For State-Funded Inter-Religious Education

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Abstract
In this paper I address the vexed question of the relationship between secular states and religious education.

In this paper I address the vexed question of the relationship between secular states and religious education. In theocracies and in states with an established religion, all publicly funded schools are required to impart religious instruction. The issue of whether or not this should be done never arises in such states. But in secular states, this question is important and urgent. This is why I raise it here, and my answer is that states already committed to the rule of law, that guarantee a bundle of meaningful individual rights, criminalize hate speech and have an established system of 'secular' education, should shed their inhibition about religion and adopt a policy of inter-religious education.[1]

This is neither an argument for formal religious instruction in schools, something that states might legitimately discourage, nor, given deep religious diversity in all modern societies, the advocacy to teach the dominant religion.[2] In fact, this is not even an argument for teaching the dominant religion but giving the option to children from non-dominant religions not to take part in such education. Instead, my claim is that states must assume responsibility for teaching the ethical traditions of all religions.

Religious education should not be left to the family where learning is largely unsystematic and informal, nor be confined to schools

[1] This has been a criticism levelled against Western European states where religious education has been dominated by Christianity. Critics have legitimately argued for a more 'capacious' understanding of humanism and world-religions, as has been articulated in the introduction to Smyth et al (2013).

[2] This argument has some validity in places where good education is unavailable in school run by non-dominant religions. In such schools, children should be provided education without discrimination on grounds of religion and also be exempt from specific instruction in the dominant religion.

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funded and run by religious communities themselves, and where biases might go unchecked. Unbiased inter-religious education alone enables citizens to learn about and responsibly criticize each other's ethical values. It also helps place one's own ethical tradition in critical perspective. This is necessary for social harmony, a value irreducible to individualistically-construed moral values. I illustrate my argument by discussing the case of India.

Before exploring this issue, I must specify what I mean by 'religious education'. 'Religious education' means a deeper, more thorough understanding of the cumulative tradition of a particular religion. I borrow the term 'cumulative tradition' from Wilfred Cantwell Smith which he takes to be, the historic deposit of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological and philosophical systems, dance patterns, legal and social institutions, moral codes, myths, and so on, anything that can be transmitted from one person or generation to another and that even a scholar (an outsider) can grasp more or less objectively (Smith, 1991, pp. 156-57). So, while aspects of particular religious experiences can only be grasped from the inside, traditions are knowable even by outsiders.

To repeat, education *in* the cumulative tradition of a particular religion is different from education *about* it. Education in religion is a part of the larger process of religious instruction, the whole purpose of which is to initiate the child into a faith or to strengthen it if she already has it. Education about the cumulative tradition, as I have mentioned may be possessed even by the outsider. Hence, the phrase 'religious education' is ambiguous between education in religion (religious instruction) and education of the cumulative tradition of a religion. I wish to sharply distinguish the two.

For those who hold the view that all religious education is religious instruction, and in addition, religion is an outdated form of living and knowledge, a storehouse of superstition and obscurantism that systematically inculcates blind acceptance of authority, and undermines any capacity for independent thought, the answer to the question is obvious. The true function of education is to impart a sense of individual autonomy (critical thinking, independence of thought) and make children into good citizens (openness, capacity to deliberate and to listen to others, reasonableness, respect for difference, solidarity, a sense of justice, inclusiveness, and accommodation), features believed to be central to a liberal-democratic, secular vision. Religious education, it is claimed, undermines both. Thus, religious education must not be part of the curriculum of any school, public or private. Rather, there must be one common school which provides only secular education to believers and non-believers alike.

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How plausible is this view? When a particular religion takes a dogmatic form, systematically undermines individual curiosity and critical thinking and valorizes religious identity above citizenship, then quite clearly it should not be taught in high schools run by secular states. Perhaps, such religions should be even actively discouraged by these states. But there is no cumulative religious tradition which wholly fits the above description, so aspects of every known religion can always be part of the school curricula.

Indeed, it is hard to deny that humans invariably relate to something beyond themselves, that for many this means relating to god, gods and goddesses or some other higher entity, that they do so in different ways, and that this manifests itself as individual belief and feeling as well as social practice in the public domain, embodied, under modern conditions, in different religious and secular spiritual traditions. As the scientist Merlin Donald has argued, humans as we know them always need all three systems of cognition: mimetic, mythic and the theoretic (Donald, 2012). If this is so, religion which emphasizes the mimetic (ritual) and mythic (cosmic narratives), will never entirely disappear. If so, a democratic secularist must find a way to reconcile the importance of citizenship and individual autonomy on the one hand, and strong religious convictions and commitments on the other. She must understand that while they wish to make their children into citizens, parents may also wish to give them the opportunity to learn about their religious traditions, have their identities shaped by them.

This raises an important issue which is rarely addressed in India but has been a topic of extensive discussion among liberal educationists in Europe. European liberals have rightly argued that children must not be treated as entirely passive, their agency must also be taken into account. This recognition of children's agency can be seen 'as occurring along a continuum that ranges from listening to children, supporting them in expressing their views, taking their views into account, involving them in decision-making processes to children sharing power' (Shier, 2001, p. 112).

I am partly sympathetic to this critique. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that until children reach a certain age, say 14-16, they remain dependent for most significant aspects of their lives on their parents. The most radical advocate of individual autonomy must concede the point that choosing with care and judgement with an understanding of the context and anticipation of potential consequence presuppose a wide-ranging, informal, and formal education. This is as true of religion as of other life choices. Indeed, one can well argue that for one's eventual choice of religion, a grasp of a

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wide variety of religious experiences and knowledge of the cumulative traditions of all major religions is crucial. Inter-religious education is necessary not only to satisfy one's curiosity about other religions, to learn from one another, to enable mutual enrichment but also to eventually decide which religion to have, whether or not exclusive allegiance to one religion is sufficient. And indeed, whether one must attach oneself to any religion at all.

But a liberal secularist can respond by asking: why cannot this take place at home? One reason why religious education at home may not be adequate is that parents may wish the transmission of this identity-shaping religious deposit to be stable, something not feasible without formal and systematic training. Moreover, they may not themselves have the time and quality required for such training.[3] Second, even when they have the time and inclination, they may additionally require the help of formal teaching and curriculum to supplement instruction at home. Thus, they may wish religious education to take place in schools. Third, the tradition may be so rich that it can be taught only by institutions much larger than the family.

The liberal-democratic secularist might accept this argument but then ask why can't this be done by separate private schools run by each community? Why get schools funded and run by public money involved in such education? This and other related issues were debated in the Constituent Assembly of India.[4] In the assembly, the case against religious education in state schools was made on four grounds. First, the financial cost of providing such education is borne by citizens who do not benefit from it. In an egalitarian and democratic society, public funds raised by taxes must not be utilized for the benefit of any particular religious community. Consider a school established by a local government that gives religious instruction in Hinduism on the ground that a majority of students in the area are Hindus. This violates the given principle because it requires that children of Muslims and other religious communities would nonetheless pay for this instruction. But why should they carry this unfair burden? The cost of religious instruction must be borne by the religious community itself. As one member of the Constituent Assembly put it, all funds for the provision of religious education must be supplied by the community that desires it, not by everyone. Since state schools are publicly funded, religious education must remain a wholly private affair.[5]

[3] For these arguments, see Spinner-Halev (2000).

[4] *Constituent Assembly Debates*, Vol. VII, 8 December 1948, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi (1999, pp. 877–78).

[5] Ibid. (pp. 832-33).

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This argument is sound if state schools teach the cumulative tradition of one, dominant religion but loses force if multi-religious education is imparted in schools. Moreover, this argument is valid only for separate schools that impart only religious education. But multi- religious education in my view remains only a fraction of the overall secular curricula. So no religious or secular parent shares any unfair burden for funding the education of his or her child. This takes care of the problem of the unfair burden.

But several other arguments were put forward in the Assembly against the proposal of multi-religious education. First, some liberal members claimed that religious education/instruction usually teaches students obedience but not the art of questioning. A second objection was that such education frequently inculcates insulation from the rest of the political community. The boundaries of religious and politically communities do not always coincide. Loyalty to one, it was argued, may conflict with loyalty to another.[6] These limitations obstruct the growth of students into good citizens of a free, democratic society. A state may just about tolerate the presence in society of schools that undermine the value of citizenship, but surely it cannot permit this to occur in state-owned educational institutions. Third, a point was made by the great Dalit leader Ambedkar: given that many religions claim that their teachings are the only right path for salvation, social peace and harmony are bound to be disturbed when doctrinal controversies are brought into the public domain.[7] Social peace is possible only if all religions publicly declare that they do not have monopoly over the ultimate truth or are publicly silent on this matter. Since religions that believe that they have monopoly over ultimate truth cannot publicly deny it, the most that can be expected from them is that they do not publicly assert this belief, but remain silent instead. This means that the doctrines of such religions must not be brought into the public domain. It follows that instruction in this religion should not be permitted in publicly funded institutions. Further, a commitment to egalitarianism, and therefore to state-neutrality, implies that no religious community should be given the right to religious instruction in educational institutions funded by the state.

A fourth related objection came from those who feared that religious instruction exacerbates communalism and communal conflict. One member wanted the article concerning religious education to be framed keeping in mind not sects and denominations as they might

[6] Ibid. (pp. 881-82).
[7] Ibid. (pp. 883-84).

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exist in some ideal world but as they really are. Real existing sects and denominations frequently forget the basic truth of all religion, he argued, and 'exalt their own particular brand as any advertiser in the market lauds his own wares.'[8]

Another member, argued that religion 'had been exploited and marketed in the country and has led to the worst horrors that could be perpetrated in the name of religion.'[9] Yet another Parsi member, R.K. Sidhwa, argued that 'the religious books of the various communities are translated by various authors in a manner that has really brought disgrace to religion. The authors have translated the beautiful original phrases to suit their own political ends with the result that today on religious grounds, the country has broken into various pieces.' Therefore, 'under existing circumstances, there should be no religious education provided in any educational institution which receive state aid.'[10] The constitution cannot give people 'the freedom to teach religion in any manner they like. Finally, fifth, there was an argument propelled simply by anti-majoritarian impulse. For instance, most Sikh members supported a total ban on religious instruction in educational institutions maintained wholly out of state funds because they feared that this inevitably favours the religion of the majority community.[11]

I concede straightaway that in contexts where religious passions are inflamed recurrently, hate speech against one another is common, the system of rule of law has virtually collapsed and conservative communitarianism trumps individual rights, in short where liberal-democracy has ceased to function, secular states should refrain from religious education in schools they fund. Indeed, there should be stringent laws against negative stereotyping, hate speech and incitement to violence. This is why my suggestion that secular states should shed their inhibition about religious education is limited to functioning liberal democracies.

The argument that religion teaches obedience rather than critical questioning takes a narrow, one-sided view of religion. For starters, debates and arguments were a part and parcel of ancient Hindu and Buddhist cultures, as indeed they were even in 'medieval Islamic cultures' shaped by Indian ethos. Second, theological debates were common in Islam and Christianity too. But even if the doctrinaire versions of religions were also given space in the curricula, they

[8] Ibid. (p. 902).
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., (p. 906).
[11] Ibid.

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would be only be taught in schools that give a strong emphasis on critical scrutiny and questioning. What pupils must learn in religiously diverse societies is critical respect for all religions. They must learn to respect genuine difference in ethical viewpoints, and as the ancient Indian emperor Asoka put it, learn to criticize each other when they have good reason to, on appropriate occasions and always moderately in a manner that does not humiliate others. Equally they must learn to be self-critical and not glorify their religion. No praise is justified where there are no good reasons to do so, articulated on inappropriate occasions and immoderately. One must learn not to brag about one's religion. When interaction takes place in the right way, there is a good chance that people would shed dogma and become less doctrinaire (Bhargava, 2014). How else have religiously diverse societies existed for so long? The motto of schools that impart multi-religious education should be critical respect, not excessive uncritical indulgence for one's own and disdain for other religions.[12] This also takes care of Ambedkar's worry of religious conflict.

Second, schools that inculcate critical reasoning and virtues of citizenship equip their pupils to think contextually and sensitively about all ethical conflicts. This would help them resolve problems of potential divided loyalties too. Finally, the argument that majoritarianism may be fueled by funding religious education is invalidated if schools run or funded by the state give equal weight to the teaching of all religions, regardless of their numbers or social dominance. On the contrary, imagine a school run by the majority community that admits students from the minority community. Here, the ethos of the school is likely to be permeated by the culture or religion of the majority, resulting in the estrangement of minorities who may have strong feelings of being misfits. To avoid having this feeling of alienation, they may even wish to assimilate. On the other hand, in publicly funded schools with multi-religious education, maintaining community identity will be easier, if not always without problems. If so, state funding is likely to benefit the minority community.

Third, communalism is exacerbated because people misunderstand each other's religion.

Though some religious conflicts could arise if people began to better understand each other's religion, most are intensified instead by false propaganda, stereotyping, and caricature.

[12] On critical respect as an integral feature of Indian secularism, see Bhargava (2010, p. 91).

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Proper teaching of different religions assists in dispelling these and also diffuses tension between religious groups. It should do so as much by minimizing prejudice as by helping us see the futility of trite answers such as all religions are essentially the same.

Fourth, multi or inter-religious education is crucial because just and peaceful societies cannot be built either without persons of faith or when people of different faiths clash with one another. Nor can they be built any longer by foolishly persevering with the belief that all religions other than one's own are wrong, by the desire to dominate people of other faiths. They can be built only when diverse groups of believers and non-believers can come to effective mutual understanding, accommodation, and acceptance.

A final objection can come from those who acknowledge asymmetries in a community's capability to undertake multi or inter-religious education, perhaps even non-religious education. In such cases, parents who wish to provide good education to their children have no option but to send them to schools run by one particular religious community. The relevant liberal argument here would be those children from religions other than the one taught in the school must have a right to be exempted from any religious instruction. Such precedents have been available in India since the time of Akbar who was the first 'to establish an exclusive department of education wherein Hindus and Muslims were taught in the same madrasa but were given the option of separate syllabi. The Hindu elite was not averse to sending its children to madrasas to receive Islamic education' (Ara, 2004, p. 36). Indeed, this provision is available even in the Indian Constitution (Art. 28). However, in my view this is a stop-gap arrangement. There is no substitute for schools that provide multi or inter-religious education to all children.

What is needed today is not just that Muslims, Hindus, Christians or atheists be good Muslims, Hindus, Christians, atheists only in their respective religious communities but rather that they be good Muslims, Hindus, Christians or atheists in a world where other intelligent and sensitive people are not Hindus, or Muslims, Christians or atheists. This is possible only with sensible multi-religious education. Indeed, historical precedents of this already exist in India. It also requires a proper setting where children from different religious backgrounds have the opportunity to meet one another, as they normally do in common state-run schools, and learn that ways of thinking and being exist in forms other than the one taught by their parents. They may even learn to respect other ways of life and thought.

This is crucial for civic friendship, for realizing the values of citizenship. We need schools to encourage students to listen to one

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another, to learn from and accept each other. We need multi-religious education to become good citizens, for after all existing individuals are not abstract citizens but members of various sub-cultures and communities. We do not interact with them only in religion-free public domains but also in political domains mediated by religions. To learn how to negotiate these is a skill that must be learnt not just at home but in schools. Nor can schools run privately by religious communities carry the burden of teaching children how to be good citizens, sensitive to the religious sensibility of others. The prime function of community-run, private schools is education in one religion or religious instruction. In short, only schools with a predominantly secular or common curricula, that neither discriminate on grounds of religion in their policy of admission nor compels children to be instructed in one religion, which teach the strengths and weaknesses of every religion but refuse to foster negative stereotypes of others, in short state-funded public schools alone can perform this task.

A final argument for religious education in India – and to some extent in all societies with sufficient number of Hindus – is grounded in a peculiar feature of religious perspectives such as Hinduism. The very distinction between religion, philosophy, and culture makes no sense in Hinduism. Therefore, taking religion out of public education would mean excluding a large chunk of Indian culture and civilization. In this context, Ambedkar draws upon the distinction between religious instruction and religious education and argued in favour of religious education. When asked if institutions where the Vedas, the Smritis, the Gita, the Upanishads are taught and which are maintained wholly out of state funds will be shut down once the constitution comes into force, Dr Ambedkar replied that there is a distinction between religious instruction and religious study. Religious instruction means the teaching of dogma. Religious study or religious education is different (religious study must imply that we also question dogma because all education implies possible critique, that is, critical questioning of anything under scrutiny). The implication was clear. The critical study of religious texts is not only permissible but must be positively encouraged.

My argument has been that we must wriggle out of the dichotomy of state schools without religious education and separate, community-run private schools, on the other hand, that provide religious instruction. Even if these schools teach their own religion in the right way, for example, without deriding other religions, they would not teach other religions. If so, we are in a situation where no school imparts proper inter-religious education, necessary for

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inter-religious understanding and eventually, civic friendship. This is unhealthy in liberal-democratic, secular polities.

Now it might finally be objected by some that states that teach religions are violating a basic principle of secularism, namely that state and religion should not mix, that they should maintain something akin to a wall of separation between one another. But this confuses a specific strategy of a particular phase in a single's country's self-understanding with a general principle. It is commonplace that political secularism means the separation of state and religion. But, the metaphor of separation needs to be unpacked. Moreover, to get a handle of what is at stake here, separation must be viewed as disconnection at three levels. A state may be disconnected from religion at the level of ends (first level), at the level of institutions (second level), and the level of law and public policy (third level). A secular state is distinguished from theocracies and states with established religions by a primary, first-level disconnection. A secular state has free standing ends, substantially, if not always completely, disconnected from the ends of religion. A secular state also endorses an institutional disconnection. Both the Church and the priestly class has virtually no role in running the affairs of the state. To some extent, this features secular states share with states that establish religion.

States with established religions have something in common with secular states – at least a partial institutional disconnection. But unlike them secular states tend to break completely away from the church and the priestly class. But secular states go further in the direction of disconnection; they break away completely. They withdraw privileges that established churches take for granted. Finally, a state may be disconnected from religion even at the level of law and public policy. When it disconnects at even this third level, it excludes religion altogether from every form of state activity. Such a state maintains a policy of strict or absolute separation.

In this incarnation, secularism becomes a doctrine of political taboo; it prohibits the state to come into contact with religious activities. It proposes that religious and political institutions live as strangers to each other, at best with benign respectful indifference. When a state is disconnected from religion at all three levels in this particular way, then we may say that a 'wall of separation' has been erected between the two. A state can be secular also if it excludes religion from its activities, but continuously interferes in religious affairs and therefore does not exclude itself from religion. It maintains a one-sided connection in order to control religion or suppress it altogether. Finally, instead of mutual or one-sided disconnection the state may keep a principled distance from all religions.

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Now, this conception of a secular state in which the state is disconnected from the religion at all three levels is not the only available conception of secular state. A state can be secular if it disconnects itself from religion at the first two levels but is connected at the third level. In short, when, instead of excluding religion at the third level, it keeps a principled distance from it. The policy of principled distance entails a flexible approach on the question of inclusion/exclusion, engagement/disengagement, and intervention/abstention, dependent on the context, nature, or current state of relevant religions. It accepts a disconnection between state and religion at the level of ends and institutions but does not make a fetish of it at the third level of policy and law.

Principled distance is premised, therefore, on the idea that a state that has secular ends and that is institutionally separated from the church or some church-like entity may engage with religion at the level of law and social policy. This engagement must be governed by principles that flow from a commitment to the values of a secular state. For example, citizens may support a coercive law of the state grounded purely in a religious rationale if this law is compatible with, or promotes freedom and equality. A state may grant aid to religious institutions or may itself provide multi-religious education if this promotes equality or fraternity. Since a third level disconnection is not constitutive of all secular states, a state does not lose its secular character if it aids religiously-affiliated schools or provides multi-religious education. I have argued that under some circumstances, a secular state may directly provide multi-religious education.

I am not here claiming, of course, that this is the only function of schools run by states. In short, multi- or inter-religious education can and in some circumstances, must be an integral part of the larger project of publicly funded education. I have also argued that secularism is a critical perspective against all forms of inter- and intra-religious domination. To reduce domination, the state may engage with religion or disengage from it – it may engage with it positively (say provide multi-religious education) or negatively (by intervening in those religious practices that are demeaning and oppressive towards its own vulnerable members and which its leaders continue to neglect.) Providing multi-religious education for the sake of reducing the alienation of some citizens and for enhancing social and political fraternity is perfectly in keeping with the core principles of secularism.

I have argued that under some circumstances, a secular state may directly provide multi-religious education as an integral part of the

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larger project of secular education by the state. This is necessary because only such schools can teach young boys and girls a language to engage each other respectfully across different religious traditions as well be critical of one another in the right way. In societies with a vibrant religious past or with citizens with a lively involvement in their respective religions, religious education is crucial for strengthening mutual respect, and in turn for enhancing fraternity. Only then will they less likely to be prejudiced against the religions of others and be more self-critical.

I end this essay with the hope that one day we will discard the idea of religion presupposed by the idea of multi-religious education that I endorse in this paper. In the present form, multi-religious education means learning about a religion that is one's own and then, secondarily, learning about religions that are not one's own, which belong to others. However, this idea of separate religious systems to which each of us owe distinct allegiance is not a natural idea, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the great historian of comparative religions, so brilliantly showed. Asian faiths, the great faiths of the East, are not and can become religions only with cataclysmic distortion.

It is well known that until the late 19th century, and in many parts of rural India perhaps even today, a person could easily be both a Hindu and a Muslim. Much the same is true of contemporary China – a single Chinese person may be and usually is a 'Confucian, a Buddhist, and a Taoist'. This may baffle many for it is difficult for some of us to imagine how a single person can belong to three different religions. But as Smith reminds us, this perplexity arises from an inappropriate imposition of the concept of a religious system on what really are three rich and complex traditions of thought. These schools of thought have been cherished for centuries in China. Their teachings are available and everyone partakes of them but what each person does with them is entirely up to him. An analogy with Political Thought and Theory may help us appreciate this point. As a student of political thought, I cherish the thought of Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Burke, Rousseau, Marx, Gandhi, and Ambedkar but I do not necessarily become an ideologically committed Lockean or Burkean or even Gandhian as I do when I embrace a religion or an atheistic ideology. I embrace a part of their thought, without swallowing the whole. Nor do I feel the need to build a closed community around each tradition of thinking. Religions too should be understood as such traditions of thought and practice. Why then is it not possible for each one of us to partake of the rich traditions of the Jains, the Buddhists, the several communities that fall under the umbrella of Hindus, the Muslims, the Jews, the

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Christians, as well of the many indigenous peoples without the compulsive need to publicly display that we belong first and foremost to only one of these?

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