

Funding Religious Schools

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I have sympathy with Frances Kroeker's moderate defense of state funding of religious schools. Kroeker argues that religious schools can adequately promote tolerance, can adequately meet the legitimate requirements of a civic education, and that they can avoid indoctrination and facilitate autonomy. But although state funding of religious schools is appropriate in many circumstances I do not think her argument decides the case.

Kroeker's characterization of my attitude toward religious parents may make my sympathy seem surprising. Kroeker says that I assume "that religious parents will waive autonomy-facilitating education for their children and 'typically live in tight-knit communities which limit the opportunities for exposure to other ways of life,'" and that I "highly exaggerate the insularity experienced by religious families" because, among other things "religious families live in neighborhoods that are not segregated by religion [and] engage in activities in the larger social and political community."

Kroeker's characterization of the comments is not exactly accurate. Here is the actual sentence from the book:

In the U.S. parents who waive autonomy-facilitating education for their children typically live in tight-knit communities which limit opportunities for exposure to other ways of life and for the development of critical faculties.¹

I do not assume that most religious parents are hostile to autonomy, even in the United States (to which country the sentence is limited). I say that those parents who *are* hostile to autonomy (which includes some subset of deeply religious parents) are willing and able to construct tight-knit communities. Kroeker is right that there are relatively few geographically or residentially defined communities of practice even in the United States (the Amish are an obvious exception); but one of the remarkable features of modern American life is the ease with which Americans can retreat into effective communities of practice because of the fragility and marginality of the public sphere. Entrance into public space is a choice, and one without which it is possible to live an entirely manageable life.

Deeply religious parents who *are* hostile to their children's autonomy, in fact, constitute a small proportion of the deeply religious, and are a rather small proportion of the group of parents whose children's autonomy is in jeopardy: children whose parents are neglectful, who unthinkingly embrace the materialistic and commercialized values that predominate in the public sphere, or who are too disadvantaged adequately to provide for their children, are more numerous and more at risk. Why make them a focus in my discussion in *School Choice and Social Justice* then? Because considering parents who are self-consciously hostile to autonomy helps illuminate the claim I wanted to make about autonomy-facilitating education better than considering neglectful parents. My claim was that autonomy should be

facilitated *even against the wishes of the parents*; consideration of hostile parents is necessary to illuminate that point.

The upshot of Kroeker's argument is that the mere religiosity of religious schools does not preclude them from fulfilling certain secular goals. But sometimes her comments seem stronger. She says, for example, that "Religious schooling is not a barrier to tolerance" and "considerable diversity will likely be present even in religious school classrooms." The first claim is true, but nothing follows from it. It is consistent with the fact the religious schooling is not, in itself, a barrier to tolerance, that religious schools in fact do present a pretty serious barrier. Some religious schools *do* teach curricula which do not conduce to tolerance. Other things being equal, the more that the religious backgrounds of the students coincide with the religion of the school, the more likely the schools are to present a barrier to tolerance. And, by segregating their students from the non- or other-religious students in secular schools, religious schools may make it less likely that *those* children will become appropriately tolerant.

So it does not follow that we should fund all, or any, religious schools. At best, their religious character does not justify withholding funding. Those religious schools that are indeed indoctrinatory provide a reason not to fund them. Those that fail to facilitate autonomy provide a reason not to fund. Kroeker's argument just enjoins us not to discriminate on grounds irrelevant to the legitimate secular purposes she identifies.

This brings me to my main point. There is something very unsatisfactory about the philosophical debate among liberals about funding religious schools. Here is a caricature. We set up certain secular goals, which, we think, exhaust the conditions a school should have to meet in order to enjoy the privilege of being funded by the state. Meeting those goals is considered either necessary or sufficient qualification for funding. Then we argue about whether or not religious schools do, or could, meet those goals.

This is the wrong approach. Here is an alternative: Again, we set some secular educational goals; then ask what overall system of school regulation, provision, and funding, would, in the circumstances, best secure those goals, taking into account (at least) three considerations:

- (1) Schools are not the only institutions influencing whether these goals are met, and the system of school provision regulation and funding might itself have an impact on how well other institutions (the family, civil society) contribute to those goals
- (2) Private schools, whether they are funded or not, will influence how well those goals are secured, and decisions about funding will affect the character of the unfunded sector which will, in turn, affect both the funded schools and the non-school institutions.
- (3) Schools affect one another, and funding decisions about one school will affect the character of others.²

How might religious schools which, in themselves, adequately serve secular goals, affect the ability of other schools to perform adequately? Here is one example. For most children it might be important to mix with other children from quite different backgrounds if they are to become autonomous. It is extremely hard for

parents, on their own, to convey the significance and meaning of ways of life other than their own to their children. To come to understand Christianity, or Islam, or Hinduism, in a sufficiently rich way for it to be a real alternative, the child must encounter it articulated in the lives of real people with whom she has some degree of intimacy. She must get to know believers, spend time in their houses, and see how they really live. School is not the only place where she might come across such people, but it is the most convenient place, especially in the United States where there is so little genuinely public space. But, if the deeply religious exit the public schools into the private schools, not only will *their* children be less likely to encounter real lived alternatives to their parents practices, but *so will* the public-school attending children of secular parents. Suppose that the religious schools themselves have genuinely diverse populations and suppose, too, that children in those schools, because they encounter the materialist commercial culture that pervades the public space, can become autonomous with less exposure to alternatives through their peers than secular children. Then, we might say that religious schools quite adequately facilitate the autonomy of the children in them; but that they nevertheless compromise the interest of secular children in autonomy by drawing off their deeply religious peers.

This is only one possible mechanism, and, as I have described it, it works against religious schools. But others may work the other way, and I do not mean this to be an argument against funding religious schools, just an illustration of the considerations it is appropriate to consider within the framework. Furthermore, even if the ready availability of religious schools generally makes it harder for non-religious children to become autonomous that effect might be offset by other mechanisms. In the United States, in particular, I strongly suspect that the apparent hostility of some religious communities to secular culture is an artifact both of a sense of alienation and a sense of secular hostility which might be eroded by a policy of funding religious schools, and almost certainly would be eroded (somewhat) if schools resembled the ideal liberal school rather than just another public arena of exposure to materialistic and commercial values. The idea is to take the whole dynamic story (insofar as it can be known) into account.

Without going into great detail about this strategy I want to make a couple of comments about what makes it different from the caricature. First, on my strategy we cannot read off the propriety of funding any school or kind of school from making observations about how well that school or kind of school meets the goals you have set. We have to ask two additional questions: how will funding the school affect the ability of other schools to meet those goals; and how will funding it affect the tendency of the surrounding, non-educational, institutions to promote or sustain those goals? Suppose my conjecture above turns out to be right, and funding religious schools (judiciously) erodes some of the hostility toward mainstream culture. Perhaps (now less hostile) parents will as a result feel less inclined to separate and alienate themselves and their children from the public sphere, which will, in turn, have beneficial effects in civil society for the prospects of both their children's autonomy and that of secular children.

Second, this strategy forces us to take into account (insofar as we can know them) the dynamic effects both of state policies toward schooling and of the behavior of good liberal citizens in (unregulated) civil society. It may be incredibly hard to predict the entire range of effects of government action, so a great deal will be left to political judgment. But in our behavior as private citizens it is sometimes easier to predict effects. Secular liberals concerned with promoting secular educational goals would do well to enter personal and local debates with the deeply religious in a generous spirit.

My conjecture is that in the United States, these calculations would support some funding of some religious schools, as long as it is accompanied by certain regulations. This combination — funding and regulation — is hotly contested as a constitutional issue, so I understand that it may not be politically feasible. But political feasibility *in this very narrow sense* should not constrain philosophical discussion — after all, funding and regulation are eminently feasible in most of the developed world, and if the United States has constitutional constraints that make it impossible to do what would be the best thing, that counts against the U.S. constitution, not against the claim that the best thing would be the best thing.

1. Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71.

2. I apply this framework in “Faith Schools in the UK: An Unenthusiastic Defense of a Slightly Reformed Status Quo,” in *Faith Schools: Consensus or Conflict*, ed. Jo Cairns, Roy Gardner, and Denis Lawton (London: Routledge Falmer 2004) and in Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).