

Religious Education and the Limits of Political Liberalism

Eric Farr

University of Toronto

The purpose of this essay is to explore the dynamics of non-denominational, public education about religion in a diverse liberal society, and the conceptual and epistemic tensions that these dynamics raise within the liberal tradition more broadly.¹ Encounters between religion and education within societies that fashion themselves after liberal democratic principles have frequently served as flashpoints for heated discussions about secularism and the evolving role of public religion in society.² I will argue that the dynamics expose and underscore a number of tensions within certain strands of liberal thought, and thus provide a fertile and underappreciated context within which to examine and interrogate them. In particular, an examination of how public religious education programming conceptualizes religion, religious diversity and religious identity within a framework of political liberalism will grant insight into certain conceptual limitations that lie at the heart of that framework. My argument will unfold in two sections. In section one, I will analyze certain characteristics of religion as a particular brand of comprehensive doctrine within political liberalism, drawing on its most celebrated articulation, John Rawls' *Political Liberalism*. In section two, I will analyze the tensions that emerge when these characteristics come together to constitute religion as an object of study in a liberal education program. I will then conclude with a few brief, conjectural reflections on the implications of these dynamics for the demands and limitations of liberalism and a liberal education.

RELIGION IN RAWLS' *POLITICAL LIBERALISM*

To begin, the reality of religious diversity is knitted into the very fabric and foundations of political liberalism. One could argue that growing religious or at least denominational diversity within post-reformation Christendom

granted liberalism one of its originating impulses. For Rawls, the existence of a plurality of religions, binding moral commitments, and philosophical outlooks, all subsumed under the category of “comprehensive doctrines,” necessitates the framework of political liberalism. For these comprehensive doctrines are not simply different from each other. Modern democracies, according to Rawls, comprise a multiplicity of comprehensive doctrines that are at the same time reasonable and utterly incommensurable with each other.³ It is their shared reasonableness and incommensurability that set up political liberalism’s generative problematic: given the profound disagreement inherent in the comprehensive doctrinal diversity of modern democracies and the deep, potentially antagonistic divisions that follow from it, what arrangement can possibly ensure stability and justice for its people without sacrificing either their freedom or their equality?⁴

Even at this stage, we can begin to make a few observations about how Rawlsian political liberalism conceptualizes religion. First, political liberalism’s primary concern is not with religion as such, but rather with “comprehensive doctrines,” a broad and encompassing category of phenomena that in some sense informs the totality of an individual’s thought and behavior, and that, as a result, commands their loyalty, at least for the time being. Political liberalism is indifferent to any aspects of religion that might distinguish it from other species of comprehensive doctrines. It is far more concerned with the fact of religious *difference* than it is concerned with substantive questions of what religion really *is* and its larger role in public and private life. Religious difference does not, in itself, attract any particular derision from Rawls. In fact, the reality of diversity among comprehensive doctrines signals the natural, free and salutary exercise of reason among individuals in a society.⁵ Some liberal thinkers have even suggested that the fact that individuals can and do freely choose to pursue a more or less comprehensive conception of the good seems to constitute a social good in itself.

Yet, despite the goods that religious diversity signals and the beneficial roles it can occasionally play, political liberalism effectively emerges in response to the problems it engenders. In theory as in history, the authority of

political liberalism is legitimated and perpetuated by sectarian conflict among comprehensive doctrines. Political liberalism is thus programmed to approach religion in the context of irreconcilable religious diversity (alongside other species of comprehensive doctrines), and it is programmed to approach religious diversity as a problem that must be managed. I do not mean to suggest at this point that this approach to religion as part of a wider range of problems in need of management is detrimental to political liberalism's noble goal of maximizing social stability and justice. Nonetheless, it is important that we take note of its basic orientation to religion, because, unsurprisingly, it will play a significant role in the shaping of any approach to public education about religion in societies governed by a framework of political liberalism.

Next, it will benefit our study to explore briefly how Rawls understands religion's relation to the thinking, reasoning, acting subject. Despite the effort to approach religion in a limited or "philosophically shallow"⁶ way, and avoid making any specific claims about its ultimate metaphysical or moral status, the functional approach that political liberalism takes to religion nonetheless carries certain assumptions about the individual, and which extend beyond mere political neutrality, implicating themselves normatively in the citizen-building project of public education and its possible religious education programs.

The first assumption is about the relationship of religion to the person and finds expression in Rawls' discussion of moral identity in V.2 of *Political Liberalism*. Rawls recognizes three different types of identity that we can ascribe to an individual: political, moral and personal.⁷ In each case, the term "identity" appears to function in slightly different ways. Political identity stems from a recognition on the part of political institutions. It is concerned with the rights and freedoms that individuals possess according to their public identity as citizens and thus is not altered when someone uses their rational and moral powers to change, even radically (though within the bounds of reason), their conception of the good.⁸ Personal identity, on the other hand, is something resembling an individual's "consciousness;" that is, an almost ontological, first-person, experiential sense of what it is like to be *that* particular individual.⁹ According to this formulation, personal identity also remains continuous de-

spite potentially radical reappraisals of one's conception of the good or one's allegiance to a particular comprehensive doctrine. It is this subjective continuity that allows us to say that Jane is in some basic way still Jane even though she was an Evangelical and is now a secular humanist. Her world view, and her metaphysical and moral commitments may have completely transformed, yet she is still Jane. We would not suggest that at this level she is a different person. So while political and personal identity remain more or less continuous, it is only one's non-political moral identity that contains within it the possibility, indeed the likelihood, to change throughout one's life, with varying degrees of gravity and frequency.¹⁰ And it is within this stratum of identity that Rawls situates religion as a comprehensive doctrine.

So far, then, we have identified a few basic characteristics of political liberalism's conception of religion, the object of study in public religious education programs: (1) religion, as one subtype of comprehensive doctrines, is conceived of primarily in terms of (2) its public, functional diversity; (3) this public religious diversity is approached as a problem in need of management; (4) a person's moral identity, which might include but is not tantamount to their religious orientations and commitments, will almost inevitably change throughout their life, as it is the only dimension of a person's identity that does in fact change. These characteristics of political liberalism's approach to religion raise a series of questions about how an education system in a liberal democracy will educate young people about religion. In the next section, I will identify some of these questions and provide some initial thoughts regarding their implications.

PUBLIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN A LIBERAL SOCIETY

In a liberal society, what is the purpose and value of educating young people regarding religion? And what are the appropriate epistemic processes that allow young people to develop knowledge about religion without compromising liberalism's core principles? While it is clearly contrary to such principles that a purportedly non-denominational public school would advance a

program intended to cultivate allegiance to a particular religion within a diverse student body, several liberal thinkers have argued for the compatibility of certain kinds of public educational processes about religion.¹¹ Walter Feinberg and Richard Layton advance a fairly typical justification in their book *For the Civic Good: The Liberal Case for Teaching Religion in the Public Schools*. First, they argue that knowledge of religion contributes meaningfully to the development of a young person's autonomy. Echoing Rawls, they suggest that autonomy expresses itself, partially but significantly, through the selection and regular revision of one's conception of the good.¹² Young people, therefore, require exposure to a variety of such conceptions, a "willingness to own one of these conceptions in light of others," and a critical capacity that allows one to "recognize and reflect upon one's inherited conception of the good."¹³ Second, Feinberg and Layton argue that learning about religion helps to develop a set of civic virtues and skills to assist young people to contribute more effectively as citizens to public democratic life. Indeed, it is quite reasonable to suggest that, since the society into which youngsters are being trained to enter comprises large numbers of people for whom religion animates much thought and action, it would contribute to justice, stability, and tolerance to develop in them a greater understanding of various religions. The justifications that Feinberg and Layton advance thus address the two levels of religious relevance found in Rawls. The public relevance of religious diversity and the individual relevance of religion as a source of moral identity via various religious conceptions of the good. In order to protect the developing autonomy of the individual youngster and not unduly influence their adoption of a particular comprehensive doctrine, a significant strand of religious education discourse, including policy and curricula, stresses the distinction between education *about* religion, and education *into* religion.¹⁴ The latter signifies an epistemic process that builds subjective acceptance of and moral identity within a specific religious tradition or into an empathetically religious outlook more broadly; the former signifies an epistemic process that builds objective awareness about a range of "world religions," often formulated as developing "religious literacy."¹⁵

I see a number of conceptual tensions within such arguments that

require resolution. First, there is an immediate tension in liberal arguments for public religious education that treat religion as a particular kind of comprehensive doctrine. Such arguments and curricula frequently frame religion as an important force in shaping human experience and affairs, as the beliefs and practices that give human life meaning and purpose, and as a significant “source of people’s conception of the good.”¹⁶ Indeed, such descriptions could equally apply to any number of non-religious comprehensive doctrines. To be sure, most models of public religious education do devote significant attention to phenomena more typically acknowledged as “religious” (e.g., ritual, concepts of divinity, scriptural narratives, etc.). Yet, these features of religious life do not constitute the stated purpose and educational value of such programming. In fact, given the overall framing of liberal arguments and curricula, religious phenomena such as divine presences, devotional practices and scriptural admonitions are inevitably construed as serving an individual, largely interior meaning-making process and the construction of a conception of the good. While such processes certainly comprise a part of many religious traditions, they reflect a particular conception of religion characteristic of Western liberal Protestantism.¹⁷ Moreover, it is not clear why religion is singled out as a kind of comprehensive doctrine that merits its own discrete programming. If one of the main justifications for public religious education is the importance of understanding religion as a comprehensive doctrine in order to expose young people to a range of such doctrines, as Feinberg and Layton suggest, it seems more appropriate and logically consistent to have curricula that center explicitly on comprehensive doctrines as opposed to religion. When curriculum writers cling to religion as the primary topic of such curricula, religion is advanced as the privileged species of comprehensive doctrine and presented, however subtly, as the most significant resource for shaping moral identity and culture. Non-religious comprehensive doctrines like “secular humanism” ironically become absorbed into such models of religious education.¹⁸ One could advance a plausible argument that religious comprehensive doctrines have in fact played a disproportionately significant role in shaping moral identity and culture throughout human history; yet it seems nonetheless contrary to the principles of secular liberalism to present it as such in a diverse public

school setting. If religion's relevance to society is as a brand of comprehensive doctrine, it becomes problematic to advocate a special place for it in a liberal curriculum.

Second, liberal arguments for public religious education, following naturally from political liberalism's principal concern with religion *as religious diversity*, frequently invoke the inherent threat of religious diversity to social stability. That is, they advance a socio-political justification for education about religion as a remedy to the current climate of heightened religious conflict prompted by new forms and degrees of religious diversity.¹⁹ The focus of the education program then is not so much to develop an understanding of religion or religions per se, but rather to develop in the young learner a set of tolerant attitudes towards religious diversity in order to maximize certain salutary social dynamics.²⁰ On one level, the argument can be plausibly advanced that the cultivation of genuine tolerance and equality is hampered by a superficial understanding of religion that emphasizes conflict across somewhat essentialized traditions through the lens of diversity-as-problem. Yet the problem runs deeper. Kenneth A. Strike has argued that strictly instrumental approaches to education, which direct the acquisition of skills or knowledge towards some other end, and approaches that focus primarily on the development of technique divorced from the goods internal to the academic subjects themselves, compromise the ideal of human flourishing so central to liberal education.²¹ One could respond that this attitude of tolerance is in fact the very good internal to such an educational program about religion. While such tolerance may indeed emerge naturally out of the study of various religions, to position it as such a study's primary educational outcome is to operate from within a conceptually impoverished understanding of religion. It is to suggest that religion as a phenomenon has little epistemic value of its own to contribute. The approach instrumentalizes the object of its study, flattening its complex conceptual universe and transforming the study of religion into a set of attitudinal techniques required to maintain social stability. The question then becomes: is it possible within a public context of political liberalism to educate about religion in a way that goes beyond the conceptual limitations set upon it

by political liberalism's practical framework?

Part of the challenge with this question is the persistent ambiguity surrounding what "religion" actually is. The history of the academic study of religion is filled with inconclusive attempts at offering definitions of religion and formulating theories to explain it. I would submit, however, following Benjamin Schewel's recent argument, that a useful way to conceptualize religion in this context is as a "system of knowledge and practice," analogous to science, aimed at developing and applying insights gained by individuals and communities into a transcendent or spiritual reality.²² One benefit of this conceptualization is its shift to a more robust consideration of the epistemic dimensions of religious phenomena. The epistemic emphasis also helps to clarify how we might begin to distinguish religion from other kinds of comprehensive doctrines and from the category of comprehensive doctrine more generally. Namely, religious knowledge systems operate according to distinct epistemological principles and modes of inquiry, which reach outside of strictly materialist and naturalistic rational frameworks. It also has the advantage of avoiding overly static formulations of religion. That is, as a system of knowledge and practice, it can evolve according to newly acquired collective capacities, to new experience and to shifting religious and moral sensibilities. No conceptualization is perfect, of course, and conceiving of religion as a system of knowledge and practice will no doubt fail to capture all practices and behaviors we might wish to categorize as religious. It is nevertheless a useful starting point from which to re-consider religion's potential place in a liberal education and in a liberal society more broadly.

Let us now examine the relationship between an education about religion outlined in the immediately preceding paragraphs and the question of personal, moral and political identity discussed earlier. Namely, to what stratum of identity does a liberal education about religion direct itself? What are the implications of this direction for the cultivation of a particular kind of liberal subject? That is, what kind of subject and what kind of identity does liberal education about religion seek to cultivate? As we discussed earlier, comprehensive doctrines reside within the realm of moral identity. They represent

the exercise of a certain kind of rational thought and choice, and are thus likely to shift and change over the course of one's life. The education *about* religion approach does not explicitly aim to alter one's allegiance to or participation within any comprehensive doctrine and is thus not overtly directed towards the moral identity of the student. Rather, it approaches religion within the realm of the student's political identity as citizen, developing attitudes of tolerance and equality critical for the requirements of citizenship. At the same time, according to Feinberg and Layton, a liberal education about religion also aims to develop the autonomy of the individual by exposing her to a variety of possible sources of conceptions of the good, and equipping her with intellectual capacities needed to reflect on her inherited conception of the good. At one level then, public religious education does in fact aim at the moral identity of the student. The dual targeting of a student's political and moral identity by religious education programming prompts at least two interrelated observations.

First, we must take seriously the ways in which such an educational approach normatively constructs a subject for whom the values constituting their political identity remain a constant whereas the concepts, allegiances and epistemologies that constitute their moral or, in this case, religious identity is made a matter of rational selection. Religious identity, beliefs and practice thus become something one *possesses*, rather than something one *discovers* or one *is*.²³ In many ways, this shift to recognizing religious belief as merely one option among numerous others is an inescapable characteristic of Western modernity.²⁴ At the same time, how one might understand her religious *beliefs* is not entirely synonymous with the ways in which she might understand her religious *identity*. Such an emphasis on belief reflects a particular Protestantized conception of religious identity, and ignores numerous other significant ways in which people conceive of and experience their religious identity.²⁵ For example, some significant anthropological research has demonstrated the ways in which religious identity and piety is consciously cultivated through bodily practices rather than belief alone.²⁶ Also, influential communitarian critiques of liberalism speak to the role of community and social relations in forming religious or moral identities. Religious identity can thus reach deeper and wider

than a set of metaphysical propositions one rationally chooses to affirm or deny.

A second tension present in the argument for education *about* religion is the presumed stance of critical distance and secular rationality upon which it depends. The epistemic move from *in* to *about* implies a critical distancing between the subject and object of study, situating religion clearly as an object to be approached from the outside. This presumption of objectivity is complicated, however, by the powerful normativity of the approach to religious-diversity-as-problem necessitated by the political liberal framework, and the normative nation-building aims of public education more broadly.²⁷ A failure of absolute neutrality is not, of course, a valid criticism of political liberalism. Indeed, arguments that call into question the neutrality of the liberal state are often premised on the epistemological impossibility of absolute neutrality in the first place. However, it is nonetheless important for us to understand the specific ways in which political liberalism's ideal of neutrality vis-à-vis religion becomes compromised, and the epistemic and political effects of equating these underlying assumptions with neutrality. In this case, the enhanced critical distance suggested by the epistemic shift to education *about* religion suggests that such an approach to religion views it "as it really is," rather than viewing it as a conceptual construct of political liberalism. More significantly, the context of objectivity constructed by political liberalism, and the state sponsored school as a particular kind of liberal public, limits epistemic activity within the naturalistic framework of reason alone. A tension thus emerges as the normative approach to understanding religion operates within an epistemological framework that precludes the alternative ways of knowing characteristic of religious epistemologies. The critical rational distance implied by "education *about* religion," paired with the normativity inherent in any public education project, suggests that the effect is more than a simple bracketing of the transcendent. While students must be allowed to reflect critically and rationally on the comprehensive doctrine they have inherited or adopted, the forms of knowledge and rationality with which a naturalistic framework equips students predisposes the trajectory of their reflection in a particular direction. The

question then becomes: is it possible to admit (and perhaps even to stimulate) thinking outside of a materialist or naturalistic epistemic framework without inculcating young people into a particular set of metaphysical commitments? Are epistemic modes that acknowledge the transcendent incompatible with education in a context of political liberalism?

We might ask then, again, whether a reconceptualization of religion as a system of knowledge and practice, which foregrounds the epistemic dimensions of religion, can help ease some of these tensions, at least at a conceptual level to begin with. First, such a conception of religion helps to navigate between the extremes of an overemphasis on non-rational belief in the formation of moral identity, on the one hand, and of an overly positivist rationalism in the critical appraisal of comprehensive doctrines, on the other. Second, it can provide epistemological resources outside of a naturalistic framework that can be drawn on to reflect critically on the operation of secular public reason itself. These intellectual resources also allow students to reflect critically on their inherited comprehensive doctrines but from within a framework more actively open to the epistemic implications of transcendent possibilities. Third, such a conception of religion is attentive to the collective dimensions of religious identity and educational practice. An individual cannot construct a system of knowledge by herself. It requires a collective effort to construct and organize a common body of knowledge. Such a constructive, collective emphasis creates space for alternative paths of religious identity development.

In this brief essay, I have sketched the possible contours of an argument about the tensions that present themselves when a liberal society advances a program of public religious education. The epistemic limits of a liberal conception of religion become especially manifest when examined in the context of public education programming. The frequently conflicting imperatives of religious and liberal processes of subject formation and identity development similarly grant a keen insight into certain fundamental assumptions about the foundations of political liberalism. In particular, I have argued for the need to consider novel approaches to the conceptualization of religion within a political liberal framework that might move it beyond the category

of a comprehensive doctrine. Specifically, I have suggested the benefits of a conceptualization of religion as a system of knowledge and practice that collects insights into transcendence or spiritual reality (broadly conceived) and seeks to apply them in individual and collective life. Further research and writing are needed. Once we begin to take seriously the epistemic dimensions of religion as a system of knowledge and practice with alternative epistemological resources, it will become necessary to demonstrate more conclusively its conceptual soundness and its practicability in a variety of educational contexts.

1 Terms like “religious education,” “religion education,” and “education about religion” are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes used to signal very different educational processes. In this essay, I will use them interchangeably to refer to educational programming about religion and religious phenomena in the context of non-denominational, secular public schooling in religiously diverse liberal democracies.

2 Benjamin L. Berger, “Religious Diversity, Education, and the ‘Crisis’ in State Neutrality,” *Canadian Journal of Law and Society / Revue Canadienne Droit et Société* 29, no. 1 (2013), 114.

3 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xvi-xvii.

4 *Ibid.*, xviii.

5 *Ibid.*, xvi.

6 Kenneth A. Strike, “Is Liberal Education Illiberal? Political Liberalism and Liberal Education,” in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2004*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), 321.

7 *Ibid.*, 30-33.

8 *Ibid.*, 30.

9 Cf. Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435-450.

10 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 31.

11 Walter Feinberg and Richard A. Layton, *For the Civic Good: The Liberal Case for Teaching Religion in the Public Schools* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Michael Hand, *Is Religious Education Possible? A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

12 Feinberg and Layton, *For the Civic Good*, 3.

13 *Ibid.*, 4.

14 See, for example, Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 55; Ontario Ministry of Education, “Policy/Program Memorandum 112,” Ontario Ministry of Education, 1990, <http://www.ontla.on.ca/library/repository/>

[ser/23965/PPM112.pdf](#);

15 See Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*.

16 Feinberg and Layton, *For the Civic Good*, 4; Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 28. See also, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, "Québec Education Program: Secondary Cycle Two" (Government du Québec, 2006), 1.

17 Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 18-19.

18 See Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, "Québec Education Program: Secondary Cycle Two" (Government du Québec, 2006); Ontario Ministry of Education, "The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 to 12: Social Sciences and Humanities" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/ssciences9to122013.pdf>

19 See Moore, *For the Civic Good*, 31.

20 See Leo Van Arragon, "Religion and Education in Ontario Public Education: Contested Borders and Uneasy Truces," in *Issues in Religion and Education: Whose Religion?*, ed. Lori G. Beaman and Leo Van Arragon (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 34-58.

21 Strike, *Is Liberal Education Illiberal*, 324.

22 Benjamin Schewel, *Seven Ways of Looking at Religion: The Major Narratives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 174.

23 Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 54-56.

24 See, for example, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007), especially 1-22.

25 Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 36-57.

26 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

27 Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 291.