BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Religion and Religious Education on the Journey to the Ideal Society

By Christina Easton

1. *Introduction*

We all want to find a way to live fulfilling lives together in spite of our differences. What beliefs must be held in common if we are to do so? What beliefs must be excluded? And what are the implications for religion's place in society? Philip Kitcher recognizes that our answers to these questions have important implications for education, and he devotes a chapter of *The Main Enterprise of the World* to the role of religion in education and wider society. This paper is a critical response to that chapter. I argue that Kitcher is right to recognize that religious beliefs cannot be confined to the private sphere and thus they are a matter of educational concern. However, I question whether Kitcher makes an adequate case for the distinctive harmfulness of the beliefs that he wishes to exclude. I also question Kitcher's suggestion that students be taught that all religions are 'on a par', epistemically speaking (2022: 210). I finish by shining a light on Kitcher's proposal that education should aim for students to develop specific beliefs about religion, clarifying the proposal and highlighting some implications for education in practice.

2. *Kitcher's analysis of religion*

Not all religions are equal. Most pertinently for Kitcher, given his pragmatist position, not all religions are equally harmful. Kitcher suggests that we can think of religions as progressing from 'tribal' forms to what he refers to as 'refined religion' (209). *Tribal religion*, which still exists today in forms such as militant Islam, fights for the one true God, aiming to extinguish heretical views. *First-stage ecumenical religion* – the most common form of religion today – makes progress by abandoning this imperative to stamp out dissenters. Adherents believe that although those who reject the one true faith are mistaken, and will suffer divine punishment as a result of their error, it would be wrong to violate the independent requirements of morality by making violent attempts to bring these people to the truth. Though these people 'filter' Scripture (196), screening out what violates their independent moral sensibilities, they also regard their religious text as having moral authority. Adherents of *second-stage ecumenical religion* still hold their

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religious doctrines to be uniquely correct, but reject the view that people will be condemned as a result of non-belief in these doctrines. It 'breathes acceptance and tolerance toward people of different faiths – or of none' (207).[1] Crucially, adherents recognize the priority of morality. Religious texts can morally inspire, but their 'proposals must be assessed through independent (secular) moral inquiry' (207); the texts do not themselves have moral authority. *Refined religion* goes further by rejecting religious exclusivism (the belief that the specific claims of your religion are true and that this implies the falsity of conflicting truth-claims made by other religions) in favour of a thoroughgoing pluralism. Adherents of refined religion believe that everyone worships the same God and that no single religion is uniquely correct. Religious texts are interpreted non-literally. All religions are on a par, and they all provide a unique way of enriching human lives. This last belief is one of the few beliefs that distinguishes refined religion from *secular humanism*. Secular humanists reject the view that religion is uniquely enriching to human lives (as well as ideas of the transcendent).

Since 'the central threat posed by religion in the contemporary world lies in the tendency to subordinate moral and political debates to the supposed authority of religious doctrines' (207), the crucial turning point is between first and second-stage ecumenical religion. Only second-stage ecumenical religion and refined religion have a place in educational institutions, and children are to be taught to reject the 'two more primitive ones' (215). Additionally, since these primitive forms of religion are in conflict with democratic values, there are implications beyond the sphere of education: 'Private institutions devoted to celebrating and transmitting these forms of faith should be scrutinized' (217–18).

3. *Examining the justification for excluding 'primitive' religions*

As a pragmatist evaluating religion's place in society, Kitcher is interested in whether different forms of religion have valuable effects (192). His case against the more primitive forms of religion is then, on the face of it, a harm-based case. He distinguishes his position from the New Atheists who are concerned with 'intellectual hygiene' (194). Rather than rooting out beliefs simply because they are false, we should be concerned only when these false beliefs will 'damage the moral and political health of societies' (212). Yet, Kitcher does seem to slip between accusations of harm and complaints that are more epistemic in nature. He argues that religious texts should not be

1 'Tolerance' is usually understood as forbearance – refraining from interfering with ways of life that you disapprove of. Kitcher must be using 'tolerance' in a different way here, since first-stage ecumenical religion does include restraint from interference with those who you believe are wrong. Later in the chapter, Kitcher adopts an even more unusual understanding of tolerance, as requiring rejecting the authority of religious texts (216).

seen as morally authoritative because they are inconsistent, have shown themselves to be untrustworthy by issuing morally repugnant commands, and are difficult to interpret. His argument here seems to be that we should worry about this method of arriving at beliefs, because it fails to meet our usual epistemic standards. Elsewhere Kitcher talks about debarring justifications 'when the epistemological failures [of this type of justification] are made evident by history', and the need to make 'epistemological progress' (223, n. 52).

At other points, Kitcher indicates that the primary harm that we ought to be concerned with is not the direct harm of false moral beliefs, but the indirect harm done to democratic deliberation by primitive forms of religion: 'Their convictions always threaten attempts to resolve moral and social problems. They cannot become the citizens a democratic society needs' (216). Let us take in turn the two central convictions that separate acceptable from unacceptable forms of religion, and examine whether they are harmful in this way.

First, there is the conviction that God will punish those who hold incorrect doctrinal beliefs. Kitcher's view seems to be that regarding one's fellow citizens as 'benighted and sinful' (216) means that one cannot engage with their perspectives. His case is strengthened by remembering the arguments of Kitcher's earlier chapter on 'Citizens'. To be open to the views of others, to 'listen seriously' (131), there has to be interpersonal trust and mutual regard. Perhaps believing that someone will ultimately become the subject of divine punishment is an obstacle to this trust and regard. Is it an insurmountable obstacle though? Surely it cannot be the case that thinking that your fellow citizen has incorrect beliefs and/or that they are engaging in immoral behaviour destroys the prospects for deliberation with them. For if that were the case, there would be no prospect at all for deliberation in societies marked by disagreements about how to live. Even if it makes it more difficult, respectful democratic deliberation still seems possible: I can engage in respectful discussion with my colleague whose affair I morally disapprove of, even though I may not seek relationship advice from her. Indeed, I have engaged in discussion in close to the model manner that Kitcher sets out in his chapter on 'Citizens' with people who believe I am destined for hell. So, perhaps Kitcher is wrong to worry about the harms to democracy done by this particular conviction (and indeed he does focus his attention far more on the second conviction).

The second problematic conviction is in the divine authority of Scripture. Here the main harm to democracy is that 'appeals to religion serve as conversation-stoppers. They are points at which joint deliberation breaks down' (193). For there to be a community of mutual engagement, working together towards 'the advancement of the lives of all', there needs to be 'agreement on a method for that cooperative work' (222–23, n. 51). This agreed method must exclude the epistemological stance that allows some

authority to be derived from religious texts: 'To be reasonable in the pertinent sense is … to be open to a kind of exchange that the epistemic bases I reject would prevent' (222).

Does belief in the authority of religious texts function in this harmful way, as a conversation-stopper that prevents the kind of exchange that the Deweyan democracy requires? It is not clear that it (always) does. For many or even most religious people, appeals to the authority of religious texts are not 'morally decisive' (198); these people do not 'subordinate moral and political debates to the … authority of religious doctrines' (207). Rather, these texts are regarded as just one tool for reaching the truth, alongside other (often more well-used) tools like reason and science. Appeals to religious texts function for many religious people in the same way as do appeals to intuition in philosophy. The philosopher making an appeal to intuition acknowledges that the intuition may not be universally shared, that the appeal cannot stand alone to be convincing and that additional justificatory support is required. Similarly, religious people tend to see Scripture as having some justificatory function at the same time as holding its authority in check by other sources of moral authority, recognizing that these other sources must provide additional justificatory support. This view of Scripture can be held at the same time as recognizing, with Kitcher, that Scripture is inconsistent, has issued morally repugnant commands and is difficult to interpret – just as philosophers recognize the limits of appealing to intuition.[2]

Kitcher gives some examples that are meant to show the dangers of accepting the moral authority of Scripture, pointing to opposition to euthanasia, abortion and homosexuality. It is undeniable that religion does lead people to rally (what Kitcher and I regard as) the wrong way on these issues. But at the same time, it is not clear that if we removed religion from the picture that people would then go in (what Kitcher and I regard as) the right direction on these issues. Take the abortion example. Religious texts do often get brought in to defend a pro-life stance. But religion is rarely the sole justification for these people's belief. Rather, it is mutually supporting with other beliefs that they hold. That religion is not the sole or even perhaps the primary cause of these problematic views is supported by the fact that 23% of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated believe that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases. This is a higher percentage of belief in a pro-life stance than that seen amongst Jews or Buddhists (Pew Research Center 2014). To take another example, think about attitudes towards the climate emergency. Supporting Kitcher's case is the fact that religious people are far less likely to be concerned about global warming than their

2 Kitcher is unlikely to find this analogy helpful, given that he is sceptical of the way that appeals to intuition have become mainstream in moral philosophical methodology (169–73). He does, however, allow that intuition might be one *tool* amongst others (173), which seems to allow it some justificatory status.

non-religious counterparts (Pew Research Center 2022). However, 'the main driver of U.S. public opinion about the climate is political party, not religion' (Pew Research Center 2022). Highly religious Americans also tend to be Republican, and Republicans tend to be much less likely than Democrats to believe that human activity is warming the Earth or to consider climate change a serious problem. The same study found that when political party and demographic characteristics are held constant, the marginal effects of religious affiliation and commitment on public opinion about climate change are much more muted (although still statistically significant in some cases). Religion is not the primary cause of the harmful views in this case.

Yet even where religious texts are invoked as an important justification in democratic debates, it is not clear that they must be conversation-stoppers. Given that these people engage in filtering, dismissing the demands of religious texts when they conflict with independent moral reasoning, it is possible to engage in productive dialogue with them. Presenting arguments in support of there being nothing wrongful about gay relationships – including scientific and social-scientific evidence suggesting that people do not choose to be gay and that children brought up by same-sex parents are as happy as those brought up by different-sex parents – has moved some religious people to reject the parts of Scripture that condemn such relationships. Productive dialogue can also take place even within the framework of the texts being authoritative. For example, we might support the case for legal abortion by pointing to passages from the Old Testament that indicate that the foetus's life is not valued as highly as the mother's (Exodus 21: 22–23), or we might introduce the arguments of queer theologians to those who oppose homosexuality.

Lastly, as the influence of partisan political beliefs on opinions regarding the climate emergency indicates, even if religion does function as a conversation-stopper, it is not clear that it is a unique threat. There are other, perhaps worse, conversation-stoppers. For example, strong feelings of patriotism might be conversation-stoppers in debates on immigration. Similarly, the belief in the right to determine one's life goals tends to be held as non-negotiable by many liberals in a way that might make it hard for a conservative to engage with them. If views that regard religious texts as authoritative must be extirpated from the Deweyan democracy because of their conversation-stopping properties, other views will have to go too.

For all these reasons, it is not clear to me that the belief in the moral authority of religious texts is sufficiently harmful to justify Kitcher's proposal to teach children to reject the beliefs of 'primitive' religions. Nor is it uniquely harmful and so deserving of special (negative) treatment.

As we have seen, various justifications for removing from society the unacceptable forms of religion appear in this chapter: they have supported noxious moral views, they have epistemic bases that are unreliable and they are obstacles to democratic deliberation. Kitcher does seem to flit between these

justifications. But perhaps there is a good reason for him doing so, and that is actually a key insight of the chapter: we cannot fully separate off the epistemic from the moral/political. Bad intellectual hygiene in forming 'personal beliefs' will have negative effects on our moral and political decision-making. In recognizing this, Kitcher makes an advance on the position adopted by political liberals such as John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum. Whereas Rawls thought we could keep religion in a separate sphere, with people leaving their comprehensive doctrines out of political deliberation (Rawls 2005), Kitcher recognizes that 'there is no safe quarantine' (216).

Of course, once we have recognized this, it is then a further question what the role of the state is here, and whether and where the 'epistemological restrictions' Kitcher suggests should be imposed (223). In the context of education, I think that political liberals have often been too 'hands off'. Nussbaum, for example, has argued that 'teachers in public schools should not say that argument is better than faith as a general way of solving all problems in life', and that they may only 'recommend argument over faith … for the purposes of citizenship' (2011: 38–39). But this relies on an implausible distinction between the political and non-political sphere. It is implausible because our personal beliefs about supposedly non-political matters affect our hierarchy of values and thus the way we order reasons that bear on more clearly public political questions (Easton 2018: 196). For example, believing that there is something wrongful about homosexual relationships will affect the way that we prioritize different arguments relating to same-sex marriage. In my view, it is part of the epistemic responsibilities of educators to teach students to guard against epistemic failures (2018: 205). But even if we were to ignore this and instead were to focus entirely on the *civic* rather than epistemic aims of education, that would *still* require teaching children to be able to distinguish between better and worse reasons, for that is a crucial characteristic of democratic citizens. As Kitcher highlights, there are good epistemic reasons for high levels of scepticism when it comes to offering up Scripture as a reason to justify a moral prescription, and so the question of the authority of Scripture cannot help but be an educational concern. As to what the practical implications of this are, I hold off discussing this until Section 5.

4. *The rejection of religious exclusivism*

In the introduction to his book, Kitcher says he will be offering a 'rough division' of religions and 'an equally rough account of religious progress' (11). Yet he is sufficiently confident of his account to recommend that it should be taught to children as part of their religious education (215). Included in his account is the idea that the most 'thoughtful', 'sophisticated' religious believers interpret doctrinal statements metaphorically (194) and believe that no religion is privileged by unique possession of doctrinal truth. This is a controversial take on a much-discussed, unresolved question in philosophy of

religion about which view ought to be taken on questions of religious truth. Why should children be taught to reject religious exclusivism (the belief that the specific claims of your religion are true and that this implies the falsity of conflicting truth-claims made by other religions) in favour of religious pluralism (the view that all religions are 'on a par' (210), all worship the same God and all recognize 'the most central and significant religious truths' (209))? Kitcher's answer seems to be as follows: second-stage ecumenical religion is unstable. It sees those who reject the correct faith as *morally* on a par, in the sense that they are not regarded as sinful and deserving of punishment. But why not then see them as also *epistemically* on a par?

I think there is good reason to hold on to the fault line between the moral and the epistemic: the reasons for accepting moral symmetry do not imply epistemic symmetry. The only justification that Kitcher gives to explain the rationale for the 'I'm OK, you're OK' (208) position of second-stage ecumenical religion is that adherents believe that God is loving and merciful and would not visit eternal torment on unbelievers (206). But that justification does not give any reason to regard the unbeliever as having beliefs that are as true as yours. Indeed, it implies that there is still something to forgive – having arrived at the wrong beliefs about questions of doctrine. Perhaps instead Kitcher has something like the following in mind as a reason for why we should regard the unbeliever as our moral peer: what we might call 'ultimate questions', questions about whether God exists and if It does, what It is like, are especially difficult questions to answer. These questions are the subject of wide disagreement. Because of the difficulty of these questions, a person should be forgiven (by God, and by their fellow humans) for arriving at, and then living their life according to, the wrong answers to these questions.

That reason does seem like a more plausible candidate for pushing in the direction of epistemic, not just moral, parity between believers and unbelievers. But even this reason does not suggest epistemic parity. A question being difficult does not mean that there cannot be better or worse answers to that question (even if it is hard to agree on what are better or worse answers). Just because there are a variety of different answers on offer, this does not mean that none of these answers are mistaken or that all of these answers are mistaken. Think of the particularly intractable questions worked on by philosophers – questions such as whether the mind is reducible to matter, whether we have knowledge of the external world, and whether we have free will. I do not regard philosophers who disagree with me on how to answer these questions as morally subordinate to me, but I do think that they are wrong and that there are reasons to prefer my own view. I do not regard the different views on these questions as epistemically on a par with my own.

Kitcher might think the religion case is different because (in his view) religions share 'core doctrines' (209), unlike, for example, materialists and dualists. But even if religions do interpret Scripture non-literally, as Kitcher thinks that they ought to, there are still important doctrinal disagreements between

religions that mean that we cannot possibly regard them as all fundamentally saying the same thing. Take the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God. Even if this interpreted non-literally, it still assigns Jesus some sort of special status that goes beyond the Muslim belief in Jesus as one prophet amongst several. There are genuine disagreements between religions, even in their 'enlightened' forms. Many of these disagreements relate to the nature of God, such as the extent to which God is personal and forgiving, and so have different implications for how we live our lives.

Kitcher points to the way that people's religious beliefs are affected by the history and culture that they grow up in. As John Hick pointed out, much religious belief is a result of 'accidents of birth': 'Someone born to Buddhist parents in Thailand is very likely to be a Buddhist, someone born to Muslim parents in Saudi Arabia to be a Muslim, someone born to Christian parents in Mexico to be a Christian, and so on' (Hick 1989: 2). Given this, what reason is there to privilege one's own set of doctrines and hold on to the view that your religion has unique possession of the truth? Kitcher is right that recognizing the role that background has played in shaping our beliefs should at least somewhat undermine our confidence that we are in possession of the central truths about the universe, giving us an additional reason to demonstrate epistemic humility by being open to the views of others and by refraining from imposing our view on others. But we can acknowledge this without giving up on the idea that one of these beliefs is uniquely true. I can recognize the role that my upbringing has played in my pro-choice stance on abortion, without this meaning that I must see my view as 'on a par' with the views of pro-lifers (and similarly, Kitcher could recognize that he would most likely have a very different view of religious truth, probably rejecting religious pluralism, had he been born to Protestant parents in Alabama, at the same time as continuing to hold the epistemic superiority of his own view on religious truth). Rather than abandoning the idea that one of the stories told by religions is uniquely true, we should instead feel impelled to look for additional reasons to help try to establish which of the stories offered provides the closest approximation to the truth.

This point relates to a more practical concern I have with teaching religious pluralism as 'progress': it can lead students towards relativism. My own research (Easton MS, 2019), as well as my own experiences of teaching Religious Education in high schools, suggests that many students already have a proclivity towards relativist views about religious truth. They are disinclined to engage in reason-giving because they think that all answers are 'equally true'. One reason to be concerned about this is that they then extrapolate from this relativism about religious matters to other kinds of ultimate question, including ethical questions such as about what is good. And if there are no right answers in ethics, we are unable to condemn behaviours that are clearly wrong.

But there are good reasons to be concerned with approaches that encourage relativism even if we put aside the spillover into ethics. Kitcher's approach encourages students of religious education to throw up their hands and say 'anything goes' when it comes to ultimate questions, as if these are questions akin to whether you should put milk in a cup before the tea or vice versa. The way we answer ultimate questions, including questions about the existence and nature of God, has implications for how we understand ourselves and how we choose to live. Kitcher wants us to 'deepen our sense of ourselves and of our lives' (212), and so surely students ought to be engaged in a truth-seeking, reason-giving process aimed at establishing which of the religious and non-religious truth-claims are most likely to be true.[3] Additionally, it is surely by engaging seriously with authentic representations of the contested truth-claims made by religions that we will best prepare young people for the tolerance and empathetic understanding required in the Deweyan democracy. Teaching religious pluralism pulls against this sort of engagement.

5. *Implications for religious education*

In keeping with his 'meliorist pragmatism' (142), Kitcher uses his ideals as diagnostic tools to help work out what improvements are required to education. The educational proposals that result are not, then, just proposals for what education would look like once we are in the ideal society. Rather, the hope is that we can use these proposals to inform policy *now*, to help us stagger our way towards the ideal society.[4] In this section, I shine a light on just one of these proposals, clarifying what is being proposed and highlighting its implications for education in practice. Whilst Kitcher's other proposals are

3 Andrew Wright (2007: 80) has argued, 'Given that our place in the ultimate order-of-things is the subject of fundamental dispute, religious education has a duty not to neutralize the controversy but to engage with it directly'. This approach to religious education is known as critical religious education. For a summary of this approach and guidance on what it looks like in practice, see Easton et al. 2019.

4 Here there is something rather 'chicken and egg' about the book's approach. We need the conditions of the ideal society to obtain to be able to fully implement Kitcher's educational proposals. For example, only in a society that gives such time and esteem to teaching non-STEM subjects can children be fully immersed from a young age in group deliberation with diverse individuals, or engaged in the Arts to the extent that stirs and expands the emotions. But then, the educational changes are needed in order for the ideal society to obtain. For example, the group engagement and expanding of the emotions is required so that citizens have the requisite deliberative skills, sympathy and fellow-feeling for a Deweyan democracy to obtain. This issue comes out particularly strongly in the religion chapter: primitive religious beliefs are attacked so as to achieve citizens who engage in dialogue in the ideal way, but in our current society, where citizens hold these beliefs and have the supposedly problematic approach to dialogue, there would be enormous resistance to the proposed educational reforms.

suggestions for structuring education, or strategies for developing important skills or habits of thought, feeling and practice, this proposal stands out by being unusually prescriptive in its content: 'A primary aim of religious education is to recognize the defects of tribal and first-stage ecumenical religions' (215). 'It is the teacher's business – in a healthy society – to defend the three most progressive frameworks against the two more primitive ones' (215). Kitcher even suggests that education should be 'indoctrinating the young to reject them' (216). In particular, we should 'aim to entrench Kant's insight about the priority of secular morality' (213).

I presume that Kitcher's talk of 'indoctrinating' is hyperbolic. Indoctrination is usually taken to mean imparting a belief to a person in such a way that the person comes to hold that belief non-rationally (Hand 2018: 6). Indoctrinatory practices in education would conflict with other aims that Kitcher wishes education to achieve, including the development of autonomous individuals able to deliberate independently about moral and social problems. Rather, I think what Kitcher means is that students should be taught *directively* first the moral parity of individuals from different religions and second that divine authority must play no justificatory role in ethical belief-formation. Directive teaching is teaching aimed at students coming to hold (or reject) certain beliefs or attitudes. Perhaps in using the word 'indoctrinate', Kitcher also has in mind that this aim ought to be fulfilled by use of *didactic* teaching methods – by instructing, informing and explaining, rather than by providing opportunities for students to work towards the same conclusion by themselves (Hand 2018: 38).

Kitcher says that 'forbidding recourse to an unreliable epistemological practice [i.e. appeals to Scripture] … is not imposing a harsh burden' (223). This is false. It is burdensome for students to have teachers, acting as figures of authority and representatives of the state, standing up and publicly denying a substantial claim made by their religion and/or the religion of their parents. Nussbaum even suggests that 'for a public official in a leading role to say "X's doctrine is not as well grounded as Y's" is … to denigrate X' (2011: 33) (Kitcher says that these people 'can rejoin society through the simple step of embracing Kant's insight' (217), but it is not clear to me that this is a 'simple step' given the importance within religious belief and practice of assigning *some* moral authority to Scripture).

There remains, however, an open question about whether imposing this harsh burden might nevertheless be justified. That depends on the success of Kitcher's argument that the beliefs that are distinctive to 'primitive' forms of religion are sufficiently 'socially and morally dangerous' (215) for them to be singled out for exclusion. I have given some reasons to question this in Section 3. But even if that argument is successful, for the sacrifice to the well-being and equal standing of individuals who hold 'primitive' beliefs to be justifiable, the directive teaching Kitcher proposes would need to be successful in leading to a society where fewer people hold these problematic

beliefs. It is hard to assess in advance what level of success to expect. But these aims would surely be more likely to be achieved if the teaching involves 'light-touch', non-didactic methods. Teaching didactically that a person's cherished beliefs (or the beliefs of their parents and community) are wrong is likely to whip up dissent. It may lead to people withdrawing their children from public schools (although this might be something that Kitcher has to disallow – he does indicate in a footnote that his aim of preventing children from being taught the beliefs of primitive religion would be most easily achieved if 'all students attend schools funded entirely from the public treasury' (218, n. 40)).

A more light-touch, non-didactic approach might involve students being engaged in exploratory discussion of material that might lead them to reject the moral authority of Scripture. For example, students might be shown a set of passages from Scripture that are inconsistent. They might also engage in discussion of passages that we now regard as morally abhorrent, such as Lot offering up his virgin daughters for gang rape in Genesis 19. They might look at examples that demonstrate the role (and difficulty) of human interpretation in the use of Scripture, such as by looking at the Quranic verses on modesty that are frequently used to justify the hijab.

Engaging in reasoned discussion with their peers and teachers about these examples will aid students in coming to understand what constitutes good and bad reasons in moral decision-making. No doubt a curriculum that includes these sorts of activities will still be unpopular with parents of 'primitive' religions, in part because drawing attention to these issues does make it more likely that students will question the moral authority of Scripture.[5] However, since it does not involve actually denying people's deeply-held beliefs, it is less likely to be regarded as disrespectful and thus less likely to cause dissent.

Kitcher does not explicitly cover this issue, but his proposals suggest the need for dedicated time in the curriculum devoted to religious education, with classes led by specialists. The teachers would need theological expertise in a diversity of religions to be able to select appropriate material and guide discussion so as to fulfil the aim of students coming to reject the moral authority of Scripture. Kitcher's views imply that (unlike in England presently), there should be no right to withdrawal from this part of the curriculum, for, assuming that the views are as dangerous as Kitcher suggests, *all* students need to encounter these reasons to reject Scripture as a moral authority. From Kitcher's perspective, neither should students encounter contradictory teaching in private educational institutions nor even at their

5 Religious Education classes in England are taught non-confessionally, introducing students to a variety of religions without aiming to inculcate specific belief. In spite of this, conservative religious beliefs are still the main reason for parents withdrawing their children from the subject (Lundie and O'Siochru 2021).

places of worship – these dangerous views are essentially banned from public dissemination. This, we should notice, is a very different society from what it sounds like Kitcher will advocate for when he says that 'pluralism is to be celebrated' (223).

6. *Conclusion*

Kitcher thinks that we should teach in a way that removes 'socially and morally dangerous' (215) views from society. This, he thinks, implies that students should be taught directively that Scripture is not a source of moral authority and that individuals with different religious beliefs are 'morally on a par'. I have argued that Kitcher is right to recognize that beliefs like these cannot be quarantined off from moral and political beliefs, and thus that religious belief-formation cannot help but fall under the purview of educational responsibilities. However, I have questioned whether the beliefs that Kitcher identifies are in fact sufficiently harmful to justify 'indoctrinating the young to reject them' (216). Nor is it clear that these beliefs are uniquely harmful, for there are other 'conversation-stopping' beliefs. More work is therefore required to convincingly show that religious education should involve directive teaching of this particular content. I have also suggested that it is possible to teach the moral parity of different religions whilst at the same time encouraging students to find reasons to reject their epistemic parity. Good religious education involves introducing students to authentic accounts of the truth-claims made by different religions and aiding them in developing the skills required to assess the plausibility of these different claims. That approach would better enable students to make good judgements about how to answer important questions about themselves and how to live their lives, and would better promote the fulfilment, good citizenship and moral development that Kitcher rightly thinks education ought to aim at.[6]

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