

An Exploration of Religious Education and its Importance for Moral Development in Children

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Abstract

This article will look at the influence religious education has on the moral development of the child in modern Western societies. Since both the image of the child and moral standards have changed throughout history, exploring how religion influences the ability of children to adjust to the society they are living in may yield valuable information. Such a relationship seems all the more important because many of these societies have gone through a process of secularization. The concept of morality will first be clarified, and defined as a set of values which include equal opportunity, acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity. Then, religious education will be explained as involving the raising of children according to Christian values. Finally, it will be argued that rearing children with an understanding of only one religion may not contribute to their moral development. However, religious education in a broader sense may aid children's moral development and their adjustment to the society in which they live.

Keywords: moral development, moral judgement, religious education, values

Introduction

The future hopes and expectations of any society reside within the children living in it. Because they will later be adult citizens, what is taught these children will significantly influence their later functioning in society. Given that current Western societies can be increasingly seen as multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious pluralistic societies (Meijer, 1996), it is critically important to teach children in these societies the skills they need in order to contribute to the functioning of culturally diverse communities. These skills may be different from those previously needed, because open-mindedness has become more important than ever in a society of open pluralism. Even though many modern Western democratic societies have gone through a process of secularization, the continuing influence of Christian democratic parties in the parliaments of those countries is noteworthy. This is because the process of secularization does not involve the separation between politics and religion (van der Poel, 2008). Not surprisingly, then, the values that are propagated by the government of such countries are influenced heavily by religious morals (Boutelier, 1996). The concept of morality is traditionally associated with religion, since the ultimate judgement of what is right and wrong lies, in this view, with God.

Yet basing moral judgements on religion in multi-cultural societies may create a problem, for doing so could undermine the moral principles of people living in this same society, but who have a

different cultural background and/or differing religious values (Durkheim, 1925; as cited in Pickering & Lussier, 1995). The question that consequently arises is whether, in such societies, moral judgements should be based on religion at all. As was mentioned earlier in this same issue by ten Brinke and Kanters, the image of the child has changed throughout history. Currently, this image holds that children live in the same world that their parents inhabit, and they therefore need to develop skills to adjust to the society they live in. Thinking about the future functioning of children in such societies, this article specifically addresses whether religious education is *necessary* for children's moral development.

This article will serve as an exploration of the question posed above. It will explore the influence of religious education on children's moral development. In order to determine the nature and extent of this influence, a specific definition of morality will be investigated. In this section, the important aspects of morality will be made clear. Since morality is quite a subjective concept, this clarification involves defining the kind of society that is considered and its characteristics. This section should shed light on which specific moral values are encouraged and needed in such a society. It will be argued that the ability to act morally lies in being able to set aside one's own short-term benefits for the sake of others. The following section will discuss the influences of religion on the previously defined moral values. It will specifically

address whether this influence is beneficial and essential for the moral development of children. First, the concept of “religious education” will be defined. This definition necessarily involves defining the concepts of religion and education separately. It will be argued that religion should be understood as broadly Christian, and education roughly as rearing. This paper will conclude with the assertion that religious education is indeed important, not in the limited sense of children being taught religious values but rather in a broader sense of children being educated *about* religion in order to better understand and accept their culturally diverse fellow citizens.

Defining Morality

It is not easy to define morality, because it is a subjective concept that varies among different human societies—as well as among smaller groups within societies. At the most basic level, morality is a concept that refers to beliefs regarding what is right and what is wrong. It can be seen as a code of conduct that is enforced by a certain authority. This authority may be a religion or a particular group, culture or society (Tännsjö, 2007). This basic definition shows that it is impossible to provide one specific set of values that *should* characterize morality. This part of the article will therefore investigate which definition of morality should be used within the context of the present study. The word “morality” in this article will be used as a concept that covers the most important values of a society. Since morality implies what is believed to be right or wrong, there should be clarity as to the sources of the morality being referenced (Tännsjö, 2007). According to Durkheim (1925; as cited in Pickering & Lussier, 1995), common values are the foundation of society, providing it with structure and unity. Especially in a secular society, morality is determined by society itself. This notion is important for the concept “morality” in this paper, because when ideal moral development is defined, the fact that this definition stems from and applies to Western, secular societies ought to be taken into account. Another definition of values that applies to the understanding of morality is that of Kekes (1993; as cited in WRR-68, 2003) which states that values are possibilities which, when realized, help make “a good life” possible in a particular society. “A good life” may seem a rather subjective concept. For our purposes, this phrase should be understood as a life which does not impose hardships on the lives of others. This understanding seems related to

the concept of equal opportunity, given that the principle that no action of an individual should impose hardship on other individuals implies that no one should be denied the right to engage in conduct that promotes his or her happiness and wellbeing. The value of equal opportunity can be seen as one of the core values of a democratic society (Scholte, 2008). Seeing it this way is also necessary because defining the ideal moral development objectively would be impossible without focusing on a specific time and place. Given that this article aims to explore the influence of religious education on moral development from a Western perspective, the concept of morality should be narrowed down to what a contemporary Western, democratic and secular society sees as its ideal values.

According to Scholte (2008) a democratic society encourages “constructive co-existence within a polity” (p. 312). This notion can be seen as an important value in contemporary Western societies because these societies are characterized by cultural diversity (Meijer, 1996). More specifically, such a culturally diverse society emphasizes values like acceptance in order to assure its survival. When the values of acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity (Meijer, 1996) are not realized, it is impossible for cultural pluralism to exist, because promotion of cultural heterogeneity will occur. However, the value of acceptance may lead to problems in a culturally diverse society. When one accepts, as is the case in the present study (Meijer, 1996; Durkheim, 1925; as cited in Pickering & Lussier, 1995), that having common values is the foundation of a society that functions well, a culturally diverse society cannot properly function, since different cultures carry their own specific morals and therefore their own values (Pickering & Lussier, 1995). For this reason, the core values of individuals living in such a society must be those of acceptance and equal opportunity.

By now, the definition of morality to be used in this study should be clear. Summarizing, this definition holds that morality in contemporary Western societies that are based on democratic and secular ideas can be mainly characterized as promoting equal opportunity, acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity. With this definition in mind, it is now possible to explore how this morality applies to children and their upbringing. As mentioned earlier, the core values of morality which should carry the highest authority are those

which stress what Durkheim called “the idea of good” (Durkheim; as cited in Pickering & Lussier, 1995). And what should carry the greatest emphasis of all is an aspect of this concept which highlights the connection between morality and making sacrifices. This is because, in acting according to certain values like tolerance and acceptance, someone needs to set aside his or her own short-term benefits for the sake of others. This altruistic aspect of morality may be seen as the foundation of the ability to act morally. Since the image of the child, as described earlier in this issue, is strongly connected to the present values of a society (ten Brinke & Kanters; Klein & Kloos, this issue), the child in modern society has to be made aware of the importance of the above-mentioned values.

Religious education

The definition of morality being employed here having been clarified, this article will now turn to the influences of religious education on the moral development of children. Here, it is important to focus on the definition of religion, for the influence of all possible religions would be too broad a topic to analyze in one study. In the previous section, morality is applied to Western democratic societies. The same should therefore be done with defining religion. In these societies, Christianity has the most adherents (Merry & de Ruiter, 2009). Furthermore, the main political parties in several of these societies are strongly influenced by Christian belief and practice. The most apparent example of this is the government of the United States of America, but important political parties in some Western European countries are also influenced by Christian belief and Christian social movements. Given these facts, I believe that it is legitimate to treat religion in this article as mainly Christian. Furthermore, it is also important to further clarify the concept of education, and the use of this word will not be restricted to the teaching that takes place at schools. Education here applies to the means of rearing children both within and outside the family setting. Since the present study aims to determine the degree of influence that religious education has on moral development, there will be an attempt to look at the different means of religious education.

According to Askarova (2007, p.34) “the ultimate purpose of religion is to educate the kind of individual who possesses moral convictions, who is decent and virtuous, [and who is] the carrier of high humanistic ideas”. This notion places high importance on religion and claims it can help moral

development, without claiming that it is the only way to inculcate morality. A different view of the relationship between religion and morality is seen in Bunge and Mahner (1996). They argue that religion cannot be seen as the basis of morality, because a moral judgement is made before the Bible is read. What is meant by this assertion is that, within Christianity, which is based on the Bible, certain passages are held up as examples of moral action, whereas others are not. This is only possible when *a priori* moral judgements have been made prior to any reading or careful study of the Bible. This is contrary to what would be expected if one assumes that religion, here Christianity, is truly the indispensable foundation of morality. If that were the case, every action in the Bible ordered by God or Jesus Christ would be seen as morally good (Bunge & Mahner, 1996). Instead, what is observed is that a pre-existing moral standard is projected back into the Bible. This phenomenon seems to support Durkheim’s argument (as cited in Pickering & Lussier, 1995) that it is really society that decides in the end what is morally just. According to this view, religion is not necessary for making moral judgements and should therefore also not be a necessary component in children’s moral development, for the simple reason that moral judgements can be made without reference to religion. For the modern image of the child (ten Brinke & Kanters, this issue) this implies that religious education is not something children absolutely need in order to adjust to today’s society.

Moreover, it is possible to reject religious upbringing because it in a sense undermines the value of equal opportunity. That is, the child that grows up in a religious setting is not given the same opportunities to choose between lifestyles and convictions as other individuals who embrace a religion at a later age, when their choice is more conscious and informed. In line with this view, Knox (1975) notes that children’s basic belief systems are formed before the age of 10. Furthermore, and also affirming this view, Bunge & Mahner (1996) state that only a minority of people change their religious beliefs after adolescence. In this same light, it can be argued that religious education should not only be seen as dispensable, but even as undesirable because it typically involves the teaching of one specific religion. When moral judgements are based on convictions stemming from that religion, there may be intolerance of values stemming from other religions which that same society. This notion directly

applies to the need of acceptance of the core values of society itself. Without this acceptance, ethnic and cultural pluralism would be impossible within a multi-cultural society. It is, however, irrational to make such a generalization about religious influences on morality. As Carr (2001) also notes, what is disturbing is not that religious moral education is always indoctrinated, but that it can be. He further states that religious education could also re-evaluate and reshape its traditional customs when acting on religious morals has proven to be immoral. Although this argument seems to contradict the assumption that religious education is undesirable in children's moral development, it fails to challenge the notion that religious education is not essential for moral development.

However, this last argument is based on a limited notion of religious upbringing. It assumes that religious upbringing includes indoctrination (Bunge & Mahner, 1996) of beliefs. The view that is adopted in the present paper concerns education in a broad sense. That is, it includes teaching at schools as well as the rearing of children in the family setting. Religious education should therefore also not be seen in a narrow sense. Religious education does not imply that children are taught the content of the Bible and are instructed to live by its rules and dogmas. Instead it should imply education with religious influences. Returning to the core values that were mentioned in the section about morality, the moral values of acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity may be quite applicable here. For when religious education in actuality consists of an education with religious influences, this kind of education can be an essential contribution to these values. What is meant here is that when religious education consists of teaching *about* religion instead of imposing a "the Truth", it may help to engender an understanding in children of other people's beliefs and values. It should be stressed, however, that this teaching about religion, in order to apply to the values of acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity, should include teachings about more than only the Christian religion, and instead should include all religions that are represented in a given society (Merry & de Ruiter, 2009). This argument implies that religious education can be very beneficial for children's moral development if it is considered as education "about" religion.

Although this conception of religious education seems to be very different from the one that was introduced in beginning of this section, the

two models are actually closely related. Assuming that the moral values of a society are those values that carry the highest authority, being raised as a child with religion may serve as an advantage for understanding fellow citizens with different cultural backgrounds, especially if these cultural backgrounds are based on or highly influenced by (another) religion. As Aydin (2002) states: "If religion as a social fact is important for certain sections of a given community, then it is important for the whole community". This statement is relevant for this discussion, for it applies to the values of acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity. One could assume that empathizing with individuals who adhere to certain cultural and religiously based morals is easier or more natural for people for whom religion had an important place in their upbringing. As was mentioned before, this assumption can only be made if religious education did not involve indoctrination (Carr, 2001). It would seem however, that, generally speaking, religious education does not typically involve indoctrination. Moreover, indoctrination regarding moral beliefs can occur in contexts that are not in the least religions (e.g., in reference to atheistic political ideas).

Discussion

It has been argued that the influence of religious education on children's moral development is a relevant topic in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies (Meijer, 1996) because the concept of morality traditionally has a religious connotation. The modern image of the child as an agentic "being" (ten Brinke & Kanters, this issue) implies that it is important for children to acquire the skills that are needed to adjust to the society they live in. However, these modern Western societies are also characterised by their secular character, and therefore defining values that are independent of religion is desirable in these pluralistic societies. Such a definition was made following Durkheim (1925; as cited in Pickering & Lussier, 1995) who stated that, in a secular society, morality is determined by society itself. The present study has also assumed that moral values should be seen as possibilities which are conducive to a good life—meaning a life which does not cause hardship to the lives of others (Kekes, 1993; as cited in WRR-68, 2003). Taking into account the fact that the societies under consideration here are liberal democratic societies, the moral values that result are equal opportunity, acceptance and affirmation

of cultural identity. It was also noted that raising children with these values may be challenging, because it requires children to set aside short-term benefits, and to make sacrifices. This is, however, not any different from what religiously based morality requires from children, the only difference being that not God but society itself holds the highest authority in deciding what is right and wrong (Durkheim, 1925 as cited in Pickering & Lussier, 1995).

Religion has been defined here as the Christian religion, because Christianity has the most adherents in Western liberal democracies and because its influence is still quite palpable (Merry & de Ruiter, 2009). Although some argue that religion serves the purpose of teaching children moral values (Askarova, 2007) it was stated, in line with Bunge & Mahner, (1996) that religion is not needed for teaching these values. This is because moral judgements are typically made before deciding which values should be emphasized in religion. This can be appreciated in the phenomenon of the selective reading of the Bible, which shows that pre-existing moral standards are projected back into the Bible in order to make moral judgements. Arguments were posited that indicated that the fact of being raised with one religion does not contribute to moral development because it goes against the value of equal opportunity in its earliest stage. That is, very decisive choices (Bunge & Mahner 1996; Knox, 1997) are made at an early stage, which means that the child has not had equal opportunity to choose his or her own religious or nonreligious convictions.

Nevertheless, this argument can only stand if one assumes that religious education is the same thing as indoctrination, in which children do not make their own choices. This assumption seems to be unreasonable (Carr, 2001) because, when religious education involves teaching *about* religion (rather than imparting the unarguable Truths of a given religion), religious education may even provide the core moral values that were mentioned earlier. This is because teaching *about* religion may help to engender an understanding in children about other people's beliefs and values. When a child is given this particular sort of broad religious upbringing that is free from indoctrination, such background knowledge may also contribute to engendering empathy with individuals who adhere to certain other cultural and religiously based morals. In this view, religious education may be

seen as indispensable for the optimal moral development of children. It should be stressed that this only applies when religious and cultural values are not the values perceived as having the highest authority if they differ from the morality accepted within a society. Relating this view to the idea that children nowadays are directly involved in the adult world (ten Brinke & Kanters, this issue), it may be desirable to employ explicitly religious frames of reference in fostering the moral development of children.

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