

Going “to the Limit” of Political Liberalism

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Eric Farr’s prescient article explores the tensions inherent in Rawlsian liberalism’s attempts at neutrality by examining the emerging movement to adopt the academic study of religion in public school curricula. He argues, rather convincingly I think, that the liberal framework is necessarily reductive in this case. In its attempts to foster autonomy, Rawlsian liberal education depicts competing comprehensive doctrines as a menu of options from which the student might rationally select. The insistence on rationalist, material analysis eschews the openness to the transcendent, non-rationalist epistemologies of many religious traditions. Further, liberalism’s staunch individualism obscures many embodied, communitarian modes of religious life. Drawing from Benjamin Schewel’s taxonomy of narratives explaining religious persistence in secular modernity, Farr suggests that the academic study of religion might adopt a framework which treats religion as an evolving “system of knowledge and practice” used for inquiry into the transcendent.¹

By way of response, I would like to raise two questions. First, Farr charitably describes this reductive character as a limitation, a minor defect, of liberalism. I would like to ask whether, in the idiom of software developers, this is “a feature, not a bug.” That is, the reductive capacity of liberalism in regard to religious loyalties may be what gives liberalism its longevity and power. Second, I wonder whether Schewel’s framework might not lead to the same deleterious consequences. By enlisting religious traditions in the service of a larger project, I fear that Schewel’s framework imposes a normative anthropology that does not substantially differ from the Rawlsian model.

After reading Patrick Deneen’s recent *Why Liberalism Failed*, I am becoming more convinced that liberalism is not a system for the maintenance of harmonious pluralism.² Rather, its inner logic leads to a homogenous and suffocating unity under the principles of what Jan Feldman has termed “positive” Rawlsian liberalism.³ Athletes speak of pushing themselves “to the limit” of their physical capacity and mathematicians use “the limit” to refer to the value which a function eventually approaches. In the same way, I suggest that if we were to go “to the limit” of liberalism in the context of religious education, we might find a single, comprehensive doctrine which demands allegiance at the expense of students’ disparate religious backgrounds.

Eamonn Callan has perhaps provided the clearest admission of liberal citizenship education’s end. For Callan, Rawls’ distinction between comprehensive liberalism and a mere political liberalism that allows the existence of private comprehensive doctrines is a psychological impossibility.⁴ Holding one set of epistemic values as a public-facing citizen and a competing set in private life yields such a personal disintegration that it cannot be permitted by conscientious educators. If schools must foster Rawls’ “burdens of judgment”—the habit of entertaining the falsity of one’s convictions—they can only, in Callan’s words “weaken the sway of ancient dogmatisms.”⁵ In a rather revealing passage, Callan applauds the “accomplishment” of North American Catholics who selectively disregard their traditions’ teachings.⁶ While religious traditions would not completely disappear under the liberal ideal, the ones that would remain would be transformed so as to cohere with the sort of rationalist individualism that Farr helpfully identifies.

This tendency can be seen in Diane Moore’s framework for teaching religious studies in secondary schools. A hallmark of Moore’s approach is that students must be taught that religions are “internally

diverse,” undergo “change over time,” and are deeply dependent on historical and cultural circumstance.⁷ These principles may seem obvious or inconsequential to those versed in the academic study of religion, but they directly contradict the shared convictions of many religious traditions. In the West at least, strands of Orthodox Judaism and orthodox Christianity as well as many schools of Islamic jurisprudence view their traditions as timeless and universal, in essence extending beyond the particularities of time and place. In practice, I fear that Moore’s approach teaches students that religious traditions are contingent, even arbitrary, and separable from one’s identity as a human person. Here the reduction of religion to a consumer choice, which Farr rightly fears, constitutes the disciplinary foundation of religious education.

In Deneen’s calculus, this is not an inconvenient drawback, but a logical consequence of liberalism, in both its classical and Rawlsian forms. By positing radical autonomy as the highest human end, liberalism removes the person from the constraints of a religious community, especially an authoritative one. Left “naked and afraid,” as it were, the liberal citizen increasingly grants power and loyalty to the state to meet the host of human needs which pre-liberal, inextricably religious communities once met.⁸ William Cavanaugh has put this process in more explicitly theological terms—by supplanting attachment to a metaphysics of “givenness,” whereby we do not have to create ourselves, liberal autonomy subsumes all our loyalties under the aegis of the nation state, which purports to respond to our desires.⁹ Interestingly, this conversion of loyalties is necessarily an educational project. As Deneen notes, liberalism “was the first political architecture that proposed transforming all aspects of human life to conform to a preconceived political plan.”¹⁰ Fashioning a citizenry unified by *ideas*, rather than ethnic or tribal ties, requires education, even schooling. I fear that religious education under Moore’s approach will eventually become totalizing in this sense.

In turning to Schewel’s proposal, it is important to note the premise of his work. Schewel classifies seven competing narratives which attempt to explain why the “secularization” predicted by Weber and modern sociology has not come to pass. After finding each unsatisfactory, Schewel suggests that a more adequate narrative might be found by tweaking the “developmental” narrative. This account holds that religions evolve to provide a greater capacity to know some indefinable transcendent force, or simply to contain greater complexity. Religions are epistemic tools by which we might better explore the transcendent. By adopting this framework in teaching about religions, Farr suggests that we might strike a balance between rationalistic and more holistic ways of knowing, gain an epistemic resource with which to critically examine secular public reasoning itself, and become more sensitive to the collective nature of many religious traditions.

Yet I wonder whether this narrative of the evolving epistemic tool similarly coopts religious traditions by making them merely resources for a personal journey of discovery. Many traditions might not cohere to the narrative of “inquiry into the transcendent.” By enlisting them in an aim outside their own self-definition, Schewel risks remaking diverse religious traditions into a syncretic monolith. This consequence seems largely identical to that of the liberal project. Indeed, the tendency of liberal democracies to homogenize diverse traditions in order to preserve national unity serves again to undermine particular loyalties and reinforce allegiance to the liberal nation state. Perhaps the most glaring example is the invention of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” in postwar America.¹¹

I admit that there may be no solution. As Farr notes, even liberal theorists have mostly abandoned pretensions to neutrality. I intuitively feel that educating for religious literacy so as to diminish bias and bigotry is a laudable and even necessary project in our time, but it seems to come

with large costs. Rawls himself perhaps put it best: “there is no social world without loss—that is, no social world that does not exclude some ways of life that realize in special ways certain fundamental values.”¹² Certainly we need further reflection on the dilemma of religious literacy education in pluralist democracies, and I’m grateful for Eric Farr’s excellent contribution to the discussion.

1 Benjamin Schewel, *Seven Ways of Looking at Religion: The Major Narratives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 174, quoted in Eric Farr, “Religious Education and the Limits of Political Liberalism,” this volume.

2 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

3 Jan Lynn Feldman, *Lubavitchers as Citizens: A Paradox of Liberal Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 1-5.

4 John Rawls, “The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17, no. 4 (October 1, 1988): 251-276.

5 Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 39.

6 Ibid.

7 Diane Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 75-83.

8 Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 1-9.

9 William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

10 Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 5.

11 Deborah Dash Moore, “Jewish GIs and the Creation of the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 8, no. 1 (1998): 31-53;

Mark Silk, “Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America,” *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1984): 65-85.

12 Rawls, “The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good,” 252.