Religious Schools

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Religious schools, in one form or another, have been around for centuries, long before education for the masses was deemed the responsibility of the state. Organized education generally was religious in nature, and this extended even to higher education; indeed, even medicine and law were subordinate to theology in many of the world's leading universities for more than a century. So late was the arrival of state-sponsored education that national governments in many places incorporated what religious schools had long been doing. Perhaps one of the better-known illustrations is the United Kingdom, where the state only began funding, organizing, and regulating the *majority* of schools after 1944, in part because religious schools so long resisted being co-opted by what they perceived to be a "secular agenda." One result of longstanding educational provision by religious authorities is that in many countries religious schools continue to be a fixed part of the state-financed educational landscape.

The variety of religious schools has expanded considerably in the past several decades, either due to delayed recognition (e.g., Jewish schools post-World War II), missionary activity (e.g., Evangelical schools in East Africa) or migration (e.g., Sikh schools in England). In Europe, official state recognition of the "new religions" (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam) began in the early 1970s, but it would be the late 1980s before the first Islamic schools would be established; this would take an additional ten years in England. And, indeed, since 1998 the most rapid expansion of Islamic schools has been in England, though the vast majority continue to operate in the independent sector, and thus without direct state financing.

Religious schools receive state funding in many countries across the world, from Australia to India to Brazil. Yet, even in Europe, where state financing and management is common, the situation is quite complex (Glenn and De Groof, 2002). In some countries, such as Italy and Bulgaria, the state offers no financial aid to religious schools. Elsewhere, such as Spain and France, public funding depends upon a contractual relationship with the state, and said contract generally favors the historically dominant faith. In Scandinavia, funding is generous but not wall to wall. National governments cover roughly three-quarters of the cost. In Germany, state financing varies between *Länder* but runs between 55 and 85 percent. In Belgium and Ireland, Catholic schools receive virtually the same funding that nonreligious schools do; in the Netherlands the state funds all of its schools – religious and nonreligious alike – for 100 percent of the costs, provided the school meets all relevant requirements. Depending upon the student body they serve, religious schools may even receive *more* funding than nonreligious schools in order to compensate for socioeconomic disadvantage.

Along with state funding Dutch religious schools are also subject to state learning targets, curricular guidelines, teacher qualification standards, approved academic assessments, civic education requirements, and periodic inspection. How much time schools are permitted to devote to religious instruction may also be stipulated. Until fairly recently, Danish free schools – many of which have a religious character – were largely exempt from many of these requirements, and, with the exception of periodic inspections that entail nonbinding recommendations, most schools in England's independent sector continue to be exempt. Elsewhere, for example in most of North America, religious schools have largely opted to remain separate from the state's direct control with the exception of minimal health and safety requirements. Exceptions include Catholic education in Ontario and Alberta, as well as certain cities (notably Cleveland and Milwaukee), which have incorporated religious schools into their voucher schemes, making them accessible to poor families.

Because most North American religious schools receive no direct funding from the state, they must rely on tuition fees, but they may also raise

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additional funds through donations and private sponsoring. Yet while they may receive no *direct* funding from the state, these same religious schools often enjoy tax exemption status, and some students may be entitled to additional public educational services, for instance, owing to a disability, whether or not a school district uses a voucher system. Unlike their European counterparts, a majority of North American religious schools are free to decide whether to follow, or deviate from, a curriculum similar to their secular counterparts. They also generally take more liberty in selecting teachers whose beliefs and values match those of the school. That said, there remain strong incentives to provide an education that is competitive with what the local public schools can offer.

Religious schools remain an attractive option to parents for a variety of reasons. Like all parents, religious parents hope to transmit their values to their children. Religious schools appeal to these parents by emphasizing the centrality of faith, but also in maintaining traditional practices (e.g., modest dress codes) that many parents have reason to value. More conservative religious schools also incorporate religious doctrine into all subjects, perhaps especially on topics thought to be controversial, such as human sexuality or macroevolutionary theory in biology. Yet while all religious schools inevitably share certain characteristics in common, the differences between them are great, ranging from the fundamentalist variety to those that retain a nominal religious identity. Some religious schools (e.g., Steiner, Quaker) may not even be perceived as such, given the association with "progressive" pedagogy. Other religious schools serve indigenous (e.g., New Zealand's Māori) or immigrant communities (e.g., Greek Orthodox). Here religious identity may serve as a proxy for one's cultural background.

In many places – including Asia and Africa – private religious schools have become increasingly popular. The reasons for this, too, are quite varied. For instance, while sex abuse scandals have rocked Catholic schools in many countries, many report far fewer incidents of physical and sexual assault in private religious schools in Africa compared to state schools. Further, a belief persists in many countries that religious schools are able to provide a better quality education. Whether this is actually the case continues to be difficult to confirm (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Driessen, Agirdag, and Merry, 2016; Dronkers, 2004). Some evidence suggests that private religious schools are popular with parents owing to the dedication of the teachers, smaller average class size, stricter disciplinary procedures, and, perhaps most importantly, the presence of a shared set of values and commitments between staff, pupils, and parents. Others attribute the success to the administrative freedoms private schools generally enjoy to manage their schools without the burdensome regulations their public counterparts have.

Critics argue that if and when religious schools "outperform" their nonreligious counterparts it has more to do with their fees, selection procedures, stricter discipline, or their smaller intake of children with learning disabilities or behavioral problems. Elsewhere, it has been observed that religious schools benefit from "magnet effects," where, for instance, the (white) middle and upper classes are drawn to a homogeneous learning environment for their child without having to "go private." In the United Kingdom, these are charges levied against Church of England and, in some cases, Roman Catholic schools.

Over the past 45 years there has been increasing vocal opposition to religious schools, particularly in Western Europe. Only some of this opposition is related to the perception that some religious schools might be excluding the less fortunate. Much of the opposition rests on the conviction that it is no longer tenable to fund and support so many religious schools when the number of persons professing religious belief has sharply declined. This argument, buttressed by the belief that Europe has undergone a profound "secularization," maintains that religious schools are but an obsolete cultural relic to be discarded in favor of nondenominational alternatives. Relatedly, religious schools are believed to contribute to segregation and "divisiveness": Rather than maintain a system in which persons are drawn to schools that reflect their own cultural or religious background, children ought to attend the same schools, learning from – and not only about – each other through substantive interaction. Underneath this argument lies a concern with fostering the skills and dispositions necessary for citizenship. It remains unclear, however,

whether religious schools are more guilty of segregation than nonreligious schools. Nor is it clear why attending a religious school would make one less capable of cultivating the skills and dispositions necessary for citizenship than nonreligious alternatives (Merry, 2013).

Another common criticism brought against religious schools is that they are guilty of indoctrinating children into beliefs that, at best, are lacking in empirical justification, and, at worst, that are antithetical to an intellectual disposition necessary for considering contradictory evidence and argument (Dearden, 1972; Kleinig, 1982). Yet, given the variety of religious schools, it is not self-evident that indoctrination features prominently in their pedagogy; it also is not self-evident that religious schools are more guilty of indoctrination *simpliciter* than nonreligious schools, for instance with respect to the teaching of history and citizenship. Whatever the case, there is no united front against religious schools, even among secular critics. Many, in fact, defend religious schools for what they are able to provide in terms of a psychologically stable foundation believed to be healthy for a child's normal identity development. Part of fostering that identity involves coming to share a coherent worldview with one's parents and other community members (Burtt, 1994; Mills, 2003). Hence, rather than "exposing" children to a smorgasbord of ideas or alternative lifestyles from which to choose, the *provisional* construction of a culturally coherent school environment can work to a child's advantage.

By far the most popular argument enlisted by philosophers against religious schools has been that they hamper a child's ability to become an "autonomous self" (Clayton, 2006; Dwyer, 2001). An "autonomous self" is meant to describe someone capable of considering different points of view, but also someone who is capable of discerning the difference between merely accepting certain things to be true as a matter of faith versus on the strength of rational argument and evidence. To foster autonomy, the argument runs, schools ought to be places that facilitate encounters with different cultures, experiences, and perspectives in terms of the teaching staff, the pupil intake, the curriculum, and generally the variety of perspectives on offer, where the intended aim is to facilitate considered reflection on these differences. In this way, young people should be exposed to a broad range of options concerning what their life might be like, with the school refraining from endorsing either the mainstream or the home culture.

Though an attractive ideal, over the years it has been subjected to a number of criticisms. To enumerate but a few, it has been argued that (1) autonomy is an overly demanding good; (2) a fixation with autonomy ignores the social and historical narratives that shape us; (3) autonomy operates at cross-purposes with the cultivation of moral character; (4) it potentially harms otherwise healthy parent–child relationships; (5) it conflicts with commitments and other life projects; and even (6) its putative requirements run contrary to the necessity of authority and heteronomy in the educational domain. Relatedly, intellectualized accounts of autonomy (such as those typical of rational choice theory) have largely been discredited for what they ignore about the impact of genetics on our personalities and temperament; the role of socialization from parents, peers, teachers, social media, and the broader culture; and the almost inexpungible presence of implicit bias.

Each of these imperceptibly shapes our – largely unconscious and therefore unexamined – beliefs, assumptions, and preferences. These and other criticisms have inclined the defenders of autonomy to dial back what they understand it to require. But in dialing back the demands of autonomy, it remains unclear just what purpose it serves in the antireligious school account: Either autonomy demands too much, or it can be fostered (if only provisionally) in religious schools, or it requires only that one satisfy a minimal level of critical reflection, in which case the threshold is easily met.

SEE ALSO: Educational Inequality; Religion; School Choice; School Climate; Social Capital and Education

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