

The Pluralist Predicament

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This paper seeks to extend the conversation regarding religion and public education. Presently, the most widely asked questions on this matter surround the proper place of religion in a democratic, pluralist state. Many scholars have approached this question and have contributed significantly to what is without a doubt an extremely contentious issue.¹ While questions regarding religious identity, the rights of children and parents in a democratic state, the proper place of captive audience prayer, moments of silence, and creation stories in public schools, and policy initiatives such as school vouchers and home schooling are all critical matters deserving ample attention in both academic and policy circles, one critical issue has been ignored. Its omission presents a significant problem for the pluralist thinker who values educational goals that include critical rationality, individual autonomy, and epistemological consistency. This issue will be referred to as the pluralist predicament and is caused in part by what Peter Gardner refers to as the fallacy of tolerance, “the fallacy of refraining from concluding that beliefs held by others are wrong or that certain people are mistaken when such conclusions are a logical consequence of one’s position.”²

The tendency to commit this fallacy gives rise to the following predicament: in order for a democratic state that values the fact of religious pluralism (the fact that many different religions exist) to respect the variety of religious traditions, the state must avoid any and all questions of the validity of claims put forth by these religious traditions; however, from a liberal educational standpoint, avoiding matters of truth is insufficient *when matters of truth are central to the subject matter*. Thus, an individual who is committed to liberal educational goals as well as to religious pluralism is indeed in a predicament for it seems that she must either redefine the general criteria for a liberal education — to exclude or to minimize an emphasis on critical rationality — or she must be willing to continue to commit the fallacy of tolerance, and refrain from an epistemological examination of religious claims in order to ensure a satisfactory degree of respect and recognition for all religions.

Given that neither of these options is particularly appealing, an examination of this predicament is critical. From a liberal educational perspective, we have an obligation to students to create educational experiences that contribute to the development of critical rationality, individual autonomy, and epistemological consistency. And from a [religious] pluralist perspective we have an obligation to treat religions and religious adherents respectfully. This paper proposes steps to achieve these dual obligations.

In order to reconcile the pluralist predicament, we must first understand why this is a problem for those who adhere to liberal educational values. I will argue that an education in religion that does not face the issue of the validity of religious truth claims head-on is not meeting the general requirements for a liberal education.

Having laid out the criteria for a liberal education and shown how one who submits to these criteria is faced with the pluralist predicament, I will introduce two different ideas, which, when combined should provide a way out of this predicament. The first is an epistemological concept of degrees of belief, and the second is the concept of extended pluralism.

LIBERAL EDUCATION

In *Religious Education in a Pluralist Society*, Peter Hobson and John Edwards present a model of liberal education that I think is useful for its concise form, its general application, and its emphasis on epistemological matters.³ They argue that there are three fundamental concepts underlying a liberal education: critical rationality, personal transcendence, and epistemological coherence.⁴ According to Hobson and Edwards, critical rationality means simply, the ability to critically evaluate evidence and forms of justification in order to arrive at rationally acceptable conclusions. They argue that critical rationality is necessary for students to achieve moral, intellectual, and religious autonomy. Personal transcendence refers to the role of education in liberating people from the constraints of their immediate socio-economic and cultural environment towards being persons who have begun to explore the foundations for their own philosophy of life. The authors point out that transcendence is used as an epistemological term in the sense of moving beyond a particular state of knowledge and awareness to a broader and deeper knowledge and perspective in order to help promote greater moral and intellectual autonomy. Finally, epistemological coherence refers to the consistency between different propositions within a subject, internal coherence, as well as between different subjects, external coherence (*RE*, 15).

Keeping in mind these three elements of a liberal education, one is able to see why current forms of religious education are either inappropriate or insufficient. There are primarily two forms of religious education in current existence, the kind used in sectarian schools — education for commitment (typically to a particular faith), and those used in public schools, education about religion (generally in the form of comparative world religions classes). Neither of these forms of religious education satisfies Hobson's and Edward's criteria for a liberal education. An education for commitment is problematic to liberal education for several reasons. First, it probably will not value critical evaluation of its own tenets, since the goal of such a program is to get students to embrace these very tenets. Second, if such an education emphasizes personal transcendence, it would likely encourage a limited version of this concept. Students might be encouraged to move from one state of knowledge to another, but only within the confines of the given religion. It is unlikely that an education for commitment will encourage students to move outside the scope of the given religion. And finally, students might be encouraged to achieve a high degree of internal coherence, but it is unlikely that such educational programs would encourage students to achieve external coherence. Since both internal and external coherence are necessary to satisfy the criterion of epistemological coherence, one can see how an education for commitment would fail on this basis as well.

While an education about religion is not riddled with the same problems as education for commitment, it is nonetheless problematic in its current form.

Education about religion typically consists of classes that explore the history of world religions, or that include discussions of religion in art history, literature, and music classes. While including these are steps towards achieving a greater degree of respect toward religion in public education, it still falls far short of the above-mentioned criteria. Including religion in history, art, or English classes, as Francis Schrag points out has very little to do with the justification for teaching religion, but rather more to do with what is required for teaching good art, music, literature, and history.⁵ Schrag is right and while such courses and course content are necessary, they are not sufficient according to our conditions for a liberal education. According to these conditions, specifically the second condition of personal transcendence, subjects should move students beyond a particular state of knowledge toward a deeper knowledge and perspective in order to help them gain moral and intellectual autonomy. It seems to me that studies about religion in this form, by themselves, will not help promote greater moral and intellectual autonomy and move students toward building foundations for their own philosophies of life; instead they will likely give students a fuller appreciation of a given historical era, or a richer, more contextualized understanding of a literary work, or artistic period.

According to Hobson and Edwards, the only form of religious education that satisfies the conditions for a liberal education is one that consists of an “open-ended exploration of world views or philosophies of life” (*RE*, 19). According to these thinkers, such a course is designed to allow for a truly open-ended critical exploration of ultimate questions. It would incorporate traditional and non-traditional religious views, as well as secular views. The goal of such a program is to present these views as honestly and as rigorously as possible (*RE*, 19).

Such a program however, might give rise to the pluralist predicament. In order to allow students opportunities for critical exploration of ultimate questions, we end up with an educational program that encourages, indeed demands, that students make judgments of validity and worth regarding religious claims. In other words, we end up expecting students to conclude that some religious propositions are true, while others are false. This, religious pluralists argue, leads to exclusivist claims to religious Truth and will not help foster respect for all religions.⁶ However, to present an exploration of ultimate questions in a non-critical way will not satisfy the requirements for a liberal education. Avoiding questions of the validity of religious propositions runs the risk of presenting religion in either a reductionist or a relativistic way. In either case, critical rationality, personal transcendence, and epistemological coherence, Hobson’s and Edward’s three criteria for a liberal education, are not met.

It seems then, given current educational conventions, the pluralist predicament is unavoidable. Either religious pluralism wins out and we teach about religion in such a way that truth gives way to respect, or liberal educational values win out, and we teach about religion in such a way that a critical examination of the validity of religious truth claims is the focus, even if this means risking respect for all religions by claiming that one religion has a greater purchase on the truth of things than others. Neither situation is desirable for those who believe both to be of paramount importance in the education of our youth.

There are, I think, two possible solutions to the pluralist predicament, which satisfy both liberal educational values and the basic tenets of religious pluralism. The first is the argument for *degrees of belief* and the second is *extended pluralism*, a philosophical methodology by which to study religion.

DEGREES OF BELIEF

The argument for degrees of belief helps us out of the pluralist predicament in that it challenges the chief claim comprised by Gardner's fallacy of tolerance — that one is always obligated epistemically to acknowledge the falsity of a conflicting claim. It does so by arguing that religious beliefs and claims are not necessarily true or false but rather that there are variable degrees of belief so that beliefs should be treated instead as more or less defensible. The range of defensibility varies depending upon the strength of evidence and justification supporting a given proposition. Hobson and Edwards argue that each proposition should be given an epistemic confidence level according to the evidence and justification supporting the proposition (*RE*, 34). Therefore, two claims may be contradictory but instead of claiming one proposition true and the other false, as Gardner would have us do, we measure the degree of epistemic confidence in the propositions given the public evidence available. We may very well end up with two contradictory beliefs each holding a variable degree of justification. Employing the concept of degrees of belief helps ameliorate the pluralist predicament because it allows us to critically examine religious claims but in such a way that exclusivism or relativism are not the only results. This should help to satisfy the concerns of religious pluralists and liberal educationists. For instance, take the following three claims:

- A. Islam leads to salvation
- B. Judaism leads to salvation
- C. Only Islam (Judaism) leads to salvation (*RE*, 35).

According to Gardner, pluralism and liberal educational thought would resist adjudicating among these three claims. Gardner would argue that if A and B are incompatible and one believes in the truth of either A or B, then one is epistemically obligated to conclude that the other is false. Pluralism or educational liberalism will resist the exclusivist option of C and might amend (or reformulate) propositions A and B to begin, "According to Islam (Judaism)..." By doing so they are able to teach that *Islam leads to salvation* is true according to Islam and *Judaism leads to salvation* is true according to Judaism.

The degrees of belief argument suggests that we avoid both of these alternatives because in the case of Gardner's theory it ends up posing a static true/false dichotomy leading unnecessarily to religious exclusivism and, in the pluralist case, leads unnecessarily to relativism or a reductionist account of salvation. Instead, the degrees of belief argument would have us measure the evidence and justification for each belief and attribute a certain epistemic confidence level to each belief. This would require placing each proposition within the context of a wider belief system or systems, rather than treating the claims in an isolated manner.⁷ Doing so, as Hobson and Edwards point out, will likely lead to a conclusion toward which both pluralists and educational liberals will be receptive. A higher epistemic confidence

level will be given to the first two claims, and a lower degree of confidence to the third, exclusivist claim. Such an approach is defensible on educational grounds because the adjudication is based on the logical demands of competing claims, rather than on the received truths of any one religion.

The important contribution of the theory of degrees of belief is that the traditional view of holding religious doctrines exclusively is not a necessary feature of religion (*RE*, 22). The notion of degrees of belief allows a more coherent way of comprehending religious propositions than a simple true/false dichotomy. Furthermore, this approach seems very consistent with other methods of inquiry already used in schools. For example, it is quite similar to the process of scientific inquiry in that in both cases claims are treated not as absolutes, but as tentative, and individual claims are measured against other pieces of public evidence and assessed accordingly. The key in both cases is to gather the best public evidence at any given time and assess the claims against that evidence, while maintaining a level of openness to changing one's views.

Some will argue that the theory of degrees of belief is nothing more than a fancy way to mask the inevitable relativism that will necessarily emerge when we are unable to come down strongly in favor of any one claim. To a certain degree, such a criticism is fair — relativism is not entirely avoidable. However, the important point to recognize is that each religious claim represents different judgments about a highly complex realm where we cannot say with absolute certainty which claim is correct. Yet, the lack of certainty need not lead to relativism but should be reflected in the degree of belief accorded each proposition, and it should remain open to ongoing appraisal and critical analysis (*RE*, 40). This is crucial if we are to avoid committing the fallacy of tolerance.

EXTENDED PLURALISM

A second way to address the pluralist predicament is to teach religion by way of extended pluralism. Extended pluralism is a philosophical methodology that attempts to correct the problems inherent in conventional pluralistic theories that lead many to teach about religion in such a way that students are encouraged to form a relativistic attitude towards religion. As I have argued throughout, a relativistic attitude should be avoided as much as possible in teaching students about religion from both liberal and pluralist perspectives. As a method of studying religion, extended pluralism takes religion and a liberal education seriously through its unwillingness to compromise on core commitments each of them holds. If we recall, the pluralist predicament emerges when one is simultaneously committed to respecting religion as well as to respecting the values of a liberal education. The virtue of extended pluralism is that it is able to achieve both. To understand how extended pluralism is able to accomplish these goals, it is worthwhile to mention what methodologies for teaching religion it seeks to replace.

The most common methodologies for teaching about religion in public schools are the historical and sociological approaches.⁸ In both cases, students are expected to utilize the tools of each discipline, to understand the beliefs, claims, ideas, and experiences of the variety of religions studied. Religion courses that utilize these

methodologies effectively will even examine the consequences of holding particular beliefs, but that it seems that is as far as these methodologies will go. Such methodologies do not concern themselves with addressing the fact that different religions make different truth claims that in many cases are incommensurable with one another. In short, utilizing a sociological or historical methodology allows belief systems to be examined to the extent of internal coherence and no further. This is not only inconsistent with the requirements for a liberal education, but it also contributes to the pluralist predicament. For instance, utilizing a historical approach, students might become familiar with important dates, events, and figures central to a given religion. Students might even come to understand why Jews hold certain beliefs, for example, and why Christians hold other beliefs. Students might even come to understand the consequences for holding or not holding certain beliefs according to a particular religion, but as far as adjudicating between the Jewish and Christian beliefs, the historical methodology offers no assistance. Likewise with a sociological approach; students might explore the variety of traditions within a given religion, say the question of why Jewish people hold very strict dietary laws, while Christians do not; why the Christian Sabbath is on Sunday and why Hindus do not celebrate a Sabbath. In addition, a sociological approach will illuminate the consequences for Jews who do not observe these dietary laws according to the dictates of Jewish law, but this approach will not broach the subject of whether the basis for this law is true, in part because schools will certainly not want to address the follow-up question, "If the basis for this law is true, why don't Christians follow it"?

In contrast to a historical or sociological methodology, a philosophical methodology of extended pluralism does in fact ask, indeed demands, that students critically and carefully assess and evaluate the claims, beliefs, and experiences of the variety of religions, particularly where the religions under study provide conflicting beliefs, claims, and experiences. While a philosophical methodology does not rule out or devalue the historical and sociological approaches, it argues that these approaches are not sufficient under a liberal educational model. Given the general requirements for a liberal education highlighted above, a philosophical methodology seems to be the only one that can come close to meeting all three requirements: critical rationality, personal transcendence, and epistemological coherence. Studying religion through a philosophical methodology values the importance of evaluation and critical analysis and places validity of beliefs and claims in a prominent place. Specifically then, extended pluralism as a methodology for studying religion in public schools argues that the truth status of religious beliefs, claims, and experiences should not be prejudged and should not be placed on the back burner in an effort to foster some type of pluralistic, tolerant disposition in students. Extended pluralism considers validity to be a core property of religious beliefs, claims, and experiences. Furthermore, it holds that to study them without considering their truth status leads to problems such as reductionism, which fails to represent religious discourse adequately or misrepresents it as an alternative discourse (*RE*, 163). Extended pluralism aims to study religion in an educational way; it reflects an emphasis on critical rationality, tolerance, respect, and the pursuit of truth in a non-dogmatic, open-minded way (*RE*, 164). In fact, this methodology is already in place

in many schools, though rarely, if ever, applied to religion. Consider the following illustration:

Imagine a middle school classroom comprising 13 boys and 11 girls. The teacher asks the students the following mathematical problem: "If a butterfly flew into the room through the window what is the probability that it will land on a girl's hand rather than a boy's hand?" While most students begin figuring out the answer, dividing 11 by the total number of students in the class, one student raises her hand and says, "It wouldn't matter if it's a boy or a girl. The butterfly will land on whichever hand belongs to the person whose sun sign is Scorpio and whose rising sign is Aries." The student continues, given the puzzled looks around her, "I know this is true because the sun right now is in Neptune."

It seems to me that most reasonable teachers are not going to let this student's "solution" go without evaluation and examination. In fact, many would argue that from an educational standpoint, a teacher has an absolute obligation to respond to this student to make sure she is properly informed and that neither she, nor any other students in the class is left thinking that astrology is an educationally appropriate way to compute mathematical probability. This, I think, is clearly the teacher's chief educational obligation in this setting — to make sure that her students are properly, accurately, and appropriately educated. Additionally, many will also argue that the teacher has an equally important responsibility to treat this student with respect and dignity; no matter how ridiculous the teacher might think the student response, never to belittle her. What then does a teacher do? Refusing to comment on her response or simply brushing it aside in order to prevent her from appearing foolish to her classmates will not satisfy the teacher's educational obligation, but simply telling the student she is flat-out wrong will not satisfy the second obligation of respect. Instead, it is the teacher's responsibility to treat the student's claim and her education seriously through critical and careful assessment of the claim that astrology is an accurate predictor of probability. This is particularly important in this case where we have conflicting ideas on how to compute probability (mathematically, astrologically). By treating her claims seriously, that is by evaluating and assessing them according to public principles of examination, the teacher satisfies both pluralist and educational ideals. Pluralist ideals are accomplished by treating the student with respect and taking her astrological claims seriously; educational ideals, by maintaining a commitment to critical rationality, personal transcendence, and epistemological coherence.

Yet two questions remain, which I think are critical to the issue of religion. First, why would a teacher be reluctant to have astrology, a popular worldview, presented without evaluation and examination but be comfortable presenting a particular religion, another popular worldview, in precisely this manner? Second, if we agree that it is important, out of respect to the student(s) and out of educational obligation to evaluate the student's astrological claim, why is not important for the same reasons to evaluate students' religious claims?

I think among the many reasons pluralists and educationists resist extended pluralism is not because they doubt that it might help students develop their

reasoning skills and might even contribute to their moral and intellectual autonomy, but they worry that such an approach might end up causing more harm than good. That is, such an approach might have the unintended effect of grossly disrespecting religious believers in that it might be terribly offensive for a believer of a specific religion to be told by an outsider that a belief he holds is invalid, unreasonable, and devoid of evidence. This might account for the inconsistency in response to religious claims versus astrological claims, but as Hobson and Edwards rightly point out, “not to be concerned about whether another’s beliefs are true or false might in fact be construed as not respecting that person at all. To allow another to persist in error seems to be inconsistent with respecting that person” (*RE*, 144). Charles Taylor, in his essay, “The Politics of Recognition,” echoes this same sentiment.⁹ Taylor argues that we cannot determine the value and worth of a culture until we submit the contributions of that culture to public assessment and evaluation. Taylor goes on to argue that to place a judgment of value on a culture prior to assessing that culture is condescending and patronizing, even if our judgment is favorable. It seems to me that one can argue that what Taylor says about culture also holds true for religion.

Extended pluralism is very much akin both to Taylor’s argument for a “fusion of horizons” in the study of culture, as well as to the scientific method.¹¹ In all three cases, the subject matter is studied in such a way that students are open to testing, hypothesis, changeability, and fallibility. Additionally, through such a methodology, students are expected to critically evaluate evidence in order to arrive at rationally acceptable conclusions and expected to maintain a high degree of both internal and external consistency between different propositions and claims. Studying religion in this way will lead students to personal transcendence; that is, it will assist students in moving beyond a particular state of knowledge and awareness toward a broader and deeper knowledge and perspective, thereby enabling them to achieve a sufficient degree of autonomy. Adopting extended pluralism as a methodology by which to teach religion can facilitate the realization of the chief aims of a liberal education and religious pluralism.

1. See for example: John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: The John Dewey Essays in Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Amy Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Rob Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

2. Peter Gardner, “Religious Upbringing and the Liberal Ideal of Religious Autonomy,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 22, no. 1 (1988): 93.

3. Peter Hobson and John Edwards, *Religious Education in a Pluralist Society* (London: Woburn Press, 1999). This book will be cited as *RE* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. These three concepts grow out of and are influenced by Charles Bailey’s comprehensive theory of liberal education in Charles Bailey, *Beyond the Present and Particular* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

5. Francis Schrag, “Religion, Education, and the State: The Contrasting Views of James Dwyer and Warren Nord,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 25, no. 3 (2000): 939-42.

6. See for example John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

7. This would include both religious and secular belief systems.
8. I have left out mention of a theological methodology, not because it is rarely used, but because it clearly has no place in public schools. In contrast to the public school, this methodology is the preeminent choice of sectarian schools.
9. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
10. Taylor attributes this phrase to Gadamer. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
11. I owe a debt of thanks to Fran Schrag and Stephanie Mackler for reading earlier versions of this paper.