

Chapter 28

Religious Education in a Time of Globalization and Pluralism: The Example of the United States

Walter Feinberg

Introduction

Historically in The United States the control of primary and secondary schools has been under local governing bodies, and the federal government had very little to say about the way schools are run. This arrangement can be traced to the revolution against England and the belief that the Federal government must be constrained to protect individual liberty. While it is still the case that the role of the federal government is limited, it is a great deal less so than it was, say 40 years ago. While the hiring and firing of teachers, the selection of the curriculum and such are still largely under local control, the national government has more recently intruded in a number of ways to constrain or influence local decisions. The most direct involves the way in which racial issues are decided, but the most far reaching is the attempt by the federal government to set uniform standards across the different states and local governments. The argument for doing so has been largely economic and the perceived, although highly questionable, connection between educational achievement and individual mobility and between educational achievement and national economic competitiveness.

The Role of Religion in Education

The role of religion in public education in the United States can be traced back to motivation of the Pilgrims to protect against tyranny, and to follow their own conscience as dictated by religion. Ironically their settlement of Massachusetts was

W. Feinberg (✉)
Educational Organization, Policy and Leadership,
The University of Illinois, Champaign 61821, IL, USA
e-mail: wfeinber@illinois.edu

followed by a series of repressive measures directed against competing religious beliefs. When the Bill of Rights was added to the federal constitution in 1791 the First Amendment dealt with religions freedoms among others. The first two clauses read: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.' Over the years this has meant less and less religious influence in the public, or government run, schools. For example when I was a grade school student in a public school in Massachusetts we would begin each day with one of our classmates reciting a psalm—often the 23rd psalm followed by the Lord's prayer—King James edition and then a salute to the flag. While individual states differed in the extent to which religion was incorporated into public schools, there was no clear federal prohibition on religious exercise. For the most part these exercises were Christian orientated, even in non-Christian communities, and largely Protestant inflected.

However, occasionally in areas with a large Catholic student body accommodations might be made. When my wife began teaching in a public school in heavily Irish Catholic section of Boston in the 1960s there were pictures of the Virgin Mary hanging in different classrooms in her public school. While this was technically illegal it was tolerated in predominantly Catholic Boston. Today most of the traces of religion have vanished. There is still a two-week vacation at Christmas time, but it is now called Winter break not Christmas vacation, just as the vacation around Easter is not called the Easer vacation any longer, but rather the Spring break. Public school teachers are no longer allowed to promote prayer in school although students are not forbidden from initiating prayer on their own without school sponsorship, and there are important legal restrictions to displaying religiously charged symbols or texts. For example, a number of court cases have been fought over the displaying of the Ten Commandments in the public schools, and with few exceptions it has been found illegal to do so.

Even though the public schools are viewed as religiously neutral zones—a phrase that I will unpack shortly—there exists along side of the public school system a robust, and perfectly legal religious school system, that educates approximately 10 % of the country's children and where prayer is not only perfectly legal, but where it is encouraged. By far the Catholic system is largest of these. Catholic schools are controlled by the local Bishop or, in some cases, by a religious order such as the Jesuits, the Dominicans, etc. While the Catholic system has had to close some schools recently, largely as a result of inadequate funds, other religious schools especially fundamentalist Protestant as well as religious home schools are growing. There is also some growth in Jewish and Moslem private schools. Some of this growth is a reaction to the reduced status of religion in the public schools, some is in response to other factors, such as demographic shifts, some is a response to parental concerns for greater discipline than they believe is provided by public schools.

In addition to the growth in the number of religious schools there have been other responses to the reduced presence of religious devotion in the public schools. For example, there is a growing interest in the teaching of academic courses in religion, especially in the public high school. These include courses in Bible history, the influence of the Bible, Bible literature and World Religions. These are perfectly

legal as long as they do not promote a particular religion, including non-religion, or entail religious worship as part of the study. One additional response to the reduced influence of religion in the traditional public schools involves a recent educational innovation that the Supreme Court has endorsed and that some localities have initiated. This allows public funds to be given to parents, through vouchers, who then are free to choose to spend them on tuition in a public, non-sectarian private, or a religious school. Since the funds are given to the parents, and not directly to schools, the court reasoned, in a highly contentious decision, that this is not a violation of the constitution. Nevertheless the ultimate decision about whether to employ vouchers in this way is left up to the local communities and the individual states and many do not allow vouchers to be used for a religious education. Indeed a number of state constitutions have an explicit ban on the use of state and local taxes to support religious schools. These accommodations notwithstanding public education in the United States today is a largely secular institution where individual schools are government supported and controlled by local and state authorities—elected or appointed—and where official religious expression is constrained by law.

History

In the United States the Supreme Court, a body of nine judges, each appointed by the president for life, determines whether a contested law is consistent with the Constitution. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, when the Bill of Rights was added to the constitution, the First Amendment guaranteed religions freedoms. However these clauses were not applied to education until the middle of the twentieth century when there were a series of landmark Supreme Court cases that curtailed the expression of religion in the public schools, leading up to a decision in the early 1960s to eliminate school sponsored prayer and religious observances from public education (*Abington school district vs Schemp* 1963). The decision is controversial with some people still believing, against much evidence to the contrary, that it is inconsistent with the “intent” of the Founding Fathers who, they argue, wanted to establish a religiously based, Christian, meaning Protestant, country. This is inconsistent with the more established view that the founders were most concerned with avoiding tyranny, which was defined in part as forcing one person to pay taxes to support the religious beliefs of another. Over time this somewhat negative goal—to avoid tyranny—was supplemented by many educational reformers by the goal of promoting civic harmony among people with many different beliefs, values and backgrounds. Yet many factors, philosophical, and religious inhibit its achievement.

While many people hold the courts responsible for the change towards secularism, in truth the court action came very slowly and was a response to larger historical and demographic factors. *Pierce v. The Society of Sisters* (1925), the first court case involving religion and education, was not decided on the basis of the First Amendment regarding the freedom of religion, nor was it about limiting religion in

the public schools. Rather it was a case that declared religious schools legal and was decided on the grounds of due process holding that children are not the property of the state. Thus religious education, a practice that had long preceded the court case, was enshrined as a right that neither federal nor state governments could violate. In this case, however, the court did not take up the question whether the state had any obligation to materially support a parent's private educational choice. That came later in a number of different cases that unpacked just what support meant in the context of the First Amendment (*Santa Fe Independent School district v Doe* 2000). Hence the up-shot of the ruling was that parents had a right to send their children to private or religious schools, but individual states were not obliged, nor were they overtly forbidden, to provide the material means to support that right, although none in fact did. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, a number of state constitutions did forbid such support. However, the general assumption was that to provide such means would be an unconstitutional furthering of religion. This assumption was derived from the fear, mentioned above, of the founding fathers and, especially Jefferson, of tyranny. Hence by providing a free non-sectarian, presumably religiously 'neutral', public educational system, and by allowing a tuition based religious education it was felt that both religion clauses could be served. Parents would be free to bring up their children in the religion of their own choosing and the state would avoid the establishment of any one religion over another, or of one system of belief or of non-belief over another. However things are rarely that simple and the question of whether the public schools were truly neutral was long in question. Catholic educators in the 1800s and 1900s questioned what they saw as the Protestant orientation of the public schools, since among other markers many public schools began the day with a readings from the King James Bible, as did the one I attended.

The 1940s, and the war against Hitler was an important turning point. Many became aware of the privileges given to some ethnic, racial and religious groups and not to others. A Supreme Court case during the Second World War was the beginning of the change in the schools. The case involved the objection of Jehovah's Witnesses to the compulsory saluting of the American flag. A group of Jehovah's Witness parents claimed that saluting the American flag violated their religious beliefs, and the Supreme Court in an act of courage ruled in their favor, allowing that forced patriotism, even in time of war violated freedom of religion. 'If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation,' the court wrote, 'it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein (*West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* 1943).' The decision thus upheld the right of conscience over the coercive power of the state to shape character and commitment. It upheld the right of individual non-conformity within the school and the right of a child to follow the dictates of her religiously formed conscience. A few years after the flag case the court rejected the practice by a public school of inviting religious leaders, ministers, rabbis and priests to teach classes in moral education within the public schools, on the grounds that it promoted religion over non religion and marginalized students who reject religion or who did not accept a belief in God (*McCollum v. Board of Education* 1948).

These decisions were very complicated and very often resulted in a split decision by the nine-member Supreme Court, with the majority ruling the day. The fact that these were often close shows both a tension between the two religion clauses—sometimes free expression seems to come close to the state establishment of religion, as for example when a student is allowed to use the school microphone to deliver a prayer or when a uniformed high school football team decides to say a prayer before the game and in front of the crowd (*Santa Fe Independent School district v Doe 2000*). In both cases the courts found these practices unconstitutional because of the context in which they were practiced. On the other hand after school religious clubs were ruled permissible, as long as the school allows other clubs as well, and as long as all clubs are voluntary. Hence while students cannot pray in uniform before a crowd, Christian students can form clubs in school, and a club for Christian athletes that meet after school is not uncommon (*Westside School District vs Mergens 1990*). Thus students are free to express their religious beliefs, but public schools cannot serve to sponsor them. To many these decisions are confusing and seem to rest on the make-up of the court at any given time and on the religious preferences of the justices. However, the general trend, at least up to the case legalizing vouchers—has been to reduce the official presence of religion in public schools.

Now so far I have been presenting the official picture. However it is important to take into account that the United States is composed of 50 different states and that within each of these states there are scores of separate school districts. Much of what happens in local schools is controlled by a large degree by the policies of the local school districts, unlike many other systems of education in other countries. Hence there are many different practices with regard to religion, and many different arrangements—some of which occur under the radar of state and federal law, and some of which are just too complicated for clear-cut legal action. For example, the court has made a big distinction between religious worship or promotion, and the academic study of religion. The first is forbidden the second is allowable. Hence a growing number of schools have instituted classes in the Bible or in comparative religion. While the Bible classes are supposed to be neutral with regard to the merits of religion over non-religion or of one religious denomination over another, the line between explaining and promoting can be quite thin, and some well-meaning teachers unconsciously promote their own beliefs. One minor example is the study of the Hebrew Bible, which will be called not the Hebrew Bible or the Tanak, as most Jews would prefer, but the Old Testament, immediately, but unconsciously supporting a Christian perspective. A more subtle example are those teachers who promote the belief that Christianity is the flower and Judaism is the root, a view that is often expressed by well-meaning teachers, but that implicitly endorses the idea that Judaism is a more primitive religious form. Other examples are teachers who encourage debate, but constrain it in ways that support belief over non belief. For example, one of the teachers in our study would encourage debate about the causes of the Red Sea parting—miracle, earthquake, wind—reinforcing the view that the Exodus is an historically accurate account of the experience of the Israelites. Because these are not likely to be contested legally, as, for example, the teaching Creationism in a biology class would be, teachers have considerable room to maneuver, and much depends on the character of the local community and the self awareness of the teacher.

The Role of the Catholic Church

One might have expected that the American Catholic Church might have been strongly in favor of including religion in the public schools, but the issue is much more complicated. Historically the Catholic Church was largely opposed to the inclusion of religion in the public schools, and this opposition was one of the inspirations for the establishment of the alternative Catholic parochial school system. The leadership objected to what they saw as a veneer of neutrality covering up an essentially Protestant educational system. Whether true neutrality—however that might have been interpreted—would have been acceptable is unclear. However, what was certainly not acceptable was a system that began with the reading of the King James's version of the Bible, presented the Bible as unmediated, and that advanced what it saw as a doctrine of destructive individualism. Hence leaders of the Church felt that under the guise of neutrality students were being indoctrinated into a Protestant world-view. And, for a long time many Catholic leaders, still under the influence of Pius IX, rejected democracy, modernism, and certain forms of nationalism, three of the pillars of the public schools. In response many American Protestants feared that Catholic loyalty to Rome would trump loyalty to Washington. During the 1800s violent protests erupted in New York over the issue of compulsory public education and resulted in the parallel Catholic parochial system. Indeed, prior to the Civil War, many anti-slavery abolitionists argued that both Catholicism and slavery were parallel systems of subjugation, this even though the Vatican, if not most American Catholics, allowed that black and white were part of the same family of man. In the nineteenth and part of the twentieth century, parochial schools appealed to their respective immigrant communities by connecting them to a set of services and familiar practices. Yet these schools also reinforced religious isolation. Their Catechism told students that the Jews were Christ killers, Mohammed was a murderer and a thief, and Protestants who did not recant and convert to Catholicism were eternally damned.

Today there is much less tension between advocates of public education and supporters of Catholic schools, than there was in the past. There are three factors that can account for this. First and most obvious is Vatican II and the ecumenical dialogue that it opened up. In addition the decline in the number of priests and nuns required that more lay teachers were needed to teach in Catholic schools and they brought with them different interests and experiences, and were more like the teachers that taught in the public schools. Hence Catholic and public schools began to look more alike in many respects. In some cases Catholic schools, even though more expensive, became schools of choice for those non-Catholic parents who wanted a more traditional and disciplined experience for their children, who believe that religion is critical for character development or who simply live in an area where the public school had a poor reputation. Second and as a result of the Civil Rights movement, feminism, gay and lesbian liberation, etc. there has been a greater acceptance by the public at large of diversity, and for the most part this includes religious diversity. The exception here is Islam where the erection of an Islamic

school in a neighborhood can still cause controversy. Third, Catholics are now wealthier than they once were, and in the United States wealth often brings with it respectability. One can see this in the fact that the now irrelevant historical debate over why Catholics had lower IQ scores than Protestants and Jews: the preferred answer was because they condemn their best and brightest to celibacy. It may be now that the IQ scores are the same, but in fact no one really cares, and this form of scientific racism is now applied only to African Americans.

An additional factor that I think has made a difference is the developing sense that there is considerable variation among Catholics, and the anti-Catholic claim of an earlier time that all Catholics march to the drum beat of the Vatican, and that their loyalty to the United States was insecure, seems absurdly inconsistent with the reality of Catholics in the country today, and probably always was. True, the Diocese schools tend to be more traditional in doctrine, but schools that are run by religious orders vary considerably in terms of the interpretation of moral doctrine. Some teachers are sympathetic to libertarian theology and to liberal social issues. In any event Catholic schools today, educate more than two and a half million students U.S. school children. A significant percentage of these are minority 25 % with blacks and Hispanics the largest non-white group. Over 13 % of the students in these schools are not Catholic, and the Diocese in Chicago is the tenth largest school system, public or private, in the United States. It has not hurt the cause of Catholic education that some research has found that minority students who attend Catholic schools from inner city or impoverished homes perform better academically than do students from the same neighborhood public schools (Bryk et al. 1993). However, this research is contentious and is inconclusive. One advantage that Catholic as well as most private schools have, is the advantage that comes through self-selection.

This advantage has not been lost on many educational reformers who are now advocating the system of parental choice, for example the voucher that I mentioned earlier. Under this system, instead of students automatically being assigned to the neighborhood school, the state would provide students with an educational voucher and parents then would choose the school they think best for their child. This proposal is less controversial when the options are limited to the non-sectarian public schools. However, because of the religion clause of the First Amendment the proposal is still controversial when the options are extended to religious schools. Advocates of this idea argue that it is consistent with the First Amendment because the state is supporting individual choice and not targeting where this choice will be exercised. Those who oppose it reject this argument and also believe that it presents a threat to the non-sectarian character of public education. As I mentioned earlier, in a recent case before the Supreme Court a voucher plan in Cleveland was approved, which did allow the vouchers to be spent in religious, here mostly Catholic, schools. Whether to do so on a broad scale, however, remains a state or local decision, and at this point it is unclear what if any role state supported religious schools will have in the educational mix. And, as noted above, some individual state constitutions ban such support. While the Federal Supreme Court has priority over state Supreme Courts, it has not ruled on these on any of the state statutes banning support to religious schools. There is also some concern among religious groups that should they begin to accept state funding,

they would also likely need to bow to greater state accountability and control. For example, if the states began to financially support religious schools, these schools might have to conform to state non discrimination hiring practices rather than to give preference to practitioners of their own religion. There is also concern about social cohesion and whether support for religiously homogenous schools will erode the commitment to the public school ideals of diversity and equal opportunity.

Lessons for Pluralism

Obviously the United States is not, nor should it be the model for other liberal democracies, but one of the features of globalization is an increase in religious pluralism and for this reason the experience of the United States can be instructive. Let me begin here with an example. When I first set out to study religious education, I had two graduate students as assistants. One, Richard, was a devout Catholic; the other, Edward, was a fundamentalist Christian. They were both very fine graduate students, known to be hard working and exceptionally knowledgeable about religion. One day as we were going over some interviews they got into a rather deep discussion about their own beliefs. The discussion was friendly and I know that they respected one another, and so I interrupted them and I turned first to Richard and said, 'You seem to like Edward a lot; am I right?' He said yes. Then I said 'And you think he is a fine person, and would not intentionally harm anyone?' He said of course. And I followed with 'But you think he believes in the wrong religion?' 'Yes', he said. 'And therefore you believe that he will burn in the fires of hell?' 'Absolutely!' And then I turned to Edward and asked the same series of questions and he too agreed. He indicated that he liked Richard, they worked well together, Richard was a fine person and would not intentionally harm any one, and he would help out wherever he could. But, Edward opined that sadly Richard believed in the wrong religion and yes, tragically, Richard would burn in the fires of hell.

This experience suggested to me, as I wrote in my book, *For Goodness Sake*, that religious education is likely to entail some chauvinism and that chauvinism is the price liberalism must pay to pluralism. The new Catholic Catechism has largely exorcised the most offensive passages about Moslems, Jews and Protestants, but it took many decades to do so, and of courses it still privileges Church doctrine and moral teaching. Nevertheless, some of the courses in comparative religious taught in some Catholic schools could be models even for non-sectarian public schools. Here other religious are treated with both respect and accuracy. Moslems may teach their children that Christianity is a polytheistic religion or that Jesus was just a prophet, not a Deity and that Mohammed had a more prophetic complete message. And Jews will of course continue to teach that they are God's chosen people, whatever that might mean. As I report in the book, some Lutherans teach their children that Catholics believe that you can bribe your way into heaven and some Catholics may teach that Lutherans believe you can get a free ticket into heaven without doing anything to deserve it.

As I said religious chauvinism is the price liberalism must pay for pluralism. Given this price liberal democracies may develop different ways to accommodate religious schools. Some, like the United States and France may choose to allow but not support separate religious schools. Others like the Netherlands may choose to support all religious schools that meet certain academic standards. Still others may have other arrangements. All countries in the West, and many throughout the world, are responding to the same forces—increasing diversity, including religious diversity, and thickening cultural contacts. Countries where one religion has been a major factor in maintaining social cohesion (e.g. Ireland), may face a special challenge—how to accommodate people from different traditions and beliefs while maintaining reasonable levels of social cohesion and mutual commitment. Is it acceptable to continue to privilege one religion, or must all forms of religious education operate under the same ground rules with the same level of support or non-support? Of course this is not a question that an outsider can be reasonably expected to answer. However a few general considerations might be worth mentioning. Liberal democracies must allow religious schools as a condition of freedom of conscience. However, as a matter of principle, they may support such schools, but are not morally obliged to do so. This will depend in part on the history of the country and on its vision for the future.

Nevertheless, there are two conditions for supporting religious schools in a liberal democratic society, should it choose to do so. The first is that the schools must not subvert the subjective conditions necessary for reproducing liberal democratic citizens. The second is that they therefore must provide the educational requirements for children to grow into reflective, autonomous citizens with the capacity to evaluate forms of life they have been socialized to accept uncritically. Hence at age appropriate times children should be encouraged to gain intellectual and emotional distance over the form of life with which they are most familiar, and to understand that there are many reasonable other forms of life. One approach would be to require a course in world religions at the high schools level where each religion is treated on its own terms and not as a foil for some other tradition. Religious schools that block other reasonable viewpoints from being considered are schools where the religious mission supersedes the democratic one. There are those who would object to their existence on the grounds that they are indoctrinating students and failing to develop their autonomy. Yet the ideal of pluralism should force us to reexamine this position and to be very cautious in prohibiting parents from educating children into their own religious beliefs, even if they do so in an exclusive way. Yet while pluralism might hesitate to disallow such schools, people who do not share this religion, or who do not share it as the one and only truth, may have trouble supporting them.

In conclusion: liberal pluralistic democracies are not automatically self-perpetuating. They require certain dispositions. Political liberalism is the political form of autonomy. It requires a society that both respects individual choice and that provides people with the skills to choose a different path. Children are not expected to reconstruct the preferences of their parents, although they may *choose* to do so. Pluralism requires a respect for different modes of association, whether occupational, political or religious. And both require citizens who are equipped not only to follow the rules, but to evaluate them and, where necessary, to change them.

An interest in liberal pluralism entails an interest in development of reflective, critical citizens. This does not just happen. It is a result of both the quality of an informal environment and as a result of deliberate, planned instruction. Religious education can play a role in this reconstruction, but for some educational traditions this will require a transformation in the way in which religious claims, both one's own and those of others, are addressed.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, there is a tendency for every county that sees itself as a liberal democracy to take for granted its own form of education and to view it as the quintessential democratic education. Yet over time each educational system must respond to changes that it cannot control, and a historical perspective can provide many of the tools needed to respond to new conditions. By its very nature democracy is an open system that can accommodate many beliefs, even those where democracy is not the highest priority. There are constraints, however, that all forms of democratic education need to respect. One constraint is intolerance for intolerance, or for education forms that promotes anti democratic ideas or intolerance towards others. Intolerance of intolerance is not the same as acceptance. A Lutheran can reject Catholicism, a Catholic can reject Lutheranism, and an atheist can place a pox on both their houses, believing iconoclastically that they are all going to roast in the fires of hell if it exists, while basking in the glory of a religion free heaven. But while each can teach the "errors" of the ways of the other, the democratic state must provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to reflect on their own belief formation, and to alter them where experience and knowledge demands. I believe, although this is certainly open to question, that at some point the personal relations that an integrated religious education provides, can further this process. Hence Edward can still believe that Richard will burn in the fires of hell, and Richard can still believe the same of Edward, but all the while both still recognizing that in this life they each have a right to hold onto their beliefs as they will.

What is important for the level of social cohesion that democracy requires is not the specific religious beliefs that Richard and Edward hold, although these can become important when they feed public policy debate. Rather, what is important is for Richard to understand that even though he, Richard, knows that Edward will truly rot in hell, that he also understands that Edward has the right to live the life he has chosen and to hold the beliefs that he holds. And, what is important for Edward to understand is that even though that he, Edward, knows that Richard will truly rot in hell, that he also understands that Richard has the right to live the life he has chosen and to hold the beliefs that he holds. And equally important in fabricating cohesion in a religiously pluralistic, democratic society what each knows of and accepts of right of the right of the other to live the life he has chosen and to believe the beliefs that he believes, that each also understands that the other knows and accepts these rights for themselves. Richard knows it of Edward and Edward knows it of Richard. This reflexivity, my knowledge of your knowledge and your knowledge of mine, is the glue that will serve to cohere religiously pluralistic democracies. To the extent that religious schools gain ground and students are more often schooled with those who are religiously like themselves, then social cohesion

among different religious groups may become a larger concern than it is at the present. At this moment though the vast majority of students will be found in government financed and controlled schools and race and social class rather than religion have greater potential to strain the social fabric in the United States (Feinberg and Layton 2014).

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