Religion and Education

The Pitfalls of Engaging a Complex Issue

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ILLEGITIMATE FEARS: ESTABLISHMENT, RELATIVISM, AND INDIFFERENCE

Bringing religion into the public school curriculum is not without dangers, and we would do well to be aware of them. Some parents may fear that their children, introduced to various religious faiths, may soon slide into a debilitating relativism where all spiritual options are equal.

Others will resent the introduction of religion because they would like to control which rites and ceremonies, which classroom topics, should be included or excluded. Some parents may

want only one religion, their own, presented to their children as a legitimate worldview. After all, public schools may end up teaching about certain subjects that some parents find objectionable, which may weaken a faith's hold on young minds. Making room for religion in the classroom, in the wrong hands, can end up making room for only one religion to the exclusion of others.

Clearly, studying religion must be accomplished in ways that avoid running afoul of the Constitution's prohibition against establishing religion. Educators and parents must be attentive to methods that do not violate Jefferson's separation of church and state or cross Madison's line of distinction between religious and civil authorities. But teaching religion can be faithful to the founders' intentions. They were careful that the government not establish a religion or religions so as not to privilege one religion over another or religion over nonreligion and also so that religion would *not* be a liability for citizens who enter the public arena.

Church-state separation traditions give good reasons for citizens to be careful about introducing or expanding subjects like religion in tax-supported public institutions. Religion is bad stuff from the word *go*, say some, and the more we can leave it out of the classroom and curriculum, the better off we will be. Put it on the shelf with astrology and other subjects that millions care about but that are not appropriate for serious pedagogy.

5 Introducing religion on curricular terms, say others, only opens the way for proselytizing and witnessing groups to get a foot in the door and to introduce elements of competition to the school scene. The aggressive groups, these critics note, are best poised to take part in religious discussion, and they will exploit the opportunity. Meanwhile more tolerant, ecumenically minded groups will be pushed into the background, and their children will be subjected to pesky and assertive witnesses.

Shouldn't the religiously minded stop clamoring for more attention to religious concerns and be a bit more generous about the republic? This scene is already overrun by competing interest groups: parochial schools, voucher advocates, released-time proponents, textbook revisers, critics of any governmental involvement in education—just to name a few. Why encourage more disruption in a locale that is already being overrun by competing forces? Why beckon the activities of these interest groups, who don't always care that much about the common good? Controversies in society can and should be pursued on the basis of "secular rationality," argue some, and introducing approaches congenial to religion will only complicate the proper, "reasonable" approach to everything.

Criticisms come from all sides. Some religious people will have trouble dealing with religion as a subject one can teach the young "about." When teachers teach "about" religion, faith may either get reduced to something so bland that it leads to a misreading of religion or become something so volatile that it will disrupt school and community life. And anyway, we should not expect the school to do everything. Moral education, to which religion in part relates, is accidental, incidental, and diffuse in schools. Putting it on the agenda weighs a school down. We already ask the schools to be babysitters, entertainers, and recreation leaders. Why make them do more? What, after all, are families and houses of worship for?

Moreover, the curriculum is already overcrowded, the textbooks are too long, and homework is too burdensome. You just can't keep piling on more. Colleges and universities have enough trouble handling the philosophical questions sparked by religion. How and why burden junior and senior high schools with such subjects and problems?

Another related difficulty is that religion deals so much with texts. How can education relate the different ways the academy and religious communities approach such texts? Even high school sophomores would necessarily be thrust into the rudiments of literary and historical criticism of ancient scriptures, and there'd be hell to pay when they report back home on how this does not square with what they've previously been taught.

In the end, many observers ask, won't you be contributing to relativism among children? In public schools, teachers and texts would have to give a basically positive spin to most features of most religions. Won't students then conclude that all religions are nice, that they are all about the same business? Won't they be led to think that it does not and will not make any difference what religious choices people make or what traditions and truth-claims they have inherited? 10

THE MORAL DIMENSION

The last and probably most important complicating factor in debates about religion and education is that of *morals*. The nation's founders and creators of common schools were uncommonly concerned with morals and civic virtue. Having just "killed the king" in the War of Independence, they were fashioning a constitutional republic under the rule of law. To succeed, the people could not be made to behave simply for fear of punishment, for

there would never be enough police to ensure compliance. The founders believed that the new republic depended on a virtuous citizenry. People had to be responsible, and to be so, they had to be moral.

Echoes of this connection between morality and citizenship can be heard in more recent American cultural disputes. Many conflicts take place against the backdrop of widespread concern over perceived moral decline. For many people, public education is the place to inculcate morality, sharpen moral sensibilities, and undergird ethical action. This assumption informs the public division over the performance and potential of public education, and citizens also divide over which available instruments should be used to teach morals and civic virtue.

Like debates over devotion, these moral disputes have a long history in American life. Citizens sometimes appeal to the nation's founders as defenders of religion-friendly philosophies. However, while the Reason and Nature they appealed to sometimes suggested an integral connection to God, this was a God accessible to all people, not just those who claimed particular revelations or scriptures. A republic could not be built on the basis of particular and conflicting revelations; instead, a more general, common-denominator religion would suffice.

Others point to George Washington's famous Farewell Address or the Northwest Ordinance of 1785 to argue that the founders considered morality and religion indispensable to the republic's health. Washington called morality and religion the "twin pillars" of the republic. The Northwest Ordinance provided for morality and religion as part of schooling, including the universities that would soon dot the landscape. There are other examples and occasions of the nation's political and educational leaders appealing to specifically Christian or Protestant affirmations, which supports the historical argument that public education was not to be value- or religion-free.

15 This common view was easier to achieve in the days of a more homogeneous society; in our time, citizens of all sorts agree that it has become more and more difficult to teach a uniform morality. Why? There are just too many competing worldviews. Each voice has something to say about the common good, the true, the beautiful, and these voices often contradict each other. How can schools negotiate this metaphysical and moral pluralism without implying the inferiority or superiority of certain worldviews?

One solution to pluralism is to place all contending beliefs on equal footing, but many observers claim that this relativism cre-

ates a bigger problem than it solves. We can define relativism as having one foot on a banana peel, morally speaking—and the other foot also on a banana peel. Everything becomes slippery. With morality as a matter of personal preference, there is nothing secure to hold on to, and no one can gain a sure moral footing. "You have your values and I have mine," people say. "Who am I to judge your morals, and who are you to judge mine?" Some college teachers report that when trying to place boundaries around this moral relativism, they might introduce an extreme example: if morality is a matter of mere preference, with no value system better than another, then what about judging the values of Adolf Hitler? And the shocking answer comes, not always cynically: Well, what about his values?

If all standards for judging right from wrong are relative, moral claims seem to be rooted only in feeling, experience, or personal preference. Gone from the moral scene, say critics, is any sense of God as Absolute Truth. Only with God anchoring morality can there be an objective standard, they argue. Only then can people know *exactly* what is right or wrong.

Only by objectively knowing right from wrong can adults instruct children in the moral life. Here Aristotle's influence shows: people do not become moral just by discussing the good or the ethical; they become so by practice. People must find appropriate models and pattern themselves after those models. They must put into practice the pursuit of "the good" until it becomes a habit. And if the habit is rooted in belief in God, then you can at least have a good argument about how all this works out in society. Throw the divine anchor overboard, and people are left to drift on the open waters of relativism.

People legitimately concerned about the moral situation can add in one more dimension to the discussion: government and the courts are far too responsive to pluralism and diversity, especially the religious variety. Most Americans respond to the Judeo-Christian tradition, which means that they derive morality from the same sources. Most believe that somehow God speaks to us through the Ten Commandments and that indeed God may have literally provided the commandments on stone tablets to Moses on Mount Sinai long ago. So why have the courts disallowed the display of the Decalogue in public school classrooms? Not only do most Americans believe in the importance of these moral guidelines, but these laws put forth moral principles on which almost everyone agrees. Hence there is a majoritarian argument embedded within the issue of morals.

20 The more ecumenically minded may suggest lifting parallel teachings from other major religions and then teaching those distilled values in a combined form. For example, many leaders of interfaith groups argue that something like the Golden Rule belongs not just to Christianity but to almost every religious tradition. Treat others as you would like to be treated, and do not treat others as you would not like to be treated. It sounds very simple and commonsensical, and of course this principle can be taught as common sense or good advice. But what one cannot do is ask children to obey the Golden Rule because God wants them to do so. Yet dropping the transcendent reference, for many people, means dropping the main reason for following such a principle. The Ten Commandments become watered down into the Ten Suggestions—or less. So what begins as a well-intentioned debate over morals in education soon turns into a theological debate that divides school boards, teachers' groups, and parent-teacher associations.

Short of abandoning moral education completely, others have tried to negotiate ethical pluralism by promoting "values clarification." It certainly sounds like a good idea: teachers and students bring their own value systems, and in the classroom they clarify them, to see what might or might not motivate valuable action. But critics swoop in at once: students not only bring to school competing value systems, which leads to confusion, but they might also bring in ideas and behaviors that most of polite society finds unacceptable. No matter how antisocial, fanatical, or dogmatic, in this system those values cannot be discouraged, only "clarified." Won't the child who has undergone values clarification not only be more confused but even less likely to act morally?

Through all these debates and behind all these questions are strong religious interests. While you can have interesting public debates about educational philosophy and moral development, people who pursue philosophical options are not as well organized into competing camps as religious groups are. The religious landscape has many polarities: fundamentalist and liberal in Protestantism, Orthodox and Reform in Judaism, conservative and liberal in Catholicism. It is no wonder that school boards and textbook authors tread cautiously when dealing with moral education. But they often fail to realize that treading cautiously is its own kind of religious or metaphysical commitment. To many religious adherents, it looks as though a competing worldview—such as "secular humanism"—has become the established or privileged religion by default, while the regular voices of the "ordinarily" religious are shut out.

What is clearly needed is more awareness of what motivates the courts and more public discussion about the wisdom or folly of their actions. Many options have been foreclosed already. Arguing for "equal time," no matter how reasonable and practical it sounds, does not seem to offer a clear way to a solution. Present both evolution and creationism and let the students decide? Scientists will contend that the language of their discipline has a different intent than religious critics suggest, while many religious people will resist having the language and claims of their faith converted into something that sounds scientific. Better alternatives must be sought, and conversations can help us reason toward them.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some of the "illegitimate fears" associated with introducing religion into the public school?
2. What do Marty and Moore mean by the following statement? "When teachers teach 'about' religion, faith may either get reduced to something so bland that it leads to a misreading of religion or become something so volatile that it will disrupt school and community life."
3. How does the issue of morality fit into the debate of religion and public schools?
4. What do Marty and Moore mean by the following statement? "The religious landscape has many polarities: fundamentalist and liberal in Protestantism, Orthodox and Reform in Judaism, conservative and liberal in Catholicism. It is no wonder that school boards and textbook authors tread cautiously when dealing with moral education."

Questions for Writing

1. Marty and Moore contend, "Teachers and students bring their own value systems, and in the classroom they clarify them, to see what might or might not motivate valuable action." Analyze this quotation in an essay.
2. Should church and state coexist in a public institution of learning? Consider the pros and cons of this question in a persuasive essay.