The Issue of Faith Schools

Professor Harry Brighouse is a British-born philosopher who specialises in issues of education, and is familiar with both the UK and the US systems. He now teaches in the University of Wisconsin, USA. Here he argues from a liberal perspective that a constructive engagement between the state system and faith schools – as exists to some extent in the UK - is likely to serve the interests of children better than the rigid separation of church and state required by the US Constitution. His main examples concern Christian fundamentalism in the US, but there are some references to, and parallels with, Muslim faith schools in the UK.

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Alan Carling

Faith Based Schools in the UK:
An Unenthusiastic Defence of a Slightly Reformed Status Quo.

Harry Brighouse

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Introduction.

I shall approach the question of whether the government should support single-faith schools through the prism of a liberal theory of educational justice. The liberal theory of educational justice requires, among other things, that children have a substantive opportunity to become autonomous adults; on the liberal view this principle has very high priority in evaluating education policy, outweighing, for example, any parental interest in having a child educated at a school which promotes the parent's religion. So when addressing state support for faith schools

we ask whether they contribute to a child's right to become autonomous. Many liberals think that they do not. If a child is subject to the same religious influences in the home and in the school, she is less likely to gain the necessary resources to reflect critically on what she is learning. Especially telling is the complaint that, because children learn a great deal from their peers, a child attending a school in which her peers have the same religious commitments as her family and school do is profoundly disadvantaged with respect to the ability to become autonomous.

Separationism, Secularisation, and Autonomy

Accordingly some liberal commentators take it as obvious that the state should not support faith schools. A.C. Grayling writes in The Observer that

> Society should be blind to religion both in the sense that it lets people believe and behave as they wish provided they do no harm to others, and in the sense that it acts as if religions do not exist, with public affairs being secular in character. The US constitution provides this, though the religious lobby is always trying to breach it - while George W. Bush's policy of granting public funds for 'faith-based initiatives' actually does so. To secularise society in Britain would mean that government funding for church schools and 'faith-based' organisations and activities would cease, as would religious programming in public broadcasting.[1]

Notice that Grayling's recommendation makes no appeal to the interest of children in becoming autonomous. He wants to 'secularise society', which involves disentangling the state from religious institutions: depriving them of any funding or privileges. He identifies secularisation with a particularly strong from of separationism: that the state should have nothing to do with religious institutions.

In this Grayling accepts the mainstream of American liberal thinking about separationism. In the US all government schools are secular, so that not only do religious organisations have no role in running schools, but the schools provide no religious education and make little reference to

religious symbols and ceremonies. The Christmas holidays are called ‘the Holiday season’, and Easter is conceded to with a (unreasonably brief) ‘Spring break’. Religious commitment has no place in defining the curriculum or ethos of the school.

It is worth noticing a consequence of Grayling’s identification of secularisation with separationism. Defenders of strictly secular public schooling in America typically argue for very extensive freedom for private schools to be run by religious foundations, and the law in most American States allows private schools to practice straightforward indoctrination of children. For example, 300,000 children attend Accelerated Christian Academy schools where unqualified teachers (some of whom have not graduated high school) instruct them from workbooks designed to reflect the values of and literal truths in the Bible. Sandra Feldman, leader of the American Federation of Teachers, and bete noir of the voucher movement, is very clear where she stands on the issue of children’s prospects for personal autonomy:

> For religious schools, public scrutiny and accountability raise issues of religious freedom; the deep infusion of religion throughout their curriculum and lessons is essential to them, as is their freedom to require children to attend religious services. They don't want state interference in any of that. Yet, accountability to the broader public must go along with public funding.[2]

In other words, separationism is so important that if some children cannot become autonomous because their parents send them to private, ‘free’ religious schools, that’s a sacrifice worth making. Secularisation of society is, indeed, an aim of liberals. But secularisation should not be identified with separationism, still less with the odd interpretation it is given by American liberals. A society is secularised when the religious cleavages that characterise it are not pertinent to public political debate, and when the barriers between religious and ethnic subcultures are porous. Before examining why liberals seek secularisation in this sense, let me deflect the objection that it is because they trivialize religion, thinking of it as a purely private matter of preference. Liberals take religion seriously. They endorse freedom of religion as a matter of deep principle, because they believe that there is a great deal of mystery in human experience that pure reason cannot settle. They believe that religious belief helps many people explain some of these aspects of human experience, and that, from the perspective of pure reason, religious explanations are as good as

any others. But they also think that in order to contribute fully to the well-being of the individual religious commitment must be authentic. That is, it must reflect the freely exercised reason of that individual. For our life to be truly ours, and to contribute to our well-being, it is we who must endorse it.

This is why liberals place such weight on individual autonomy. People need to be autonomous so that they can live lives that they have judged to be of value. And for this they do not just need autonomy-facilitating schools, but an autonomy-facilitating general culture. If the public culture allows different ethnic or religious groups to feel embattled and underconfident, they are liable to look in on themselves, and devote energies to building strong boundaries between themselves and other cultures. This, I believe, is what has happened in the US since the 1960s to the more fundamentalist sects of Christianity. Despite the energy with which certain entrepreneurs have mobilised them politically, they have essentially seceded from the public culture. But strong boundaries between ways of life undermine autonomy, because they make it harder for children (and adults) who grow up within one way of life to come to know and understand the values of alternatives, and to see them as realistic options.

The second reason liberals seek to undermine the barriers between religious faiths is because they accept a principle of legitimacy that says that it is a prima facie wrong to use the coercive power of the state against people on justificatory grounds that they could not reasonably be expected to endorse. This means that when we vote for the state to act coercively we should base our vote on sincere reasons that reasonable people could come to endorse. Purely religious reasons fail this test, because religion is a matter on which free reason is not decisive. This does not mean that religious voters cannot be motivated by their sincere moral commitments, because often those are commitments that they have reason to believe could be accepted by reasonable people, for example, the idea that killing is usually wrong, or that the elimination of human suffering is a high moral priority. Nor does it mean that the state should directly police the reasoning of voters: it cannot and should not, for numerous reasons. But it does allow that the state should favour institutional structures, as long as they are consistent with maintaining basic liberties and distributive justice, which support public, rather than private, reasoning in the justification of state power.

Autonomy and Faith Schools.

So we now have two liberal aims: ensuring that every child has a real opportunity to become an autonomous adult; and minimizing the extent to which religious cleavages have pertinence in public political debate. Let's take the first consideration. We want to establish the system of public schooling that maximizes the probability that each child will have a reasonable opportunity to become autonomous. We have to ask whether the kinds of secular schools we can reasonably expect in a strictly secular public system will promote autonomy better than the religious schools that would otherwise be incorporated, and also whether the involvement of the state in funding and regulating religious schools makes them more autonomy-facilitating than if the state refrains from provision but allows private religious schools. The best control we have is the US, whose model Grayling advocates.

The typical American urban or suburban public high-school has little in common with the liberal ideal of the autonomy-fostering common schools. It is a 2000-plus student institution, in which no individual knows every other individual, in which many children never have any teacher for more than one year of instruction, in which the prevailing values include pep-rallies for school sports and a slavishly conformist loyalty to the school and neighbourhood. These schools maintain a deafening silence about spiritual or anti-materialist values, take sides in the Cola wars, and accept as a given the prevalence of brand names and teen-marketing. Religious parents often, with justice, believe that their own beliefs are at best ignored, at worst actively worked against by the schools. Since September 11th 2001 countless school districts have enforced a morning recitation of the pledge of allegiance, a ritualistic affirmation of patriotism as a quasi-religious commitment. The reasonable liberal parent shrinks in horror at the thought of any children, let alone their own, attending these places. There are, of course, better alternatives in the public sector, but few school districts or school leaders show signs of being inclined or able to foster it.

Similarly, while many private religious schools are indeed deeply sectarian, many are not. You cannot judge how well a school facilitates autonomy simply by looking at its mission and how it carries it out. A Christian school with a religiously diverse student body may facilitate

autonomy just because children learn about the articulation of other ways of life primarily by seeing it articulated in the lives of their peers. The key issue of liberal principle is not whether schools in the state system serve autonomy, but what system of regulating all schools, state and private, will do so. The distinction between public and private schools in this context is artificial. The state is the guarantor of liberal justice, and it is as responsible, in the political sense, for the operation of private schools as it is for that of state schools. I would conjecture that in the UK religious schools that cooperate with the state in running a school will, over time, come to be better at facilitating autonomy than religious schools that don't, other things being equal. I would conjecture, with more confidence, the same thing in the US, partly because I am confident that political coalitions that succeed in getting funding for religious schools will have to concede a good degree of public regulation (just as Sandra Feldman suggests). Proponents of the US model often talk as if the alternative to State funded religious schools is State funded secular schools. But for many students it is not: the alternative is a private religious school, which is less likely to promote their autonomy than state-run schools (whether religious or secular) other things being equal.

I suspect that in the US many parents are drawn to private religious schools not by any interest in having their children indoctrinated, but by their horror at the experience of the shopping-mall high school, and, in fact, an unarticulated sense that the values of the peer group, tolerated by the school, threaten, rather than serve, their children's prospective autonomy. If they do, I feel considerable sympathy. Fundamentalist Christians have managed to foster a counter-culture in the US which includes a whole parallel world of rock music, kids videos, and teen magazines. Margaret Talbot describes the magazines available for teenagers: `It has its own magazines for every demographic niche, including Hopscotch and Boy's Quest for kids 6-13, which promise "no teen themes, no boyfriends, girlfriends, makeup, fashion or violence and NO ADVERTISING" '.[3] Religious parents fear that schools which do not incorporate strong moral values, and which treat spirituality as just another lifestyle option, one which may not even be presented to children by sincere believers, endanger their children's prospects for a balanced and satisfying life.

Advocates of the American model should bear this in mind. Once we understand that the

principle of promoting the prospective autonomy of all children trumps the merely institutional measure of separationism, we have to make a hard-headed comparison between how well a strict secular model and something like the current English model serve autonomy. I certainly believe that autonomy would be better served in the US if policymakers adopted something closer to the UK model. I doubt the UK has much to gain from adopting the US model.

Of course, the live issue in the UK is that the government has begun to grant voluntary status to Hindu, Sikh, and, most controversially, Muslim schools. A great deal of fire is directed against Muslim schools because Islam is a religion which supposedly degrades women, so that the schools can be expected to diminish the opportunities of female pupils. Let's assume that Islam is indeed more misogynistic than Christianity and than the mainstream secular culture. Does it follow that Muslim girls will get worse education if the state gives voluntary status to some Muslim schools than if it does not? No. It depends on which schools the girls would have attended if the state had not granted Muslim schools voluntary status, and on how the schools respond to being granted voluntary status. If the girls would otherwise attend private Muslim schools which have no reason to negotiate with the mainstream culture and its educational expectations, they are no worse off in voluntary status Muslim schools. And the state has equal responsibility for their wellbeing regardless of where they are going to school[4]. It, and its taxpayers, cannot say `We are implicated if we fund the schools but we're off the hook if we merely permit them'[5]. The state does no less wrong when it neglects children than when it pays attention to them.

Secularisation and Separationism

Why is the issue of government involvement in faith schools relevant to secularisation? Here is a story about the exclusion of religion from public schooling in US. I think this story is true, although I cannot prove it, and wouldn't know how to start. If it is true, though, it suggests that the strictly secular schooling model of the US will not be a promising model to copy, if we take seriously the aim of secularisation.

In the US parents must choose between secular public schools and religious private schools. The state exercises minimal control over private schools, and private religious schools

have two markets: the religious sectarians who would send their children there even if there were public faith schools available, and the religious moderates who would choose public faith schools if they were available. So religious moderates send their children to schools influenced by sectarians rather than by secularists.

Because the public schools do not accommodate religious parents, they are inclined to defect to sectarian schools. A striking example is the well-known Tennessee case of Mozert vs Hawkins. The Mozert parents objected to a primary level civic education program using readers in which boys were seen making toast for girls, in violation of what the parents regarded as God-given sex roles; which quoted Anne Frank's speculation (false, according to the parents) that unorthodox religious belief was better than no belief at all; and mention was made of witches and magic. The school district refused the parents' request to exempt their children from the readers, and ultimately the Courts found for the school district. The consequences: the publishers of the textbook removed the offending passages from subsequent editions, in order to maintain their market; and the parents removed their children from the district to a self-run school which taught fundamentalist values and which only children of fundamentalists attended. In other words, the rules give artificial market power to the extremists in the marketplace of ideas. I suspect that if the state acted as it does in Britain, cooperating with, but heavily influencing, religious authorities in providing schools, the market for sectarian schooling would collapse, and sectarians, rather than being able to influence the children of moderates, would have their children subject to influence by the mainstream and the moderates.

On top of that, sectarian religious entrepreneurs are able to present the state as an enemy of religion. Stories abound in the fundamentalist Christian world of bibles being banned from the classroom; of prayer groups being harassed by school authorities; of ministers and religious parents being excluded from school PTO activities. In every case I know of where these stories contain a grain of truth the courts have finally found in favour of religious freedom as properly understood: that is against the school authorities. But the grain of truth is enough for sectarian entrepreneurs, and independent information is hard to come by and not scrupulously sought by the fundamentalist community. The strict understanding some people have of the implications of state/church separation contributes to the alienation of religious communities from the

mainstream public culture, and hence to the pertinence of religious cleavage to public disagreement.

My conjecture is that a system in which the state collaborates with faith organizations in the provision of schooling is more likely to produce autonomy-facilitating schools and an autonomy-facilitating culture, other things being equal, than a system in which the state refuses to collaborate with faith organizations, but allows them to run their own schools independently. This is only a conjecture, and as I've indicated I don't know how to prove or disprove it (especially because I have a preference for quantitative methods of proof), opponents of faith schools should take it more seriously than they do.

Reforming Faith Schools.

How should the status quo be reformed? I have not argued that any particular faith school facilitates autonomy better than any particular secular school, but that a system in which the state collaborates with faith organizations in providing some schools will have a better effect than adopting a strictly secular system would. I want to advocate a reform that would help both secular and religious schools facilitate personal autonomy for their pupils: prohibiting them from selecting students on any basis whatever.

How would this help with autonomy? If religiously based schools could not select on the basis of the family religion of the child such schools would have a more diverse student population. And since the main way that children can be expected to learn about the articulation of the ways of life recommended by other religions is by observing the lives of their peers, this will make for more of an opportunity for children in faith schools to become autonomous. But a second reason is that it will also make for more of an opportunity for children outside faith schools to become autonomous. Contrary to the much expressed fear that faith schools undermine the opportunities for autonomy of those children who attend them, I fear that they undermine the opportunity for autonomy of those who do not. Children from secular homes cannot become autonomous without an appreciation of what the religious life involves, and this is something that, I am only too aware, their parents cannot give them. They need children from religious backgrounds to be in their schools and their classes, which is more likely if those children are not

hived off into faith schools. If faith schools are not allowed to select on grounds of family faith, and some children from atheist families apply, more religious students will attend secular schools.

Does this measure violate the right of parents to send children to schools that reflect their religious commitments? Sure, if they had such a right. But they don't. I understand that Catholic parents may feel that RC schools are 'theirs' in the sense that I might feel that a socialist school was 'ours'. But in fact it is a public resource the purpose of which is to contribute to a just system of public education. Suppose an atheist parent chooses to send her child to an RC school so that the child will have a proper understanding of one of the world's central religions, and an enhanced opportunity to become autonomous. It is hard to see what reason the state could have to allow a child whose parents simply want her to be a good Catholic to be preferred over that child.

Conclusion

Many secular American visitors to the UK are struck by two features of the public culture. First is the open discussion and debate about religious matters. Some politicians are openly atheist, others appear to be genuine believers: few make ritualistic and insincere invocations of God and the bible. Openly atheistic and avowedly religious public figures discuss religious matters as if they were matters of real significance. The second is the fact that on any given public issue a diversity of religious and non-religious perspectives are found on all sides. The public reasonableness of religious believers is particularly striking. Religion in the US is treated by the public culture as a purely private matter, the boundaries between religious and mainstream culture are sharply drawn, to the detriment of the inhabitants of both, and religious cleavages are far more politically pertinent than in the UK. Introducing the American model of separationism would jeopardize the level of secularization British society has achieved. British liberals should proceed cautiously.

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Endnotes.

[1] 'Keep God out of Public Affairs', The Observer, Aug 12th, 2001

[2.] Sandra Feldman, `A commentary on public education and other critical issues: First Choice' THE NEW YORK TIMES, OCTOBER 3,1999 (advertisement).

[3.]Margaret Talbot, `A Mighty Fortress', New York Times Magazine Feb 27th 2000, p. 40. Caps in the original.

[4] I am ignoring, for the purpose of this discussion the problem that the British state has systematically discriminated against non-Christian religions, which gives it an urgent responsibility to treat Islam (and other non-Christian religions) fairly.

[5] Grayling is quoted as saying "Given the great harm that religions do ... in the way of conflict, war, persecution and oppression and preventing the growth of science and freedom of thought. I object profoundly to my taxes being used to this end." in Clare Dean, 'Backlash against Church Schools', Times Education Supplement, 23/02/2001