

Educating children to think for themselves

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Iain T. Benson, in his *Citizen* article “Why ‘public’ should not mean ‘atheist’” (September 16), argues convincingly that secularity need not be opposed to religion. He is right that a secular government should not take up arms against either religion in general or any particular religion.

But then Benson concludes that a secular government, at least in a diverse or pluralistic country, should protect and nurture religious and other cultural groups. Not only should secular governments not oppose religious communities, he says, they should help them to socialize their young into their own particular ways.

This means in practice that secular governments should contribute public money to groups concerned to bring children up in their particular religion tradition and its moral injunctions.

Benson is wrong that secular governments should nurture religious communities, both in fact and on his own grounds. The correct conclusion to draw from his argument is that in a secular society, even a multicultural one, each religious or cultural group has to take its chances among all the other religious or cultural groups. Moreover, if it wants government money, it has to show that it is worthy to receive it.

Benson's argument fails even on his own grounds, for Benson is absolutely clear that a secular government may take its money elsewhere when a religious or cultural group fails to promote certain high-level values of a liberal society. The problem is that Benson misidentifies those high-level values.

He thinks the values are respect for local ways of life and diversity, and concern for the well being of faith communities and other cultural groups. In truth, the high-level values of most importance to a liberal, secular government, especially in the context of primary and secondary education, are the prosperity of society in general, respect for law, and the well being and autonomy of the individual.

Children in Canada, whatever sort of school they attend, whether it be public, private, religious, or at home, must receive an education that will enable them as adults to find a place in the economy and earn a living, that informs them of what they legally may and may not do to others, and, perhaps most importantly, that equips them to choose their way of life for themselves.

This does not preclude their having a religious or other values-centred education. To be extreme about it, it's no business of the government that children in some school are taught that homosexuality is wrong, that the religious elders are always right, that rape is a natural imperative of strong men, that abortion is murder. A secular government might even have sufficient reason to fund a school in which these things are taught.

But government must require that the children in this school also be instructed that homosexuality is legal and gay bashing isn't, that rape is a crime and that it has these and those consequences for its victims and for society as a whole, and that if one is to save unborn children, one must work peacefully and democratically to change the laws, or else.

Most significantly, whatever sort of education a child gets, she must be schooled in how to evaluate claims such as rape is natural and the elders are always right. The liberal state has a duty to ensure that all children acquire the ability to think for themselves.

So a secular government may properly withhold money from a school that isn't helping kids to become adults who can hold a job, stay on the right side of the law, or make their own informed choices. Indeed, the government has a responsibility to get such kids to a good school right away.

It's the thing about thinking for themselves that's the sticking point for Benson and others. Benson agrees that a government may require any school taking its money to teach civics. But he adds that no school should subvert the religious beliefs that sustain opposition to same-sex marriage or abortion. Well, kids able to think for themselves who are learning about sexuality or abortion might, by talking to people and evaluating evidence, come to reject those beliefs all by themselves.

Of course, no school should actively subvert religious or any other sort of commitment. Yet it occasionally happens in schools that a child's belief gets subverted. Educating children, actually educating them, is always a risk. They might not come out how you would like them to.

Benson is right that our traditions in Canada do not distinguish between the religious realm and the non-religious in the way American traditions do. Few of us have an in-principle objection to religious groups receiving public money. What matters to us is that whoever receives government money receives it fairly or uses it well to produce goods we all can enjoy.

Yet our traditions do distinguish between liberal attitudes and practices, the ones that take individuals and their flourishing seriously, and illiberal ones. We should have no truck with public money supporting illiberal schooling.