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Title: Constructing God: Educational implications of two framings of religion

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Abstract

Many discussions of the relations between religion and education develop critical accounts either of certain religious ideas or educational assumptions. This paper takes a different tack by resisting assessment of particular religious views or framings of religion within education. Rather the paper attempts to elaborate some of the educational implications that certain views of religion entail. The discussion focuses on two conceptions of religion: one a propositional or worldview framing of religion, and the other characterised here as a hermeneutic or aesthetic view of religion. Many of the typical problems of religions influence on education, such as indoctrination and the competing rights between various agents, are solved if we shift from the former view of religion to the latter. Furthermore, the implications of the two are suggestive of a particular conception of subjectivity as a free agent that make choices. It is that conception of subjectivity that is influential both within religion and education: within religion as the idea of a subject who chooses to believe certain religious doctrines, and within education as the ultimate goal being understood as the development of rational autonomy.

Paper

Efforts to discuss the connections between religion and education can involve a delicate balance: one is often cast either as a believer (by secularists and atheists) who is committed to developing an apologetics for religious influence upon education, or as a sceptic (by the religiously committed) who rejects any and all such influences. I propose the timely idea of the 'postsecular' as some kind of mediation to soften what has become a rather stale polarisation. However, invoking this concept will be regarded with particular suspicion by secularists who often repeat that we have never been secular, never mind *postsecular*. Religious people might also be disappointed to discover no simple 'return of religion' through the postsecular. There is a middle ground between sceptic and believer, and many of us find ourselves in this sense, betwixt and between. This logically excluded, but in practice quite expansive, middle place is not, of course, neutral. It may be a place from which to catch sight of certain framings of the debate, framings which too readily allow polarisation into believers and sceptics. Standing in this middle, requires careful analysis of terms which, to draw on Foucault's genealogical method, "we tend to feel [are] without history" (Foucault 1980, 139). Certainly neither religion nor education are ahistorical, and so a genealogical orientation will be essential to what follows. But Foucauldian genealogy may not be methodologically adequate if we are holding out for something to be disclosed by way of the faculties of the incarnated consciousness, and so I present the tensions between the givenness of revelation and the projections of historical cultures, between history and truth, in terms of a hermeneutic phenomenology, a methodology that arises out of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur, and has begun to make substantial impacts upon contemporary discussions of religion and education (Aldridge 2016).

I will try to resist defending any particular view of the nature of religion, of education, or of the legitimacy of any influence of one upon another. Concerning the term 'postsecular' I will also attempt to remain circumspect, understanding it as a recognition of the persistence of religion, rather than as a celebration of its return. The postsecular moment does speak to the need for greater religious literacy, and sensitivity concerning the resurgent interest in religiosity around the world. So rather than defend any particular perspective on postsecular religiosity, I will explore the educational implications of what I regard as two related but fundamentally different conceptions of what it might mean to be religious, two conceptions

that reflect a much broader and more complex spectrum of lived religious experience. My argument requires me to say something about what education is as well, since this is also highly contested, ranging from indoctrination to persuasion to formation and so on. In particular, and to give a sense of the argument that will follow, there seems to me to be a tension between the necessity of pedagogical simplification or reduction, and concerns about the framing of religion in reductive propositional terms.

My attempts at offering a systematic account, by showing the consequences of different conceptions of religion for education, rather than attempting to assess those conceptions directly, has the advantage that my argument will not be immediately rejected on the basis that I bring some bias, either for or against religious influence on education. Of course, I do not pretend to have no view or bias on this topic, but I hope that a more systematic account of the relations between different educational and religious ideas do not stand or fall on any own particular religious orientation which could be characterised as postsecular in only a limited sense.

I define my own approach to postsecularism as concerned with the spaces between confessionalism (standing for one particular religious tradition) and atheism: this is a grey area in which religions have something important to contribute but not with the exclusivism and absolutism often associated with authentic confessional commitment. This is postsecular partly because it recognises that something broadly religious cannot be entirely eliminated from public life; at least not if we wish to entertain rather less parochial views of what it means to be religious than those absorbed only from modern Western Christian thought.¹ The concept of the postsecular is an invitation to think about the complexities around the relations between religion and public life, driven in part by a need to reassess some of the founding assumptions of our geo-political order (Christoyannopolous 2014). So I would hope that this postsecular moment provides an opportunity to question the idea that, as José Casanova puts it, “to be secular means to be modern, and therefore by implication, to be religious means not yet fully modern” (Casanova 2010, 59). I would particularly want to challenge what I take to be the educational equivalent: *that to be educated means to be secular, and therefore by implication, to be religious means not yet fully educated.*

A certain nineteenth and twentieth century progressive historicism continues to make itself felt through the ways in which, in Western contexts, freedom, democracy and laïcité (French secularism), are often associated, if not always straightforwardly aligned. Although not generally stated explicitly, this alignment of secularism, education, freedom and progress has been influential in interpreting the places of religion in education. In general, the influence has been to frame the relation between religion and education as *a problem*: for example, a problem of indoctrination, or a problem of competing rights and responsibilities between children, parents, religious communities, and the nation state. This competition of rights places children against parents, against communities, and against the state: a Hobbesian ontology of violence is presupposed in which all are at war with all, and the Leviathan has to impose an order upon the chaos. The alignment of secularism, education, freedom and progress is problematic partly because it fails to recognize the critical resources immanent to religious traditions themselves (hermeneutical or interpretive resources that lie within complex religious and cultural histories). This leads to understandings of religion in rather reductive and univocal terms: as worldviews, or belief systems which are thought to be essentially exclusive and absolute in nature. Such a view of religion is, at least partial, and so one important sense of the postsecular is the opportunity it offers to think more broadly about

¹ I have in mind here the idea that secularism is particularly a Western Christian construction, having its roots in the division of ages, the ‘saeculum’ or otherworldly age, and the worldly age (See Taylor 2007).

the nature and place of religion in present society. But I am attempting to resist assessing this interpretation of religion, rather I want to explore its educational implications. So, with (some of) my cards on the table allow me to present (for the sake of simplicity) the two forms of religion that I think characterise key points on a spectrum of religiosity. Particular traditions can be interpreted as sitting at different points on this broad spectrum, though I will say only a little about the ‘particular’ preferring to establish a few principles from which to interpret the particular.

We can view religions as representing belief systems, worldviews, doctrines, truth claims and the like. This is a common-sense view of religion these days. It entails a view of religious positions as: absolute and exclusive; it involves the idea that different accounts of the world (e.g. religious and scientific) are competing with one another; or that there is a fundamental conflict of reason and religion (or criticality and conviction). Although I am going to suggest that this is not the only way to think about religion (and that there might be good reasons to think this view of religion is even, historically at least, relatively marginal), I want to state it as convincingly and directly as possible. So, to make the case that religions might be about absolute and exclusive truth claims, and that this is not (or not only) a secular or atheist positioning of religion (as people like John Milbank and Jamie Smith have suggested), but a view that many religious people themselves would subscribe to, consider the nature of religion as follows: Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the one and only incarnation of the word of God. For Muslims, the Qu’ran is God’s final and unsurpassable revelation. A devout Jew would begin morning prayer with thanks to God for not having been made a heathen. And this exclusivism extends to forms of poly-theism and a-theism: the eternal Dharma of Vedic Hinduism pronounces that the almighty power of the Supreme Divinities is only One: Brahman. And Buddhists take the eightfold path to be the only way to enlightenment.² Then there is the atheist belief in the fact of the non-existence of God or gods.

This view of religion is often associated with a propositional approach to religion where religious truths are expressed a series of statements or facts. Unsurprisingly, this view is more often associated with so-called ‘religions of the book’ (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) in which revelation and proposition are fused into sacred text (Smith 1998). These facts are presented unproblematically as true which, if we are concerned with the most basic rules of logic, inevitably brings one set of propositions into tension with others. Moreover, this propositional account is often linked to what is sometimes called ‘Protestant voluntarism,’ in which religion is identified with a decision of faith, to ‘decide’ to believe in the resurrection, for instance (Strhan 2013). To be clear, my intention is not to argue against this view of religion which might require me to establish an alternative religious essentialism from which to denounce this view. Even though I think it is problematic, it applies to many contexts that are conventionally understood to be religious. Rather I want to suggest some implications for education of such a framing of religion.

So alongside this framing in terms of propositional beliefs or worldviews, religion can also be viewed more hermeneutically or aesthetically. This conception understands religion less as a set of claims about how the world is, than as a way of seeing and being in the world. The *truth* here is less important than the symbolic power that religious narratives and practices offer. Or perhaps it is better to say that the conception of truth shifts from a literal one to a more metaphorical, poetic or aesthetic form. Religions have aesthetic and poetic power that might be experientially or morally significant, even if the religious statements are

² This statement of the exclusive and absolute nature of religion is adapted from a very convincing critical analysis of this account by Morimoto (2016). Morimoto attempts to show how meaningful dialogue is made possible by the critical traditions within religions themselves. This argument clearly relates to my own though Morimoto is not directly concerned with education.

not taken to be factual. The hermeneutical (or interpretive) component here is important because this attitude understands religious life not as being bound to uncritical univocal orthodoxies, but as historically and socially constructed and inflected. From this perspective, religions are in dialogue with themselves as the histories of schism, reformation and revolution suggest. This is clearly a much messier view of what it means to be religious, standing upon less firm ground when attempting to determine who can be defined as within a religious group or what is definitive of a religion at all. This perspective emphasises the varied ways in which any given religion understands itself, acknowledging that variety, rather than excluding most of it as unorthodox (as the first definition of religion might tend to do).

But the very concept of orthodoxy suggests, does it not, that religions seek to coalesce around, or – drawing on the etymology of ‘religion’ – to *bind us* to a correctness of knowing or understanding; that they are seeking to eliminate this variety even if it has to be tolerated from time to time. Perhaps the difference here hinges upon this idea of correctness (*orthos*). The root *ortho* refers to being straight, upright, rectangular, regular, true, correct, proper. Has this come to mean something rather too fixed and inflexible, either to be enforced by the demand to assent to a set of particular doctrines or practices? And this is clearly not just a problem for religious propositions and worldviews, but equally applies to religious practice. If we simply replace orthodoxy with orthopraxy, the hermeneutical component may still be absent. The hermeneutic framing of religion, by contrast, examines the idea of truth as correctness, or *orthos*. On the one hand, the propositional belief and worldview conception of religion indeed seeks to determine what is correct, while, on the other hand, the second aesthetic view seeks to explore the variety of religious perspectives as different ways of what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur called ‘figuring the sacred’ (Ricoeur 1995).

The issue may hinge on whether religion is regarded as a construction of the human; or even more significantly how we *construct* the idea of construction. In response to atheist confrontations, but also as a consequence of larger shifts within modernity, many theologians and philosophers of religion have come to terms with the constructed or projected nature of religious experience without thereby denying the significance, even the revelatory possibility, of that experience (Dupré 1998). One can, indeed today one surely must, acknowledge the projected aspects of human experience. But does that require us to assert that (religious) experience is *only* a human projection. This is essential to the second kind of hermeneutic account of religion. The hermeneutical account recognizes the constructed moment within religious understanding and experience. Most of us are familiar with the atheist critique that God is a projection of the religious subject. Perhaps we don’t realise that this idea (or a form of it) is also a central insight of Christian theology (and a part of all the great religions). The difference is that for the theologian, God is not ‘just’ the projection, but the projection is the vehicle by which something can be encountered. In other words, the ways in which we ‘figure (or construct) the sacred’ are attempts to open the religious subject, to make the religious subject sensitive to (or able to think) that which exceeds thought. This invokes the most complete, but also paradoxical, definition of theology as thinking that which exceeds thought. It involves a theological dialectic between knowing and unknowing (Turner 1999). The philosopher of religion Henri Duméry has put this dialectic in the following terms:

Consciousness is projective, because it is expressive, because its objective intentionality cannot fail to express itself, to project itself on various levels of representation. This does not mean that these representations themselves become projected upon the objective essence, or upon the reality which this essence constitutes. When contemporary phenomenologists write that the thing itself [i.e. God] becomes invested with anthropological predicates and becomes known through those predicates, they merely allude to the need to represent the object in order to grasp its intrinsic meaning with all the faculties of the incarnated consciousness. But

they do not deny that the object, the objective meaning, the “thing itself,” orders, directs, rules the course of these representations (Duméry quoted in Dupré 1998, 10-11)

In other words, through the constructions of the religious subject, she is able to come into contact with something other: it is in this sense that we are engaged in constructing God. The idea of a constructed dimension of religious experience is here used to deconstruct the idol of absolute revelation upon which absolutist and exclusivist religious claims are built, though admittedly risking the very essence of that experience according to some people. I could invoke John Hick’s philosophy of religious experience to allow human categories of interpretation to frame the experiences of God, though developing this argument fully, is beyond my present scope (see Hick 2004). Thus revelation of God always entails the interpretive instruments of the religious subject, whether that is through texts, dialogues, feelings, or other experiences. The sacred can still be a reference point even if nothing is unconditionally sacred.

Political commitments offer an alternative model for understanding this aesthetic/hermeneutic view but now highlighting an important *deliberative* component of religion which is particularly relevant for educationalists. Political promiscuity has become popular in the UK in recent years as political gaming has reached new levels both of idealism but also of cynicism. For some, this offers opportunities to make opponents less electable. For others, there is a serious possibility that one could simultaneously be part of multiple political parties, or at least that political engagement should be seen well beyond party politics. Whether being part of multiple political parties breaks certain social norms or party rules, it seems at least a practical possibility, suggesting interesting parallels for religious identity. Commitment to multiple political communities can be justified in terms of fostering deliberative culture, *learning, engaging and belonging as widely as possible*. It seems at least partly possible to view religious engagement and belonging in similar ways. The postsecular age can define the space in which many people find themselves: between the confessional commitment to a single religious community and the rejection of religion wholesale. So this aesthetic/hermeneutic view might also encourage us to understand religions deliberately: as discursive communities that both express but also form ultimate concerns. From this point of view, it is less of an issue to commit to at least some dimensions of multiple religious lifeworlds. Just as one can enact multiple political principles through a wide engagement with political institutions and actors, so one can engage in religious understanding through participation in a range of different religious lifeworlds. This requires a certain shift in understanding what it means to be religious, since, from the perspective of the first definition, religious commitments appear to involve exclusive and absolute claims, a view that has a rather provincial history and context.

I have tried, then, to show an alternative to the belief system and worldview conception of religion. The aesthetic/hermeneutic/deliberative view may be less familiar to us today, and – given the pressure it puts upon the category of revelation – would, no doubt, be highly controversial among certain groups. But there are significant histories in support of these ideas, which, furthermore have important implications for how we think about education.

There are several implications for education. Consider the problem of indoctrination which characterizes much educational theory in this field. There are at least two points to make here. Firstly, the way in which indoctrination is discussed by educational theorists, but also in much wider discussions in politics and the media, about the place of religion in education tends to assume this belief system/worldview framing of religion. A more hermeneutical/aesthetic/deliberative account of religion would transform the nature of much of these debates. We could recognise the aim of religious education or upbringing to be less

about raising the child such that they assent to (or reject) a particular worldview as being true or false (or a set of given practices), and more concerning the child's encounter with complex historical traditions that involve ongoing interpretations and narratives that might have more or less significance to their own orientation. This may also involve an aesthetic encounter, where the religious expression takes a particularly aesthetic form: for example, the Cathedral choir evensong service, or the Buddhist sand mandalas. Arguments about the competing rights of Buddhists and Christians in these contexts seem to wholly miss the point.

But even if we were to agree that religions are historically and culturally inflected in complex ways, and that they are to be aesthetically and hermeneutically understood, it is not obvious that we should introduce children to that complexity, or whether such complexity would aid religious literacy. The extent to which the child should experience the contested nature of a tradition is itself quite complex, since young children are often provided with a simplified representation of features of the world for the purposes of education. The pedagogical reduction of the world is a further problem that I will consider in a moment when exploring issues around the religious education curriculum. Some might object that I am naïve in thinking that religious people would be prepared to forego the exclusivist and absolutist foundations of their faith. I would respond, that this propositional framing that sits behind this exclusivism and absolutism does not seem to belong to any group, religious or not, but is part of a discursive milieu which frames the debates at a more subtle level. Whether this is identified as a Foucauldian 'regime of truth' or Heideggerian ontology, the framing seems to precede our general discussions of the place of religion within education, determining the kinds of questions that seem relevant and the kinds of answers that seem convincing.

My second concern with indoctrination is that it is not an issue specific to religion and education, but is a general problem for any education that inhibits rational autonomy. There is good reason to suppose that religious communities encourage greater degrees of autonomy than some political or social communities. Harry Brighouse, for instance, has argued that secular schools in the USA are no more autonomy enhancing (if that is our educational goal) than publically funded faith schools in other parts of the world, and may even be less so since the forms of coercion and manipulation are concealed by an assumption of secular neutrality (Brighouse 2006). James Smith has developed a similar argument concerning what he calls 'cultural liturgies' in which non-religious spaces are shown to engage in formative practices intended to shape or manipulate the desires of children in terms that are at least as harmful to autonomy as many religious liturgies (Smith 2013). So indoctrination as an issue is clearly one that cuts across the secular/religious divide.

If we turn to religious education (RE) as a curriculum subject, then the worldview framing of religion really comes into its own. Religions are quite literally framed onto textbook tables with headings such as 'deity,' 'founder,' 'holy book,' 'belief.' Now, I am all for some kind of pedagogical reduction and selection which I take to be essential to teaching and learning. But this kind of enframing demonstrates how important it is that such pedagogical reductions should be hermeneutically charged by being self-conscious and self-subvertive. Such hermeneutic qualities appear to be distant from the typical treatment of comparative religions in RE. Comparison itself raises many other heated debates. These debates tend to create a conflict between those who see RE as reducing religious views to a kind of bland pluralism (which at least is in some sense inclusive of all students' perspectives) vs. the recognition that something significant (or absolute) is at stake in religion. The point is that teachers of RE don't quite know how to mediate between the absolute and exclusive claims of religions, and the plurality present in the class. The solution tends to be tolerance and respect (which is something) but which also involves placing the existential dimensions of lived religion in the private sphere, and reducing public religious

debate to an examination of the outer shell of religious life. The hermeneutic/aesthetic framing of religion could define RE as offering spaces in which deliberative culture and aesthetic interpretation can be nourished: teachers of RE would need to take seriously the different views of students without forcing those views to be interpreted as irreconcilable and therefore ultimately private. All parties would need to understand their own interpretive histories and how those histories affect the way religious insights are expressed. They may even embrace multiple religious identities: being Hindu Muslims, Christian Buddhists and so on. And some of the more extreme positions adopted in the name of religion would, I suggest, be moderated by exposure to deliberative cultures that appear as good RE.

These considerations also bear upon the general nature of education. In liberal Western societies we take the development of rational autonomy to be an important (or even the central) goal of education. And yet in all sorts of ways adults and teachers restrict the autonomy of children in order to impart values that they consider to be important (taken to be more important than autonomy). For instance, political commitments are expressed by parents, teachers and the structures of social life. Parents and teachers also wish to inculcate aesthetic sensibilities. The kind of restriction on autonomy is often levelled at religion, but, again appears to reflect the worldview/belief system framing of religion. The faith school debates engage with this controversial and complex area. We can wonder, for instance, whether rational autonomy is facilitated by the existence of faith schools. A typical argument will be that faith schools attempt to restrict the exposure of young people to a range of different perspectives, thereby inhibiting the extent to which autonomous choices about the good life can be made. For example, a Catholic school might prioritise Catholic teachings and practices over that of others. More radically perhaps, Amish children are allowed to exit statutory education in the USA two years earlier than their non-Amish peers so as to retain strong links with Amish culture and religion. Insofar as they restrict the autonomy of the child, these restrictions could be regarded as illegitimate. But here the Amish or Catholic parent, or the wider Amish or Catholic community, might have genuine concerns about the inculcation of other values, values which they regard as equally, or even more corrosive to the rational autonomy of the child (relating to consumerism or materialism).

I can only touch on these issues in this short paper, but in terms of the two conceptions of religion discussed above, these arguments around autonomy tend to place the emphasis upon the rationalist conception of religious life, related to worldviews and belief systems. I suspect that a particular construction of rational subjectivity lies behind both religion and education, structuring their interactions. The influence of the construction of the rational subject on religious understanding, as well as its rather parochial provenance, has been discussed by Wendy Brown:

The conceit of religion as a matter of individual choice . . . is already a distinct (and distinctly Protestant) way of conceiving religion, one that is woefully inapt for Islam and, I might add, Judaism, which is why neither comports easily with the privatized individual religious subject presumed by the formulations of religion freedom and tolerance governing Euro-Atlantic modernity (Brown 2013, 17)

There is more to be said here, but the notion of education as the formation of the autonomous rational subject who is capable of, and responsible for, making choices seems to have become naturalised. That idea of the autonomous subject shapes the conception of religious choices for one (or no) particular religion. In short, our conceptions of religion and education are inextricably bound up together. When we imagine that education is about the formation of rational subjects (a view that I am not rejecting, despite it being quite problematic), we should consider the framing of rational subjectivity itself: we should not view that subject as an ahistorical one. The ahistorical subject for whom religious identity is a matter of individual choice frames religion in propositional and worldview terms, which itself

determines the nature of debate around the relations between religion and education. Clearly, these ideas could be extended to questions of political education, citizenship, patriotism, moral development or becoming happy. But because religion is most explicitly to do with that which concerns us ultimately, and generally entails some form of transcendence to define or express that concern, then religions power to exclude and assert absolutes is strong. These issues are all educationally significant, and all take up particular ideas of what it means to be a subject who makes choices, or in more sociological language, an agent whose agency always resides within a larger structure that shapes what is and is not possible.

I have not successfully concealed my own bias. My arguments reveal my own commitment to reinterpreting religion in hermeneutical/aesthetic/deliberative terms. But I hope I have begun to draw attention to some of the implications of the particular views as they play out in educational debates whatever view of religion one takes. I hope I have drawn attention not to questions of indoctrination and competing truth claims, but to the framing of the debate about religion and education which tends to take these questions as its point of departure. I hope to have indicated new possible points of departure upon the question of the place of religion in education.

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