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ON THE ILLUSION THAT WE CAN CHOOSE TO BELIEVE

Tom Green
Syracuse University

Macmillan is puzzled at the idea that we can choose our beliefs. Most of all he is puzzled at the idea that schools ought to educate so that upon "coming of age," that is, the "age of reason," youth might be able to choose from among alternative visions of the good life. It is supposed by some, for example, that religious instruction in the schools, if there is any at all, should aim at students' "later choice of religion," and not at their present induction into one or another religion. "The school should avoid promoting a particular 'vision of the good,'" but should develop, instead, a capacity for rational choice from among alternative visions. Macmillan is not just puzzled about such a point of view, however. He goes on to a more drastic position. Unless I am mistaken, he comes to reject this sort of approach as, at least impractical or perhaps impossible for the schools, but at most untrue and maybe even incoherent.

There are different sorts of things that can fall under the general heading of "belief." Propositional belief, that is, belief expressible in statements of the form "A believes *that s*uch and such," is only one form. There is also, as Jim points out, such a thing as "A believes *in* thus and thus," which is less like propositional belief than it is like simple trust. It seems apparent to me, in any case, that in none of its various senses, do any of us ever simply decide what to believe, and thus neither are we ever free to simply choose what to believe. If we distinguish between believing, on the one hand, and the propositional content of belief, on the other, then we cannot suppose that the act of believing is entirely willful as though I could exercise it upon any proposition I care to entertain in the way I might apply my carving tools to any piece of wood that comes along. Belief and the content of belief are not separable in that way. In fact, I am disposed to think (I could say, "disposed to believe") that not only is belief not *entirely* a willful act, it is not a willful act *in any particular*. If that is so, then it really makes no sense at all to speak of "choosing" what to believe.

Now that is one position that a person might assume in relation to Jim's concern. It is a position stronger than he advances, more radical, I suppose. Now, however, I want to show that there are some features of common experience to *suggest* that this view is *too* extreme, *too* radical.

There is, in Christian history, a peculiar idea that I have long wondered about, an idea, that only lately I have come to feel that I have some understanding. It is the idea that there is such a thing as "willful ignorance." The thought comes to mind now, I suppose, because if ignorance can be "willful" then why not belief? Well, just what is meant by "willful ignorance?" It think it is that condition that I note from time to time in those who (1) are ignorant on some matter important to their lives, (2) are aware of their ignorance, but even more than that, are (3) resolved to remain in their ignorance, (4) not the least because it is such a source of enjoyment and pleasure to them. I suppose that each of us can recall someone who fits this description. It is a bit more difficult to admit what is probably no less true, that there are traces of this sort of thing in ourselves.

If you have any sensibilities on the matter at all, it is quite possible that in the idea of willful ignorance you will find something describable as sin. That is to say, here there is a genuine distortion of the self, a kind of corruption, something not to be confused with innocence, or even naiveté, but allied more with pigheadedness or arrogance, a disposition to be exactly what we are not, some kind of God or so. The suggestion I want to set before you on this point is just that — a

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suggestion only. It is that this idea of "willful ignorance" only appears to be parallel to the idea of willful belief. Its more immediate and relevant connection to Jim's paper lies in the claim that when present, willful ignorance presents a distortion of the self much as willful belief presents us with a twisted notion of belief.

But this last point needs to be pressed. Macmillan is not really concerned with propositional belief in any case, and neither are those who aim at a kind of neutrality in the schools concerned merely with propositional belief. Jim is concerned about this peculiar claim that we can preserve choice among beliefs about ways of life, understandings of the good, or about religious convictions, matters of destiny and meaning. These are the sorts of beliefs about which there is oft' repeated concern that the public schools must be neutral, providing instruction somehow, but eschewing imposition, or, to borrow yet another political term, avoiding any trace of interposition. The school should not stand between family and child or between the child and what must eventually become a decision of the child as to what to believe.

But belief in this case is no more the product of will and hence, no more the result of choice then beliefs of the crudest propositional sort. In order to make this likeness more explicit, I must engage in what might seem a kind of biased representation of the truth, but it is one that I hope can be grasped so as not to seem entirely consumed by the bias. The central point is that Macmillan is speaking of beliefs as included in "networks" and thus constituting, as it were, whole "ways of life," a typical Wittgensteinian expression. I want to adhere to that perspective, but without reference to Wittgenstein. I want to draw upon one, among several religious traditions, to discuss the matter.

But even "religious" tradition won't quite do the trick. One must distinguish "religion" and "faith," as two different things as viewed from within one tradition. Religion may be a matter of belief, but faith is not essentially. That is to say, faith is more a matter of trust than belief. The opposite of faith is not unbelief, but fear, or uncertainty. This is not, of course, a full account. I wish only to point out a partial contrast by which it might become clear why a person who takes matters of religious perspective or one's life-course seriously would find it really quite strange and even offensive to suppose that someone is going to undertake to teach another about faith. Religion, especially someone else's religion, might be studied. But this has almost nothing to do with the cultivation of faith, much less adherence to some faith.

My point is that one does not *choose* one's faith any more than one chooses whether to believe that tabby is a golden retriever. The more appropriate description might be that one comes to be captured *by* a particular world perspective. Jim's question, the one with which he ends, strikes me as the most serious question currently facing the very possibility of public education. Does it make any sense at all to suppose that the schools can be educationally serious in dealing with such matters of belief and at the same time remain neutral as between the different views of the world, and of the good life that are represented in the society? I harbor a growing skepticism as to the possibility, a doubt that this conviction with which I grew up, namely that such neutrality is possible and also educationally useful is a sustainable conviction. It seems a more plausible view that either what we teach will be educationally non-serious, or else anything but neutral as among the variety of perspectives that the world offers.

I am grateful to Jim Macmillan that he has brought this question to the fore in the way in which he has. I think his is perhaps the most serious paper that we have heard in many years. It offers not simply a case that needs to be heard, but one that deals with the very possibilities of public education. In the spirit of Jim's question and to extend somewhat this rather skeptical suspicion of my own, one might consider the following.

In discussing the most basic problem of education — what he termed "the problem of generations" — Bruno Bettleheim reported one adolescent as remarking, "You can't live if there's nothing to push against." Bettleheim went on to comment.

> You cannot test your own strength and vitality, the very things you feel most dubious about as an adolescent, when all you can push against is a vacuum, or an adult society more than ready to give way, to act more youthful than even befits youth. Without something definite to push against, youth feels lost.[1]

Walter Brueggemann, recently and in a complementary way, has spoken of education in, and by, Torah as part of a larger picture that emerges when we try to think of education as modeled along lines of the biblical canon. In contrasting the word of the prophet and the Torah of the priest, he writes,

> we have seen that the Torah deals in that which is normative, known and given. It answers the child's question about who we are and what we are about. The answer is already known and settled. The Torah reports that on which there is consensus. It is essentially uncritical or precritical. It does not invite intellectual curiosity, penetration, or analysis. The Torah is not debatable. It states the basis on which analysis and debate can take place. The Torah itself, however, is positioned beyond such questioning.[2]

When Brueggemann remarks that the Torah sets down what is normative and given, what is known and settled, he does not mean that it affords no quarrels. He means only that its being "given" is what guarantees that whatever quarrels there are will be family quarrels. He elaborates on this "given," — the "base-line" education of Torah, as "The adult response to the yearning of the children." This response, he says,

> is the articulation of the creed, or if not creed, at least classical, highly stylized testimonies to faith. The answer given is a set recital, not an answer made up on the spot. The base line of identity for the community is known. Adults are capable of articulating it. These stable, known answers announce what is normative for both generations. It is not asked if the hearing children will find the answer convincing or binding, or if they will find it too heavy or complicated or parochial or embarrassing. And it is not asked if the adult who speaks it has misgivings or reservations. The elemental educational moment is uncomplicated, unencumbered, and unembarrassed….The Torah of the priest could not have been formed by people with misgivings.[3]

Here are two complementary accounts each affirming that some kind of self-confident and self-conscious, firm, community of adults is needed if education of the most elemental sort is to proceed. There must be something to push against, else growing up is impossible. There must be some positive body of experience that can be shared by adult and child, something that, in consequence, is inter-generational, something saying, "This is who we are, where we stand, and how we got this way, this is why we do these things" (Ex. 12:26; 13:8; 3:14; Deut. 6:20-21; Josh. 4:6; 4:21). Without something like this central affirmation, there will be nothing to push against, and nobody to push back.

Yet over against any such unity, and in contrast to any such solid affirmation understood by adults and presented to youth as unencumbered, uncomplicated and clear, there stands the primary fact of our world, namely, plurality and complexity, anything but unity, clarity, and assurance. Ours might be described as a world fallen away, a world, that is, in which the supreme fact is difference more than likeness, division more than unity, a world in which the center does not hold, a world in which, perhaps, there is no center, a world in which identities are riven. The divisions are more than ethnic, racial, and economic. They are rooted more deeply in religious, linguistic, and traditional distinctions, as well, differences rooted in insulated and partisan histories including experience with quite distinct even irreconcilable varieties of political and legal arrangements. If all such differences, all the elements of such pluralisms, were allowed to reign, each secure in its own petty dominance, the whole could only be described as something akin to pandaemonium, that universal gathering of demons, that John Milton described as the capital of Hell in which each pleading devil is convinced of the worth of its own sovereign uniqueness. How does one educate in pandaemonium?[4] The answer is that one cannot.

When such conditions prevail, they marvelously focus the mind. They make it easy to see that education in any complete sense needs some community of likeness. When the need is met, it will be unnoticed, not even requiring commentary. Its satisfaction will be unremarkable. But when that

need is no longer met, then the question nags, "What are we to teach our youth?" The matter is then lifted from the speculative or "merely academic" to the "outright urgent." Yet, in proportion as what we *ought* to teach is uncertain, then what we *will* teach will be clear. We will teach that we are in doubt, that there are many views of what matters, that we can neither confidently affirm what we think nor firmly say that what we think is preferable to some of what others may think. Under these conditions, the need for a community of likeness, some unity of memory, may seem more apparent, and seem more apparent, perhaps, to the extent that its absence is more apparent and more keenly felt.

When plurality, always a reality, becomes not simply fact, but the dominant fact, the central fact, then it does more than offer mute testimony to the plurality that is. Instead, it begins to shout for attention. It points to a need. When that happens, it may become possible, interesting, and perhaps even necessary, to consider whether education, in any truly basic sense, can occur at all except within enclaves where some central affirmation is possible, where plurality, in other words, is not the brute fact and where adults, therefore, can speak to youth with solid assurance and without embarrassment about who they are, how and where they stand, and how they got that way.

Here then is an educational necessity — clarity and confidence about what to teach, a necessity, however, that stands over against a particular social reality — an uncertainty about what to teach as well as disagreement on why and how we ought to do it. So, in one moment we are called upon to meet an educational need, and, in the next, we are called upon to cancel it. The difficulty is just that stark and just that intractable. What we must do, for the education of the next generation, is precisely what we cannot accomplish.

Now it will be argued that this characterization is too extreme. Clearly it is possible to educate under the conditions of plurality and even extreme division on such rudiments. Though education may exist under such conditions of division and plurality, the next question must be asked: "What kind of education can it, must it, be?"

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1. Bruno Bettleheim, "The Problem of Generations," *Daedalus: Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 91, no. 1 (Winter 1962): 81-82.

2. Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 40-41.

3. Ibid., 16-17.

4. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in a brilliant book on ethnicity in international politics, reminds us that Pandaemonium was the capital of Satan and his peers in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. As Moynihan observes, it was "inhabited by creatures quite convinced that the great Satan had their best interests at heart. Poor devils." *Pandaemonium, Ethnicity in International Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 174.

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