Indoctrination and Assimilation in Plural Settings

Ken Badley
George Fox University, kbadley1@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty
Part of the Education Policy Commons, and the Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Badley, Ken, "Indoctrination and Assimilation in Plural Settings" (2000). Faculty Publications - School of Education. Paper 70.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty/70

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - School of Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
A twofold problem faces Canadian education. The first fold involves the indoctrination debate, still unsettled after several decades, yet still bearing decisively on educational policy. The second fold involves the changing Canadian educational landscape, now obviously characterized by increasing cultural, religious, and linguistic plurality. This plurality manifests itself in tribalism and in regular conflicts about normativity in the public square. In the midst of this plurality, many Canadian parents of school-aged children believe that courts, provincial governments, and educational authorities deny them educational justice by determining that their own religion cannot inform what their children learn in schools. Yet, from their vantage point, their own educational tax dollars are used to indoctrinate their children into another worldview—some combination of materialism, secular humanism, and liberalism—every day of the school year. When these parents cry foul, defenders of common schools reply that the only way to make schools accessible to everyone is to make them neutral, which implies leaving religion out of education.

Examining the various charges and replies in this discussion reveals a philosophical-ideological thicket, through which the various parties apparently can no longer hear each other. I suggest that educators and educational theorists could go a long way toward solving these policy difficulties if we can find the will to move forward on the matters of indoctrination, pluralism, and related concepts, such as neutrality.¹

INDOCTRINATION: AN UNSETTLED DEBATE

Conceptual problems and disagreements still dog the debate about indoctrination in education, even after decades of struggle. Educators, philosophers of education, the courts, and the public, dispute what differentiates indoctrination from education, and what criterion or combination of criteria actually singles out what counts as indoctrination. What does count as indoctrination? The criteria usually listed include:
the intention of the teaching activity is to bring about in the student unshakable or unquestioning belief in an idea, regardless of the veracity of that idea.  

the means of teaching violate in one or more ways the rights, agency, or person of the student. In the language of the philosophy of education, the means violate a differentiated or positive concept of education, in which worthwhile learning is implied versus education in the descriptive or undifferentiated (education system) sense of the word. On this account, education implies approval of the means of teaching by whomever is speaking at the moment.  

the contents are doctrinaire or contain doctrinaire elements. Some claim simply that if the contents are about doctrines then we have a case of indoctrination. In Holocaust revisionism, we uncover a paradigm case of doctrinaire contents. Some observers, of course, suggest that instruction in Christian faith serves equally well as a paradigm.  

the upshot or outcomes of teaching involves the student’s emerging with either false, unquestioning, or unshakeable beliefs, despite a teacher’s good intentions, laudable methods, and worthwhile content.

Each of the above has found defenders who have argued that one of these criteria is sufficient by itself to identify indoctrination; others have argued for various combinations of the four. Debates continue regarding each of the separate criteria as well, resulting in questions like: what is a worthwhile intention, what are acceptable means, what are doctrinaire contents, and what is false belief, unshakable belief, and non-evidential belief? Some, in their innocence perhaps, have even asked what is wrong with unshakeable beliefs, especially and obviously, for example, with regard to analytic truths such as \(2 + 2 = 4\).

Aside from the disagreement about means, intentions, content, and outcomes, other matters remain:

1. Distinguishing and delimiting such key concepts germane to the indoctrination discussion as neutral, faiminded, impartial, empathetic, committed, dispassionate, and just;  
2. Establishing the semantic range and possibly the logical status of doctrines; and  
3. Establishing whether religion has been defined too narrowly, and whether worldviews might not lead to clearer reflection on indoctrination.

By no means, do these questions exhaust the avenues of approach we might take to such a complex area of enquiry. To the point of this chapter, the debate on indoctrination has thus far largely failed to identify the following:
1. Cases where a community or society widely accepts a dominant worldview and then hegemonically enforces that view through the school system. This situation is illustrated for us if we believe, for example, the allegations typically made on the one side by critical theorists (who believe schools have been hijacked by free-market conservatives), and, on the other side, by conservative observers (who believe schools have been hijacked by leftists and liberals); and

2. Cases where the curriculum contents fail to treat a matter sufficiently and thus portray, by silence, an inaccurate picture, regardless of the intentions (or means) of this lopsided portrayal. For example, Aboriginal Canadians are usually invisible in histories of Canadian engagement in World War II. The role of religion often goes missing in Canadian curricula. Until recent years, women and “ordinary life” were largely absent from most history books. I will return shortly—in my discussion of pluralism—to these sometimes overlapping, unidentified, possible cases of indoctrination.

Several participants in the indoctrination debate have noted how frequently one person positively labels a process education which someone else insists counts as indoctrination. Noting this tendency certainly does not gut the latter term of its meaning for other purposes, but it should give anyone pause before levelling the criticism that someone else is indoctrinating. That the pejorative sense of indoctrination has now largely supplanted the descriptive, instructional sense of the term (dating from before World War II) may or may not be related to education’s being largely a positive term, whose differentiated sense implies worthwhile learning done in acceptable ways. Whatever the range of possible relationships between the two concepts, indoctrination and education, they become diametric terms only when one selects the negative meaning of the one and the positive sense of the other.

PLURALITY AND PLURALISM: FORCING A RECONSIDERATION

Plurality and Pluralism

To begin this section, I will differentiate pluralism and plurality. In common Canadian usage, pluralism tends to do two jobs which we should not only distinguish, but which we ought to assign to two separate words if we hope to maintain precision through our discussions, and eventually move those discussions forward. First, pluralism usually designates a plural situation, to which I would rather assign the term plurality. In this situation of plurality, we find more-than-oneness, the “coexistence within one political jurisdiction of people with publicly important different beliefs and ways of life,” people with “incommensurate ideological” differences, who “indwell irreducibly different worlds.” The term commonly used for both meanings, pluralism, also implies the absolutization or advocacy of the plural situation. That is: as an “ism” it
Towards an Ethics of Community

implies that the many-ness designated by the rarely used term plurality (and by the frequently used term pluralism) is worthwhile and that public policy should be directed toward its realization. Confusion attends the use of pluralism because it usually does this double duty, describing a plural state of affairs and prescribing partiality to that state of affairs. I want to restrict pluralism to the second, prescriptive meaning listed because, while I take it as given that Canada faces cultural, linguistic, and religious plurality, it is not so clear how many Canadians actually value genuine pluralism, or which kinds of plurality they wish to embrace.¹⁰

Thus, although I noted the typical implications of “ism” words a moment ago, my desire to restrict pluralism does not rest on morphological grounds. Still, in differentiating these two senses of pluralism, and assigning one to the separate term plurality, I think I am making morphological sense.

In graphing the range of possible responses to plurality, we may see more easily the importance of distinguishing these two common meanings of pluralism, and thus the value of assigning one of the meanings its own more descriptive word, plurality. Faced with linguistic, religious, or ethnic plurality, a society, its institutions, and individuals might respond in any of several ways:

*celebration* | *tolerance* | *eradication*

<<<<<------->>>

*respect* | *assimilation*

Obviously, other words could be used instead of these five, and other intermediate points on the continuum could be identified. My suggestion here is that ordinary usage has varied from what one might expect. Words ending in “ism” usually connote a position of advocacy. Yet, recognizably, eradication and assimilation can hardly be viewed as the advocacy of plurality. Even tolerance leaves us in some doubt, despite its having become a kind of linguistic icon in multicultural, Canadian education. In light of the amount of fuzzy usage in usual discussions in these areas, I recommend to all of us the distinctive terms pluralism and plurality, and will use them as distinctive terms throughout this chapter.

**History of Canadian Plurality**

One comment on the prehistory of Canadian plurality is warranted. Religious wars made it clear to post-Reformation Europe and England that some common basis for public peace was required. The 1689 Act of Toleration in England was viewed by many as a legislative means to end publicly oppressive and tyrannical expressions of religious intolerance. Perceptions have shifted over three centuries so that by our own time, pluralism (in its undifferentiated sense) has achieved the status of secular doctrine, almost of cultural myth. Canadian
plurality has, until recently, seemed to rest on three related, classical liberal, largely unchallenged, somewhat contradictory assumptions:

1. That we can get along only when we leave our deepest (religious) commitments in the private sphere;
2. That the public square must be reserved only for those things which we all hold in common (despite the now-so-typically Canadian use of public money to celebrate some fundamental differences); and
3. That the public school must and can be neutral.

New conditions in both Canada and the rest of the world are beginning to force all educators to consider again our understandings of both plurality and indoctrination. A "crisis of nationalism"\(^\text{11}\) begins to tear Europe apart almost as soon as the Soviet empire dissolves. Religious violence threatens the stability of many nations. And, to the substance of this section of this chapter, people around the world ask why there is no space for their religious convictions in publicly funded schools that, they charge, are not neutral but rather thoroughly doctrinaire. In Canada, several changes now force us to reappraise plurality (and indoctrination). Immigration has brought increasing cultural, linguistic, and religious plurality to Canada. As it does elsewhere, disagreement frequently erupts in Canada regarding what topics are too divisive (language, religion, culture) or controversial (abortion, homosexuality, birth control) for treatment in Canadian schools.\(^\text{12}\) The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) has recognized Canadian plurality and, in a 1992 memorandum of agreement, seemed to lean toward the acceptance/celebration end of the continuum:

Canada is a highly diversified country in every respect. Linguistic, racial, cultural and religious differences, within and among provinces and territories, are a fundamental characteristic of its people. We view this pluralism as a source of great richness for the country, and believe that its strength lies in maintaining a profound respect for differences.\(^\text{13}\)

Despite their undifferentiated use of pluralism, the ministers express a common Canadian sentiment. Interestingly, they include religion on their list. Multiculturalism, until now, has primarily been perceived as a cultural and linguistic matter.\(^\text{14}\) The Canadian education ministers thus offer a more inclusive range of characteristics by including religion in their statement. With or without religion, their list points toward the respect and celebration end of the continuum that I sketched earlier. Whether Canada is pluralistic is another matter. Many Canadians point to a gulf between prose such as that in the CMEC agreement and the reality they witness in their own schools, where, they insist, some important differences between Canadians are barely tolerated, let alone accepted or celebrated.
Two other factors add to the difficulty that schools and policy-makers encounter in their work. First—a foreground factor—the public has historically come to view schools as a natural channel to bring about social change. This view has meant increasing, not decreasing, normativity in the curriculum regarding such matters as the environment, AIDS, smoking, and nutrition. Ironically, this increase in normativity comes at a time when, in the hands of schools, religious allegiances have become mere preferences, and individualism seems to have taken ethics by storm. The second is a background factor: previously central groups, such as the church, which did indoctrinate or try to assimilate and even eradicate difference, now find themselves marginalized. Here, I choose the church as an example, and the words central and marginalized specifically to echo R. I. Moore’s 1990 book, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250.*

Another example of this emigration from centre to margin relates to what is now roughly called “Euro-centrism” in the curriculum, a view of the world now frequently questioned by educators and others concerned with education.

What has changed to warrant my proposing that the advent of cultural and religious plurality suggests that the unsettled indoctrination debate be examined again? Little has changed within the debate itself. Rather, the social and educational landscape in Canada, like that of Britain and the United States, has undergone statistically small but politically significant alteration so that Canadian schools now serve several constituencies in ways that the members of those constituencies consider inadequate. Specifically, the epistemological assumptions underlying Western thought and science are seen to be in conflict with certain peoples’ religious convictions and ways of life.

*Muslims*

The Canadian Muslim population remains small, but Muslims encounter great difficulty in accepting the claim to objectivity which underlies Western science. I will quote representative sources to illustrate this difficulty:

In Islam and the civilization which it created there was a veritable celebration of knowledge all...related to the sacred extending in a hierarchy from an “empirical” and rational mode of knowing to that highest form of knowledge (*al-macrifah* or *cirfan*) which is the unitive knowledge of God not by [people] as [individuals], but by the divine center of human intelligence which, at the level of *gnosis*, becomes the subject as well as object of knowledge.

Many in the West consider this isolation of object from subject one of the prerequisites of knowing; knowing is viewed as an asymmetrical relation between subject and object. In fact, those who celebrate what they see as the superiority of Western science and philosophy, often point to this feature as that which, perhaps more than any other, has served to move Western science ahead.
But some cry “foul” regarding the claim that Western thought and science are neutral, objective and therefore superior. To these people, Western arrogance flows out of Western misperception of the subject/object relationship that informs the hegemonic Western view of knowledge.

Qadir puts the problem more starkly than does Nasr:

[The Islamic theory of knowledge...is fundamentally different from the Western theory. One major reason for the difference is that the former is based upon the spiritual conception of [human beings] and the universe [they inhabit], while the latter is secular and devoid of the sense of the Sacred. It is precisely for this reason, according to Muslim thinkers, that the Western theory of knowledge poses one of the greatest challenges to [human]mankind. Knowledge in the West has become problematic as it has lost its true purpose. It is ill-conceived and wrongly interpreted. It has elevated doubt and scepticism and in some cases agnosticism to the level of scientific methodology and has thereby brought chaos to all realms of human knowledge. However, it should be understood that the Western conception of knowledge is not value-free as is sometimes supposed; it is very much partial, being the product of the Western worldview.]

Many in the West would object that Qadir’s complaints are ill-founded, that our science is value-free, and that it yields up objective knowledge. Yet, if Qadir is correct in delineating the differences between Islamic and Western views of knowledge, he makes quite plain why some people believe that allegedly neutral, publicly funded schools indoctrinate.

Now, some may object by arguing that Muslims have their epistemology wrong. But for the question of indoctrination as I mean us to reconsider it here, such an objection carries little weight. Two groups follow incompatible epistemologies, both claiming to be able to adjudge the other. In a sense, the philosophical discussion must stand aside because we live in plural Canada. Why? Because Muslims use the school system, and they are not interested in being told they simply have understood epistemology wrongly. The point is that from their point of view, Western education appears fundamentally in opposition to their at-bottom convictions about the world and their knowledge of it. Qadir continues his remarks this way:

[The sense of the Sacred which furnishes the ultimate ground for knowledge has to accompany and to interpenetrate the educative process at every stage. Allah not only stands at the beginning of knowledge, He also stands at the end, and He also accompanies and infuses grace into the entire process of learning. In this process the sense of the Sacred is nowhere lost sight of.]

I will quote just one more remark from Qadir to illustrate how deeply Muslims’ difficulty with Canadian education might run: “The distinction between divine
and non-divine knowledge is spurious. Knowledge is knowledge...no matter what its contents are."20

Given this epistemology, Muslims will not be satisfied to have a world religions class added into the curriculum somewhere in grades ten to twelve. Nor will recognition of the Islamic year satisfy them. Muslims would view these moves and others like them as unsatisfactory carrots, as insults. Religion is, in one sense, everything for them, and as the Islamic Institute at Cambridge argues continually, they believe school curriculum should reflect this. In Ontario, a few Muslim families have sent their children to Christian schools, a phenomenon already widespread in England. The parents of the Muslim children in these Christian schools reason that although Christianity may be an inferior religion, Christian schools at least recognize the hand of God on all of life. They prefer this combination to publicly funded education, which insists that the public square cannot make space for genuine religious differences and that, when religion does come to school, it must be reduced to a song-and-dance routine. The restoration of Christian religious education in British (state-funded) common schools in 1988 was, in fact, heavily supported by Muslims, who argued that religion belonged in schools. Furthermore, they argued that because Christianity—even if only nominal Christianity—was the majority religion in Britain, Christianity, rather than comparative religions, should be taught in British schools. That some Muslims in Britain still send their children to Christian schools illustrates the depth of their conviction that religious faith underlies the whole of the educational endeavour.

**Canadian Aboriginal Peoples**

For those from parts of Canada with minute Muslim populations, traditional Canadian Aboriginal epistemology may pose more of a challenge.21 Like Muslims, Canadian Aboriginals protest the Western approach to knowledge that underlies and saturates Canadian school curricula. For them, an obvious point of difference with the dominant approach lies in the view of the natural world, of which they consider human life an integral, not a separate part.22 Again, Western science and philosophy assume that subject-separateness is a strength, and even a necessary first step to the development of our science. Such a view is antithetical to the panentheism of Aboriginal spirituality. This short extract from the Thanksgiving Prayer of the Longhouse People catches some flavour of the Aboriginal view of the interrelatedness of all things:

> We have been given the duty<br>  To live in harmony with one another<br>  And with other living things.<br> We give thanks that this is true.<br> We give thanks to our Mother Earth.<br> All that makes us strong and alive, comes from you.
We are all like children as we walk upon you.  
You nourish us and all living things.

Defenders of Western thought might (accurately) protest that the panentheism evident here would not move Western science ahead, or even that Canadian Aboriginal children had best learn Western ways if they want to get ahead in Canadian life. Economically, such assimilationist sentiments make sense. But to express them is, in a sense, to be answering the wrong question, because Aboriginal people are concerned about a worldview inimical to their own. They argue that this worldview runs through the curriculum and that publicly funded Canadian schools (even band-controlled ones) indoctrinate. Mentioning Aboriginal history, or even worldviews, in a class here and there does not address the underlying differences between Western epistemology and an epistemology informed by traditional Aboriginal spirituality, nor does it address the problems Canadian Aboriginals thereby typically encounter in Canadian curricula.

A brief survey of Canadian curricula which give space to Aboriginal epistemology is very brief indeed. At this time, Newfoundland recognizes it only minimally. In the Nova Scotia social studies curriculum, the Mi'kmaq people are studied, though not in detail. New Brunswick offers a grade eleven and twelve native studies course, and two elementary schools offer Maliseet heritage programs. Prince Edward Island gives 25 percent of its grade seven social studies curriculum to Aboriginal cultures. In Manitoba, Aboriginal epistemology and spirituality are included throughout kindergarten to grade twelve social studies in the context of broader examination of Aboriginal culture, recognizing “that in traditional societies spirituality informs the day to day activities of the people, and that a knowledge of people’s beliefs and values is essential to understanding the society.” According to the 1989 Indian and Métis education policy from kindergarten to grade twelve, the province of Saskatchewan requires that Aboriginal content—that is, epistemology and spirituality—be integrated into all curriculum areas. By the 1992-93 school year, Aboriginal content was being classroom tested. To their credit, officials in Saskatchewan education understood that Aboriginal spirituality was not simply a compartment of life: “When people see the term spirituality, they often assume it is a form of religion. It is not. Rather, Indigenous spirituality is a philosophy which attempts to understand human existence and relationships with nature. It is a perspective of individual and community development, human societies and the environment.” In Alberta, all students take Aboriginal “histories, cultures, and lifestyles” in various social studies courses “so they can benefit from the values and lifestyles of Native cultures.” The Native Education Project produced a Native Content Analysis Information guide in September 1989 to aid in detecting bias. While it raises several concerns, it deals little with the integrality of Aboriginal worldviews. In British
Columbia, nothing specific is required, and even in band-controlled schools, attention is varied, “depending on the convictions of the band.”

As one might expect, the Yukon has Aboriginal worldviews thoroughly integrated at many points (as required by the September 1990, Education Act), including permitted absences from school for religious and cultural activities. The Northwest Territories has two separate curricula specifically to address questions of Aboriginal worldviews (Dene, Kede, and Inuit). Although Canadian schools now pay a degree of attention to Canadian Aboriginal history, or to their views of environment, the epistemological foundations on which those views rest remain largely absent from Canadian education; Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the territories being the main exceptions.

So far, I have argued that Canadian publicly funded education faces a difficulty, somewhat of its own making. The indoctrination debate leaves few parties happy about what transpires in schools. Those who would dominate that debate now find themselves facing representatives of a plurality of worldviews, some, such as Islam and Aboriginal spirituality, with epistemologies utterly different from the Western rationalism that they charge shapes and controls Canadian classrooms.

**SUGGESTED WAYS FORWARD**

What forms or models might we use to show genuine respect for these worldviews and others like them which are fundamentally incompatible with the worldview apparently underlying most Canadian publicly funded education? Given that minority worldviews will not be satisfactorily addressed by adding a course to the school curriculum, or merely recognizing special days, foods, and music, how can we honour and implement true pluralism? If we are going to take these fundamental differences seriously, I suggest that we take a four-pronged approach. This will involve considering epistemology, the assimilationist appearance and effects of some public policies, other possible ways to structure plurality, and further exploration of some key concepts related to the indoctrination and pluralism discussions.

**Reexamining Epistemological Foundations**

Because we must be more cautious than we have been in the past not simply to dismiss minority worldviews with a wave of the hand, we would do well, first, to reexamine the foundations of the dominant Western epistemological paradigm. We must be more cautious than we have been in the past; we cannot simply dismiss minority worldviews with a wave of the hand.

Marginalized groups who discover a gulf between their own epistemology and that dominant in Canadian public schools gain momentum almost daily from feminist studies in philosophy as well as from other quarters. For example, Lorraine Code, philosopher at York University, notes that
Implicit in the veneration of objectivity central to scientific practice is the conviction that objects of knowledge are separate from knowers and investigators...that they remain separate and unchanged throughout investigative, information-gathering, and knowledge construction processes.33

However, she argues that "knowledge is, inextricably, subjective and objective" and that "knowledge is inescapably, the product of an intermingling of subjective and objective elements."34 Code does not go as far as many feminists in subjectifying knowledge, but she does open enough space to give a Muslim or a Canadian Aboriginal room to breathe.35

Richard Rorty, albeit still a confessed rationalist and liberal, has begun to speak of those finally untestable, at-bottom convictions by which we all live. He calls these our "final vocabularies" and admits to their divisive function within society, even suggesting that liberalism itself retains the power to exclude.36 Rorty is not far from Anthony Flew on at least this matter: Flew describes at one point the "ultimacy of science" and even calls for openness "to the possibility of new, and possibly upsetting discoveries of what actually is the case."37 Ronald Laura calls Rorty’s "final vocabularies" the "epistemologically primitive" starting points of science, and he speaks of "frameworks" within which scientific and philosophical questions and answers make sense.38 I do not know whether Muslims and Aboriginal Canadians consider people like Code and Rorty their allies. Nor do I know how many are aware that Reformed folk have been offering such criticisms of epistemology for decades. However, I do know that they are asking some of the same questions of Western science: Why did one way of viewing things gain its "epistemic privilege?" and "Is this epistemic privilege justified?"39 In this current debate, these foundational, worldview questions are not only among the most formidable, but they are among the most important.

Rethinking Current Policies: Appearance and Effect

Besides asking rationalism to make space in the epistemological discussion for other approaches, we must review the appearance and effect of current educational policies toward minorities, especially those whose religious sensibilities are offended by what appears to them an assimilationist approach. Minority groups are now charging that indoctrination in an alien way of thinking takes place in ostensibly public schools. Members of these groups perceive an essentially religious character in publicly funded Canadian schools and they feel like they have encountered the teeth of a policy of eradication and assimilation. These encounters, ironically, occur surrounded by the language of pluralism, neutrality, and toleration—even celebration—of difference.

The defendants in the Mozert court case in the United States argued successfully through two courts that public schools essentially serve
assimilationist ends, in conflict with the Christian religion. While such a case has no legal bearing on Canadian education, it may have moral suasion inasmuch as this same kind of "subtle coercion"—read: indoctrination—may also characterize Canadian education.

Pressure to reconsider whether publicly funded school classrooms are as neutral as their defenders claim comes from many quarters, not only from cultural and religious minorities or legal scholars. Some educational theorists as well are saying as much. For over two decades sociologists of education have argued that school classrooms further a conservative agenda. Simultaneously, voices on the right charge that classrooms promote a liberal agenda.

**Reconsidering Alternative Structures for Plurality**

Thus far, I have suggested that we not only scrutinize the epistemological discussion, but that we reexamine educational policies related to worldviews, to religion and to religious education. Third, I suggest that we seek ways to structure plurality other than the effectively assimilationist approach that, some people charge, presently characterizes Canadian education (even while most defenders of Canadian public education deny having assimilationist intentions). Canadians may want to attempt some kind of structural pluralism (and I mean pluralism in my own restricted sense here, where plurality is advocated). The Dutch, for example, have organized their public life in this way for most of this century. Whether in broadcasting, education, or labour unions, Dutch communities based on various political ideologies and religious viewpoints have enjoyed public space (and in the case of education—public money) to pursue their goods with others of like mind.

Given how differently Dutch society is organized from our own, Canadian provinces should perhaps consider the model implemented in Quebec as a partial solution to the dissatisfaction of religious minorities. Quebec school boards are required to offer students as many as three choices as demand warrants: Roman Catholic religious education, Protestant religious education, or moral education. The first two are made available as opt-in courses, the last is required of those not desiring either of the explicitly religious options. If it wished, Quebec could extend the list to include, for example, Islamic religious education in those districts where population justified such a move. If other Canadian provinces adopted Quebec's approach, Canadians could provide legal room for minorities (and majorities) to give attention to, and expression of, their at-bottom religious commitments within some single publicly funded system. On this account, religious differences would not be ethnicized as they often are now—reduced to a song-and-dance routine for celebration days—but would be treated seriously in curriculum by people whose commitment was considered an asset rather than a liability. In making this suggestion, I assume that all
religious groups with the inclination and resources to do so should be given public space and money to describe their outlook on the world.

From the point of view of some religious folk, of course, this option still suffers from one telling limitation: religion is still cordoned off in a single course, perhaps while secular materialism continues to saturate the remainder of the curriculum and the school ethos. Still, allowing representatives to make such courses available seems like the least that school boards should do if they indeed want to take worldview differences seriously.

These are only two means by which to express genuine pluralism within education, and even they come up wanting in obvious ways. There may be more, and I suggest that we must think creatively to articulate what they might be. All the creative thinking on earth, however, will be of no use, unless those who claim to be the guardians of the public square admit that all education will be informed by one set of convictions or another, and that a society concerned with fairness will see to it that parents’ convictions inform their own children’s education.43

Reopening Key Concepts

My last suggestion involves some of our key concepts. Even a cursory look at the matters I have raised here shows that we must reexamine some of the key ideas in the indoctrination and pluralism discussions.

I begin with public education. Canadians interested in education, especially philosophers of education, may need to begin asking a highly modified gloss on W. D. Hudson’s question of twenty years ago, “Is Religious Education Possible?”; namely, “Is public education possible?”44 Throughout this chapter, I have used the phrase “publicly funded” to refer to the schools most people call public schools. Without a doubt, almost all Canadians pay for these schools, and in that sense, they are public. But public, by definition, has to do with that which we do or have in common, whether meetings and parades, or transit systems and arenas. We want to recognize that the meaning of public has changed historically, and will continue to do so, but I insist that the time has come again to make the concept problematic, as did John S. Mill in On Liberty and John Dewey in The Public and Its Problems.45 This is necessary because increasing numbers of Canadians are now saying they do not recognize the publicly funded school systems of this country as theirs; that is, they do not share the worldview underlying these school systems. For many, public schools imply neutral schools, and neutral schools do not exist.46 In what direction must we go, or should attempt to go to make room for those groups claiming that publicly funded Canadian schools are failing either to make space for their own, openly religious, at-bottom ontological and epistemological convictions, or to recognize and admit the ontological and epistemological assumptions lying at the bottom of public education itself?
Refusal to reopen this question of how truly “public” Canadian publicly funded education actually is may indicate that defenders of publicly funded education have something to hide, albeit unconsciously. Such a refusal will serve only to increase the suspicions of those who already believe a monopoly exists and is primarily interested in protecting itself. Such a refusal may also demonstrate a shallowness of actual sentiment behind the rhetoric of pluralism so characteristic of Canadian educational discourse.

Included in this call to problematize the term “public” is the reconsideration of our definitions of “religion” as we use it with reference to education. Ninian Smart has suggested that religious education courses (in the United Kingdom) consider a wide variety of ideologies when such courses treat world religions. Thus Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity would be joined by humanism, secularism, communism and whatever other “final vocabularies” or symbolic systems people ultimately employ to organize their cognitive framework. In addition to this change, Smart suggests we use the word worldviews (as I have largely done here) instead of religions. Smart’s suggestion would accord well with one line of opinion regarding US legal debates on separation of church and state, establishment, and free exercise. That line of opinion is that “any set of beliefs concerning a desirable way of life” functions as a religion and should be counted as such. Recognizably, Smart’s suggestion leads us miles away from any of the received definitions within philosophy of education, but it does lead us toward the creation of space for all Canadians to express their deepest convictions within the schools they are compelled to fund.

Educational theorists also need to clarify several terms that arise in discussions of indoctrination. I include here especially neutrality and impartiality, the former because it has figured so centrally in American religion-in-education jurisprudence for over forty years and is now creeping into Canadian educational discourse, and the latter because I view it as the needed disposition among those persons committed to some worldview or other who inevitably will teach religion in Canadian public school classrooms. Those who call for neutrality in education seem to have confused something ideological or confessional, which does not exist, with something procedural and pedagogical. These people seek the former—ideologically neutral teachers—when they should be seeking the latter—those teachers capable of impartiality or some kind of procedural neutrality. That this search may necessarily be fruitless is discussed thoroughly in legal and educational literature. Perhaps what drives such a search is a confusion of neutrality in public space, and secularism, which often comes cloaked as neutrality.

John Valauri, in his survey of how neutrality has functioned in American establishment clause jurisprudence, notes three features of neutrality that I want to repeat here. First, he notes that neutrality is a complex concept, implying both non-involvement and impartiality. For Valauri, non-involvement does not
mean disinterestedness or isolation, rather it implies intentionally refraining from intervention which would reveal favouritism for one of the parties. Witness the referee in sports, who we expect to be intensely involved, yet remains impartial, by which Valauri means that one should examine and regulate one’s actions to avoid giving advantage to any side.

Valauri also notes that neutrality is a formal concept, by which he means that “neutral” asserts a relationship between specified things or people. We would need specific information about each case to determine what one is neutral toward. Thus, we are never able to claim that we are absolutely neutral or neutral toward everything (unless “we” is ontologically challenged perhaps).

Third, Valauri notes that neutrality is an ambiguous term, having different meanings in different contexts, especially as it has been interpreted in the US Supreme Court, and in prescriptions for educational practice. This ambiguity may be partly related to the fact that the concept of neutrality is subject to conception building. By that I mean that a dictionary will report several meanings for neutral or neutrality, but as is the case with many central concepts in educational or social policy discussions, in actual use people begin to shape the concept according to their definitions of the good life and their visions for society.\(^{54}\)

I am not saying there is anything wrong when such conception-building occurs, in fact it is in some ways the lifeblood of policy-making in a democratic society, I just want us to be conscious of what we are about when we do it. That people will argue for their conceptions of neutrality in this way should catch none of us off guard. But, back to Valauri’s point about the ambiguity of neutrality. Given that the concept has become so important within educational policy discussion and is thus subject to conception-building, should we not expect such ambiguity?\(^{55}\)

We now ask the historical question about neutrality. Historically, have people thought schools or teachers should be neutral? The answer of course is, “for the most part, no,” although we recognize that philosophers have struggled for centuries with questions of authority and neutrality in education. In fact, almost until the present century, the stated purpose of schools and the effect desired by both parents and teachers has always been to inculcate in the young specific knowledge, skills and, to our point here, values (and sometimes even “wisdom”!). And this pertains to duty, loyalty to king, and honour, democratic citizenship, good character, and the love of God, or any of several dozen other values or sets of values (depending on what century and state one examines). Neither was there any doubt historically whether school knowledge should be presented in such a way that the values in view were promoted.

Having reviewed educational history in one paragraph and concluded that neutrality has for the most part not been considered desirable, we should now ask if it has ever before this century been thought possible? Again, we boldly answer, “no.” However, we must remember that because it was not considered a viable notion, it was not analyzed as such. The first religion-in-education
cases began to reach US courts only in the 1880s. Now, ironically enough, a century later, many people outside the courts and the academy are becoming interested in the role of religion, and ideology in education. In fact groups from both ends of the political spectrum now say, for a variety of reasons, that schools are not neutral. Libertarians, children’s rights advocates, some free-schoolers, and some home-schoolers raise complaints, especially about the effects on children of compulsory schooling and of the curriculum in place. Critical theorists and feminists observe that schools treat knowledge as if it were actually structured the way schools structure it, instead of recognizing its contingent character. In other words, all knowledge is constructed by certain people or classes of people at certain times, with certain class or gender interests in view. They argue that the received view of knowledge, in fact, perpetuates these class and gender inequalities. In short, the curriculum itself is not neutral; rather it represents a selection from among many possible contents.

This absence of neutrality in schools also concerns members of many acknowledged religions, who can cite a litany of complaints. They point to the relativisation of religious belief, indoctrination by silence about the role of religion in life, open hostility to religious belief, perceived opposition between the school curriculum and their own religiously informed views of geological origins, species development, authority, women, war, morality, sexual orientation, contraception, sex before marriage, self-authentication, the basis of self-esteem, and human perfectibility, to name only the main flashpoints.

Representatives of business interests complain that students are poorly prepared for participation in the marketplace. The missing skills themselves are not an issue of neutrality, but the dispositions toward work with which students graduate, and the failure of schools to instill skills may indeed find their roots in the same intellectual ethos.56

Finally, Christians in the Reformational tradition, Canadian Aboriginals, Sikhs, Muslims and many others believe that all of life is rooted in underlying, religious convictions, that it is lived in adherence to one worldview or another. Such persons also struggle with what they see as the non-neutrality of classrooms.

Within earshot of this chorus of voices, I find problematic the commonplace Canadian notion that schoolteachers should or could be neutral in matters of religion, or that such neutrality should or could be manifested by ignoring religion. Examining three non-educational situations where neutrality is used will make that problem clearer.

In a most straightforward use, we speak of a car transmission being in neutral, that is, not in gear. With the transmission in this state, the car may stand still, roll forward, or roll backward, but, by definition, cannot do so either aided or hindered by the car’s engine. If the car transmission is an example of neutrality, then those who expect teachers to demonstrate neutrality regarding
religion and other controversial issues must either be looking for some other kind of neutrality, or be setting themselves up for disappointment; teachers in classrooms are simply not capable of this kind of neutrality because the "engine" of one's mind is always in gear. I contend that demanding or seeking such neutrality gets us nowhere.

Moreover, we remember that during the Second World War, Switzerland adopted a policy of neutrality, which does not mean it had no concerns, wishes, or preferences. Rather, it did not actively side with either the Axis or Allies.\textsuperscript{57} The car example digests much more easily than does the Swiss example, perhaps for this very reason. In the sphere of action, Switzerland's neutrality may be akin to that of the car transmission. But we recognize that what the Swiss felt and what they did are two separate matters. In doing so, we gain another glimpse why classroom neutrality is so difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, if we consider the referee in sports for a moment, we realize that any attempt the referee might make to act neutrally toward the two teams is bound to fail. A tight game, for example, a game played close to the rules, will inevitably favor one team over another. Allowing the game to open up—interpreting and enforcing the rules loosely—will favor the other team. So what is a referee to do? Those concerned for justice might call for just that, officiating executed in such a way that justice is done, though this stance obviously leaves great latitude and responsibility with the official as to what that means and how it is to be dispensed. This stance also implies non-neutrality—likely in more than one direction—at various points during the game. Recognizing the difficulties with neutrality in these circumstances leads us closer to the problem with classrooms. In sports officiating, we most likely define the neutrality we seek in terms of impartiality toward the two teams. Indeed, those who are calling for neutrality in the classroom are seeking this kind of neutrality.\textsuperscript{58}

Obviously, in confessional schools, no one wants neutral teachers.\textsuperscript{59} But for publicly funded schools, and multi-faith schools, the question remains: Is there any way to move forward in our thinking about classroom neutrality and to respond to the rather naive call for neutral teachers? I suggest that classroom neutrality on controversial issues such as religion is more akin to neutrality in sports officiating than it is to that which car transmissions achieve regularly. It is likely only the Martian teacher who is truly neutral on matters of controversy such as politics and religion. Faced with the current shortage of Martian teachers, we need to ask who can best handle education about religion in classrooms. Logically, we are faced with few choices when we look for teachers:

1. Experts who are usually either:
   a. insiders to religion and thus, by definition, persons who believe one religion to be true\textsuperscript{60} or superior, or
Towards an Ethics of Community

b. outsiders to religion who believe that religion is merely an anthropological phenomenon and not true.

2. Non-experts, with varying degrees of religious commitment, who fit roughly the two categories of expertise listed just above.

Obviously, we could fit our four classes onto a matrix, a presentation that would miss much of the nuancing necessary to discuss accurately the kinds and shades of belief we are attempting to discuss here. More accurately, we could perhaps talk about degrees of commitment and degrees of expertise by means of intersecting vertical and horizontal continua. Assuming that we expect teachers to be relative experts in the fields they teach (and thus have barred members of the second group I mentioned—non-experts—from teaching about religion), we can ask this question: Which kind of person is best qualified to teach about religion in a Canadian classroom?

In its recommendations, the 1994 Ontario document *Guidelines for Education about Religion* makes clear that religious believers are disqualified in principle because they are likely to indoctrinate. In one stroke, these guidelines (which are typical) eliminate one of the two groups of experts from which one might pick teachers for courses dealing with religion. Such a recommendation rests on a misunderstanding of neutrality (one suspects among other things). Ontario Ministry of Education seems to work under the impression that ideologically/confessionally neutral teachers are out there somewhere, though they are obviously not adherents to acknowledged religions. I respond that not one of us is ideologically and confessionally neutral, that all persons carry within themselves and live by fundamental convictions about religion—I would even call them religious convictions—of one kind or another. If we all in fact do live by such at-bottom convictions, then we must ask what will be the “angle” or “cant” on acknowledged religion in Ontario publicly funded classrooms? If the teachers in those classrooms meet Ontario’s preferences and are therefore not adherents to any acknowledged religious faith, we can expect that angle to be one of comparative religion, with its built-in antipathy for religious conviction. Once again, followers of acknowledged religions are given cause for complaint.

We could go at this problem of teaching about religion in publicly funded schools another way. Some people are dispositionally capable of impartially handling controversial matters in a classroom. It is these teachers, who have demonstrated that they are disposed toward and capable of such impartiality that ought to teach about religion in publicly funded classrooms. In other words, the grounds for selecting appropriate teachers are dispositional and not ideological. These grounds are related almost to skill. Unfortunately, mention of the disposition toward impartiality (or the ability to teach with impartiality) is absent from Ontario’s guidelines (as is usually the case in such documents and discussions of teaching religion or about religion). Instead, several university
religious studies programs are recommended to prospective teachers of religion. Apparently, the twin assumptions (of Ontario’s Ministry of Education) are that such programs provide the knowledge and dispositions necessary for proper instruction (or perhaps that dispositions are not an issue when one has studied comparative religion), and that what we might call “insider” education (at the Buddhist Study Centre, The Institute for Christian Studies, or The Islamic Society of North America, for example) is ill preparation for teaching in publicly funded schools.

CONCLUSION

When we proceed with commitment, we must recognize that the tolerance required in the public square should not imply indifference to real differences in the classroom. Rather, teachers and students should be able to be clear about and, within certain limits, live according to their differences, even argue about those differences, albeit with civility. In selecting teachers for religious education or for education about religion, we must recognize that all people possess faith commitments about religion (which I earlier called religious commitments). As Niblett said more than three decades ago, “The teacher of religious knowledge who does not understand what religion is really about can no more teach the subject than a teacher of art little moved by beauty can in any real sense of the term teach art.”

If academics refuse to budge on their claim to privileged epistemic access, and refuse to make such terms as public, neutrality, and religion problematic, then those groups who sense their active and continued marginalization will grow increasingly impatient with the process, and with publicly funded education. Parties on all sides must show willingness to engage in dialogue. Neuhaus dismisses as impossible the notion of a naked public square, and asks instead for a hospitable public square in which all are welcomed to participate. Recognizing that Canada is characterized by plurality, recognizing that annihilation and assimilation are unjust (and unworkable anyway), and recognizing that talking tolerance grants too little in some cases and too much in others, we must begin making space in Canadian schools or at least with Canadian educational dollars for the genuine expression of genuine differences.

Notes

1. The author wishes to acknowledge the editors’ reading of the manuscript, as well as the thoughtful editorial work of Jan Wesselius. Also, the ICS Junior Members in the Fall 1995 Education 1513 seminar (Epistemology, Ontology, and Anthropology of Education) made very helpful criticisms and suggestions. Parts of this chapter were presented at the 1993 and 1994 meetings of the Canadian Association for Foundations of Education and the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society.

2. R. M. Hare, “Adolescents into Adults” in T. H. B. Hollins, ed., Aims in Education
Towards an Ethics of Community

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), pp. 47-70. (Cited as Hollins;)


5. Elmer Thiessen surveys all the indoctrination arguments, explains the outcomes criterion, and outlines constructive ways for Christians to teach for commitment without indoctrinating in Teaching for Commitment (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1993).


15. Thank you to Craig Bartholomew for bringing these authors to my attention in an interdisciplinary seminar in 1992-93.


19. Ibid., p. 6.


21. We differentiate traditional Aboriginal spirituality here from Christian spirituality. A majority of Canadian Aboriginals follow the Christian religion.


23. And the sense they make illustrates how deeply economic growth is presumed to be a good within our society, that is, how far a certain Western worldview prevails.


One Newfoundland religious education textbook for grades ten to twelve attends to
Indoctrination and Assimilation


32. See also Tooker. Aboriginal spirituality is frequently introduced in Canadian classrooms in unwise ways, offending Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike, both on religious grounds.


34. Ibid., pp. 27, 30.


36. *CIS and ORT.*


43. This influence should be exercised within two limits: that the education serve the public good, and that it be carried out in responsible ways.


46. The usage may, however, reflect increasing influence of American legal language and thought in Canadian educational jurisprudence.


48. N. Smart, p. 303.

49. Lieder, p. 816.

50. N. Smart, pp. 23-41, 195-205.


54. As far as I know I developed this distinction first in my dissertation at UBC in 1986. Later, I found the political philosopher Gerald Dworkin using the same distinction, in The Theory and Practice of Autonomy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 10. He notes that the “filling out of an abstract concept with the different content is what is meant by different conceptions of the same concept.”

55. One further comment about neutrality is warranted in the context of noting the three elements Valauri identifies. With Robert E. Goodin and Andrew Reeve, I want to note that neutrality is usually an instrumental value; it is meant to achieve something else, e.g., achieving justice in a courtroom (for judges), or avoiding indoctrination in a classroom (for teachers). See “Liberalism and Neutrality” in Goodin and Reeve, eds., Liberal Neutrality (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 3-4. My own observation is that this instrumentality is not always clearly in view in Canadian educational usage of neutrality.

56. We note again that some critics on the left charge that business interests have hijacked publicly funded education.

57. It would be helpful here to ask what neutral noninvolvement looks like during a war? For example, in a single, albeit important area, Switzerland could take any of several stances toward its trading partners who have gone to war with each other. It could (1) cease trading with both belligerents; (2) trade equal amounts with both belligerents; (3) trade at levels equal to prewar trade levels with both belligerents; (4) trade proportionally to the respective populations of the belligerents. Each of the last three approaches to trade would favour one or the other of the belligerents compared to the first approach (cessation with both). Even cessation arguably would hurt the belligerent most in need of whatever products the neutral nation produced. Thus, we see that all four approaches actually aid one of the belligerents more than the other. Thus, we see that strict political neutrality may be as elusive as classroom neutrality.

58. Were schools to find this kind of procedural, pedagogical neutrality, the non-neutrality embedded in the curriculum would remain. Even that embeddedness divides into two levels. The curriculum could be said to teach or to teach about one or more epistemologies, but the curriculum also found its own shape and structure within an epistemology. So we see that pedagogical neutrality, even if it were possible, would function simply as a veneer over other, deeper, commitments. The author thanks Robert Sweetman for pointing this out in an earlier draft.

59. I still want to argue that impartial teachers would serve the educative purposes of the school, while recognizing that some parents connected to confessional schools want indoctrination, not impartiality.

60. In this context, I use true intentionally and consciously.

61. Toronto: Queen’s Printer, 1992. Restrictive as they are, these guidelines are more open than Memorandum #112 (Toronto: Queen’s Printer, 1991) which they are meant to replace. Memorandum 112 largely proscribed treatment of religion in any way at most
Indoctrination and Assimilation

...times (in response to the Elgin County Decision of January 1990 which ended Religious Education in Ontario publicly funded schools). As Brian Hill points out (Hill, p. 51), to “teach certain subjects and not others declares our value judgements about the worthwhile life and the educated person” and to exclude religion is to “disvalue” it.

62. Further examination is required of the assumption that meeting ideological criteria guarantees that religion will be neither aided nor inhibited in publicly funded classrooms.


65. These commitments precede and underlie any and all philosophies of education.
