

Indoctrination Reconceived: Religious Knowledge and Liberal Education

Suzanne Rosenblith
Clemson University

In his thoughtful and illuminating intellectual history, James Lang provides important insights into the use and meaning of the term indoctrination. Lang depicts a historical trajectory that shows how the meaning of the term changed radically, from one once equated with learning to one now understood pejoratively to effectively rule out values embodied by the liberal, Progressive educator. That is, Lang points out that Progressive educators at the turn of the twentieth century reconceptualized indoctrination and indoctrinatory teaching as the antithesis of a liberal education. While a liberal, progressive education helped open up opportunities of thought and action for students by presenting content in such a way that students gained skills and tools of autonomous thinking, indoctrinatory education minimized the range of thoughts, ideas and possible courses of action, by transmitting a narrow course content in such a way that thinking was not highly valued. According to Lang, the liberal project of radically redefining indoctrination to serve its own ends has been quite successful. It seems Lang is right on this account. Most (liberal) educators today would take great pains to distance themselves from those who endorse indoctrination as a worthwhile teaching tool. One area where this is plain to see is in the overwhelmingly critical response to homeschooling. Liberal thinkers have taken issue with homeschooling in part because many of those who use homeschooling, Christian fundamentalists, do so in order to inhibit their children's autonomy.

Lang's project becomes all the more interesting when he boldly suggests that certain subjects traditionally conceived as antithetical to the liberal, autonomy maximizing project, such as religion, can actually promote such goals and thus should not be conceived *prima facie* as indoctrinatory. This is important to a more comprehensive understanding of indoctrination. Additionally, it forces those of us who consider ourselves liberal thinkers to take a more critical look at the rigidity within our own ideology.

Lang chooses religious education as an example of a pedagogical project that stands in stark contrast to the liberal project. As he puts it, religious education is denied access to the liberal encampment. He offers two counterarguments, both of which he thinks show that religious knowledge can be legitimated. If his examples prove true, then religious education should not be treated as indoctrinatory, and religion as a subject of study should be welcomed into the liberal fold. While I think this project is bold, and that the examples of religious knowledge are important in making his more general point that indoctrination has been reconceptualized over time to suit the liberal project, I am not convinced that the examples he offers ultimately strengthen this position. In the space that remains, I will offer some thoughts on why this is so.

Lang's first example relies on Ronald Laura and Michael Leahy's notion of epistemic primitives. This argument is reminiscent of other antifoundationalist arguments for ordinary perceptual knowledge.¹ The position in essence argues that religious knowledge can be legitimated if our thinking is based on a certain set of foundational beliefs. The fact that we might come by these foundational beliefs through imposition is not problematic as long as the thinking that comes from these basic beliefs is systematic and reasoned. While antifoundationalist arguments have been successful in debunking classical foundationalist positions like those of W.K. Clifford,² they have been less successful in offering a positive alternative, particularly in the case of religious perceptual experiences, because according to this view, the consistency of beliefs and claims need only be internal to the individual claimant. It seems to me that if one wanted to convince liberal thinkers that religious education could be non-indoctrinatory, one would need to put forth an argument that relied on some sort of external verification, much like we have readily available for ordinary perceptual claims. Consider for instance that part of my "epistemic primitives" is the claim "God exists," and though I readily acknowledge that I have come by this belief through imposition, it might nevertheless be rationally defensible if, according to Lang, the thinking that goes on subsequently is systematic and well-thought out. In other words, in the face of doubt I am able to construct a defense of this belief that relies on the sort of thinking that liberals would be satisfied with. The problem here is that the best I can do is provide internal, rather than external, verification for my belief. All of my beliefs and claims stem from this basic belief, and if the basic belief is treated as properly basic then it needs no defense. If I believe God is benevolent, it naturally presumes God's existence. Since according to this view I need not defend that view since it is a primitive or foundational belief, I am free to provide evidence and systematic reasoning for the claim that God is benevolent. Yet, I think the liberal educator wants something more in this case; they want a defense of the more controversial claim, "God exists."

The second example Lang offers, pragmatic rationalism, has to my mind more possibilities of meeting the liberal challenge. Pragmatic rationalism, as Lang understands it, takes account of the relation that holds between the belief expressed and the range of beliefs the claimant sincerely holds to such that both the belief and the range of beliefs must be consistent. As Walter Feinberg defines it, pragmatic rationality "allows that a belief is warranted if it does not interfere with other beliefs that we hold and if those beliefs enable us to live productive, satisfying lives."³ From this perspective, the goal is not to rid one's stock of beliefs of all inconsistencies, but rather to find ways for these inconsistencies to live well together. While I tend to think this is an important approach to dealing with the problem of religious pluralism, I am not certain it satisfies the liberal critics' concern that we evaluate evidence objectively and externally. I think the great strength of this approach is its contribution to the moral realm of belief and action, but if the liberal challenge is to be able to provide external, public evidence for one's religious beliefs, claims, and experiences, that is, evidence arrived at through critical examination, I am afraid this position falls short as well.

What, then, can be offered as more compelling evidence to reinforce the claim that certain subjects like religion, traditionally excluded from membership in liberal circles, do not deserve such banishment? I think Lang's examples might be strengthened by considering work being done in philosophy of religion and philosophy of science. Philosophers of religion like Richard Swinburne and Keith Yandell take up the very issue of providing public, external evidence for the veracity of religious beliefs, claims, and experiences.⁴ Though their projects differ, each thinker develops principles by which to assess the veracity of religious experiences in such a way that the weight of their principles is comparable to the weight given to scientific method in assessing ordinary perceptual experiences. This is crucial to the project of meeting the liberal challenge because, as Yandell warns,

Unless there are tests that have a function for numinous experience similar to the epistemological service these features [publicity, multiple modalities, falsification, repetition] provide for sensory experience, this dissimilarity will be of negative relevance to numinous experience as evidence.⁵

Yandell, I think, rightly points out that in order to begin to speak of the possibility of the rationality of religious belief, there must be a way to sufficiently verify or falsify religious experiential claims.

Philosophers of science have begun using the theory of critical realism to look at the role of models and paradigms in the growth of knowledge. They argue that such a theory, "allows for a greater degree of freedom to explore interpretations of our experiences of the world, within the context of a public external reality."⁶ In both science and religion multiple interpretations of the world might be offered, but it is possible to decide, with the help of models and paradigms, between less and more adequate understandings of it. Religion, like science according to this view, requires us to use models, metaphors, and other forms of analogical thinking to help us make sense of our experiences.⁷ In short, Lang's re-construction project may only be enhanced by the work currently under way in related fields.

The idea that the concept of indoctrination has been altered over time and reconstituted in a pejorative sense to suit the liberal, progressive education agenda is quite fascinating. Lang's project is not only intellectually intriguing but, more to the point, it carries educational significance for thinkers concerned with philosophical conceptions of teaching and learning.

1. See for example Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational if It Has No Foundation?" in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 135–86, and Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality*, 16–93.

2. W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 269–73.

3. Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenry* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

4. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

5. Yandell, *Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 265.

6. Peter Hobson and John Edwards, *Religious Education in a Pluralist Society* (London: Woburn Press, 1999).
7. *Ibid.*, 74.