley Pendlebury, received only background material prior to the delivery of the lecture.