

Overcoming a Crucial Objection to State Support for Religious Schooling

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INTRODUCTION

In their recent overview of religious education, Hanan Alexander and Terence McLaughlin discuss the characteristics of education in religion and spirituality and the benefits and challenges presented by religious education in liberal democracies.¹ One of the questions they do not address, but which they suggest needs further consideration, is the extent to which the state should offer financial support for religious schooling. In recent years, religious parents in both the United States and Canada have challenged state refusal to fund school choice when it involves religious schooling, and have received a varied response. In the Cleveland case, the court ruling seems to offer encouragement to those seeking funding for religious education. In Canada, where a number of provinces offer support for religious schools, the courts have ruled that the state has no legal obligation to do so.² The response to these rulings has been divided between those who support parents in their claims for funding and those who fear religious schooling will lead to the erosion of public education. Both the growing interest in parental choice in education and the lack of consensus regarding the appropriate liberal response to the demands of religious parents, suggest that a great deal more dialogue is required on the question of state support for religious schooling. That dialogue must take into consideration both reasonable arguments advanced in favor of state support, and an examination of the objections to state funding for religious schools. In this essay, I begin with a brief overview of some of the claims that may be advanced in support of funding religious schooling. I then examine an important criticism of religious education — that is the charge that religious schools cannot offer a satisfactory civic education. If it can be shown that this particular charge against religious schooling is unfounded, one of the most serious objections to state support would have been overcome and claims for funding could be more seriously considered.

CLAIMING STATE SUPPORT

Those who make appeals for state support of religious schooling do so on a number of grounds. Most often such claims are made on the basis of individual rights. Parents who have a responsibility to educate their children expect to have the right to choose how best to fulfill this responsibility, including the right to educate their children from a religious perspective. In both Canada and the United States, there is at least some acknowledgment of this custodial right, and parents are permitted to withdraw their children from common schools to enroll them in religious schools. However, when no state support is provided, those who do not have the necessary financial resources cannot choose religious schooling and are essentially denied this right. Claims relating to religious rights may be advanced when educational funding is denied solely for religious reasons, or when, as is the case in some Canadian provinces, some religious groups receive funding while

others do not. Funding for religious schools may also be claimed on the basis of children's rights. James Dwyer challenges the practice of allowing parents to withdraw their children to religious schools but failing to provide state support for that schooling, arguing that it is an injustice when, consequently, some children are unfairly disadvantaged.³ Ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all would require that religious schools be provided with adequate resources.

The recognition of individual rights is not the only reason to provide state support for religious schooling. It could be argued that an education in religion and spirituality enriches our society, deepens our diversity, and provides individuals with an understanding of themselves and others. Religion, says Warren Nord, has given voice to our deepest questions and structured our thinking about death, the meaning of life, guilt, forgiveness, love, and community. According to Nord, "if students have no sense of the spiritual dimension of life, they are ignorant of much of the human condition."⁴ Alexander and McLaughlin claim that students who receive an education in religion and spirituality are the richer for it, for they expand the "range of perspectives from which they shape their lives."⁵ Liberal democracies, they argue, should be committed to a robust pluralism that leaves room for a range of religious ways of life. Both Nord and Alexander and McLaughlin propose introducing education in religion and spirituality "from the outside," that is education *about* religion, in order to provide an opportunity for all students in common schools to learn about religious ways of life. But if society is to continue to benefit from the range of diversity we currently experience, we may also need to support groups who want to present an education in religion "from the inside." In those cases in which religious groups feel compelled to establish schools to maintain their identities and promote their way of life with a particular education, state support may be justified in order to preserve the pluralistic nature of our society.

An understanding of the importance of individual commitments to particular communities may give further cause to support groups who wish to offer an education from a particular religious perspective. I cannot in this short paper engage in any satisfactory discussion of the connection between religion and identity, but one need only consider the work of Charles Taylor, for example, to gain an appreciation for the connection between individual identity and group membership. Taylor's work suggests that individuals need recognition not only for the individual potentiality that forms an essential part of their identity, but that they also need to be affirmed and accepted as members of particular cultural groups.⁶ Religious practice includes, as Alexander and McLaughlin point out, "the experience of participating in a faith community of belonging, shared memory, discourse, and practice."⁷ For some, this participation in the religious community becomes an important part of their individual identity. Children so raised are likely to develop a "rootedness" that serves them well in our constantly changing society. Alexander and McLaughlin suggest that spirituality is sometimes seen as "an antidote to anomie among young people and an aid in the search for meaning and rootedness in modern life."⁸ Such anomie may have been avoided in the first place if children had been brought up within a particular community that provided them with a sense of self and a place of belonging. The importance of religious groups to those who

identify with them and to the children who benefit from the security they provide, suggests that modern democracies should at least be open to the possibility of supporting the educational efforts of religious communities.

Arguments advanced in favour of support of religious education can, as shown, rest both on the rights of individual citizens and on the benefits of religious education to our society. However, before a satisfactory appeal for funding can be made on any basis, it is necessary to address as well the charges against religious education. Such objections are frequently made on constitutional or legal grounds, but may also be advanced from more philosophical perspectives. I believe that one of the most important objections to religious schooling comes from those who argue that religious education cannot meet the requirements of civic education in liberal democracies or provide children with an education that is adequate for their needs as autonomous future citizens.

Modern liberal democracies aim to provide an education for all children regardless of their circumstances. The goals of civic education are extensive: to promote tolerance and understanding in the midst of diversity, to prepare students to participate in democracy, and to give children the skills necessary to live good lives as autonomous citizens. Religious education is frequently viewed as a form of indoctrination and religious schools are thought to limit children's futures and undermine the efforts of the pluralistic democracies to create tolerant societies. The withdrawal of students to schools founded on a particular way of life is seen as divisive, intolerant of diversity, and thus contrary to the foundations of liberalism. It is feared that children raised within religious traditions will not have the opportunity to make autonomous choices with regard to their own futures. While some of these fears may be based on an unreasonable intolerance of religious ways of life, in many cases they reflect a genuine concern for the future of liberal democracies and for children who deserve an education that will allow them to live as autonomous citizens. My main purpose in this paper is to consider the possibility that religious education can in fact meet the aims of civic education and provide children with an education that is more than adequate to prepare them for full citizenship. For the rest of this paper, then, I address the question of religious schooling and the demands of civic education.

RELIGIOUS SCHOOLING AND THE DEMANDS OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Those who defend religious schooling against its detractors, generally claim that religious schools encourage civic participation and good citizenship. Michael McConnell, for example, argues that religious schools may be "more effective than government-run schools in inculcating the virtues and values essential for democratic citizenship."⁹ For instance, McConnell claims that religious Americans are more democratically engaged than other citizens. However, something more than demonstrating civic participation may be required to satisfy critics of religious education. Eamonn Callan, for example, suggests that it would be easy enough for religious schools to implement a minimalist civic education, but it is clear that he does not find this to be any great argument in their favor.¹⁰ A minimalist civic education, as Callan describes it, instructs children only in those aims or virtues to

which the majority of citizens subscribe. Such an education would attempt to instill respect for the law, encourage participation in democracy, and develop patriotic attachment to the state. It would not, however, engage students in critical evaluation of the past or ask them to participate in democratic deliberation. The whole point of minimalist civic education, says Callan, is to “evade whatever disagreements divide us.”¹¹

Weak forms of civic education offer a solution to the enormous challenge of citizenship education in pluralistic democracies. It is often difficult to encourage support for the goals of liberalism and the political and legal institutions of the state when immigrant peoples have unique stories, many people feel a primary attachment to a community other than the nation as a whole, and some aspects of a nation’s history have little patriotic appeal. As a result, educators can be tempted to achieve their purposes by presenting a version of history focused on unifying or inspiring stories and avoiding difficult issues that may cause anxiety or distress. But while a minimalist civic education may have some appeal, an education that avoids conflict or disagreement cannot meet the more strenuous requirements of a civic education that encourages tolerance for diversity, democratic deliberation and critical reflection, and the development of autonomous citizens. Civic education that promotes these goals is a much more controversial project than more minimalist versions, for the most part because the inculcation of liberal values erodes diversity and undermines communities that do not give primacy to autonomy or critical reasoning. It is for these reasons that a rigorous civic education is assumed to be in conflict with religious schooling. However, I would suggest that religious schooling need not stand in the way of any of the more demanding goals of civic education.

Consider, first of all, the promotion of tolerance. Whether we welcome diversity with or without reservations, the very fact of pluralism requires that we learn to live together in respectful ways. Schooling, argues Callan, must be designed to develop an understanding of the complexities of society and an appreciation of the many perspectives present in pluralistic democracies. It is the role of civic education to teach children to regard others as equals and accept their cultural differences. It is generally agreed that the common school provides the ideal context for an education that will engender respect for diverse ways of life, if only because of the diversity present among students and teachers. According to Callan, the required context for the promotion of tolerance can hardly be recreated in a separate school whose members all agree. They are forced to engage in dissenting positions through the use of imagination with results that could hardly be as demanding as genuine dialogue. According to Callan,

The sense of fellowship and common fate demanded by liberal citizenship cannot be nurtured in an environment that has been more or less cleansed of encounters with fellow citizens — or future fellow citizens — whose lives are lived beyond the cleavages that mark the boundaries of one’s own parochial loyalties.¹²

Is the diverse environment of the common school necessary for the promotion of tolerance or can this view be successfully challenged? Of course, if we conclude that diversity is a necessary condition for the development of tolerance, we must also conclude that common schools located where the population is not diverse could

never promote tolerance. But a diverse school population may not in itself be a necessary condition for the development of tolerance. This point is discussed by Short, who suggests that evidence shows incidents of racism are as likely to be instigated by students who attend integrated schools as by those who attend schools that are more segregated. His research leads him to conclude that it is not contact between different religious or ethnic groups that will lead to tolerance, but rather “anti-racist education which can, in principle, be undertaken as effectively in a faith-based school as in a non-denominational one.”¹³ What is required, in this view, is a curriculum that teaches children to respect all people, regardless of race or religion. If tolerance is learned through the teaching of values, then there is no barrier to learning tolerance even in schools that are segregated by religion.

Separate schools are in any case rarely segregated in all respects. While drawn together by their desire for a religious education, the families in religious schools represent a range of socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups. Members of particular religious schools seldom hold a single view on social, political or even theological issues, but are likely to engage each other in genuine and sometimes heated deliberation. Of course, as in any school, the intensity of the engagement is dependent on the commitment of the teachers and the maturity level of the students. Young children are likely to be ill equipped to defend any religious or philosophical position in any depth and must be taught to think about differences at a more serious level than the externals they may tend to notice. Education that promotes genuine consideration of others can take place in religious or secular classrooms, whether or not the classrooms are models of diversity. In Canada at least, the Social Studies curriculum is based on the belief that it is possible to teach children to understand and respect cultures through classroom study. The imaginative engagement with other cultures that occurs in the classroom is a valuable preparation for the actual encounters that may follow. Imaginative engagement provides a comparatively safe environment for open discussion and may allow for a more complete exploration of cultural differences than children would dare to conduct were others physically present. So, while diverse classrooms certainly provide an opportunity to teach tolerance, diversity is not a necessary condition for learning to respect others, and even segregated religious schooling need not be a barrier to the development of tolerance. Tolerance is an attitude that can be instilled in children in any classroom.

But can education from a religious perspective give children the skills necessary for critical reflection? Critics of school choice fear, as does Randall Curren, that religious parents “do not want their children to think things through for themselves”¹⁴; or assume, like Harry Brighouse, that religiously sectarian education is repressive and likely to “limit the development of critical faculties.”¹⁵ Given that religious scholars have throughout history reflected critically on their own faith and on the deep issues of human existence and that their critical philosophical works continue to provide resources for study today, this charge does not seem well founded. It is likely, however, that religious parents want their children to learn critical reflection from within the traditions of their faith and not from the secular perspective of the common school. Religious ways of thinking are seldom invited into deliberation in public schools and so children in common schools learn to debate

important matters without considering religious views. What they are likely to learn as a result is that religion is irrelevant to the important ideas that are studied in school. Parents with deep religious beliefs want their children to develop an understanding of the relevance of their faith to all aspects of life, including the scientific, moral or political ideas studied in school. Religious schools are able to integrate the religious perspective into all areas of instruction and thus provide an education that encourages children to think about their faith.

The fact that religious parents want to teach their children from within the traditions of their particular religion does not rule out the possibility of critical reflection. There is no reason to believe that approaches to critical thinking must be the same for all individuals. Consider for example, Jane Roland Martin's engaging description of the different approaches to critical thinking taken from masculine or feminine perspectives or by participatory or distant thinkers.¹⁶ So, too, approaches to critical reflection may differ from religious to secular thinkers, with each nevertheless engaged in critical reflection. Manachem Loberbaum, writing from the perspective of the Jewish faith, argues that an education that teaches critical reflection need not disassociate individuals from their religious beliefs, but that skills of reasoning and reflection can be developed within religious traditions. Talmudic discussions, for example, encourage debate about a range of questions such as the nature of a mistake or the obligation of a subordinate who realizes an authority is mistaken.¹⁷ "Traditions," he writes, "provide a range of acceptable authoritative argumentation" and, "when vital, embody continuities of conflict."¹⁸ Thus, the introduction of a religious perspective does not immediately curtail reflection and debate. In fact, religious thought is likely to encourage reflection and questioning, for religion, as suggested earlier, addresses some of the most significant aspects of human existence. When we think deeply about the nature of mankind, the meaning of life and death, or the nature God, we are unlikely to come to any immediate conclusions. More likely we will find ourselves searching for answers that are difficult to come by and that, when achieved, require endless revision. We will, in other words, learn to engage in reflection because the questions raised by religion are important enough to demand our attention but mysteriously difficult to resolve.

It should not be assumed that a child taught from a particular perspective is prevented from evaluating such views at a later time. Consider an argument made by Curren. Curren, who views religious education as highly indoctrinative, denies similar charges against his own recommendations that children receive a moral education in particular virtues. Curren claims that children who learn to think about moral virtues "will become morally serious and committed critical thinkers, motivated by conceptions of themselves as both moral and devoted to truth."¹⁹ Curren argues that although children will necessarily form certain perceptions and sentiments as a result of such an education, this does not preclude future examination of those beliefs. It seems to me that a similar argument could be made with regard to religious education. Learning to think about important and serious matters is likely to develop, not impair, one's capacity for critical reflection. Because religion causes children to think about issues that they may otherwise not stop to consider, religious

education in fact encourages the development of critical thinking skills. A particular religious perspective gives children a starting point for reflection and comparison that is unavailable when all options are regarded from the beginning as neutral or equal. Critical reflection is likely to be more meaningful if the child has gained a deep understanding of a particular way of life and what is at stake in rejecting or accepting it as his or her own.

If religious education is not a barrier to attaining the skills of critical reasoning, then it is unlikely to harm the child's opportunity for future autonomy. Concerns with regard to the child's future autonomy have caused many liberal philosophers to reject religious education as an option in liberal democracies. Brighouse, for example, assumes that religious parents will waive autonomy-facilitating education for their children and "typically live in tight-knit communities which limit the opportunities for exposure to other ways of life."²⁰ Brighouse believes that children so brought up have no opportunity for autonomy because even if they manage to exit from their parents' way of life they will be worse off than before because they have not been prepared for the social milieu of modern society. In his mind, then, public schooling is necessary to protect children from the efforts of religious parents to control their children's lives. But if I am right in arguing that religious education can encourage the skills of critical reflection, then we are already half way to an education for autonomy. What else is required is for children to be aware of the opportunities and options that await them. If religious families were as isolated as Brighouse believes, then such knowledge would be in serious jeopardy. However, I would suggest that he highly exaggerates the insularity experienced by religious families.

For the most part, religious families live in neighbourhoods that are not segregated by religion. They engage in the activities of the larger social and political community. Indeed, Brighouse himself laments the fact that "in the United States, fundamentalist Christianity remains a strong, cultural force, and even a remarkably strong political force."²¹ Nor does religious education appear to be an impediment to preparation for almost any career. As Joseph Raz notes, members of all communities inhabit the same economy and must possess "the same mathematical, literary, and other skills required for effective participation."²² Considering the number of entrepreneurs or professionals, who, though raised in religious homes and schools, are highly successful in their chosen careers, religion does not seem to be a barrier to acquiring those skills. No doubt a religious school or religious upbringing will close off some options, but any upbringing and any education will predispose children to select some options and reject others. Education for autonomy can only assure that some choices are available and that children are prepared to choose the option that is best for them. If it is not possible to provide an education in all choices, then parents should only be expected to provide an education in the options they feel are most critical for their child's good. With the necessary resources, a religious school would be as able as a common school to prepare children for a range of opportunities.

But those who argue against this view insist that it is the fact that a religious education presents only one religion as a viable option that closes children's minds

and makes it impossible for them to be autonomous. But even in this respect, I doubt the charge against religious education can fully succeed. True, children are likely to view the religion in which they were raised as a more credible option than one with which they are less familiar, and even the capacity for critical reflection is unlikely to completely overcome this bias. At the same time, however, a child raised in a home that practices no religion at all and who is educated in a secular common school is unlikely to view any religious life as a serious option, although of course the possibility is not entirely closed. Religious schools for the most part present only one religion as a viable choice, but common schools on the other hand rarely present any religion as a serious option. Why is one of these scenarios considered more limiting than the other unless we have already determined a secular life to have more value than a religious one, even freely chosen? While there are some obvious exceptions, liberalism that claims to be open to the possibilities individuals choose for themselves would not presume to favour one choice over the other. It would seem then that we should not judge the limitations of religious education with respect to choice to be more serious than the limitations of common schooling.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER DIALOGUE

A complete exploration of the ways in which religious schooling can attend to the requirements of civic education would require more space than I am here permitted, however, I believe it can be shown that religious schools can meet all the requirements of civic education, even those of a strong and robust version. Religious schooling is not a barrier to tolerance, for tolerance can be encouraged whether or not those we are to tolerate are present, and in any case, considerable diversity will likely be present even in religious school classrooms. While religious education may approach critical thinking from a different perspective than secular education, religious schooling does not preclude critical reflection. Children in religious schools may learn to take their faith into consideration when making choices, but they are not prevented from determining the course of their own futures, nor are there a great many options that are closed off to them.

All of this is not to say that all religious schools are models of the kind of civic education required by liberal democracy, though it might be fair to say that neither are all common schools. What we can say is that religious schools are not prevented from presenting a rigorous civic education simply because they aim to do so from a religious perspective. If we can acknowledge this possibility, we are more likely to be willing to consider a legitimate role for religious schooling in the liberal state. There are other objections that must be answered, but recognition that religious education need not undermine the goals of civic education would allow us to give more genuine consideration to arguments advanced in favour of state support for religious schooling. While it is unlikely that we are going to reach any sort of consensus in the near future, it seems reasonable to be open to true deliberation on the matter, and, as Alexander and McLaughlin have suggested, give further consideration to the extent to which state support should be offered for religious education.

1. Hanan Alexander and Terence H. McLaughlin, "Education in Religion and Spirituality," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Nigel Blake, et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

2. *Adler v. Ontario* 1996.
3. James Dywer, *Vouchers Within Reason: A Child-Centered Approach to Educational Reform* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).
4. Warren Nord, *Religions and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 205.
5. Alexander and McLaughlin, "Religion and Spirituality," 362.
6. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
7. Alexander and McLaughlin, "Religion and Spirituality," 359.
8. *Ibid.*, 365.
9. Michael W. McConnell, "Education Disestablishment: Why Democratic Values Are Ill-Served by Democratic Control of Schooling," in *NOMOS 43: Moral and Political Education*, ed. Stephen Macedo and Yael Tamir (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 127.
10. Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
11. *Ibid.*, 171.
12. *Ibid.*, 178.
13. Geoffrey Short, "Faith-Based Schools: A Threat to Cohesion?" *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, 4 (2002): 568.
14. Randall Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 216.
15. Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71.
16. Jane Roland Martin, "Critical Thinking for a Humane World," in *The Generalizability of Critical Thinking*, ed. Stephen P. Norris (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 163-80.
17. Menachem Loberbaum, "Tolerance in Jewish Tradition," in *Democratic Education in a Multicultural State*, ed. Yael Tamir (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 116.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Curren, *Aristotle*, 6.
20. Brighouse, *School Choice*, 71.
21. *Ibid.*, 207.
22. Joseph Raz, *Ethics in the Public Domain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 173.