

Religion and Public Education: Rival Liberal Conceptions

Suzanne Rosenblith
Clemson University

Current liberal thought concerning the study of religion in public schools is divided. On the one hand there are thinkers like Warren Nord who argue that it is important to show respect toward religion in public schools, and that by not including the study of religion in public schools in a particular way, religion is grossly disrespected. On the other hand there are thinkers who appeal to John Rawls's theory of political liberalism and argue for the exclusion of the study of religion in public schools. This view also holds that it is important to show respect toward religion; however, it contends that showing respect need not extend to the inclusion of the study of religion in public schools.¹ Though both of these views sit comfortably underneath the liberal umbrella, neither view is one liberals ought to support. In both cases the kind of treatment they think religion must be accorded in public schools in order to show it respect is seriously flawed in ways that not only undermine their projects of treating religion respectfully, but also undermine any serious commitment to individual autonomy.

A useful way to understand Nord's program of study is to conceptualize his interpretation of showing respect toward religion as emanating from what I will refer to as a multi-religious perspective, something akin to a multicultural approach to the study of race and ethnicity. Like the multicultural approach, the multi-religious approach has the following goals: building tolerance among believers of different faiths as well as among believers and unbelievers, teaching students to view the world from differing religious frames of reference, locating religious voices and experiences in the center of the public school curriculum instead of on the fringes or not at all, and providing all students with opportunities to become better acquainted with religious beliefs, experiences, traditions and ways of viewing the world. From a multi-religious perspective, education ought to give pride of place to voices and views that have traditionally been excluded from public school curricula; given this, the point of study from a multi-religious point of view is not to get at the *Truth* of a specific issue, but rather to provide opportunities for students to share their multiple perspectives and *truths* on a specific issue. Teaching from a multi-religious outlook requires educators to be sensitive to the fact that in many cases, students' views will conflict, and, therefore educators must negotiate a fine line between deference to minority religious views and the more traditional, dominant religious views.

Nord argues that religion and religious worldviews are important to people, that religion has had a profound impact on society and culture, and that including the study of religion in public school classrooms, in the ways he proposes, will lead to a more tolerant and respectful citizenry. He contends that religious viewpoints, histories and experiences are notably absent from curricula. This is problematic not only because it cheats students out of a comprehensive educational program, but also because it silences many students by telling them in subtle ways that their religious

experiences and points of view are unimportant. By approaching the relationship between religion and public education multi-religiously, Nord suggests that we take the norms, traditions, beliefs and experiences of religious and spiritual worldviews seriously by giving them their due place in public schooling.

Nord supports the Rawlsian belief that religious worldviews are by nature, private. He contends that religious beliefs and truths are not assessable or understandable via paradigmatic methods for the search for truth. Since, according to Nord, neither science nor religion trumps the other, both forms of truth seeking should be included in schools. For Nord it is a matter of respect. He contends that religious voices and experiences have played an important part in society and culture and deserve a prominent place in the public sphere. Furthermore, according to Nord, religious worldviews have something to offer—an understanding of the world and reality that differs from the scientific worldview. Given the fact that many people subscribe to religious worldviews, he believes it is disrespectful to this plurality of people to exclude their beliefs, experiences and norms from the public arena because of an unsubstantiated belief that science has a purchase on the truth of things. Like a multicultural approach, a multi-religious approach aims to eliminate the hegemonic domination of Eurocentric educational views as well as scientific monopolies on interpretations of reality. Both approaches argue that different experiences yield different understandings of truth and reality; as such, neither the dominant Eurocentric experience nor the scientific method should encompass the totality of what knowledge is worth acquiring or imparting on students.

The study of religion from a multi-religious perspective would include the following aspects: teaching history of world religions, experiencing different religions at work through optional field trips to houses of worship, and teaching students religious ways of thinking. According to proponents of this approach, studying religion in this way has important educational value for several reasons.

First, it gives systematic time and voice to the beliefs, experiences, and worldviews of the majority of the citizenry. Second, this approach allegedly gives rise to a more humanistic, tolerant attitude among believers, non-believers, and believers of different faiths. Third, both religion and science offer accounts of reality that help people make sense of the world in which they live. Finally, according to the multi-religious point of view, matters of truth are not central for valuable educational experiences in the study of religion; rather, exploring and appreciating students' different frames of reference to beliefs, experiences and reality is at the heart of such an educational approach.

Though the multi-religious perspective acknowledges and is sensitive to the fact that religious perspectives and ways of thinking are notably absent from public school curricula, the remedy this approach offers, including religious perspectives and ways of thinking where matters of truth are set aside, might run counter to their intended outcome.

In fact, many of Nord's suggestions could have consequences that educators and citizens in general would deplore. An educational program such as the one Nord supports would sanction and support relativism. This consequence is unavoidable

when Nord suggests that religious truths and claims need only cohere with the tenets of either the religious tradition or the individual.

Engendering a relativistic attitude might have the effect of reducing the plausibility of the claim that students, if given opportunities to reflect on religious beliefs from a personal, internal position, will become more respectful and tolerant of those who hold different beliefs, and a more humanistic attitude will result. While such a result is possible, it is also equally possible that precisely the opposite will occur. For people who hold absolute and fundamental beliefs, surfacing opposing points of view might produce more hostility among believers and unbelievers. Consider, for example, the issue of homosexuality. For those whose religious traditions consider being gay an abomination, no coherent argument to the contrary will be acceptable. For those who consider homosexuality natural, there is a great likelihood that hostilities will increase towards those who hold conflicting views. This possibility is likely because a multi-religious framework endorses a program where the only condition for a position to be acceptable is that it be internally coherent.²

While it is a possibility that a relativistic attitude might increase hostilities among people who hold opposing points of view, it is also possible that the relativism might undermine the authority of everybody's claims, since presumably all students will recognize this relativism, so that the ultimate effect will be that no one feels particularly strongly about his or her views. This effect might be especially troubling for people who live their lives by their religious convictions.

A further result of this relativism is that it might force truths, facts, and knowledge to take a secondary role in favor of facilitating a student's psychological and moral development. For some this might be a welcome change as many have argued that schools need to pay more attention to these matters. While Nord agrees that evidence is important, the sort of evidence he has in mind is of a private nature, not held to any standards outside of its being internally and privately coherent. Without some standard method of evaluation, many might be skeptical of the sort of psychological and moral development that could result.

The multi-religious perspective argues that it is important to show respect toward religion in public schools by including the study of religion in such a way where matters of truth are set aside. An alternative liberal view offered by John Rawls also argues that it is important to show respect toward religion in public schools, but argues instead that respect is paid to religion by excluding such study from public schools.

The central question guiding Rawls's *Political Liberalism* is "How is a just and free society possible under conditions of deep doctrinal conflict with no prospect of resolution?"³ Rawls is primarily concerned with understanding what it takes to construct a society where citizens are respectful and tolerant of each other even when reasonable disagreement exists among them. In order to articulate those standards that are necessary for social cooperation, Rawls contends that we must set aside religious, moral and philosophical points of view and consider only those basic matters of justice that are widely acceptable to reasonable people. He believes that

religious, moral, and philosophical points of view are private perspectives, and if our society is to be just and free and achieve a reasonable level of social cooperation, these matters must remain outside of the secular, public realm. This focus, which Rawls calls justice as fairness, shifts attention from competing views of the whole truth toward the shared political aims of the citizenry. According to Rawls, justice as fairness is practical insofar as it “presents itself as a conception of justice that may be shared by citizens as a basis for reasoned, informed and willing political agreement. It expresses their shared and public political reasons.” However, Rawls warns, “To attain such a shared reason, the conception of justice should be, as far as possible, independent of the opposing and conflicting philosophical and religious doctrines that citizens affirm.”⁴ Political liberalism does not ask citizens to forsake their beliefs, but rather, asks them to put them on the back burner so that all citizens can focus on what is widely agreed upon and necessary for social cooperation. Cooperation, according to the Rawlsian view, is only attainable if all citizens accept publicly recognized rules and procedures and regard these rules and procedures as regulating their conduct. Rawls makes a distinction among religious, moral and philosophical points of view and basic principles of justice because the latter are formulated by relying on public reason while the former are not. In Rawls’ words,

Since the political conception is shared by everyone while the reasonable doctrines are not, we must distinguish between a public basis of justification generally acceptable to citizens on fundamental political questions and the many non-public bases of justification belonging to the many comprehensive doctrines and acceptable only to those who affirm them.⁵

Rawls contends that we must tolerate and respect religious, moral, and philosophical doctrines not because they have some purchase on how things actually are, but because within their own worldviews they are consistent, coherent, attached to a tradition, and present an intelligible view of the world. According to this view, though, toleration and respect need not extend to the inclusion of these comprehensive worldviews in the development and determination of the principles and standards of social cooperation.

Because these comprehensive doctrines can only be reasonable within a given tradition, Rawls suggests placing these worldviews on the back burner when developing public principles and standards for social cooperation. Rawls says we must do this because no agreement over these competing comprehensive doctrines is possible. This means that instead of appealing to privately held comprehensive doctrines, we turn our attention toward the publicly rooted shared principles and doctrines that are established based on practical reason. Herein lies a key point of Rawlsian political theory: religious, moral, and philosophical comprehensive doctrines do not employ the same “rules of the game” as do principles and standards of justice. The former rely on a coherence and consistency to which only the adherents must agree; the latter rely on publicly accessible and assessable “rules of the game” that are in accord with practical reason.

Rawls would disagree with Nord’s position even though these positions stem from the same basic assumption, namely, that religious beliefs and claims are not contenders for truth and must be set aside. Rawls would object to Nord’s position because including private, religious beliefs and claims in the public domain would

only serve the purpose of deepening doctrinal divides. Allowing religious beliefs and claims to enter the public sphere would serve to undermine the necessity of citizens being committed to public reason.⁶ If citizens are not committed to the standards of public reason, they will not abide by these principles and standards that are necessary for social cooperation. Instead, Rawls might be concerned that citizens would hold fast to their deep doctrinal beliefs and make conflict and disagreement more pronounced. This, he would likely conclude, will not serve to foster a citizenry that is mutually respectful and tolerant.

Nord would reject the Rawlsian claim that the secular and religious should remain separate and distinct by arguing that social cooperation can only be achieved if people who are doctrinally opposed come to understand one another and appreciate and respect difference. The best way for people to come to understand different points of view, he would likely contend, is by giving students opportunities to study these different claims, beliefs, and perspectives in a systematic way. Contrary to the Rawlsian belief that separation would lead to social cooperation, Nord would urge that inclusion is the most effective way to bring about these goals.

It is likely that Rawls's rejoinder to Nord's position would be to argue that it is difficult enough to come to reasonable agreement when citizens abide by the principles and standards of public reason, and that to add religion to the mix of public discourse would likely eliminate any true opportunity for reasonable agreement. Furthermore, because there is no way to adjudicate between competing religious points of view, hostility and contentiousness among these conflicting worldviews would likely increase. The possibility of a tolerant, respectful society would be highly unlikely.

A different objection to both liberal views emanates from what I call the recognition challenge. The recognition challenge agrees that it is important to respect religion, but it has a fundamentally different understanding of what is involved in "showing respect." The recognition challenge takes objection to two central claims: (1) bracketing truth in religion is a sign of respect, and (2) setting aside matters of truth is educationally valuable.

According to the recognition challenge, bracketing matters of truth in religion is not a genuine act of respect for it presupposes that truth is neither central nor relevant to religion.⁷ Instead, it asserts that one shows respect and honor when one is open to the possibility of truth in religion. This challenge argues that Nord and Rawls misrecognize religion by presuming that religion is not and cannot be a contender for truth. While the recognition challenge concedes that Nord and Rawls might ultimately be right and no religion may in fact be true, it asserts that the presumption that religion is not and cannot be a contender for truth is condescending and patronizing.

For Nord, achieving respect comes about by giving voice and time in classrooms to religious points of view and experiences. Presumably, one can contrast this position with the Rawlsian view that argues for the exclusion of religion and religious matters from public school classrooms. Yet, it seems to me that achieving respect comes about neither through exclusion nor by inclusion. Rather, to truly

respect and honor religion, one must resist making any presumptions or judgments about the status of religious beliefs and claims, and instead wrestle with those beliefs and claims and only then make a determination as to their value. It seems patronizing and offensive to include or exclude religion in public school classrooms where the study of religion is not held to some standard of evaluation because of the presumption that religious beliefs and claims either cannot stand up to any serious standard of evaluation or are not required to stand up to one.

Consider the following example. Appealing to Rawls's theory of political liberalism, Stephen Macedo suggests that the best way to deal with the issue of religion and public education is to exclude such study from public schools. Nevertheless, Macedo recognizes that it is both possible and likely that students will raise religious questions or perspectives especially in a science class when discussing creationism and evolution. He says that in such situations children should not be reproached for offering a creationist account of the origins of humankind, but that teachers should keep the focus on science and ask students to describe scientific theories and evidence on this matter.⁸ This approach, which allows the student to state his religious belief, but shifts the focus toward the study of science, is greatly disrespectful to the student, the religion, to the rest of the students in the class and to the enterprise of learning in general. Furthermore, it will do more to prevent tolerance and respect than it will to foster such attitudes.

It is patronizing to the student and his religion because it eschews any discussion, examination or critical analysis of his claim. This is particularly offensive in a science class where an integral part of the study of science is discussing, examining and critically assessing beliefs and claims. It is even more offensive when compared to the way the teacher will likely treat a student's scientific account of the world's origin. It is insulting to the student and to his religion to ask him to provide scientific evidence, but not require him to offer religious evidence, presupposing that there is no such thing as religious evidence for the student's creationist ideas.⁹ Furthermore, the teacher's different treatment of religious ideas will likely be glaring and obvious to all students in the class. The underlying message will be that the religious belief is unimportant and the scientific belief is of critical importance.

This solution is also disrespectful toward the rest of the students in the class and to education in general, because it prohibits students from learning and understanding alternative accounts of the world's origin, thereby having the effect of limiting competing ideas from which students might choose. Additionally, it greatly reduces the opportunity for students to hone their skills as autonomous and reasonable thinkers. Affording students the opportunity to assess competing points of view on any given matter allows them to develop the skills and tools necessary to become autonomous and reasonable thinkers, something liberal thinkers typically view as imperative in a democracy.

Even if it were possible to avoid religious questions and issues, the very omission might incite more hostility given that, according to Nord, the majority of the citizenry believes in God. In other words, the notable absence of religious

perspectives might itself create unnecessary resentment and hostility. Approaching the study of religion from a multi-religious perspective will not help abate these hostilities because it argues that all beliefs and claims are equally good. This approach may further divide students into separate ideological camps, or as indicated above, may lead all students to feel apathetic in relationship to their beliefs.

An alternative approach that takes recognition of religion seriously allows students to share their religious beliefs and claims, but also demands that those beliefs and claims be substantiated according to a shared theory or standard of evaluation. This approach properly recognizes religion, religious believers and the institution of education. According to the political liberal, for a democratic state to thrive, its members must be committed to public principles of reason; citizens must have the ability to think autonomously and reasonably.

The standard positions of many political liberals, many educators sympathetic to religious traditions, and many religious adherents or leaders, are disrespectful to the many religious perspectives. The political liberal avoids saying anything about how to teach and study religion, insisting that it is a decision for families and religious institutions. This is a serious flaw in political liberalism for it presupposes that the study of religion will not cohere with public reason. Eamonn Callan recognizes this flaw in political liberalism. He says,

Political liberals may indeed avoid saying anything about how religion is to be studied. But the avoidance is evasion because if respect for reasonable people is the nerve of political liberalism, it cannot coherently deny that religious education should honor the limits of the reasonable.¹⁰

Thinkers such as Nord argue that schools unreasonably favor secular ways of thinking by not allowing religious perspectives into the mix of public dialogue. While the intention behind such a charge is to advocate for the inclusion of religion in public education, it does so in a way that compromises both religion and education. Like the Rawlsian position, it presupposes that the study of religion cannot proceed in any way that accords with public reason. Implicitly and explicitly at times, it says that religious worldviews are not and cannot be coherent and consistent within “secular” modes of inquiry, and the burden for religious worldviews is only internal coherence and consistency.

Some religious leaders and adherents claim that by favoring more rational methods of thinking, schools privilege a secular view of the world. This claim as well is a vilification of religious perspectives because it assumes that religions cannot stand up to rational methods of understanding.

There is a great tradition in Western philosophy dedicated to the ideals of liberalism.¹¹ These thinkers argue time and again that a truly free and democratic state will emerge only when its citizens are taught to think autonomously and respect their neighbor’s views. These thinkers seem concerned, first and primarily, with the process of coming to decisions, thoughts and actions, and second, with the actual decisions, thoughts, or actions. They are also aware that to achieve such aims the public schools within such a state are going to have to concern themselves with enabling students to develop the tools necessary to become the sort of citizen they have in mind. Callan argues that schools must explicitly work toward establishing

autonomous development in students. This requires that students provide reasons, both reasonable and rational, for the decisions, thoughts and actions they propose:

If forming my own best judgment about how to live requires me to reflect autonomously on the judgment that others make and on the criticisms they might level against mine, then how can a good life be possible at all if I shirk the requirement?¹²

At the core of my argument is the thesis that public schools have a mandate both to enable students to be autonomous, intelligent thinkers and to recognize religion properly. This means that students must be exposed to all points of view that admit of assessability through public forms of reason and inquiry, and that schools must be open to the possibility that religion can be assessable through public forms of reason and inquiry. A pluralist state demands as much. I see no better way to learn to respect and tolerate individuals who hold very different points of view from my own, then to engage collectively in the hard work of rationally assessing all of these points of view. While we may still disagree on what is the more accurate account of any given matter, perhaps due to what Alvin Plantinga calls an “epistemic blind spot,” John Stuart Mill is right to say that at least it provides us with strong, intelligent reasons for believing what we believe and shunning what we do not believe. The standard political liberal position is inadequate because it asks us either to exclude religious viewpoints from the public square or to include religion in such a way where matters of truth are peripheral. I suggest, instead, that we demand that our schools actively encourage dialogue on all issues from all perspectives that admit of public reason. In this way, we genuinely cultivate a tolerant, respectful and pluralist state. Additionally, such a program in no way diminishes the secularism that we hold as a very high value for the means taken in such discourse are rational, refutable and public.

1. Though it is likely that Rawls would have no objection to public schools offering history of world religion classes, or courses in art history or literature that included relevant religious material.

2. By internal coherence I mean consistent with a particular religious worldview, or consistent within an individual’s own worldview.

3. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: The John Dewey Essays in Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xxx.

4. *Ibid.*, 9.

5. *Ibid.*, xxi.

6. This includes public schools.

7. See Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

8. Macedo, “Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of the Good v. John Rawls,” *Ethics* 105, April (1995): 468-96, 476.

9. Religious evidence could mean anything ranging from a public principle of rationality to the student’s religious worldview.

10. Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 38.

11. See for example John Stuart Mill and John Locke.

12. Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy*, 67.