

EDUCATION, CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND FAITH: IS LIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM THE BEST APPROACH?[†]

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Abstract

In the latter part of the 20th century multicultural education was widely accepted as an appropriate educational response to the growth of cultural diversity in western states. Over the last seven or eight years, however, there has been a lot of talk about the death of multiculturalism (which has been blamed for creating an atmosphere where violent extremism can flourish) and a new emphasis on shared values, citizenship and community cohesion. This paper argues that multicultural education, with its roots in the core liberal values of equality, justice, rights and respect for others, still has a strong claim to be the best response to cultural difference, but that problems remain with the relationship between multiculturalism and faith. Liberal multiculturalism is often portrayed as unfriendly to faith: it may encourage relativism, religious neutrality and a pick-and-mix approach to faith; it does little to promote the spiritual development of children; and it exposes children to influences that may destabilise or undermine their faith. But this does not mean that there is no possibility of co-operative educational endeavour between liberal multiculturalism and faith. It is suggested that even in multicultural schools faith can be recognised as having a continuing and enriching role in children's spiritual, moral and cultural development, and that faith may provide an appropriate basis for moral authority and guidance.

Introduction

The origins of multicultural education are best understood as a pragmatic response by educationalists, based on broadly liberal principles, to a number of practical educational issues that surfaced in the last 40 years as a result of the increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity within western states. In the intervening time a substantial body of theory has developed around the concept, and it has been argued that multiculturalism is internal to the very idea of liberal education. However, multicultural education has never had widespread popular support and over the last

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seven years or so political support for the policy has also dramatically declined. There has been much talk of the death of multiculturalism, and in its place there is increased emphasis in schools as in society at large on concepts like citizenship, community cohesion and shared British values.

In this paper I shall focus on three issues. First, I shall consider why it has proved so difficult for western societies to find an appropriate educational response to cultural and religious difference. Second, I shall argue that despite recent devastating critiques of liberal multiculturalism, it remains an intellectually justifiable approach to cultural difference—perhaps, in many ways, still the best approach. Third, I shall discuss why the issue of faith continues to present particular difficulties for liberal multicultural education and in conclusion I suggest a possible way forward.

How should we respond to cultural difference?

Historically, the development of multiculturalism as a response to cultural diversity has been far from smooth. The inadequacies of earlier approaches to cultural diversity such as assimilation or the ‘melting-pot’ theory were easily exposed, but it was less clear what policies and practices should replace them. For example, both collecting racial statistics and refusing to collect them have at various times been challenged as racist, and in the UK the practice of intentional racial mixing (seen for example in the policy of ‘bussing’ black children to white suburban schools) was condemned and eventually abandoned as racially discriminatory—exactly the reverse of the earlier American practice of ‘bussing’ (Kirp, 1979, p. 40). Nevertheless, for twenty years or so multiculturalism came to be widely accepted as an appropriate response to cultural diversity in the UK, with its insistence on giving a voice to all the different cultures represented in the country and ensuring that members of different cultural groups are treated with equal respect. Among the many strengths of multiculturalism are that it highlights the moral duty citizens have to tolerate differences in fellow citizens, so long as the differences do not lead to public harm; and also that it draws attention to the danger of alienation or conflict if a particular minority feels itself oppressed or not treated with the same respect as other citizens. Multiculturalism was seen as a moderate policy occupying the middle ground between critics on the left who argued that it paid inadequate attention to the structures of power in society and thus failed to get to the root of racism, oppression and inequality in all its manifestations, and critics on the right who argued that children need the highest level of cultural literacy in the dominant culture of their society if they are to thrive in that society and succeed in the increasingly competitive job market (Hirsch, 1988).

More recently, however, a change has occurred in political attitudes to multiculturalism (Halstead, 2010). What has made the difference since the turn of the new century is the coincidence of (a) a stronger political emphasis on national identity, shared values, citizenship and community cohesion (Brown, 2007), with (b) growing concern about the impact of increased immigration to the UK and (c) most importantly, a perceived threat to the West from Islamic extremism, with multiculturalism being blamed for providing the context in which such extremism can thrive. It has also been blamed for undermining social cohesion, resulting in the self-segregation of minority communities; for being socially divisive and fostering

fragmentation; and for supporting group rights to maintain their traditional values and practices (including such evils as forced marriage and female circumcision) at the cost of individual freedom (Halstead, 2010, pp. 187-94). All these things have been described by some commentators as the 'legacy of multiculturalism' (Carmichael, 2007). By 2005, there was widespread talk of the 'death' of multiculturalism: journalists like Melanie Phillips made hysterical claims that multiculturalism was trying to 'stamp out majority values' (Phillips, 2006), some Christian leaders spoke out against multiculturalism, and politicians from both Labour and the Conservatives began to distance themselves from the policy (Watt, 2008, p. 9). Discrimination against minorities, particularly Muslims, became more common (and apparently more acceptable), and increased suspicion and mistrust of minorities led to new policies of surveillance (Modood, 2006, p. 2). At the level of higher education, these new policies include monitoring student Islamic societies, banning certain groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir from university campuses and watching Muslims at universities for signs of extremism (DIUS, 2008). At the school level, they include the banning of a student from wearing the *jilbab* to school (Dyer, 2006), the guidance issued to schools on the detection of extremism (DCSF, 2008), and the requirement that all schools, including all faith schools, promote community cohesion, understood partly as having a 'common sense of identity' and a 'common vision and sense of belonging' (DCSF, 2007, pp. 1, 3). It is clear that what is happening here is that the new ways of thinking about extremism and terrorism are being introduced directly into schools and generating new requirements relating both to curriculum and to educational ethos. Diversity is perceived as potentially dangerous in educational contexts just as in society at large, as it is considered to be a route through which extremism can take hold.

Yet the underlying issues that led to the development of multicultural policies within educational provision some 40 years ago remain unchanged. Philosophically, they can be analysed under four main headings.

First, there is a need to clarify what right ethnic or religious groups have (if any) to expect publicly funded education to contribute to the preservation and maintenance of their own distinctive beliefs and values. Though minority groups typically claim equity of treatment with other groups of citizens within the state (and thus freedom from discrimination and racism), they may also claim the right to see their own cultural and religious identity as worthy of celebration and as a source of pride and personal commitment. They may therefore on occasions wish to prioritise their cultural and religious beliefs and values over the expectations on them as citizens. In education, this has resulted in demands from Muslims for single-sex schooling and halal meat for school dinners, for freedom for girls to wear the *hijab* in school or boys to wear a beard, for permission to be absent from school on religious festivals, for facilities for Islamic prayers in school, and so on.

Second, there is a need to clarify the role of schools in the preservation and development of culture. Should schools be more concerned with the maintenance and transmission of traditional cultural values and practices, or with an approach to culture that allows for criticism, development and change? Is it possible to encourage children to engage critically with a range of different cultural identities, including their own, to explore connections and differences, and to exchange

experiences in creative dialogue with people from different faiths and cultural backgrounds, without potentially undermining children's existing religious and cultural commitments? Do schools have any right to undermine any of children's existing beliefs and values?

Third, there is a need to clarify whether the state and its institutions (such as schools) should always remain neutral with regard to faith and culture, or whether there are any circumstances in which the state can justifiably align itself with the culture of the majority and promote this through its institutions and its legislation. It is sometimes argued that the price minority groups must pay for general toleration in a pluralist society is the acceptance of a public order at odds with its fundamental ideals. But this sounds like cultural domination. Would it be better for the state to afford formal recognition to minority faiths and cultures, so that these can be formally recognised in the nation's public institutions?

Fourthly, the question arises who has the right to make fundamental decisions about the way children are to be educated. There is clearly a potential clash between the rights of parents to bring up their children in their own faith and culture and the rights of children (perhaps protected by the state) to be liberated from the constraints of the cultural background of their parents. But it may be claimed conversely that children have a right to a degree of cultural continuity in their education, continuity between the values of the home and those of the school. This raises more general questions about the nature of the educational experience children should receive in the common school, and in particular, the nature of the values on which that common educational experience is based (Levinson, 2008). If it is based on a highest common factor of values (i.e. a framework of values that is shared as a matter of empirical fact by all the main cultural groups in our society), then the framework might be too thin to support any substantial system of education. But any attempt to provide a thicker framework of values might run into difficulties in a multicultural society. If the thicker framework is based on the culture, history and traditions of the dominant group, this might again be seen by minority groups as cultural domination. If an attempt is made to establish a framework through democratic negotiation, this might still end up as a form of majority domination, and in any case faith groups may not consider their values to be matters for negotiation. An interesting possibility raised by the late Professor Ali Ashraf in an earlier seminar at the University of Cambridge involves the claim that all cultural values have their roots in religion and that it is only by exploring 'those fundamental absolute values that all religions share' that an adequate conceptualisation of 'shared values' can be reached (cf. Ashraf, 1986, p. vi). But such an approach may well prove unpopular in an increasingly secular age. However, it is hard to see how any form of education can be developed for the 21st century without some agreement over the shared values on which it is to be based.

Why liberal multicultural education must be taken seriously

Liberalism provides a coherent and fairly persuasive answer to most of these questions (though as I shall argue in the final section of this paper there are still major problems with the place of faith in a liberal system of education). It may be worth looking a bit more closely, at this stage, at what liberal multiculturalism really is. Some people suggest that it is based on the belief that individuals from diverse

cultural backgrounds share a natural equality and a common humanity (cf. Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, p. 10). But I want to suggest that just as liberalism as a political theory takes its origin in the tension between the two fundamental values of liberty and equality, so liberal multiculturalism is built upon the tension between similarity and difference. An emphasis on similarity suggests the appropriateness of equal treatment for all, but if this means that everyone is treated the same in schools it could result in cultural insensitivity and oppression. Conversely, diversity may be presented as something that is culturally enriching, but too strong an emphasis on difference may perpetuate stereotypes and encourage segregation and social rejection. In the liberal vision of multicultural education, therefore, there is an equal stress on two main principles: on the one hand, respect for difference and on the other, the equal need of all children for education for life in a pluralist society.

The principle of respect for difference manifests itself in schools in attempts to respond positively to the cultural needs and sensitivities of children from minority groups wherever possible. This may take a variety of forms:

- Welcoming and making educational use of the different cultural experiences that children bring with them into the classroom, such as linguistic diversity;
- Respecting the religious and cultural integrity of children from ethnic minority groups by avoiding putting them into a position where they are expected to act against their own deeply held cultural beliefs (e.g. by requiring Muslim children to wear a school uniform or PE kit that does not meet their own standards of modesty and decency, or requiring them to attend school on major religious festivals);
- Combating cultural, racial and religious prejudice and discrimination and condescending and patronising attitudes towards cultural and religious difference;
- Recognising the need for courses that support the identity of children from ethnic or religious minorities.

The principle of education for life in a pluralist society is based on the belief that all children, irrespective of their own cultural or faith background, share the same need to develop tolerance, respect and cross-cultural understanding if they are to live together harmoniously as adult citizens. Like the principle of respect for difference, it combines a number of elements affecting both the ethos and the curriculum of the school:

- It involves educating children from different cultures together in a safe, inclusive learning environment where the staff, values, structures, teaching practices and curriculum reflect the cultural diversity of the children, so that the school becomes a microcosm of the broader society and children have opportunities to learn to interact naturally with others from different cultures;
- It rules out the uncritical presentation of any particular worldview or concept of the good, but rather encourages children from all groups to question their assumptions, to engage in rational debate, to develop as autonomous individuals, to respond critically to a range of different worldviews, and to value the diversity of outlooks that makes such critical engagement possible;

- It encourages students to develop tolerance towards beliefs and worldviews they do not share, and a sensitive respect for people from different cultural and faith backgrounds;
- It seeks to prepare students for citizenship in a democratic, pluralist society, and challenges all forms of racism, religious prejudice, bias and ethnocentrism—and indeed anything that denies students equal access to their rights as citizens;
- It entails studying the cultures and religions of different groups and coming to see cultural diversity as a source of enrichment and breadth of perspective.

Together these two principles prove a coherent and distinctive approach to multicultural education that is based on liberal values (Parekh, 2006). Of course, liberalism is a broad canvas which includes different priorities and perspectives. In the Rushdie affair, for example, many liberals emphasised freedom of expression as the primary value, but some put more stress on respect for minority cultures. With regard to wearing the *hijab* in school, some liberals see this as an issue of freedom of expression while for others it is a symbol of unacceptable cultural constraint and the oppression of women. In spite of such differences within liberalism, however, certain key principles remain constant within liberal multiculturalism, such as the rejection of ethnocentrism, cultural domination, racism, stereotyping and religious discrimination. The core liberal values of freedom, equality, rationality and justice also generate such values as tolerance, respect for persons and rights (Halstead, 1996). The right of parents to bring their children up within their own worldview and the rights of groups to maintain their distinctive cultural identity are central to the liberal concept of multiculturalism, but liberal individualism also protects the right of children as they grow older to free themselves if they choose from the beliefs and cultural practices of their parents. The liberal refusal to align itself with any determinate version of the good ensures that the liberal state accepts pluralism as an underlying principle, welcomes diversity, and adopts a stance of neutrality on the diversity of views about the good life, while at the same time supporting the value of personal autonomy by leaving individuals free to pursue their own vision of the good, and free from both cultural domination by the majority and cultural ghettoisation within a minority group.

Bikhu Parekh provides a particularly persuasive argument in support of multicultural education, which he sees as a logical extension of liberal education. Monocultural education, he claims, is not only alienating to children from ethnic minorities but is also a narrow and impoverished education for children from the majority culture: it restricts the growth of imagination, curiosity and critical self-reflection and provides fertile ground for the development of arrogant, insensitive and racist attitudes. Multicultural education, by contrast, helps children to develop open, lively, enquiring minds, and encourages sensitivity, intellectual humility and respect for others. Ultimately, it is an education in freedom—freedom from inherited biases and narrow feelings, and freedom to explore other cultures and perspectives and make choices in full awareness of the available and practical alternatives (Parekh, 1986, pp. 26-9).

On this view, the demise of multicultural education is to be deeply regretted, and the emphasis on mistrust, surveillance and monocultural values that has taken its place

may be the worst possible way to achieve a cooperative and harmonious society and the most likely way to generate a sense of alienation among minority groups (Halstead, 2008, pp. 333-4). A minority group's commitment to its host society will be much stronger if it feels trusted and respected enough to be given the same choices and privileges as members of the majority group (in terms of whether or not to send their children to a faith school, for example). A country that can allow minority faiths the freedom to establish their own faith schools is a country that is comfortable with its own cultural diversity and one that is determined to treat all its citizens with justice and respect.

Multiculturalism and Faith

But I am not so much concerned in the present paper with the issue of faith schools as with the place of faith in the common school, and it is here where problems begin to emerge in the vision of liberal multiculturalism that I have expounded above. Can faith (as opposed, say, to *religious literacy*, which is much less controversial; cf. Carr, 2008; Strike, 2008) thrive in an educational system based on liberal multiculturalism? Can it survive any better in the post-multicultural era?

So far in this paper I have sought to contextualise the place of faith in contemporary English schooling in the recent history of, and debate about, liberal multiculturalism. The remainder of the paper provides a brief discussion of two key arguments focusing more directly on faith. The first is the argument that liberal multiculturalism may not be as friendly to faith in the context of schooling as its emphasis on freedom (to worship, to believe) and on equality (a neutral approach to all faiths and worldviews) may lead one to believe. The second is the argument that it might be possible to find a bigger place for faith within contemporary education without the loss of liberal ideals such as neutrality on controversies to do with the good life and the avoidance of indoctrination—though we might have to look outside the domain of contemporary religious education to find it.

The doubts that I have about the treatment of faith within liberal multiculturalism can be summarised in four main points.

First, as we have seen, liberalism refuses to align itself with any determinate version of the good and adopts a stance of neutrality on controversies to do with the good life, while at the same time supporting the value of personal autonomy by leaving individuals free to pursue their own vision of the good. In a multicultural society, this means that schools are expected to be neutral not only between different faiths but also between faith and non-faith, and this means that if religion is to be taught in schools at all, a neutral, 'phenomenological' approach should be adopted (Carr, 2008; Williams, 2008). But it is relevant to ask what sort of hidden messages children will pick up from this approach (since children learn as much from hidden messages as from direct instruction). The hidden message seems to me (a) that all religions are of equal worth, and therefore any choice between them is more or less random; and (b) that neutrality is morally superior to commitment as a response to faith, even though a faith commitment is acceptable within liberalism as it comes under the heading of individual freedom (Halstead, 2008, p. 832).

Second, the liberal emphasis on individual freedom encourages children to believe that it is entirely a matter of individual choice whether to adopt a particular

faith or not. This emphasis on individual choice and commitment may favour some faiths (such as those in the Protestant tradition) over others (like Catholicism or Islam) where belonging to a group and accepting teaching on authority are more central. While liberalism advocates *rational* choice, the outcome may be that choice is seen as a good thing *per se*, whether it is rational or not, and children may come to believe that they are free to adopt a pick-and-mix approach to faith, rejecting any aspect of the teaching of a given faith that they don't like.

Third, many people believe there should be a place in education for such things as developing children's understanding of common human experiences like celebration, awe and wonder, the quest for meaning, purpose and values, but multicultural education rarely offers much to children in this area, because the spiritual development of children has little place within the framework of liberal education. The inclusion of faith could thus have an enriching effect on the educational experiences offered to children. We may, for example, compare the liberal concept of respecting one's neighbour with the faith-centred notion of *loving* one's neighbour as oneself.

Fourth, the way that multiculturalism operates within the common school militates against the preservation of distinctive religious beliefs and values. It may seem fair, for example, that if Muslim children make up between five and six per cent of the school population, a similar proportion of the curriculum (for Religious Studies, but also perhaps for History, Literature Art etc, since culture is not usually taught directly but picked up through the teaching of mainstream subjects) should present subject material from an Islamic perspective. But that would still mean that 95 per cent of the cultural influences to which Muslim children are exposed in the common school on a daily basis are not based on Islamic values. This does not of course imply that they are being forced to shed their old way of life and accept an alien set of cultural values; much depends on how strong the original values are, how resistant to transformation and change, and how much reinforcement they are given outside school. Nonetheless, the non-Muslim influence is constant over an extended period of time, at an age when children are most receptive to such influence, and it may be perceived as pressure to change, especially when it is reinforced by school rituals and practices, peer pressure, the school ethos and the hidden curriculum (Halstead, 2008, pp. 331-3).

All this may lead some people to believe that the liberal values of multiculturalism are actually undermining faith, and that it would perhaps be better to formalise the separation between schooling and faith development as in the US and France and make faith development the responsibility of the family and the faith community alone, rather than assume that schools should support the development of students' faith commitments or religious identity in some way.

In conclusion, however, I want to suggest that there may be a place for faith within contemporary English schooling that is not inconsistent with the liberal ideals of neutrality on the variety of views of the good life and the avoidance of indoctrination. The suggestion is based on the belief that faith may have a continuing and enriching role to play in the spiritual, moral and cultural development of children. Thus, for example, faith may provide the source of moral values and moral motivation and the foundation of moral education in schools. Of course I'm not implying that one

has to be religious to be moral, or that morality is the only domain of faith that it is worthwhile for children to study these days. But while children are still developing towards moral autonomy, they need the guidance of a determinate moral framework to act as an authoritative point of reference on how to behave. Of the various possible sources of this guidance (parents, one's conscience, the law, society at large, one's feelings, etc), most are seriously flawed: parents may be wrong on moral matters; the conscience is an unreliable guide; the law is not designed to provide individuals with a guide to what is morally right or wrong. For many people, religion still remains the best direct source of moral authority throughout their lives and, for them, faith-based moral teaching may provide a useful introduction to the broader study of faith as well. Others may accept faith as a reliable interim moral authority as children grow towards moral autonomy, because of the historical influence faith has had on the moral values of a society or cultural group. Even if they do not share every detail of the belief system or ethical framework, many parents may prefer a school that provides an authoritative form of moral education at least while the children are growing up to one that offers inadequate moral guidance and leaves children unsure how to behave. Equally, they may prefer to know that there is a clear moral foundation to the school's own structure of rules, discipline and moral authority. There is a danger that if schools teach only about the 'public' values of citizenship and neglect the 'private' values of spiritual, moral and cultural development, then children's balanced growth towards maturity may be harmed (cf. Halstead, 2009, pp. 89-93). Many parents from all sectors of society are worried about this in the current educational climate in schools, and perhaps a new openness in schools to learning from religion will help to resolve their anxieties.

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