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Religious education and religious choice

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In previous work (Hand 2003; Hand and White 2004) I have argued that the only adequate justification for compulsory religious education in schools is what I call the ‘possibility-of-truth case’:

Pupils should be given opportunities to consider religious propositions, and be equipped to make informed, rational judgments on their truth or falsity, on the grounds that some of those propositions *may in fact be true*. Religions make claims about the world with far-reaching implications for the way life should be lived; if there is a genuine possibility that some of those claims are true, it is arguable that pupils have a right to be made aware of them and provided with the wherewithal to evaluate them. (Hand 2003, 161)

Justifying compulsory religious education in this way has some important implications for the aims and content of the subject. It implies that religious education will not be primarily concerned with imparting bodies of knowledge about religious institutions, texts and practices, or with cultivating empathetic understanding of other people’s religious views, or with inviting reflection on morally edifying narratives in religious literature (though it is likely to retain these as secondary concerns). Rather, the foremost task of religious education will be to ensure that pupils understand the meaning of religious propositions and can evaluate the evidence and argument bearing on the question of their truth. Attention will be given to arguments for and against the existence of God, the immortality of the soul and life after death; to reports of miracles and private religious experiences and their evidential weight; to the appeal of comprehensive doctrines or worldviews and the criteria by which they might be assessed; and to different forms of textual authority and their justifying grounds. Crucially, the possibility-of-truth case for religious education implies that pupils will be actively encouraged to question the religious beliefs they bring with them into the classroom and to judge for themselves which religious or irreligious view is the most plausible.

My focus here will be on another argument for compulsory religious education that bears some striking similarities to the possibility-of-truth case. According to this argument, pupils have a right to be made aware of the religious and irreligious paths open to them and equipped with the wherewithal to choose between them. Different paths make different demands on those who follow them and, because people are differently constituted, the demands of any given path will be more burdensome to some than to others. People cannot flourish if they are following a path that is unduly burdensome to them, so a central task of education is to enable pupils to find and follow paths that allow them to flourish. What justifies compulsory religious education, then, is the interest people have in knowing what religious and irreligious paths are available and being able to choose between them. I will call this the ‘religious choice case’.

Notwithstanding the similarities between the religious choice case and the possibility-of-truth case, my view is that they are fundamentally different and that only the latter succeeds. In what follows I try to explain why.

The religious choice case

In a recent essay Harry Brighouse makes the religious choice case for religious education in the course of defending personal autonomy as a basic educational aim:

Children have a right to the opportunity to make and act on well-informed and well-thought-out judgments about how to live their own lives. The animating idea behind the goal is that, for human beings to enjoy a good life, they have to find a way of life that is suited to their particular personalities. Think about religious choice. Some people may flourish brilliantly within the constraints laid down by Roman Catholicism, but others may find that those constraints make it impossible to live well. We make our choices about whether to be Roman Catholics based on a judgment of fit between the chosen life and ourselves; the better the fit, the better we flourish. But it is important that we have knowledge about other religious views and nonreligious views because, for some (those who cannot flourish within Catholicism), flourishing will depend on being able to adopt alternatives. Not only do we need knowledge of the alternatives, we also need the self-knowledge, habits of mind, and strength of character to make the appropriate alternative choices. (Brighouse 2009, 36)

Personal autonomy should be a basic aim of education because we significantly improve people's prospects of flourishing by giving them the knowledge and independence of mind to choose ways of life that suit them. Autonomy is particularly important in the area of religion because, for some people, the constraints of the religious tradition in which they are raised 'make it impossible to live well'. So an education for personal autonomy will necessarily include a form of religious education in which pupils acquire both 'knowledge about other religious views and nonreligious views' and 'the self-knowledge, habits of mind, and strength of character to make the appropriate alternative choices'.

Brighouse identifies two further areas in which it is important to cultivate personal autonomy: work and sexual relationships. People are more likely to flourish if they are in jobs and relationships that fulfil them; and they are more likely to end up in fulfilling jobs and relationships if they are in a position to make independent and well-informed occupational and sexual choices. Just as people must be free to choose religious traditions other than the ones they are raised in, so they must be free to choose forms of employment and types of sexual relationship other than the ones their families push them towards. The religious choice case for compulsory religious education is, then, an exact analogue of the occupational choice case for compulsory careers education and the sexual choice case for compulsory sex education.

Brighouse is not the first to articulate the religious choice case. An early statement of it is found in the 1971 Department for Education and Science report *Prospects and Problems for Religious Education*. The authors write:

religious education, seen as an introduction to the religious dimension of life, to the faiths and philosophies with which man has faced the human situation, has a very

strong claim to a place in the curriculum, both because of the importance to man's history and development of the themes with which it deals, and *because the pupil needs such knowledge to enable him to choose his own way of life for himself.* (DfES 1971, 56, my italics)

Basil Singh also advances a version of the argument in his defence of the 'phenomenological approach' to religious education (Singh 1986). Singh's premise is 'the basic notion that the pupil's education must assist his task of choosing responsibly and selecting critically between the available possibilities within a pluralist society' (240). Given this premise, the fact that 'religious education can play a part in bringing about the choice of an informed and intelligent life stance' (*ibid.*) counts strongly in favour of its inclusion in the curriculum.

Notwithstanding these examples, it is fair to say that the religious choice case does not enjoy widespread support among religious education theorists in the UK. While most recognise that the legal requirement on English schools to provide religious education for all pupils stands in need of justification, few are tempted by the justificatory thought that children must be equipped to choose responsibly between religions. While, in the end, I agree that this is not the right way to justify compulsory religious education, I also think there is a tendency among religious education theorists to dismiss it too quickly and for the wrong reasons.

Choice and taste

The most familiar objection to the religious choice case is that it reduces religion to a matter of taste. It assumes that people choose their religious beliefs in roughly the same way as they choose their breakfast cereals: they browse the products on display and select the one that most appeals to them. Robert Jackson describes the worry as follows:

The perception of members of certain religious groups is that schools encourage children to be a 'law unto themselves' in matters of religion and values. Children, it is alleged, are encouraged to choose beliefs and values rather in the manner of selecting cans of beans or fruit from the shelves of a supermarket. (Jackson 2004, 28)

To think of religions as analogous to food products, and religiously plural societies as analogous to supermarkets, is, of course, to trivialise them. It is to underestimate the significance of religion in people's lives, the intimate connections between religious belief and personal identity, and the difficulty and upheaval of conversion from one religious view to another. The point about supermarket choice is that very little turns on it: it really doesn't matter whether one chooses tinned peaches or tinned pears. We allow such choices to be governed by taste precisely because we think them unimportant. (And the moment we stop thinking them unimportant is the moment we stop using taste as the criterion for making them: if meat is murder, the fact that I prefer hamburgers to veggie burgers has no bearing on my choice between them.)

The trivialisation of religion associated with the idea of religious choice is expertly satirised by Woody Allen in the film *Hannah and Her Sisters* (Allen 1986). Allen's character, Mickey, is plagued by hypochondria and existential angst and decides to try out some different religions in the hope of alleviating his discomfort. He begins, to the horror of his Jewish parents, with Roman Catholicism, selected for its beauty and structure (or, at least, the beauty

and structure of its 'against-school-prayer, pro-abortion, anti-nuclear wing'). When Catholicism fails to satisfy him, he turns his attention to the Hare Krishna movement:

KRISHNA LEADER: What makes you interested in becoming a Hare Krishna?

MICKEY: Well, I'm not saying that I want to join or anything, but... I know you guys believe in reincarnation, you know, so it interests me.

KRISHNA LEADER: Yeah, well, what's your religion?

MICKEY: Well, I was born Jewish, you know, but last winter I tried to become a Catholic and... it didn't work for me. I studied and I tried and I gave it everything, but, you know, Catholicism for me was die now, pay later, you know. And I just couldn't get with it. And I, and I wanted to, you know.

KRISHNA LEADER: You're afraid of dying?

MICKEY: Well...yeah, naturally. Aren't you? Let me ask you, reincarnation, does that mean my soul would pass to another human being, or would I come back as a moose or an aardvark or something?

What Allen exposes in these scenes is the travesty of construing religions as objects of consumer choice. Mickey tries out new religions in the way most of us try out new restaurants, declining to go back when they are not quite to his taste. His conversion from Judaism to Catholicism is scuppered by his inability to make the transition from rye bread and mustard to Wonder Bread and Hellmann's Mayonnaise. And his decision about the Hare Krishna movement is made, in the end, on tonsorial and sartorial grounds: 'Who are you kidding? You're gonna be a Krishna? You're gonna shave your head and put on robes and dance around at airports?'. Anyone trying to choose between religions in the way Mickey does has badly misunderstood what they are about.

The worry that choice trivialises religion is, I think, the chief reason for wariness among theorists about the religious choice case for compulsory religious education. But it is a bad reason. It is a bad reason because taste is not the only choice-making criterion. From the claim that people should be equipped to choose between the religious and irreligious paths open to them, it does not follow that they should be taught to choose, or even that they are likely to end up choosing, on the basis of taste. To the contrary, an important early step in any serious attempt to equip people for religious choice will be to differentiate it from consumer choice: it is precisely not a matter of browsing rival belief systems and selecting the most appealing.

Recall what Brighthouse says about our religious choices. They are made, he says, on the basis of 'a judgment of fit between the chosen life and ourselves'. To make such choices well it is not enough for us to have knowledge of the religious options available: we must also have self-knowledge. We need to know ourselves deeply enough and clearly enough to be able to recognise that certain kinds of demand will be too onerous for us to bear, certain expectations so stifling as to prevent our flourishing. We must understand that there are facts about the way we are constituted, about our most basic orientations, inclinations and affiliations, that fit us well for some religious paths and poorly for others. The task of choosing a religion involves thinking hard about who we are and about our capacity to lead good lives as members of different religious and irreligious communities.

Again, occupational choice and sexual choice are helpful analogues. We do not choose our careers in the way we choose our socks. Rather we spend our formative years finding out

what we are good at, what we enjoy doing and what we want out of life. And we try to match this understanding of ourselves with an understanding of the range of employment opportunities realistically available to us. Similarly, decisions about whether to form sexual relationships with people of the same sex or the opposite sex or both, or whether to form many or few or no sexual relationships, and whether simultaneously or serially, are decisions properly based on self-knowledge, on understanding of social norms, expectations and prejudices, and on ethical reflection about what it is to live well and treat others well. It is because these choices are difficult, complex and important, because we do not think of them as matters of taste, that most of us support programmes of careers education and sex education in schools.

To make a choice is simply to select something from a range of possibilities. There are many kinds of choice and many ways of making them. Supermarket choice, selection from a range of products on the basis of personal taste, is not paradigmatic of choice generally. So the religious choice case for compulsory religious education cannot fairly be rejected on the grounds that choosing between religions somehow trivialises them.

Choice and belief

There is, nevertheless, a problem with the religious choice case, and it is a serious one. There is a very important respect in which religions are quite unlike careers and sexual relationships. At the core of what it is to have a religion is the holding of certain beliefs – about the transcendent, the supernatural or the spiritual, about the beginning or the end of the world, about gods, avatars, angels or demons, about the immortality, incarnation or liberation of the soul, about sin, sacrifice, salvation or redemption. The differences between the followers of different religious and irreligious paths are fundamentally differences of belief: the followers assent to different propositions about what the world is like. That is not the case with people who work in different fields or form different types of sexual relationship. What distinguishes a barrister from a barista, or a physician from a physicist, is not adherence to a creed; nor is this what distinguishes people in same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, or in open and closed ones.

The core cognitive dimension of religion is problematic for the religious choice case because there is something awry with the notion of choosing beliefs. It assumes we can exercise direct control over what we believe. But our beliefs are not so much things we *do* as things that *happen to us*; they are one of the ways in which the world impresses itself upon us, not one of the ways in which we impress ourselves upon the world. We believe what we do because of how things strike us, and how things strike us is not usually of our choosing.

Direct doxastic voluntarism (the view that we have direct control over our beliefs) has come under heavy fire from philosophers over the last few decades. Here is William Alston's well-known argument against it:

I shall merely contend that we are not so constituted as to be able to take up propositional attitudes at will. My argument for this, if it can be called that, simply consists in asking you to consider whether you have any such powers. Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the United States is still a colony of Great Britain, just by deciding to do so? If you find it too incredible that you should be sufficiently motivated to try to believe this, suppose that someone offers you \$500,000,000 to

believe it, and you are much more interested in the money than in believing the truth. Could you do what it takes to get that reward?... It seems clear to me that I have no such power. Volitions, decisions or choosings don't hook up with anything in the way of propositional attitude inauguration, just as they don't hook up with the secretion of gastric juices or cell metabolism. (Alston 1988, 263)

Alston's claim is not that believing at will is *logically* impossible. We can *imagine* beings who are so constituted as to be able to take up propositional attitudes at will, beings who can see quite plainly that grass is green and yet choose to believe that it is blue. But we are not beings of that kind. It is *psychologically* impossible for us, or at least for most of us most of the time, to believe whatever we want. We form beliefs about how things are on the basis of how they seem to be, not on the basis of how we would like them to be. Because things are not always as they seem, our beliefs are often mistaken; and because things seem different to different people, we often disagree; but our propensity to error and disagreement attests only to the gap between appearance and reality, not to a capacity for forming beliefs at will.

The picture Brighthouse paints of autonomous individuals choosing between religions on the basis of judgments of fit is therefore badly distorted. People do not convert from one religion to another, or lose their faith, because they find a way of life better suited to their personalities. They convert, or lose their faith, because the view they previously held no longer seems credible to them, because the world now strikes them differently from the way it struck them before. Far from being choices, made with a view to harmonising self and life stance, conversions and apostasies are often involuntary, unwanted and detrimental to flourishing. Converts to conservative forms of Christianity or Islam may find themselves committed to standards of conduct quite at odds with their personal wants and needs; those who lose their faith may be in permanent mourning for the tradition and community that once sustained them. In religion, as in other areas of life, changes of belief are rarely under our direct control and cannot generally be said to make our lives better.

The religious choice case for compulsory religious education fails, then, because people do not choose their beliefs. Religious and irreligious views have a core cognitive dimension that makes it inappropriate to talk of choosing between them. Religious education cannot be justified on the grounds that children in plural societies must be equipped for religious choice.

From the claim that we do not have direct control over our religious and irreligious views, however, it does not follow that we have *no* control over them, or that we have no responsibility for them. To the contrary, there is much we can do to improve our beliefs on religious matters and good reason to do it. We can and should exercise *indirect* control over our religious beliefs by attending as closely and as carefully as we can to relevant evidence and argument, to the full range of considerations bearing on the question of their truth. We cannot choose our religious beliefs, but we can choose how hard to think about them, how critically to examine their grounds, how open-mindedly to consider contrary views and alternative perspectives. This sort of rational scrutiny will often result in things coming to look different from the way they looked before, and thus in changes to our beliefs on religious matters. The new beliefs are no more likely to be suited to our personalities than the old ones; but they *are* more likely to be true. And it is because we all have an interest in holding true beliefs, especially on matters of significant practical

import, that we have good reason to exercise this sort of indirect control over our religious and irreligious views.

Here, then, is the crux of the difference between the religious choice case and the possibility-of-truth case. The former mistakenly assumes that beliefs can be changed at will and proposes that children be equipped to choose the religious beliefs that best suit their personalities. The latter recognises that the control we have over our beliefs is usually only indirect, a matter of choosing whether and how closely to examine their grounds, and proposes that children be equipped to conduct such examinations as competently and carefully as possible.

Steps of faith

Someone who broadly accepts the philosophical critique of direct doxastic voluntarism, who agrees that it is not usually psychologically possible for us to believe at will, might nevertheless hold that religious beliefs are exceptions to the rule. A distinguishing feature of religious beliefs, such a person might argue, is precisely their volitional basis: religious beliefs are characteristically acquired by consciously chosen steps of faith. Religion, on this view, is the one area of life in which beliefs are things we do rather than things that happen to us.

This objection deserves to be taken seriously. Talk of steps or leaps of faith is by no means uncommon in religious contexts, and the metaphors of stepping and leaping certainly seem to suggest acts of believing over which people exercise direct control. Some consideration of this phenomenon is needed before the religious choice case for religious education can be safely dismissed.

Perhaps the first point to make is that many sincere religious believers report nothing resembling a step or leap of faith. They are persuaded of the truth of their religious beliefs in roughly the same ways as they are the persuaded of the truth of their scientific, historical and psychological beliefs: by the testimony of trusted others, acquaintance with supporting evidence and argument, coherence with intuitions and other beliefs, etc. Their experience of coming to religious faith, or of progressing from an unreflective to a considered faith, is no more one of choosing or leaping than their experience of coming to believe that human beings evolved from more primitive species, or that the causes of human behaviour sometimes lie in repressed desires and impulses. Steps of faith are certainly not necessary to religious belief and may not be particularly common. It is possible that they are a rather local and recent feature of Protestant Christianity, a legacy of Kierkegaard and existentialist accounts of the human situation.

A second point is that steps of faith, as ordinarily understood, are very unlike the sort of religious choices described by Brighouse. The anomic unbeliever who leaps into the arms of God is not making a prudential judgment about the way of life best suited to her personality. Her decision is not the end result of a series of cost-benefit analyses and self-life-stance compatibility tests. It is striking that the example of religious choice Brighouse gives is of someone exiting Roman Catholicism to escape its constraints – a move in the opposite direction from those we might be tempted to describe as steps of faith.

How, then, should we understand the notion of a step of faith? I suggest that the idea is naturally at home in a rather specific set of epistemic circumstances. Sometimes in life we find ourselves confronted with rival views, theories or hypotheses and insufficient evidence to say which of them is right. Usually, in such situations, our response is to reserve judgment, to remain agnostic until such time as more evidence comes to light. But suppose that, for a given epistemic agent, two further conditions obtain. First, the available evidence, while insufficient to settle the matter, nevertheless seems to support one view better than it supports the others. Second, indefinite agnosticism is in some way costly: perhaps, for example, the matter under dispute strikes one as so important, so significant for the conduct of life, that reserving judgment feels like an evasion of responsibility or a failure to face up to an existential demand. It may be that an epistemic agent for whom these two conditions are satisfied *is* able to choose between agnosticism and acceptance of the best supported view. Perhaps, in these specific circumstances, we really can decide for ourselves whether to withhold belief on the grounds of insufficient evidence or commit ourselves to whichever religious or irreligious view seems most likely to be true.

If this is right, direct doxastic voluntarism is not wholly false. While it is normally the case that believing at will is not psychologically possible for us, it sometimes is possible. Where we judge that the evidence for a claim is insufficient, that it nevertheless supports the claim better than any alternative, and that reserving judgment is problematic, we can choose whether or not to believe the claim. We can go beyond what is warranted by the evidence and believe by faith. (Note that we are concerned here with what is psychologically possible, not with what is ethically responsible. I leave open the question of whether there is room in a defensible ethics of belief for steps of faith as I have characterised them.)

But I do not think any of this helps the religious choice case. In plural societies people hold a wide variety of religious and irreligious views, and schools certainly have a role in equipping children to respond appropriately to that variety. But responding appropriately is not a matter of choosing the view that best fits one's personality. It is a matter of subjecting each view to critical scrutiny, of investigating the relevant evidence and argument with an open mind, of trying to discover the truth. The hope is not that children will determine their own beliefs, but that they will let their beliefs be determined by the evidence. Choice does not come into the question of whether it is Christianity or Buddhism, Islam or Confucianism, pantheism or atheism, that enjoys the strongest argumentative support or tells the most plausible story about the human condition. If there is, for some of us, a choice to be made at the end of our religious inquiries between reserving judgment and accepting the best supported view, that fact should not be ignored; but nor should its significance be exaggerated. The hardest part of the journey, and the part for which education can do most to prepare us, is the search for the best supported view.

Granting the possibility of voluntaristic steps of faith, then, offers no reprieve for the religious choice case. Only the possibility-of-truth case is adequate to the task of justifying compulsory religious education in schools. The basic question about religion children must be encouraged to ask and equipped to answer is not 'Which, if any, of these ways of life is right for me?' but 'Which, if any, of these claims about the world is true?'

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