

Religious Diversity, Education, and the Concept of Separation: Some Further Questions

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The tensions inherent in the political philosophy of a liberal democratic society over what constitutes public and private are manifested in the ongoing conflicts over the legitimate role of religion in public schools. In the United States, the constitutionality of church/state relationships has been interpreted in a series of Supreme Court decisions that place limiting conditions on what is legally allowed in the arena of public education. While all liberal democracies in the modern Western world guarantee the religious freedom of individuals against government interference, the United States constitution demands strict neutrality by removing religion from any government-sponsored activity through the establishment clause of the first amendment. Judicial interpretations of these religious clauses have given rise to the metaphor of a wall of separation, a concept first suggested by Thomas Jefferson. Jeffrey Milligan refers to these constitutional interpretations as the *doctrine of separation* and distinguishes them from a broader *concept of separation* understood in ordinary language and educational discourse. He argues that the way the *concept of separation* functions in educational discourse and practice often goes beyond what is actually required by the legal *doctrine of separation* as interpreted by the courts. This misunderstanding has often resulted in “misapplying...[that doctrine] in ways that infringe the free exercise rights of religious students or failing to apply it to actions that clearly put schools in the position of endorsing religion.” Moreover, the misuse of this metaphor has hindered both the attainment of legitimate educational goals and an adequate understanding of what democratic conversation entails.

Of course, the Supreme Court has never insisted on the total removal of religion from the curriculum of the public school. In the 1963 Schempp case that found school-sponsored prayer unconstitutional, the Court was careful to state that “nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.”¹ Is the frequent omission of religious studies in public schools to be attributed to motives of fear of controversy or are there any philosophical misunderstandings that might benefit from further philosophical clarification and argument. I would like to suggest that there are a number of questions that emerge from the argument that Milligan puts forth that could fruitfully be addressed with further philosophical analysis. In this response, I will try to outline some of these areas of questions.

Essentially, Milligan argues that a set of historical forces rooted in the Protestant reformation, the Enlightenment, and the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries resulted in a separation of the secular from the sacred in the culture. Indeed, one argument often made claims that a secular culture is itself antithetical to religion and does violence to religious believers in institutions like public schools when it reflects that culture. This was the argument used in several

court cases where Christian fundamentalist parents argued that a curriculum devoid of a religious framework would either become an impediment to their religious beliefs or function as a religion of secular humanism. Essentially, the argument dichotomizes the culture into secular and religious spheres effectively rendering the secular as antireligious. The courts have rejected this argument and have contended that the meaning of secular is better understood as nonreligious.² The intent behind the choice of books in public schools, whether religious texts or nonreligious texts, for example, is not guided by religious or antireligious criteria but rather by secular purposes consistent with a democratic society. Thus, the court found that the purpose was largely to promote tolerance and expose students to a variety of different cultural attitudes and outlooks. Religious as well as secular subjects could be studied as long as such study was done objectively. That is, such study could not promote religion nor could it be anti-religious.

Still, one could argue that it is not at all clear what an objective study actually entails. To say that students can learn about religion as well as its role in history, art, literature, or music in the same way that they learn about economics, sociology, anthropology, or psychology, conceals another problem. For as Milligan argues all school subjects are grounded on premises that are likely to privilege one perspective over another. Warren Nord gives an interesting illustration of Milligan's point. The typical study of economics, for example, assumes that "economics is a science, people are essentially self-interested utility-maximizers, the economic realm is one of competition for scarce resources, values are personal preferences and value judgments are matters of cost-benefit analysis."³ In effect, the so-called objective study of economics makes a number of assumptions about human nature, society, and values. What is left out of this study of the economic domain of life is the theologian's questions of social justice, stewardship, poverty and wealth, human dignity and the meaningfulness of work. To what degree do students understand or are even aware of these hidden assumptions in their study of economics? For students to be aware of these assumptions would require more than the inclusion of a study about religion in the curriculum. It would also require that students understand the social construction of knowledge itself and the ways conceptual paradigms frame the questions we ask.

The distinction between learning about religion objectively and practicing religion leads to still other questions. To what degree does the understanding characterized by an educated person in a democratic, secular society require the student to see the world from within that paradigm, to experience it from the inside. Consider a point that Paul Hirst has made:

schools should teach "about" religion, provided that is interpreted to include a direct study of religions, which means entering as fully as possible into an understanding of what they claim to be true [that] will demand a great deal of imaginative involvement in expressions of religious life and even a form of engagement in these activities themselves. This must not, however, be confused with asking pupils to engage directly in any religious activities for the sake of these activities themselves.⁴

This leads, of course, to further questions. What kind of engagement and imagination is required for an educated person to understand a form of knowledge from the

inside? And how can we assure that such study does not slip over into a form of proselytizing. Moreover, to what degree should public institutions engage in practices even if they are thought to broaden the student's cultural and religious understanding and promote social awareness necessary for a democratic dialogue. For example, the intent of teachers teaching courses (largely on the college level) on Shamanism was to help students understand aboriginal rituals and practices and reclaim their own lost shamanic heritage. But the Native American community found such courses offensive. They believed the enactment of their sacred ceremonies was a violation and that respect would require honoring such knowledge as private. Moreover, they believed that it trivialized the deep understandings that Native American people have about their sense of place, spirit, traditions, and personal responsibility by decontextualizing those understandings from the world around them that gave them meaning.⁵

Central to any discussion on the legitimate role of religion in public schools then leads us into a broader set of questions on the nature of an educated person capable of engaging in a democratic dialogue of a religiously diverse society. Indeed, Milligan is correct in saying that the legal *doctrine of separation* is only the beginning for understanding a *concept of separation* that is appropriate for that society and the kind of education, respect and tolerance it should foster. For the public school to create a public capable of sustaining an ongoing inclusive dialogue that makes democratic renewal possible, it cannot bracket "religion out of history, culture, and human experience." But just how to do this raises more philosophical as well as practical questions.

1. *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp and Murray v. Curlett*, 374 U.S. 203, 83 S.Ct. 1560 (1963).

2. *Grove v. Mead School District* No. 354, 753 F. 2d (9th Cir. 1985) 1538.

3. Warren A. Nord, "The Relevance of Religion to the Curriculum," *The School Administrator* (January 1999).

4. Paul Hurst, *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 187-88.

5. For a fuller understanding of this view, see the works of Vine Deloria, Jr. For example, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1992).