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Review Article
Suite: Book Symposium on John Tillson's *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence*

Tillson on religious initiation

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ABSTRACT

In *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence*, John Tillson argues that initiating children into religion is morally wrong. His argument overlaps and intersects at various points with my own argument against confessional religious education in schools. In this brief reply I consider two notable differences between our arguments.

KEYWORDS: religious initiation, religious education, indoctrination, belief transmission, intellectual authority

As John Tillson makes clear in his ambitious and provocative book, there is a great deal on which he and I agree. We agree that, when it comes to the teaching of beliefs, schools should be governed by the epistemic criterion. That is to say, beliefs should be taught as true when they are known to be true, as false when they are known to be false, and as neither true nor false when their truth value is unknown. We also agree that the truth value of at least a large and important subset of religious beliefs is unknown. The inference we both draw from these points is that the teaching of most religious beliefs in schools should be nondirective.

Notwithstanding this significant overlap in our views, however, there are some important differences between us. In this brief response, I shall focus on two of them. First, Tillson and I disagree about the harm done to children in schools by confessional religious education—that is, by the teaching of religious beliefs as true. In my view, such teaching is indoctrinatory: it harms children by impeding their ability to think rationally about religious matters. In Tillson's view, such teaching is harmful only in the sense that it increases the likelihood of children holding false beliefs.

Second, we disagree about whether the prohibition on confessional religious education in schools should be extended into homes. I argue that it should not, on the

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grounds that parents can impart religious beliefs to young children without recourse to indoctrination. Tillson defends the more stringent thesis that 'religious initiation is morally wrong whether conducted by parents, teachers or others' (Tillson 2019: 2), on the basis that religious initiation in any context increases the likelihood of children holding false beliefs.

Thus, Tillson tries to justify a prohibition of wider scope than mine with reference to an account of the harm done by confessional religious education that is rather thinner than mine. In this, it seems to me, he is unsuccessful.

THE HARM OF CONFESSIONAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

I have argued in various places (e.g. Hand 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2012, 2014) that imparting religious beliefs to others is indoctrinatory because rational means of persuasion are unavailable for beliefs whose truth value is unknown. Where beliefs are known to be true, it is because there is evidence or argument that demonstrates their truth, and such beliefs can be imparted to others by acquainting them with the relevant evidence or argument. But beliefs whose truth value is unknown cannot be imparted in this way. Those wishing to impart them must resort to nonrational means of persuasion, to some form of manipulation or psychological pressure. And imparting beliefs by nonrational means is just what is meant by indoctrination.

Tillson rejects this argument. My objection to confessional religious education is, he thinks, incompatible with my 'contention that people may reasonably believe religious propositions: that they have come to believe them without having been indoctrinated, but on the strength of some reasonable interpretation of the evidence' (Tillson 2019: 105). Tillson agrees that religious beliefs can be rationally held, despite their truth value being unknown. And he supposes it to follow from this that teachers can coherently aim to impart rationally held religious beliefs to their pupils.

That supposition is a mistake. Choosing to adopt a belief whose truth value is unknown is one thing; imparting that belief to someone else quite another. The uncoerced religious believer goes beyond the available evidence and argument by taking a step of faith: she makes a choice to believe, rather than remain agnostic, because the matter at hand seems to her too important to set aside until more evidence comes to light. Her choice is not irrational, but it is highly personal, in that it depends on her best reading of ambiguous evidence and argument, the weight she assigns to religious questions, her need to make sense of the world, and her capacity and inclination to take things on faith. Personal choices of this kind are not transferable; they cannot be made on other people's behalf. When someone imparts religious beliefs to others, she takes personal choice out of the equation and replaces it with external manipulation or pressure.

Because he rejects my claim that imparting religious beliefs to others is indoctrinatory, Tillson needs another reason to oppose confessional religious education. The reason he opts for is that initiating others into religion increases the likelihood of their holding false beliefs. He writes:

> All the same, one may argue that it is wrong to teach something that is not known to be true, as true, without its wrongness depending on having relied on non-rational means to impart the belief. It is wrong because tracking the truth is both intrinsically and extrinsically valuable and frustrated by false impressions. (Tillson 2019: 105)

In another passage he says that religious initiation is objectionable because 'it comes at a high opportunity cost—that of being ready to recognize and respond to the truth and to avoid error' (p. 2). These formulations are not as lucid as one might wish, but the idea seems to be that false beliefs are generally disadvantageous and, because religions are numerous and mutually exclusive, there is a good chance that the set of religious beliefs imparted to any given child will be false.

How worried should we be about the non-indoctrinatory transmission of possibly false beliefs? It is certainly less worrying than indoctrination. Because indoctrinating people impedes their rationality by saddling them with beliefs that are resistant to revision and correction, it does them a significant harm. The non-indoctrinatory transmission of possibly false beliefs is less harmful by several orders of magnitude. Still, we might be tempted to agree with Tillson that it should be prohibited in schools: it is hard to see what could justify the practice in an institution of formal education. Rather less tempting, I think, is his proposal to extend the prohibition into homes.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROHIBITION

On my account of what is wrong with imparting religious beliefs to others, there is a salient difference between confessional religious education in schools and religious upbringing in the home. The parents of young children have at their disposal a method of imparting religious beliefs that does not involve nonrational means of persuasion. In the first few years of life, children necessarily and reasonably believe whatever their parents tell them on a wide range of matters beyond their direct experience, including matters of religion. During this period, parents can share their religious beliefs with their children on the basis of their perceived intellectual authority, without recourse to any kind of manipulation or pressure. The period does not last very long: children soon come to realize that there are, in fact, no intellectual authorities on religious matters and no religious beliefs that are known to be true. But, for as long as it lasts, non-indoctrinatory transmission of religious beliefs is possible.

If religious upbringing in the home can avoid the significant harm of indoctrination, and if, moreover, there are significant benefits it can plausibly be thought to confer, there will be a strong prima facie case for permitting the practice. Terence McLaughlin has drawn attention to one such benefit:

> [There is a] need for families to constitute an *organic unity*, which involves not merely a sharing in practices and family events, but also in some sense a common *world view*, a shared range of commitments and loyalties: a sense of solidarity which would be diminished if children were merely spectators upon certain key elements of the family's life. It is this kind of organic unity which constitutes the family *as* a family and marks it off from other groupings of individuals. … The need for the family to achieve an appropriately organic, holistic character and to diminish the attendant dangers of psychic disunity cannot be lightly set aside or neglected. (McLaughlin 1985: 123)

Religious upbringing, then, is the means by which religious parents share their practices and commitments with their children and thereby unite their families. This benefit is not so weighty as to override all other considerations, and perhaps McLaughlin somewhat overstates its importance, but there is at least something in the idea that the quality of children's lives is enhanced by family unity. The plausibility of this benefit, combined with the availability to parents of a non-indoctrinatory method of imparting religious beliefs, puts a heavy burden of proof on those wishing to prohibit religious upbringing in the home.

Yet, as far as I can tell, the only justification Tillson offers for extending the ban on religious initiation to parents is that it involves the transmission of possibly false beliefs. Whilst I do not deny that this is a relevant normative consideration, and indeed that it may be a decisive consideration *other things being equal*, it seems clear that other things are not equal in the context of family life. As long as religious initiation in the home does not bypass children's reason and make it hard for them to change their minds later, the mere possibility of the imparted beliefs being false does not outweigh the benefit to children of solidarity with their families.

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