

Education for Autonomy: the Role of Religious Elementary Schools

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I argue that religious elementary schools whose pedagogical methods satisfy the principle of rational authority have distinctive advantages over secular elementary schools for the purpose of laying the foundations for ethical autonomy in the children of religious parents. Insights from developmental psychology bolster the argument from conceptual analysis. Before children have the cognitive capacities to engage in authentically autonomous reflection, their long-run interest in developing autonomy is best served by developing their understanding of and provisional identity within their primary culture and by encouraging a limited form of ethical reasoning within the framework provided by that secure cultural identity.

Are children who attend religious schools less likely to develop ethical autonomy, understood as the capacity and inclination for ongoing, critical-rational reflection about one's conception of the good, one's ethical beliefs and values? This question might seem to invite an empirical inquiry, but the formidable conceptual and practical difficulties involved in measuring individual autonomy suggest that a careful philosophical examination may be more fruitful (Reich, 2002, p. 161). Many theorists have taken up this question, but no consensus has emerged.

According to one influential strand of liberal theory, common, secular schools are clearly preferable to religious alternatives for the purpose of cultivating children's autonomy (Ackerman, 1980, chapter 5; Gardner, 1988; Levinson, 1999). The emphasis in such arguments is on the need for an educational environment that is detached from the ethics of children's religious parents and communities in order to give those children the critical distance necessary for autonomous reflection about their primary ethical culture of upbringing. Other self-styled liberals (Crittenden, 1988; Reich, 2002) insist that religious schools can effectively cultivate ethical autonomy so long as these schools both expose children to and encourage critical engagement with ethical diversity; some of these writers (Burt, 1996; McLaughlin, 1984, 1985) have emphasised the ways in which the religious ethos of a school might make a positive contribution to education

for autonomy. Still others (Galston, 1989, 2002; Gilles, 1996) doubt that autonomy would need to be pursued through schools at all, since children can be expected to develop it through their encounters with diversity outside of and after school. But few writers take seriously the possibility that education for autonomy might mean very different things for religious *elementary* schools than for their secondary counterparts, and those that do see this possibility (Callan, 1997; Coons and Sugarman, 1999; de Jong and Snik, 2002) have not explored it in sufficient detail. In an effort to plug this gap, I offer four arguments designed to show the potential for certain types of religious elementary school to play a valuable role in educating children from religious families for eventual autonomy.

Interestingly, the roots of these arguments are to be found in the works of Bruce Ackerman and Meira Levinson, two of the most radical opponents of religious schools on grounds of autonomy. Both writers recognise that, in order to develop autonomy, children require more than just being exposed to ethical diversity and learning the critical-thinking skills needed to evaluate rationally these different positions. Autonomous ethical choice is impossible, indeed an incoherent ideal, unless one possesses a relatively secure *provisional* ethical identity to situate one's decision problem—a problem whose solution, if we accept some version of the pluralist thesis, is always under-determined by pure reason. So, Levinson concedes, 'membership in a community and embeddedness within a cultural and normative framework is a primary need of individuals—and an essential prerequisite for autonomy. One cannot act autonomously if one has no firm structure of beliefs on which to act' (Levinson, 1999, p. 56). Similarly, Ackerman observes that 'while an infant may learn English or Urdu or both, there are limits to the cultural diversity he can confront without losing a sense of the meanings that the noises and motions might ultimately signify' (Ackerman, 1980, p. 141).

What are the implications for schools of recognising children's need for cultural coherence as a prerequisite for the development of autonomy? According to Levinson, 'while children's development of autonomy may be the school's ultimate educational aim, it should help foster different skills and capacities at different times' (Levinson, 1999, p. 144). Liberal schools must educate 'in an age-sensitive and age-appropriate manner. Very young children, it is true, may well experience confusion and distress if confronted with a plethora of choices too early, or with teachers who tell them that their way of life embodies only one possibility among many' (p. 95). But, Levinson insists, the necessary age-sensitive and age-appropriate education can perfectly well be supplied in detached, secular schools—there is no need to provide a religiously homogeneous and supportive environment even for very young children. Similarly, Ackerman urges that, for the sake of children's cultural coherence, 'the early stages of a liberal curriculum will content themselves with the elaboration of life options relatively close to those with which the child is already familiar' (Ackerman, 1980, p. 157), but he never takes seriously the idea that, especially for the children of devoutly religious parents, this might require a religious elementary school.

My thesis in this article is that the significance of cultural coherence as a prerequisite for autonomy provides one of several reasons to believe that religious elementary schools may be an important part of the best sequence of educational institutions to cultivate ethical autonomy in the children of religious parents. Arguments for age-sensitive education for pre-adolescents can and should be extended into a powerful case for providing religious elementary schools to consolidate each child's grasp of her primary culture and begin the process of ethical reasoning within it, long before she is cognitively equipped to engage in fully-fledged autonomous reflection. (My claims about religious schools and families should, in principle, generalise to nonreligious comprehensive ethical doctrines. As for those children whose parents' ethical worldview scarcely extends beyond an unreflective acceptance of the materialism and consumerism that pervade capitalist societies, they too would benefit from being taught how to live according to some consistent set of explicit ethical principles, but my arguments provide little or no support for the idea that such children's future autonomy would be best served by their being schooled in comprehensive materialism.) In what follows, I develop my case in four separate arguments, before considering what conditions are nonetheless necessary to ensure that a religious elementary education does not threaten the child's development of autonomy.

PRIMARY CULTURE AND IDENTITY

The first argument in favour of religious elementary schools as instruments of education for autonomy appeals to the importance of consolidating a young child's primary culture by designing the school experience to harmonise with and reinforce the ethical messages she receives at home. If cultural coherence is an important step on the road to personal autonomy, as Ackerman and Levinson admit, then there is value in positively promoting such coherence.¹ In this spirit, John Coons and Stephen Sugarman recommend 'binding the younger child's home values to his formal education as a means of promoting emotional security and appreciation for the role of personal values' (Coons and Sugarman, 1999, pp. 82–83). Children need (but obviously cannot choose) a provisional ethical identity as a point of departure for the journey to autonomy: this identity should be secure and stable, although not of course so firmly rooted as to be immune from future reflection and revision. As Shelley Burt argues, 'the effort to provide a consistent moral and religious environment for a child represents an important way of building the psychological and cognitive resources the child will need to choose and lead a good life as an adult' (Burt, 1996, p. 425).

Of course, many children's homes sadly do not provide any kind of stable and well-ordered ethical environment: these children desperately need such an environment at elementary school, but a secular ethic would serve them just as well as a religious one. By contrast, for children who grow up in a strongly religious family, the threat to the coherence of their

ethical upbringing lies precisely in the possibility that a secular elementary school will actively or passively undermine the principles espoused and practised at home. As Terence McLaughlin notes, ‘religious elements are not essential to the coherence of primary cultures for children in general, but they may nevertheless be crucial to those whose parents are themselves religious’ (McLaughlin, 1985, p. 122)—the issue is one of consonance between home and school. For the young child of devoutly religious parents, a school with a secular curriculum, diverse membership, and not a whisper of religious reasons in its pedagogical methods of motivation and justification can be a profoundly disorientating place. As Stephen Gilles has argued, to send a six-year-old child each day from a religious home to a detached school ‘places the strongest educational influences in the child’s life at cross purposes and sows confusion and discord rather than coherence and stability’ (Gilles, 1996, p. 969). Notice that this problem is not solved merely by designing the school’s curriculum in an age-sensitive but still secular way, as Levinson would propose: it is precisely the total absence of familiar and reassuring religious language and cues, often combined with the presence of a large majority of children from families of very different ethical doctrines, that threatens to disturb the young child’s fragile sense of self.

The importance for eventual autonomy of children’s establishing a secure and stable provisional ethical identity lies significantly in their learning the nature and value of personal commitments and how to make these commitments. Before children can start to reflect autonomously on their conception of the good, they must, in the words of Kevin McDonough, ‘learn what it is like to have a conception of the good in the first place’ (McDonough, 1998, p. 477). It is instructive to think of this issue in the developmental psychology framework established by James Marcia, following the work of Erik Erikson (1968). Marcia defines four identity statuses ‘in terms of the presence or absence of a decision-making period (crisis) and the extent of personal investment (commitment) in two areas: occupation and ideology’ (Marcia, 1980, p. 161).² Failure to attain ethical autonomy, in my terms, can come about in two ways. The familiar liberal worry is that children will fall into Marcia’s category of ‘Foreclosures’—persons whose commitments ‘have been parentally chosen rather than self-chosen’ (ibid.). But scoring equally ‘low on various measures of self-directedness’ are so-called ‘Identity Diffusions,’ persons who lack ‘ideological direction, regardless of whether or not they may have experienced a decision-making period’ (p. 164). Patricia Miller explains that the identity-diffused person ‘is easily influenced by others and changes her beliefs often’ precisely because she has not developed the ability to make personal commitments (Miller, 1989, p. 167). Whereas Foreclosures typically report strong parental pressure to conform to family values, Identity Diffusions frequently describe themselves as feeling ‘detached’ from their parents (Marcia, 1980, p. 171). Our efforts to avoid Foreclosure must not disrupt the coherence of the child’s primary culture to the extent that she develops into an Identity Diffusion, lacking an understanding of the nature and value of personal commitments.

Any attractive conception of personal autonomy must incorporate the capacity to undertake ethical commitments that are lasting, serious and partly constitutive of one's identity, although truly autonomous persons cannot regard any of their beliefs or values as being entirely beyond review. This capacity for structuring one's life according to serious ethical commitments is not something whose development we can take for granted in children's development. Whether or not one agrees with Bill Galston that 'the greatest threat to children in modern liberal societies is not that they will believe in something too deeply, but that they will believe in nothing very deeply at all' (Galston, 1989, p. 101), it is hard to deny that both are real dangers. A secure grounding in a coherent primary culture teaches children the nature and value of personal commitment and wards off the kind of listlessness that can inhibit autonomy just as much as lack of critical reflection.

REASONING WITHIN AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

A second reason to believe that religious elementary schools may form part of the best educational programme to cultivate autonomy in the children of religious parents rests on the idea that ethical reasoning naturally begins and is best learned within a framework of provisional commitments (Crittenden, 1988, pp. 136–137). The best theoretical defence of this claim lies in the work of Elmer Thiessen (1987), who builds upon but significantly departs from the analysis offered by Paul Hirst in his *Moral Education in a Secular Society* (1974). Hirst differentiated and analysed several concepts of education, including education as 'transmission of beliefs' and education as 'development of critical rationality'. Thiessen's argument is that these two concepts should be reinterpreted as two *phases* of liberal education and that the transition from the first phase to the second is gradual (Thiessen, 1987, p. 229). Initially, ethical reasoning takes the limited form of considering how to apply or interpret fairly concrete principles within a particular ethical system that is transmitted to children but not itself justified to them in rational terms. Only considerably later are children typically ready for and able to profit from critical reflection on the framework of principles and commitments within which their ethical reasoning capacities were first developed.

The idea that ethical reasoning is best taught at first within a fairly well-defined ethical system is justified by appeal to the young child's limited cognitive capacities and social or emotional maturity. Confronted by the staggering ethical diversity of modern pluralist society, young children are liable to be overwhelmed and to give up altogether on the idea of reasoning about ethical issues. But a religious elementary school can be the ideal venue in which to encourage an early, limited form of ethical reasoning in the young child of religious parents. The religiously grounded curriculum and pedagogy as well as the high degree of homogeneity in the ethical commitments different children bring from home provide a natural

framework within which students can begin to practise ethical deliberation. As Coons and Sugarman put it:

While conflict under some conditions can stimulate growth, the quality of the moral dialogue, particularly in the early years, may rest on a relative compatibility of view among the children. Interchange employing a common and familiar set of values may be the most complex kind of moral engagement possible for young children (Coons and Sugarman, 1999, p. 84).

Of course, although ethical reasoning may begin within an unquestioned framework of principles and commitments, it cannot end there if it is to merit the title of 'autonomous' reasoning. So we should beware of those, like Gilles, who see the value of learning to reason within a religious tradition but do not insist that children should ever be encouraged to reflect on the merits of that tradition versus possible alternatives: 'Many people think a child gradually achieves true autonomy by making choices and acting well within a belief system that the child's parents adhere to and instruct the child to accept as true' (Gilles, 1996, p. 949). Cultivating autonomy in children entails not simply teaching the skill of critical reasoning, which can be done wholly within an unexamined doctrine, but also initiating children into the practice of using that skill to assess one's ethical conduct and values, including (eventually) one's deepest commitments. McLaughlin appropriately recognises the danger that 'autonomy might be seen as limited in scope (its exercise being confined to details within a religious faith rather than its fundamental basis)' (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 80). Education for autonomy requires that religious elementary schools be complemented by secondary schools that encourage all children to move beyond reasoning within an ethical framework to reflect critically on the merits of the framework itself.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND AUTONOMOUS REFLECTION

Both the arguments so far conclude that religious schools are suitable for an early stage of education for autonomy, but one might wonder whether that stage lasts until the end of formal elementary education. Is it not possible that consolidation of the primary culture and reasoning within an ethical framework are indeed both important characteristics of the early stage of education for autonomy but that this stage ends much earlier than I imply, perhaps even before formal elementary schooling begins? Actually, there is a good reason in cognitive developmental theory to draw the line at the end of elementary education: only by the age of eleven or twelve have most children developed the cognitive capacities necessary to engage in a recognisable form of autonomous reasoning. Before this age, it would therefore be futile to try to move children beyond the limited practice of reason-giving within an ethical framework that, for children of religious parents, is best taught within a religious school.

The father of modern cognitive developmental psychology, Jean Piaget, argued (1962/1999) that the development of intelligence passes through four distinct stages, beginning before the child's acquisition of language with the 'sensori-motor stage' and culminating at the age of eleven or twelve years with the stage of 'formal operations.' Much criticism of Piaget's theory has focused on the apparent rigidity of the stage model, implying as it does a series of abrupt changes from one type of intelligent thought and behaviour to another. But the value of Piaget's insight for our purposes does not depend on there being a sudden change in all children's intellectual capacities over the summer vacation between the last year at elementary school and the first at secondary school: the institutional design of children's formal education will inevitably involve drawing lines and imposing stages in a way that fails fully to capture the nuances of individual children's continuous development. Given the inevitability of drawing such lines, Piaget's theory offers a strong reason to believe that schools designed directly to foster distinctively autonomous reflection will serve little purpose for elementary school children.

At around the age of eleven or twelve, Piaget argues that children become capable of 'formal deduction, i.e., reasoning from premises that are merely assumed and not supplied by immediate belief', an operation that requires 'a sort of detachment from one's own point of view or from the point of view of the moment' (Piaget, 1928/1976, p. 71). Once children reach this stage of formal operations, Miller elaborates, 'thought has become truly logical, abstract, and hypothetical' (Miller, 1989, p. 60). Of course, this claim sounds absurd if it is understood to entail mastery: very few twelve-year-olds exhibit consistently logical thought or operate comfortably at high levels of rational abstraction. Piaget's claim is rather more modest: formal thought, imperfect but recognisable as such, is possible for most children of twelve in a way that cannot be said of most ten-year-olds. Therefore, when children are about twelve, it makes sense for a system of formal education to begin assigning tasks and encouraging behaviour that rely on formal operations. Although he may not use the capability reliably, at around the time he enters secondary school 'the child becomes capable of reasoning not only on the basis of objects, but also on the basis of hypotheses, or of propositions' (Piaget, 1962/1999, p. 41).

Formal thought is necessary for autonomous ethical reflection, which precisely requires an agent to detach herself from some of her existing beliefs and values to seriously consider the merits of an alternative perspective.³ To see and evaluate the appeal of an ethical system not one's own, one must be able to see what would be entailed by holding a belief or value that one does not actually hold: this involves 'reasoning in a hypothetico-deductive manner' (Piaget, 1950, p. 148), which is the essence of formal operational thought. Indeed, Piaget sometimes refers to formal operations as 'reflective thought' because of the way in which this activity of the mind liberates the person from his concrete circumstances: 'with formal operations there is even more than reality involved, since the world of the possible becomes available for

construction and since thought becomes free from the real world' (p. 151). Indeed, in a passage that is particularly revealing for our purposes, Piaget departs from his more typical discussions of elementary scientific method and propositional logic and offers an example of distinctively formal thought that bears a striking resemblance to autonomous *ethical* reflection: 'The individual adopts a certain rule as a hypothesis, to see whether by applying it he reaches a state of moral satisfaction, and especially whether he can remain true to himself and avoid contradiction' (Piaget, 1928/1976, p. 194).

Cognitive developmental psychology supports both the general notion that education for autonomy should proceed in stages, because younger children lack the resources to practise autonomous reflection, and the specific claim that the first stage, during which the child consolidates his ethical identity as a member of his primary culture and begins to reason within that culture, should extend until the age of eleven or twelve, when the child completes his elementary education. As R. F. Dearden puts it, 'Cartesian doubt, the taking out of one's beliefs and examining of them to establish which are good and which to be rejected, is not normally a feature of the primary school child,' so it would be futile to design elementary education to enable and encourage the child to make a 'choice of ideal: the kind of person that he thinks he ought to be' (Dearden, 1968, p. 181). Given young children's cognitive limitations and developmental needs, religious elementary schools have an important role to play in laying the foundations for future autonomy in children from religious homes.

MAINTAINING THE OPTION OF AUTONOMOUS RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Religious elementary schools may have another important advantage over secular schools in terms of children's ultimate development as autonomous individuals. The systematic religious instruction and supportive atmosphere of faith in a religious elementary school are the best means to ensure that the children of religious parents will have an adequate understanding of their family's religion, so that it can be the object of an informed choice in their future as autonomous agents. As Burtt argues, 'given the difficulty of nurturing and protecting genuine religious faith . . . schools that claim a commitment to furthering liberal principles regarding the importance of autonomous choice should show particular sensitivity when formulating policies that might have the effect of denying certain choices to their charges' (Burtt, 1994, p. 66). An important premise, strangely neglected by Burtt, to this argument for religious schools on grounds of autonomy is the idea that not all options are equally valuable for an autonomous person: in particular, I suggest, it is of special importance that children be able to make an informed choice about their parents' ethical doctrine once those children have developed their autonomy. Contrary to the assumptions that underlie many discussions of autonomy, it is often a natural expression of one's

autonomy to endorse, reflectively and rationally, many elements of the ethical system in which one was raised, and we should do everything we can to ensure that a robust education for autonomy does not preclude its beneficiary from exercising that autonomy to endorse the religious faith of her family.

It can be argued that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, truly to understand and evaluate the option of living according to a particular religious doctrine without experiencing such a life. If, with McLaughlin, we emphasise 'the significance of *practice* to religious meaning and understanding' (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 82), we must recognise that children will be more likely to develop an informed view of their parents' religious doctrine if they are immersed in that doctrine as participants during their early years. Of course, religious parents can do a great deal outside school to introduce children to the faith. But if these children attend a secular elementary school, the religious nature of their upbringing is necessarily compromised, or at least substantially diluted: teachers will invoke exclusively secular reasons and explanations, there will be no collective acts of worship or supportive references to the familial religion, the children may find that the majority of their peers do not share or even understand their religious beliefs.

In addition, at least some of the teachers at religious schools are likely to be qualified to deliver religious instruction in a way that most parents, however well meaning, are not. So, Harry Brighouse misses a crucial element when he observes, rightly as far as he goes, that 'a child cannot be autonomous either in her acceptance or rejection of a religious view unless she experiences somewhat enthusiastic advocacy' (Brighouse, 1998, p. 733). Enthusiasm is important, but *competence* in an instructor is even more vital if we are preparing children to make rational, autonomous decisions about their lives. So, when McLaughlin argues that a religious upbringing can be justified in the name of autonomy by the 'aim of ensuring a significant engagement with the beliefs, so that their subsequent assessment—and perhaps rejection—will be based on appropriate understanding and acquaintance' (McLaughlin, 1985, p. 121), we should add that the ideas of 'significant engagement' and 'appropriate understanding' cannot be mere quantitative measures of the child's exposure to religious ideas but must rather be judgements about the *quality* of the instruction and the child's resulting understanding.

It might be objected that, for the young children of devoutly religious parents, elementary school is the one sphere in which they can understand 'from the inside' what it means *not* to lead a religious life: where is the autonomy gain if the child's informed understanding of a religious tradition is purchased at the price of an adequate grasp of all other options? This concern does not discredit the autonomy argument for religious elementary schools, and for two reasons. First, elementary schools can legitimately focus on consolidating the child's grasp of her primary culture if they will, as I believe they should, be followed in the sequence of formal education by schools that will expose adolescents fairly-mindedly to a range of alternative ethical options. Second, the option of

religious faith is particularly fragile in most modern, pluralistic, liberal democratic societies, whose mainstream culture is overwhelmingly secular. In this spirit, McLaughlin suggests that we expand children's range of options by giving them 'a substantial exposure to a domain of experience, a tradition of thought and response, a view of and a way of life which tends to be rather stifled in the general conditions of the wider society and which is not therefore as available as it might be for the autonomous consideration of young people' (1985, p. 126). Does this mean that we should require all children to attend a religious school, regardless of the ethical convictions of their parents, on the grounds that we would thereby increase the number of valuable options among which these children might ultimately exercise their ethical autonomy? We would only be led to this conclusion, I suggest, if we thought that the option of a religious life was a particularly important option for *all* children to have, but I do not make that claim. My more limited proposition is that the option of making an autonomous choice to live according to religion X is an option of special value to the children of parents who subscribe to religion X.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PEDAGOGY: LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR AUTONOMY

Of course, not all forms of religious elementary education would enhance the future autonomy of recipients. An authoritarian religious school—one which merely emphasised obedience to priests, teachers and religious precepts without offering substantive reasons to explain these demands—would not provide children with an informed basis on which to endorse or reject the faith, assuming that there are such reasons available within the doctrine and that the school simply declined to furnish them to students. Such a school would also fail to develop in children the primitive ethical reasoning skills that subsequent formal education seeks to enlarge into the practice of autonomous reflection. So we cannot endorse religious elementary schools as suitable for providing the first stage of education for autonomy without imposing certain conditions. But we must also be realistic about the expectations we have of elementary schools, given the fact that pre-adolescent children are not yet developmentally capable of reasoning in a truly autonomous fashion. Good elementary schools must lay the foundations upon which secondary schools can build. What does this mean in practice? I conclude this article by sketching the hallmarks of a religious elementary school that would adequately lay the foundations for children's future autonomy.

Religious elementary schools should *not* be required, for the sake of cultivating autonomy,⁴ to expose children to multiple ethical doctrines or, therefore, to encourage critical engagement with doctrines other than that around which the school is constructed. These conditions are appropriate for secondary schools as the sites where actual autonomous reflection can realistically begin, but they are useless and possibly harmful for

pre-adolescent children, as discussed earlier. Even Johan de Jong and Ger Snik, who see the distinctive role that religious elementary schools can play in laying the foundations for autonomy, err in this way by applying standards appropriate for secondary education to elementary schools: 'There should be no indoctrination and no segregation. Moreover, in denominational schools alternative views should be brought to the fore, children should not be shielded from diversity, and debate must be tolerated and even encouraged' (de Jong and Snik, 2002, p. 584). As we shall see, the prohibition on indoctrination and the call for debate are warranted, but the requirements for exposure to diverse ethical traditions are misplaced. Roughly speaking, religious elementary schools should be subject to certain requirements on acceptable *pedagogy*, but the autonomy goal does not justify the kind of *curricular* requirements to which secondary schools should be held.

What are the hallmarks of acceptable pedagogy in a religious elementary school? As Dearden argues in *The Philosophy of Primary Education*, we should be deeply suspicious of schools that consistently eschew the practice of giving reasons to their students, whether for ideas taught in class or for exercises of discipline, and deny those same students the opportunity to give and request reasons within the reasonable ethical framework of the school. 'From the premise that moral education is at first largely a matter of having to do what is insisted upon by others, it by no means follows that it must therefore be authoritarian in character' (Dearden, 1968, p. 178). The practice of reason-giving by teachers stimulates the reasoning capacities of even very young children by 'drawing attention to the basis on which people can determine for themselves what to think and do' (Dearden, 1972, p. 464). Through their commitment to reason-giving, permissible religious elementary schools will exemplify the principles of 'rational authority' rather than 'authoritarianism' (Dearden, 1968, p. 170).

But what does this distinction mean in pedagogical practice? First, it means that teachers should typically invoke religious authority in a mediated way, reasoning inferentially and interpretively from accepted values and principles, rather than by immediate appeal to the claims or commands of a text or divine entity. 'Why? Because God (or the Bible) says so!' is a prime example of such an unmediated appeal to religious authority: the problem with this kind of authoritarian justification, according to Dearden, is that it treats as virtues only 'unquestioning obedience, conscientious compliance and deference' rather than encouraging the child's instincts and capacities for a primitive form of ethical reasoning (1968, p. 170). Elementary school pedagogy that effectively lays the foundations for children's future autonomy must divert attention from the authoritative status of particular principles, persons and texts towards the rational process of interpreting and applying the words and ideas of these authorities. At a minimum, this helps children to understand the notion of ethical consistency and how it is derived from the application of unvarying principles: rational authority means the rule of ethical law, not rule by ethical decrees issued by teachers or priests. It should also help

to encourage the kind of questioning that is an essential part of the autonomous person's approach to ethical issues: as John Passmore argues, 'a child will be encouraged to be critical only if he finds that both he and his teacher can be at any time called upon to defend what they say—to produce, in relation to it, the relevant kind of ground' (Passmore, 1972, p. 420).⁵

Of course, according to my argument, the 'relevant kind of ground' in a religious elementary school can be a principle or value within the religious doctrine and need not itself be justified in a way that would be acceptable to someone outside the faith. Drawing the distinction between reasons within a narrowly defined religious doctrine, on the one hand, and direct appeals to authority, on the other, will sometimes be controversial and difficult, but the distinction is meaningful: there is a real difference between offering children reasons that explicitly draw upon interpretations of Biblical passages and meeting children's demands for justification with a flat 'because the Bible says so'. In any case, permissible religious elementary schools will employ pedagogical techniques and assign classroom activities that clearly show a commitment to the first conception of justification, namely the practice of reasoning interpretively to particular applications from general values and beliefs. Passmore puts it thus:

The crucial principle seems to be: wherever possible and as soon as possible, substitute problems for exercises. By a problem I mean a situation where the student cannot at once decide what rule to apply or how it applies, by an exercise a situation in which this is at once obvious (1972, p. 428).

Even before children are ready to subject received ethical principles to criticism, working through such problems can help children develop the skills of, and inclination for, primitive ethical reasoning that involves 'the application of [rules] to circumstances which cannot be wholly predicted in advance' (Passmore, 1972, p. 428).⁶

In order for the régime to be one of rational authority rather than authoritarianism, it is also necessary for a religious elementary school to admit the existence of hard cases, conflicts and tensions within its religious doctrine. Children should be exposed to, and ideally engaged in, reasoning about the various possible resolutions of these difficulties: their attention must be drawn to those issues where reasonable disagreement exists within the faith. Children benefit from having a stable and coherent ethical upbringing, but their prospects for developing autonomy are not well served if they are taught that reason always selects a unique right answer to tough ethical questions. If, for practical purposes, teachers require children to *act* in accordance with a particular interpretation of religious doctrine, the reasonableness of certain other views must nonetheless be explicitly acknowledged. Passmore characterises this, in rather extreme terms, as a 'frank admission . . . that a particular rule [is]

purely arbitrary, not defensible in itself, although perhaps defensible as a rule in the game' (1972, p. 430).

In summary, religious elementary schools do not threaten children's future autonomy by designing their curricula and selecting students and teachers in such a way as to immerse children in a particular religious tradition, but the pedagogy of such schools should ensure that children develop the primitive reasoning capacities and inclinations that are the first step on the road to ethical autonomy. In particular, teachers should exercise rational authority by structuring most justifications as reasoned inferences from explicit principles and values, asking and encouraging questions that invite rational analysis and interpretation rather than recitation of dogma, and highlighting hard cases within the religious doctrine where reasonable disagreement exists even among the faithful. Religious elementary schools that meet these pedagogical conditions will serve to consolidate the primary ethical culture of children from religious families without failing to lay the other appropriate foundations for their future development into autonomous persons.

CONCLUSIONS

Religious elementary schools have a positive role to play in the development of certain children's autonomy. Before children have the cognitive capacity to engage in authentically autonomous reflection, their long-run interest in developing autonomy is best served by consolidating their sense of identity within a coherent primary culture and beginning to teach the practice of ethical reasoning within the framework provided by that secure cultural identity. For the children of religious parents, a religious elementary school may well be the ideal institutional environment in which to achieve these first-stage goals, provided that such schools are committed to the principle of rational authority in ethics. Religious elementary schools that satisfy this condition also offer another advantage in terms of the child's future autonomy: children who have received consistent support and competent instruction in the religious doctrine of their parents are ultimately more likely to be able to make an informed choice on the important question of whether to endorse, modify or reject their familial culture of upbringing.

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NOTES

1. De Jong and Snik, in their argument for public funding of religious elementary schools (2002), make a version of this same claim, but they do not satisfactorily explain the developmental and conceptual connections between young children's provisional ethical identity and primary culture, on the one hand, and their future autonomy, on the other.

2. In the case of children, we are typically more interested in the ideology dimension.
3. Lawrence Kohlberg (1987) famously used a Piagetian approach to cognitive development to argue that the capacity for formal thought is necessary for the type of post-conventional reasoning that defines the *morally* autonomous person. Although I understand *ethical* autonomy to be quite different from Kohlberg's explicitly Kantian conception of moral autonomy, the attainment of either requires the cognitive capacity to engage in rational-critical evaluation of the values in which one has been raised.
4. I leave open the possibility that some degree of exposure to ethical diversity at elementary school might justifiably be required on civic grounds, i.e. to encourage the virtues of toleration and mutual respect required in citizens of the liberal democratic state.
5. See also Gareth Matthews (1980) on the natural way in which young children ask questions and the importance for cognitive and ethical development of taking these questions seriously.
6. See also Thiessen (1987), discussed above.

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