

## Presumptions of Worth and Pedagogical Imperatives

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John Tillson's thoughtful essay covers tremendous ground in limited space. Tillson does a terrific job highlighting many of the central concerns of religious education both in British and U.S. contexts. The thrust of his argument questions the point of pursuing open-ended discussions on matters that are settled, or as he says, "dead options." As I understand him, Tillson's point is that to the degree that an issue is truly open-ended, then Michael Hand's notion of nondirective instruction, instruction where the goal is consideration of a range of views, is appropriate. Tillson, however, doubts that many religious claims are in fact truly open-ended. Therefore, our choices, he says, are all "unattractive." According to Tillson, in considering all kinds of religious views and claims we (a) run the risk of having to remain non-committal on matters like holocaust denial or young earth creationism; (b) must also include discussions of atheist and agnostic claims, as well as flying spaghetti monster claims, which (c) inevitably leads to figuring out what to remove from the curriculum in order to make space for all of these open-ended discussions. Instead, he concludes, religious education is best if limited to a survey of the history of religions and perhaps the cultural contributions of religions over time.

Tillson is right and if consistency is a concern, we do open the floodgates to treating any and all kinds of views in classroom discussions. Yet, I am less concerned with this potential problem than I am with the effect of ignoring and excluding "dead options" to individuals in a pluralist democracy. In the remainder of this essay I offer two arguments, which taken either separately or together, suggest that Tillson's thesis and conclusion are problematic. The first argument stems from the notion of respect for learners while the second is more concerned with our obligations as educators.

### PRESUMPTIONS OF WORTH

To respect the other, in a substantive way, means providing real opportunities for the other's views, claims, and ideas to get a public hearing. Charles Taylor writes about this in his essay the "Politics of Recognition."<sup>1</sup> Taylor writes of our obligation in a pluralist democracy to recognize and respect the other by giving his or her views a presumption of worth. Taylor's concept of a presumption of worth requires that we treat these views as *possible* contenders for truth and require that they undergo assessment through public principles of rationality. This argument suggests that to truly respect a person's or group's perspective we must suspend judgment on the worthwhileness of the claim(s) until those claims have a chance to be examined through the lens of public principles of evidence. So even in the case of a so-called "dead option," we must suspend this very notion of it being settled and give it a hearing in the classroom. In many ways, this position is quite similar to Michael Reiss and Eamonn Callan. According to Tillson, Reiss and Callan think that it is better to take a claim like young earth creationism and provide the student with

evidence to support its implausibility rather than simply ignoring the claim by excluding it from the classroom. I tend to agree that if one's ultimate goal is to get the learner to ascribe to those things with more evidence than those things with less evidence a hearing in a forum of a public school classroom seems a more effective way to proceed. But where I depart from Reiss and Callan is in my assertion that part of a pluralist democracy is the requirement to treat all people with respect, which in turn means treating their claims as tentatively worthwhile. Recognizing that this is a tall order and potentially messy business, I do believe that evidence will ultimately win out and the holder of the claim to young earth creationism will either have to acknowledge the implausibility of the claim or publicly acknowledge his disregard for reason and evidence. Either way, we have fulfilled our obligations to respect the claimant and we have not, as Nel Noddings says, "let nonsense go unchallenged."<sup>2</sup> One might argue that, in a pluralist democracy, there is a moral imperative to treat people with respect by conferring on them this presumption of worth. This is a point made quite forcefully by Peter Hobson and John Edwards in their book, *Religious Education*. The authors argue, "Not to be concerned about whether another's beliefs are true or false might in fact be construed as not respecting that person at all. To allow another to persist in error seems to be inconsistent with respecting that person."<sup>3</sup>

#### PEDAGOGICAL IMPERATIVES

While respect for the other might itself convince some of the flaws in Tillson's thesis and conclusion, there is, I think, another line of reasoning that ought to cast doubt on the desirability of ignoring "dead options" particularly as they relate to religion. This argument is based on the notion that as educators we have certain pedagogical obligations toward our students. This imperative includes helping them, as Noddings says, have good reasons for their belief or unbelief.<sup>4</sup> Take the example of a young earth creationist. Of course Tillson is correct in that young earth creationism is certainly not on par with evolutionary theory and it would be a failure of education if a student left a biology classroom thinking that they were intellectually compatible. And it is also true, as Eugenie Scott of the National Center for Science Education has stated, that there really is no controversy among scientists about evolution,<sup>5</sup> but nevertheless there is an imperative on the part of the teacher to help the student see at once that there is a controversy, one of the student's making, and that there is not one at all. If we consider our young earth creationist — ignoring his views might have some immediate negative consequences that are educationally problematic. He might be so offended by this marginalization that he shuts himself off from hearing and listening to a lecture on evolutionary theory. Of course, the teacher must do that which is possible to get the student to pay attention, but her pedagogical responsibilities still must go further. The teacher is also obligated to try to get the student to learn science. Pedagogically speaking, showing the student that the issue is more complex than the dualistic choice of young earth creationism or evolutionary theory might be instructive. We might challenge the student to consider old earth creationist views and the idea of intelligent design. We may be more successful in reaching our goals if we teach the student in such a way where we

convey to the student ways in which believers have accommodated some science within their religious worldview. While old earth creationism and intelligent design are both problematic from a scientific perspective, providing the young earth creationist with this perspective makes possible to him the notion that there is more than just two ways of thinking about the matter, something that is likely absent from a young earth view. Once the student has allowed for this the teacher has made significant headway in conveying the scientific sensibilities of doubt and examination, and the importance of questioning and problem solving. Whether the teacher is ultimately successful in helping the student embrace scientific accounts of the earth's origins is less important than the fact that she has fulfilled her pedagogical obligations to the student by imbuing in the student the skills and dispositions to continue to think, question, and examine.

Ignoring so-called “dead options” neither conveys the respect due to all human beings in a pluralist democracy nor does it allow us to fulfill our responsibilities as pedagogues. Even if, as adult thinkers, we are offended or annoyed by claims of holocaust denial and young earth creationism, ignoring these claims because they are nonsense does nothing to facilitate pluralistic respect nor does it do much to imbue those critical skills of thinking, questioning, and examination in our students — believers and unbelievers alike.

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1. Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 21–73.
  2. Nel Noddings, *Education For Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 28.
  3. Peter Hobson and John Edwards, *Religious Education in a Pluralist Society* (London: Woburn Press, 1999), 144.
  4. Noddings, *Education For Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*.
  5. Eugenie Scott, *Evolution vs. Creationism: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).