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Review Article
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Enabling children to learn from religions whilst respecting their rights: against monopolies of influence

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ABSTRACT

John Tillson argues, on grounds of children's well-being, that it is impermissible to teach them religious views. I defend a practice of pluralistically advocating religious views to children. As long as there are no monopolies of influence over children, and as long as advocates do not use coercion, deceit, or manipulation, children can greatly benefit without having their rational abilities subverted, or incurring undue risk to form false beliefs. This solution should counter, to some extent, both perfectionist and antiperfectionist reasons against initiating children into religions.

KEYWORDS: value formation, religious education, domination, children, parents, nonparents

INTRODUCTION

Should we teach children to read, write, and count? Everybody thinks so: literacy and numeracy are good for children, and we adults owe it to them to advance their well-being. Should we teach children to smoke? Nobody believes we should: smoking is bad for children. Should we teach them religious beliefs? People deeply disagree about this. John Tillson, in his book *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence* (2019) argues that adults should not initiate children into religion, but instead they should make children aware of the existence of religions and teach them *about* their content. This is because of a number of features displayed by religion, and the connection between truth and well-being. First, religious views are comprehensive, and very important in the overall economy of one's beliefs, which means that one should be cautious about encouraging children to embrace any of them. Second, religious beliefs are not rationally compelling; indeed, Tillson is sceptical

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about the prospects of religious views turning out to be true. Finally, access to truth is, according to Tillson, not only instrumental to our well-being (by helping us embrace valuable options) but also constitutive of it. In short, Tillson thinks that encouraging children to learn from religion is not good for them.[1]

In these comments I explain why I disagree with Tillson's conclusion and why I think that adults should let children learn from religions (not only about them), although with the crucial caveat that adults must ensure that each child has adequate opportunities to learn from several religions as well as from (militant) atheism.[2] I will argue for this without denying that knowledge contributes to well-being (instrumentally and noninstrumentally), and without challenging Tillson's carefully defended claim that religious beliefs are not rationally compelling. I also accept his view that children's interests should determine adults' exercise of power over them. A last point of agreement with Tillson is that, like him, I think that duties to influence children in ways conducive to their well-being fall not only on parents, but, more generally on the adult community in which children grow up—at least when some division of labour is required to fulfil the duty. I am therefore hopeful that Tillson can accept my proposal as in line with the deepest normative commitments that animate his own account of the ethics of influence. Indeed, given that I understand religious initiation in a looser sense than Tillson, it is not clear that our views would yield very different verdicts on what ways of treating children are impermissible in this context. But I hope to show that my looser understanding of religious initiation is warranted and, if so, that children are *owed* a fairly comprehensive introduction to the religious lives led by adults in their communities—a conclusion with which Tillson may disagree.

MULTIPLE INITIATION

Before advancing my proposal, let me share a short piece of autobiography. I was raised both with and without religion. 'With religion' because, whilst my parents were not religiously observant, they held religious beliefs of varying depths, which they wholeheartedly shared with me, expressing hope that I, too, embrace them. Our neighbour, a grandmother figure for me, who was observant, sometimes took me with her to church. My maternal grandmother, whom I visited every summer, and who had a different religion, did the same. And in school I had the good luck of being taught the history of religion by a teacher who was so empathically

[1] Tillson also thinks that human beings have a *duty* to seek truth. Since not all religions can be true, initiating children into different religions is very likely to impede, for a large number of children, the performance of this duty.

[2] In the field of religious education studies there is an established distinction between learning about and learning from religion, as drawn by Michael Grimmitt. In his words, learning from religion refers to 'what pupils learn from their studies in religion about themselves—about discerning ultimate questions and "signals of transcendence" in their own experience and considering how they might respond to them' (Grimmitt 1987: 225). In the sense used here, learning from religion is more capacious, reflecting my own understanding of religion, itself more capacious than mainstream views and including, alongside metaphysical and ethical beliefs, practices, dispositions, and forms of sensitivity.

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immersed in each of the religions she was teaching that her lessons were a lot more than reporting on various views—rather, each of them was a plea for a particular religion (most usually inconsistent with the previous weeks' and with the ones to come). And I had plenty of occasions to meet atheists, militant or not, in Romania in the 1980s and 1990s of the last century. Yet, in a sense, I also grew up without religion, because I have never been required to embrace any, neither by being expected to adopt rituals and declare my faith, nor by being scared into fearing gods or punishments in the afterlife. Nobody pressured me into rejecting religion either. This regime of mild initiation into multiple religions as well as atheism enriched my understanding of the world and my sensitivity; it gave me access to epistemic and aesthetic goods without, as far as I can tell, violating my right to exercise my budding personal autonomy.

In his case against initiating children into religion, Tillson raises two specific worries. One has to do with the opportunity costs that children incur if they are initiated into a religion based on mistaken beliefs, and are therefore less likely to have access to true beliefs about the metaphysical and moral matters on which that religion takes a stand. The second concerns the risk of what he calls 'collateral errant belief formation (i.e. beliefs formed on the basis of premises which do not simply disappear when one later rejects the premises)' (Tillson 2019: 2). That is, even people who eventually reject a religious belief that they had acquired as a child are likely to retain some wrongly formed and mistaken lingering beliefs that survive the abandonment of their former religion.

But these desiderata are not necessarily in tension with religious initiation, unless 'initiation' means 'exclusive initiation'. Assume that adults ensure that children learn from a multitude of religions, rather than only one, thereby developing an ability to understand, as it were 'from within', a number of religious viewpoints and apply their own reason to evaluating them. This cannot but help children appreciate the contradictions between different religious views, and directly appreciate the merits and demerits of each religion. (As I explain in the next section, it also allows them to appreciate how much more there is to religion than a set of beliefs.) If anything, a regime of mild initiation by a multitude of believers in different religions is likely to prepare them to assess religious beliefs better than both exclusive initiation and no exposure.

Moreover, it is possible to initiate children into religions respectfully, that is, without recourse to coercion, manipulation, or deceit. Children's education, I propose, should be organized such that each child has multiple opportunities to visit the places of worship of different religions, under the guidance of some of their believers, with the aim of letting them be directly exposed to religious practice and religious people's reasons for their beliefs. This would involve having parents, educators, and others (like priests) tell children about their religions *qua* advocates, take children to places of religious practice, and encourage them (by a restricted array of means) to join in, facilitate their further access to these places and other believers. Children should have a protected freedom to engage in the rites of one or several of those religions, meaning that they can be intentionally introduced

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to religions and *allowed* to experiment with their beliefs and practices. But children, of course, cannot be coherently *required* to believe mutually contradictory doctrines, or to perform a variety of rites whose rationale are in contradiction with each other. Much of the attractiveness of this proposal depends on its details, which I cannot fully spell out in this short piece. Religious initiation that is respectful of children's rights does not license adults to seek to religiously enrol children by presenting as certain empirical claims that are highly controversial, by directly appealing to their fear of death or sense of guilt, or by using bribes. If children's initiation excludes the kinds of coercion and manipulation that make them likely to suspend critical thinking, the danger that children pay epistemic opportunity costs or acquire enduring pernicious epistemic attitudes, relative to no initiation, is significantly diminished.

I anticipate two, complementary, kinds of criticism levelled at this proposal. On the one hand, Tillson may worry that such direct exposure of children to religion increases the likelihood that they acquire false religious beliefs. I acknowledge that such risk exists, even if children are protected from expectations that they embrace any religious attitudes, beliefs, or practices. Children may be more influenceable than adults *via* nonrational means—like music, or scents, or the highly emotional effect of a group of people praying together. And yet, I think this is a risk worth taking, for two reasons. The first is that children are not entirely devoid of autonomy; rather, from an early age they have some measure of personal autonomy. As Paul Bou-Habib and Serena Olsaretti (2015) argue, adults ought to respect children's autonomy in proportion to its stage of development. This, I think, requires that we allow children—at least school children—to take some epistemic risks. If children are respectfully exposed to diverse sources of religious influence, the epistemic risks are highly mitigated, as they are likely to be able to use their reason to distance themselves from any particular beliefs. Second, getting a first-hand, empathetic grasp of religion is enriching, and can advance children's interest in the further development of their autonomy. Experiments in religion are part of their more general experimentation with beliefs, practices, and social roles, and this is how children form their practical identities (Schapiro 1999). Respectful multiple initiation is good for children because it gives them valuable access to different ways of living—as I elaborate in the next section.

On the other hand, a critic of my proposal may say that all the advantages of learning from different religions can be realized by merely allowing children to learn *about* religions, as Tillson himself proposes. And/or they may think that my proposal is in fact indistinguishable from the proposal of teaching children about religion, for instance by providing them with merely academic instruction. To meet this objection, I turn to the question of how to best understand religion. Whilst I think that the merits of my proposal are not entirely dependent on a particular view on this issue, their significance will likely vary with the answer to the question of what religion is.

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RELIGION AS PRACTICE AND SENSITIVITY, AND THE GOOD OF MULTIPLE INITIATION

Religion is particularly difficult to define. Like most contemporary philosophers of religion, Tillson works with a belief-centred account. According to him, religion has two essential—that is, individually necessary and jointly sufficient—features: 'a religion is anything which essentially requires (a) belief in superbeings and (b) submission to them as having rightful dominion' (Tillson 2019: 120).

I think this understanding of religion as, essentially, a set of metaphysical and ethical beliefs, is excessively intellectualist. It is the dominant understanding amongst contemporary scientists and philosophers, including practical philosophers (as argued, for instance, by Crane 2017 and Laborde 2017). But there are alternative views,[3] according to which religions are practices and forms of sensitivity—emotional and aesthetic dispositions, to a large extent interrelated—that members of that religion think are justified by particular metaphysical and ethical beliefs. Following Mircea Eliade (1987), I note that the metaphysical beliefs include, most generally, and at least implicitly, an ontology that distinguishes between sacred and profane reality. He understands the sacred as the reality perceived (rather than judged) to be the most fundamental, and therefore 'real'. The profane is (perceived as) a more trivial, sometimes even illusory, reality. Tim Crane refers to this feature by calling it 'a sense of the transcendent', and gives an account of religion by reference to 'the "religious impulse": a sense of the transcendent, of there being "more to it all than just this"' (Crane 2017: x). God(s) are typically part of the sacred, but the sacred need not consist of personal beings, and apophatic theologies deny the possibility of knowing *any* characteristics of the deity. Thus, the sacred seems to be more fundamental to religion than belief in supernatural beings. On this account, the most basic element of religion is a sense of the sacred rather than any conception of it. Whilst less intellectualist understandings of religion, like the one sketched here, encompass beliefs, they do not see the content of these beliefs as alone determining their religious character; to be religious, a belief must play some role in supporting religious sensitivities and dispositions.[4]

Such sensitivities and dispositions include a sense of the sacred and patterns of engaging one's senses in one's seeking, and partaking in, the sacred. (Or, in the case of more austere religions, seeking to relate to the sacred in nonsensorial ways.) One's religious sensitivity could, for example, consist of a sense of existential security, appeasement, consolation, or hopefulness, and one's availability to engage in the practices that are part and parcel of one's religion. It is possible that some such emotional dispositions, once formed, survive the loss of the belief, and perhaps even that

[3] In the philosophy of religion, less intellectualist conceptions are adopted by Crane (2017) and Laborde (2017).

[4] Exploring this possibility Plantinga (2007) writes that 'a belief isn't religious just in itself. The property of being religious is not intrinsic to a belief; it is rather one a belief acquires when it functions in a certain way in the life of a given person or community. To be a religious belief, the belief in question would have to be appropriately connected with characteristically religious attitudes on the part of the believer, such attitudes as worship, love, commitment, awe, and the like.'

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they can be generated through engagement in the practices of a religious community, in the absence of any corresponding religious beliefs. If so, then it makes (conceptual) sense to say that someone is religious even when they have lost the beliefs that they had once taken to justify the practices, sensitivity, and dispositions that constituted their religion. Maybe it even makes sense to say that one is religious without ever having held those beliefs, because one acquired the sensitivity and emotions that the religious community takes to be justified by their religious beliefs, and because one is open to engaging in the practices of that religion. If so, then Tillson is mistaken to think that '[n]obody is of a religion, unless they accept at least its key doctrinal elements (or something close enough to them)' (Tillson 2019: 179).

Such an anti-intellectualist account of religion significantly strengthens the proposal of multiple initiation.[5] If a religion is, essentially, a form of sensitivity, a set of dispositions and practices, this both explains the value of understanding religion and the claim that one cannot acquire such understanding without at the same time being initiated—in the loose sense explained above—into (a range) of religion(s). On the first count, it seems intrinsically valuable to be able to grasp enduring kinds of practices and sensitivities that have been engaging enormous numbers of people—indeed, probably the vast majority of human beings—throughout history. At the very least, as Crane puts it, we 'should try to understand religion because without such an understanding we lack an adequate sense of a fundamental part of human civilization and its history, and we therefore lack a proper understanding of ourselves' (2017: xi). Moreover, as others have noted, knowledge of religion is necessary for religious choice (McLaughlin 1984). Perhaps one need not acquire such knowledge during one's childhood in order to enjoy full autonomy in one's choice of religion; if so, all I have shown is that it is valuable to impart religious knowledge to children and that one can permissibly do so in the circumstances I specify. But I believe that in fact a stronger claim is correct: since children are owed the conditions necessary to develop their autonomy, and on the plausible assumption that they are faster learners than adults, it appears that childhood is the ideal time to engage in the process of learning from religions, and opportunities to do so may in fact be owed to children.

On the second count, religious understanding involves experiential knowledge as well as acquaintance with beliefs—or even instead of acquaintance with beliefs, in the case of religions that place little weight on beliefs. It requires to know what it feels like to be part of a religious practice, and directly exposed to the expressions of that religious sensitivity. Making sense of religion cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge; it requires an element of know-how. But if 'religious initiation' is best understood as the gaining of experiential knowledge of religion, then what it takes for a child to grasp the religious phenomenon is indeed a kind of initiation.

[5] But is not crucial to it, since, even on intellectualistic conceptions of religion, practices and sensitivity arguably play some role in religious phenomena; knowledge of these religious aspects is both valuable and requires experience in order to be properly grasped.

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CONCLUSION

My substantive disagreement with Tillson—if we have one—depends on how profoundly aware children ought to be made of religion. Do they have a claim to be given access to the nonpropositional aspects of religions, that is, to their sensorial, aesthetic, communal, and therefore profoundly emotionally impactful sides, such as song, dance, or other rituals? And is it possible to appreciate these without being allowed to be an occasional participant in religious practices, and have someone sympathetic to such practices help make sense of them?

I gave my sketchily justified answers to these questions above. But I share, with Tillson and others, the concern that adults should not subvert children's ability to use their reason, which is still in training and therefore more vulnerable than adults'. Indeed, this is one aspect of children's general vulnerability which, I argue elsewhere (Gheaus 2021), requires the elimination of monopolies of power and influence over children. Before concluding, I note that an arrangement whereby all children are exposed to multiple religious influences, respectfully conducted, would be a lot less vulnerable than Tillson's view to what I take to be one of the greatest challenges to the latter: that, by requiring children's education to be guided by truths about human flourishing, it violates the neutrality constraint on exercising power over children (Clayton 2024 and forthcoming). Exposure to multiple advocates of diverse religions views and militant atheism can be justified by appealing to children's interest in personal autonomy instead of their interest in a flourishing–enabling childhood. Further, such education is far from amounting to children's enrolment in particular religions, nor does it need to subvert their ability to rationally appreciate religious views.

I have argued that religious initiation is likely to always have value. But it can only have its full value realized, and it is only permissible, when conducted in a respectful manner and involving a plurality of religious initiations. The agents who stand in fiduciary relationships with children are under a duty to ensure that these conditions are met. Religion, taken seriously, can be powerful, and no highly impressionable person should be left alone to deal with the spell of a single such influence.

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