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Why Choice is Not Enough: Christian Schooling and Ethical Autonomy

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Background

At a time when there is a proliferation of groups providing schooling in the UK and the variety of providers is set to increase still further, it is important to consider the legitimate expectations a politically liberal society can have of the faith-based schooling its young citizens experience, whether in home-schooling contexts or in that provided within the public and private sectors contexts, the distinction between which is becoming increasingly blurred. Many schools in the UK are already run by religious organizations and around a third of the new academies have religious sponsors. Many more may follow suit and I shall argue here that a key test for any group running a school is how choice concerning religious matters is tolerated. This paper (which follows good advice rather than exercising complete autonomy) will show why individual choice is necessary but not sufficient in the schools of a liberal democracy.

Research Questions

What are the legitimate expectations a politically liberal society can have of the faith-based schooling its young citizens experience? How important is choice and how do commitments come to be held? Is choice enough?

Methods

Philosophers have written much about autonomy and individual choice. Arguably, the 'significance attached to autonomy' (Pring, 2005, p. 56) will have a determining influence upon the faith schools debate and yet 'autonomous action is not so much an aim as a presupposition of educational endeavour' (Hand, 2006, p. 541). While liberal support of faith schooling has traditionally been predicated upon 'the condition that faith schooling should serve as a context for individual choice' it has been argued that political liberalism can support faith schools that do not serve as a context for individual choice 'because the ability to choose is not necessarily a liberal value' (Dagowitz, 2004, p.166). It has also been claimed that although beliefs are not 'the sort of things one chooses' and that a person, 'is only truly autonomous when her decisions are not affected by wants or like or cares about, but are determined by pure practical reason alone' (Hand, 2006, p. 544, p. 541). The assumptions underpinning these claims will be evaluated in this paper.

Frame

The analytic frame is informed by a synthesis of philosophy of education and applied literary theory. Dagowitz claims to resolve the paradox of 'how someone who did not choose her religion and views herself as incapable of changing it can still qualify as autonomous' (Dagowitz, 2004, p.166) by arguing that 'the ability to form and revise one's conception of the good is not synonymous with the ability to choose or change one's religion' (Dagowitz, 2004, p. 167). Yet this fails to acknowledge that many believers have a comprehensively religious 'worldview' where their conception of the good cannot be separated from their faith. I shall argue that it is inconsistent to argue that, 'Schools do not need to serve as a context for choice to receive the support of political liberalism; they need only serve as a context for teaching liberal values' (Dagowitz, 2004, p. 178) because choice is a fundamental liberal value and the freedom to choose one's religion must be protected. This brings us to how beliefs and commitments come to be held. To argue that beliefs are not 'the sort of things one chooses' because, 'we are very much at the mercy of what the world is actually like' (Hand, 2006, p. 544) does not perhaps recognize the extent to which some people interpret 'what the world is actually like' as a result of presuppositions which are informed by readings of religious texts within a particular

community of interpretation. Nor does it sufficiently acknowledge that when someone 'knows what is best for him or her to do, but none the less does not act accordingly' this may be due to 'some imperfection in the education and disciplining of the passions' (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 156). For Augustine, 'the will is governed by what it loves: love determines will, and will in turn... governs interpretation' (Jacobs, 2001, p. 45).

Research findings

The choices of many believers are informed by an interpretation of sacred texts that they have chosen to believe are authoritative for living. A paradox of the Christian faith is that people do not only exercise 'autonomy via faith' (McLaughlin, 1984, p.79) but they also come to 'faith via autonomy'. Therefore, to teach students to choose faith in Christ on the basis of another person's 'testimony' (Hand, 2003, p. 98) is both inaccurate and inadequate. It is a justifiable (and rational) educational aim for young people to learn that they are free to make choices, to adopt beliefs and act ethically. For a Christian school to teach children that they have the option to live a Christian life in a secular society, to give them good reasons for doing so and to teach them to love their neighbours as themselves, is an entirely rational educational aim. If any parental organization, claiming adherence to any faith, wished to run a school we would need to know whether the freedom of students in matters of faith would be respected but we would also need to know how they would be encouraged to choose to be tolerant of others. Decisions about which schools should be supported in a liberal democracy need to take into account whether students' autonomy is respected but also the values they choose.

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