

Religious Education and the Floodgates of Impartiality

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INTRODUCTION

The issue that I have in mind is part epistemic and part ethical: it is the question of what the content and aims of school curricula ought to be with regard to the place of religious propositions. What I have in mind by “religious propositions” are the “doctrines” or “truth claims” of various religions, the plausibility of which would benefit from corroboration with historical, scientific, and philosophical considerations and suffer from being in tension with such considerations.¹

One helpful distinction for clarifying the roles of education, which Michael Hand makes use of in his work, is what he calls the “directive/non-directive” distinction. “The intended outcome” of nondirective teaching is “emphatically not that they [the pupils] should come to share the view favored by the teacher.” Whereas in directive teaching “a problem is taught along with its solution, a question along with the answer,” *so that* pupils will “come to share the teacher’s view on a matter.”²

According to Hand, part of what justifies directive teaching is the presence of “epistemically decisive reasons,” part of what justifies nondirective teaching is the absence of “epistemically decisive reasons.”³ These are necessary, but not sufficient conditions. He takes the question of truth with respect to some religious propositions to be a case where epistemically decisive reasons are absent and advocates its systematic, nondirective teaching. Hand makes the following argument for religious education (RE) being a compulsory, discrete subject in *all* school curricula: “Pupils should be given opportunities to consider religious propositions, and be equipped to make informed, rational judgments on their truth or falsity” he says, for the following reasons:

1. “Some religious propositions are sufficiently well supported by evidence and argument as to merit serious consideration by reasonable people.” (I will call these “live options in unsettled matters.”)
2. “Religious judgments matter, in the sense of making some practical difference to people’s lives.” (I will call these “important matters.”)
3. “Making religious judgments rationally requires a facility with distinctive kinds of evidence and argument.” (I will call these “*sui generis* truth-considerations.”)⁴

While Hand does not suggest that the conclusion follows syllogistically from the mutual truth of the premises, he does hold that the mutual truth of the premises renders the conclusion more plausible. On this rationale, RE is conceived of as forum for the systematic, open discussion and critical evaluation of epistemically controversial matters, matters about which no conclusion is rationally decisive. Now, supposing one denies that religious doctrines are “live options in unsettled matters” on the one hand, ought they still advocate their systematic nondirective teaching on

the other? Although there is no contradiction in taking these stances,⁵ I argue that consistency on this policy brings one to unattractive conclusions, which one would certainly not want to maintain (that is, that holocaust denial ought to be discussed in an open-ended manner on a systematic (rather than ad hoc) basis and that teachers ought not to advocate the falsehood of holocaust denial).

INCONSISTENCIES

Suppose that you oppose anyone's advocating the following, particularly to children and particularly in a school or educational environment and suppose you do so, in part, because of "epistemically decisive reasons" for their falsity or, at a minimum, their ungroundedness:

- that young earth creationism is true
- that the holocaust did not happen
- that climate change is a conspiracy
- that the earth is flat, and
- that the key doctrinal claims of Christianity are true

Rather, instead one would encourage the denial of the following, particularly to children and particularly in a school or educational environment:

- that young earth creationism is true
- that the holocaust did not happen
- that climate change is a conspiracy, and
- that the earth is flat

One's grounds for this opposition in the first case would be that the available evidence does not support any of these assertions, and may even establish their falsehood. Their grounds for this encouragement in the second case would again be that the available evidence does not support any of these assertions. This raises for us the question "Why delete the assertion that the key doctrinal claims of Christianity are true from the second list?" Suppose that one believes the available evidence does not support the assertion and perhaps even that it points to its falsehood, why should one not encourage the denial of the claim in a school or educational environment? After all, schools plausibly ought to advocate and promote what is known to be, or most likely to be the case. What could motivate educators to promote the systematic, open-ended discussion of claims that are not remotely plausibly the case? In epistemic terms alone, one might just as well promote the systematic, open-ended discussion of the existence of the flying spaghetti monster. At the very least it would seem time could be better spent discussing important propositions that might plausibly be true.

If religious propositions really lack the remotest plausibility and education ought to reflect the deliverances of epistemically decisive reasons, it would seem that religious education ought to be treated as an occasion for learning about the history of religions, the causes of (these probably false, and anyway groundless) religious beliefs, and so on; certainly the question of the truth of religions would be no more open to systematic nondirective teaching than whether the holocaust

happened, whether climate change is a conspiracy, whether the earth is flat, or whether young earth creationism is true. If one takes the plausibility of these things as being (unfavorably) on par, why should one not advocate the teaching of atheism and agnosticism as true or at least advocate denying that the key doctrinal claims of Christianity are true, particularly to children and particularly in a school or educational environment?

SHOULD RELIGIOUS EDUCATION BE IMPARTIAL OR
SHOULD IT BE PARTIAL TO EVIDENCE?

While one's advocacy of any position on any matter will only be convincing if one is *able* to discuss and criticize alternatives, it does not follow that one should start by batting down every dead option to make a case. One ought to ask, "Is this a settled matter?" and, if not, "What are the live options in it?" In a history class, one might systematically entertain a variety of explanations of what caused the First World War with a view to stimulating open-ended discussion, but in a science class, one would not want to systematically, impartially entertain a variety of creation stories alongside evolution by natural selection and modern cosmology as equal contenders in explaining the proliferation of life on earth. In the case of young earth creationism versus evolution in science education, one wants to say an impartial and inclusive education is not appropriate. In the case of holocaust denial versus holocaust remembrance, one wants to say that an impartial and inclusive education is not appropriate. With respect to the structure of the solar system and the rivalry of flat earth theory with Copernican theory, one wants to say an impartial and inclusive education is not appropriate. Rather, education ought to be partial to evidence. If one thinks that religious belief is just as ludicrous as holocaust denial and young earth creationism given the available evidence and arguments, why make an exception in the case of an impartial and inclusive education with respect to the question of religious truth? Indeed, if there is evidential and argumentative parity between belief in the flying spaghetti monster and Christian belief, why shouldn't the flying spaghetti monster appear on the curriculum as well?

PARITY OF IMPARTIALITY

The reply may come that there is no tradition of belief in the flying spaghetti monster and so it is not something that needs to be combated. Open discussion is anathema to false beliefs and those that are widely held ought especially to be included. This understanding of what RE is at its best was well voiced by an attendee at an Institute of Public Policy Research "roundtable discussion [which] aimed to provide a space to explore some of the pertinent issues" regarding what a nonstatutory framework for RE programs of study should look like: "RE gives teachers the opportunity to question and challenge thinking and young people the chance to develop the wear-with-all to resist missionary persuasion."⁶

So, on this view atheism and agnosticism are evidentially and argumentatively sounder than belief in any religion and even children are able to see this for themselves, if only the evidence and arguments are presented to them. In an impartial and inclusive, open-ended education, children will come to see that atheism and agnosticism are evidentially and argumentatively sounder than belief in any religion

for themselves. This is because reasoned argument is truth tracking and unreasonable views are unlikely to survive reasonable discussion. Now, we ought to draw a distinction between preparing students to go out and avoid forming false beliefs and exorcising false beliefs that they have already formed. We will discuss false belief exorcism in a moment. In the case of false belief evasion, it will be clear that there are very many false beliefs which one could come to form and so having come to see why some are false in nondirective classroom discussion will not do much to ensure that others are recognized as false. Further, it will have left excluded something far worthier of curriculum time: namely *live* options in important, *unsettled* matters.

Since reasoned argument is truth tracking and unreasonable views are unlikely to survive reasonable discussion, one might defend the inclusion of implausible ideas in open-ended discussion on the grounds that these beliefs, if harbored, are best exorcised in open discussion, since reasonable discussion is truth tracking. Michael Reiss and Eamonn Callan each defend this sort of view with respect to the discussion of young earth creationism and “liberal heresies” respectively. In a paper entitled “When to Shut Students Up: Civility, Silencing and Free Speech,” Callan claims that children, simply punished and told to shut up for each of their “liberal heresies” (for example, racist and sexist remarks), will not rationally revise their views but, at best, merely feign respect. It is better, therefore, to allow liberal heresies to be discussed openly, although impersonally.⁷

Reiss is interested in enabling students to learn about good science, that is, in understanding what the scientific community takes to be settled matters and live options in unsettled matters about the natural world. In the case of evolution and cosmology, some students’ religious views (for example, young earth creationism) contradict the scientific community’s reason and evidence based understanding of the natural world, and Reiss wonders how they can be brought to understand good science in spite of this. One worry students may face is that “science teachers will try to convince them that God was not ultimately responsible for human and cosmic origins.”⁸ Reiss points out that that one’s religious worldview, while it might be a mistaken, is not the same order of mistake as, for instance believing that “plants get most of their mass from soil,” since it is much more closely associated with their identity.⁹ He claims that “Science educators and teachers need to take account of religious worldviews if some students are better to understand the compass of scientific thinking and some of science’s key conclusions.”¹⁰ The aim is to avoid seeming threatening and ridiculing students and so not alienating them from science, but “allowing students to raise any doubts they have (hardly a revolutionary idea in science teaching) and doing one’s best to have a genuine discussion. The word “genuine” doesn’t mean that young earth creationism or intelligent design deserve equal time.”¹¹

However, Reiss and Callan’s suggestions would clearly proceed on an ad hoc basis: there would be little point discussing mistakes one might make, rather than mistakes one has actually made. Indeed, dedicating an entire subject to the study of implausible beliefs would be a waste of valuable curriculum time, making a museum of curiosities out of education. Alternatively, one might say “there would be uproar

among ignorant (that is, religious) people if the denial of their faith were taught as evidentially sound. Since this is to be avoided, the denial of their faith ought not to be taught as evidentially sound.” Here one would be opting for pragmatic liberalism; ideals of truth and truthfulness would be subordinated to retaining peace. However, we ought to ask, if this were one’s response, suppose there was a similar level of outrage at the denial of the following:

- that young earth creationism is true
- that the holocaust did not happen
- that climate change is a conspiracy, and
- that the earth is flat

Would one genuinely say “There would uproar among ignorant (that is, creationists, holocaust deniers, climate change deniers) people if the denial of their doctrines were taught as evidentially sound. Since this is to be avoided, they must be taught as open questions”? One’s answer would surely turn on the on the degree and extent of uproar and so be pragmatic matter rather than one of principle. There is good reason to think then, concordant with Hand’s first premise, that the dedication of an entire statutory curriculum subject to the open ended discussion of the possibility of some beliefs’ being true does require that those beliefs could plausibly be true.

CONCLUSION

None of the logical extensions we have discussed look attractive, but they do seem to be entailed. We have then to choose between the following: advocating the teaching of atheism and agnosticism’s plausibility in the same way as evolution and climate change currently are on the one hand and advocating the teaching of evolution and climate change in a systematic, nondirective way. While one could motivate the systematic, nondirective study of religious propositions, as Hand does, by suggesting that they were live options in unsettled matters, this would be a clear case of altering one’s judgment in order to secure a desirable conclusion. So, for the likes of Richard Dawkins, given the implausibility of religious propositions, religious education ought to be treated as an occasion for addressing religions as a natural phenomena if it is featured in school curricula at all; an occasion for learning about the history of religions and the causes of (these probably false, and anyway groundless) religious beliefs.

1. This is clearly a disputed position, disputed by, for instance, Wittgenstein: “queer as it sounds: the historical accounts of the Gospels might, in the historical sense, be demonstrably false, and yet belief would lose nothing through this” from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, rev. ed., ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 37e. However, all such fundamental questions are disputed and I think the position assumed here has much to be said in its favor, although it cannot be said here.

2. Michael Hand, “What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 2 (2008): 213. Hand, rather optimistically, conflates the beliefs of the teacher with those born out by “epistemically decisive reasons.”

3. Michael Hand, “Moral Education and the Idea of a Reasonable Moral Pluralism,” (keynote lecture presented at the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Annual Conference, Oxford, UK March 2010).

4. Michael Hand, "Religious Education," in *Rethinking the School Curriculum: Values, Aims and Purposes*, ed. John White (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004). That the truth—considerations relevant to religious propositions are sui generis is clearly in tension with my claim that the plausibility of various religions' "truth claims" would benefit from corroboration with historical, scientific, and philosophical considerations and suffer from being in tension with such considerations. I think my view is clearly the one to take if, for instance, doubting the historical veracity of the Gospels casts doubt on Christianity.
5. Indeed, there is no contradiction in affirming Hand's premises and denying his conclusion: it's not a deductively valid argument.
6. Institute of Public Policy Research, *What Is Religious Education For? Getting the National Framework Right* (London: IPPR, 2004), 16.
7. Eamonn Callan, "When to Shut Students Up: Civility, Silencing and Free Speech," Unpublished manuscript.
8. Michael Reiss, "Teaching Evolution in a Creationist Environment: An Approach Based on Worldviews, not Misconceptions," *School Science in Review* 90, no. 331 (2008): 2, <http://www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk/docs/ReissSchoolScienceReview2008.pdf>.
9. Michael Reiss, "Science Lessons Should Tackle Creationism and Intelligent Design," Guardian Science Blog, Sept. 11, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/sep/11/michael.reiss.creationism>.
10. Michael Reiss, "Imagining the World: The Significance of Religious Worldviews for Science Education," *Science and Education* 18, nos. 6–7 (2007): 783.
11. Reiss, "Teaching Evolution," 7.