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Review Article: Commitment to Liberal Education

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Elmer John Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment*. Montreal & Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, Leominster, England: Gracewing 1993. 277.

1. INTRODUCTION

The central purpose of Thiessen's book is to defend religious nurture and instruction against the charge of indoctrination. In doing so he questions the prevailing ideal of liberal education which underlies the charge of religious indoctrination. But Thiessen's ambition reaches even farther: he also wants to sketch the outlines of a new ideal of liberal education, in the extension of which a redefinition of indoctrination can be presented. From the beginning the author is quite explicit about his own commitment: "My roots are Christian; I was raised in a Mennonite home . ." (p. xii). And he also makes clear that his analyses should be placed "within the context of a fairly conservative interpretation of Christian doctrine" (p. 29; see also: p. 55).

In Thiessen's opinion the method of conceptual analysis is less suitable for his inquiry: "I wish to move beyond the sometimes narrow and seemingly futile preoccupation with conceptual clarification . ." (p. 5). Terms ought to be understood in their historical context (p. 33), and Thiessen considers it "more appropriate to aim for a 'theory of indoctrination', rather than an analysis of the concept of indoctrination" (p. 232). On the basis of prevailing descriptive analyses of this term, Thiessen presents a *rescriptive* inquiry of indoctrination and liberal education. The driving force of a rescriptive inquiry is a kind of intellectual discontentment with existing (configurations of) central concepts, and the product of such a rescription has to be more adequate from a *theoretical* viewpoint than certain current (frameworks of) central educational concepts (Steutel, 1988). Later I will answer the question whether Thiessen has succeeded in this undertaking.

2. RELIGIOUS INDOCTRINATION AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

In the first chapter Thiessen explores the different forms of the charge of religious indoctrination and the alternative approaches to avoid this reproach. Religious indoctrination, according to Thiessen, is largely a phantom of our liberal minds. This 'modern ghost' was created mainly by analytic philosophers, like Peters, Hirst, Wilson and Hare. The conclusion that can be drawn from their

analyses is that it is not teaching *about* religion but the teaching *of* a specific religion that is indoctrinatory.

Christian nurture or upbringing takes as its starting point the affirmation of Christian truth and further seeks to foster belief as well as commitment (p. 27). The central question of Thiessen's book is: Does Christian nurture or the confessional approach to religious education involve indoctrination? The following approach is taken: instead of (re-)defining 'indoctrination' in order to decide whether Christian nurture falls under the concept of indoctrination, it is examined whether the methods, content, aims, and consequences of Christian nurture are morally and educationally acceptable. The mentioned criteria are the logical condition of 'indoctrination' that philosophers have identified in their analyses.

The concern about and charge of indoctrination arises of the context of the Enlightenment ideal of liberal education. According to Thiessen, an examination of the underlying values and assumptions of this ideal should help to understand the charge of indoctrination. From the perspective of this ideal, described by Richard Peters, religious upbringing turns out to be too narrow, it fails to stimulate an open, rational, and critical exploration of other ways of experience. It discourages critical thinking and hampers the development of autonomy. According to Thiessen, one assumption that underlies the modern conception of liberal education needs special attention: liberal education has acquired a secular meaning. In this connection I want to raise the question whether liberal education is hostile to religious or Christian upbringing *per se*, or only to specific forms of religious or Christian nurture. Though he acknowledges that Christianity is not all of one piece (p. 29), throughout his study Thiessen speaks about Christian parents or educators and the Christian faith, whereas in relation to the charge of indoctrination it surely matters whether the parents are members of Opus Dei (a secretive ultra-orthodox organization within the Roman Catholic Church) or consider themselves as (liberal) Mainline Protestants. I will return to this subject, and more in particular to fundamentalism, later.

Thiessen does not simply reject the liberal context: "While broadly accepting the ideal of liberal education, together with its underlying values and assumptions, I want to subject all this to critical scrutiny, not with a view to discarding the ideal, but rather with a view to moving towards a more defensible and carefully defined ideal" (p. 54). In his view the ideals of autonomy, rationality, and critical openness need to be modified. By introducing the necessary qualifications to the liberal assumptions, much of the sting of the charge of indoctrination against Christian nurture should be removed. When properly qualified, the principles of liberal education are compatible with a fairly orthodox version of Christianity: "What is being assumed here is the possibility of some shared convictions and beliefs between Christians and non-Christians" (p. 55). There is some *common ground* between the two, including certain aspects of theories of liberal education and liberalism. Of course, Thiessen acknowledges, anti-liberal forces have always existed in the Christian church, and though he cannot validate the claim in his study, he suggests that these forces do not belong to mainstream Christian thought.

3. DOCTRINES AND NON-RATIONAL METHODS

In order to refute the charge of indoctrination Thiessen discusses the criteria that are thought to define the concept of indoctrination: content (related to the scientific ideal), methods (related to the ideal of rationality), intention (related to the ideal of autonomy), and consequences (related to the ideal of critical openness).

The upshot of Thiessen's analysis of *doctrine* (content) is that 'doctrines' as described by Kazepides, Wilson, Flew, Spiecker, and Gregory and Woods are also found in science, the paradigm of non-doctrine. By focusing on 'doctrines' and describing these as first-order principles, primary beliefs and epistemic primitives and as being an essential part of all forms of knowledge, Thiessen loses sight of the fact that science and religion are quite different kinds of human enterprises. In religion people try to find answers to the questions on the meaning of life, on their ultimate destination and origin, and how they should arrange their life accordingly. In religion no hypotheses are formulated or theories falsified. In science Thiessen's so-called doctrines will eventually be questioned and replaced by other first-order principles ('progressive paradigm-shift'). In most religions, and in Christianity as well, doctrines form the 'eternal hard-core'. Also the nature and the role of doctrines in Christian nurture and in the initiation of students into science are quite different. Doctrines in religion often have the potential to promote the development of intellectual vices and irrational feelings. In particular those beliefs which refer to the meaning of life, the ultimate or eternal destiny and origin of mankind and the final goal of history have enormous potential to arouse feelings of fear, guilt, despair and zealotry. It is hard to imagine how (often incomprehensible) formulae from nuclear physics or astronomy, which do not directly relate to the question meaning of our lives, can possibly give rise to such irrational feelings (Spiecker, 1991).

With regard to religion, Thiessen capitalizes too much on the insights of the new philosophy of science. Surely, in a more philosophically defensible conception of science the distinction between doctrines and non-doctrines has become somewhat blurred, but Thiessen's conclusions that both science and religion involve theoretical attempts to understand the world, and that both are trying to make sense of (different aspects) of empirical reality (p. 84), are rather insignificant. After all, the nature of these theoretical attempts are quite different. And when Thiessen states that "(O)rthodox Christianity is further firmly rooted in the empirical", thereby referring to John 1:1, 14 (p. 85), one cannot but have the impression that different language-games are being mixed up. The same applies to his claim that orthodox Christianity shares with science the principle of fallibility. Here Thiessen is parting company with those Protestants and Catholics who explicitly or implicitly make claims to infallibility (p. 86). But what is the scope of this principle for an orthodox Christian? Let's give an example. Recently, the Dutch-Reformed professor in theology and ethics Kuitert (1995) explained that Christianity has unjustly awarded the divine status to the historical person Jesus, who literally was a scape-goat in his times. The exaggerated Christology has to be scaled down. Kuitert, so we could say, applies the prin-

ciple of fallibility to the heart of the Christian doctrine itself. Now how is an orthodox Christian who endorses this principle to react to this view? Is she to acknowledge this view as a 'progressive shift', or is she to reject it because it is 'degenerative'? (Kuitert considers this shift as fruitful, because it will remove a doctrinal barrier between Jews, Muslims, and Christians.) Orthodox Christians, I assume, will rule out Kuitert's un-orthodox and 'revolutionary' interpretation, and if they do not reject his views then they are not orthodox Christians any more. In many respects religion is quite unlike science. Therefore, Thiessen's conclusion that "(I)f indoctrination is not inevitable when teaching scientific doctrines, then it is not inevitable when teaching religious ones, because science and religion share many features" (p. 80, 81, see also: p. 86), needs to be questioned.¹

In relation to the criterion of method Thiessen defends the obvious view that if indoctrination is defined in terms of non-rational teaching methods, then education and the initiation into forms of knowledge necessarily involve indoctrination (p. 98). Here his analysis suffers from the fact that Thiessen discusses the criteria of indoctrination separately. After all, most philosophers do not consider one single condition as sufficient, a point that he recognizes (p. 87, 117). Thiessen then explores the ideal of rationality itself that underlies the attempt to define indoctrination in terms of non-rational methods. Some of the central problems with the outdated (Enlightenment) account of rationality are outlined for the purpose of demonstrating that with a more defensible ideal of *normal* rationality, many of the challenges to religion and Christian nurture can be answered. Normal rationality recognizes that the justification of beliefs is a process conducted by human beings who have a psychology and a history. It is very conscious of its subjectivity and fallibility. Thiessen's conclusion will not come as a surprise: "It is important to acknowledge the impossibility of measuring up to the ideal of rationality, both in science and religion, because there are limits to our being fully rational: we are finite, all justification must take certain things for granted, we have to rely on authority, and so forth. If despite these limitations, we deem scientific inquiry to be rational, then we must also classify religion as rational because science and religion are in fact very similar" (p. 110, 111). Therefore, according to Thiessen, the teaching of religion can be as rational (in the normal sense) as the teaching of science.

Thiessen reminds us that this discussion is limited to orthodox Christianity, that is, to a cognitive approach of religion. But again I consider the comparison with science to be unfortunate. Think for example how moral education can be justified. From a prescriptivist (versus a emotivist) perspective on morality, for example, Hare has succeeded in demonstrating the rationality of morality as well as the logical differences between science and morality.

4. AUTONOMY AND CRITICAL OPENNESS

The favoured approach in defining indoctrination seems to be in terms of *intention*. When parents intentionally hamper the development of the child's capacity

to live autonomously, they can be accused of indoctrination. Christian nurture is often understood as antithetical to autonomy for it does not aim at independence, it teaches unshakable beliefs that are immune to evidence, and it aims at unconditional obedience.

Thiessen wants to give up the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy and defend the ideal of *normal* autonomy. His defence draws on themes found in communitarian critiques of liberalism, critical theory, and post-modernist thinking. Normal autonomy is realistic with regard to the possibility of critical reflection because the letter is always tradition bound. An autonomous person can depend on others and trust them (forms of substantive dependence). All that is required for normal autonomy is that these commitments and relationships be entered into with some degree of freedom and deliberation (procedural independence) (p. 133). Now is Christian nurture indoctrinatory in the sense of failing to promote growth towards normal autonomy? For Thiessen the Christian Scriptures support the key elements of normal autonomy. The argument that submission to God and the ideal of autonomy are incompatible rests on a failure to distinguish between substantive and procedural independence: "Clearly Christianity advocates substantive dependence. But as long as people enter a relationship of commitment to God reflectively and from time to time reassess this commitment, they satisfy the requirements of procedural independence and hence must be described as autonomous" (p. 138). If the ideal of normal autonomy is adopted then Christian nurture is compatible with the goal of fostering autonomy. Thiessen's arguments, however, are not convincing. The reassessment of an *orthodox* Christian finally comes down to (autonomously) deciding to give up his normal autonomy and rationality with regard to his commitment and he will accept God's revelation as authoritative. So with relation to this person's commitment it is probably more adequate to speak about a *limited* (normal) rationality and autonomy.

I like to raise another point here. There are many different *conceptions* of Christian nurture and Thiessen should have elaborated the specific ('normal' or orthodox) conception of Christian upbringing he is defending. We then would have been in better position to agree or disagree with his statement that it is "a mistake to associate the provision of a relatively closed environment of Christian homes and primary schools with indoctrination" (p. 143). After all, most of us are well acquainted with conceptions of Christian nurture that wilfully suppress autonomy, that intentionally promote feelings of irrational fear, guilt and despair. Up to now Thiessen has redefined the different aspects of the Enlightened ideal of liberal education. He surely would have rendered us a service if he had elucidated, from the perspective of his normal ideal of liberal education, what conceptions of Christian nurture could be called mentally unhealthy, authoritarian, anti-liberal, and undemocratic.

Indoctrination is often defined in terms of *consequences*: the failure to produce minds that are open and critical ('critical openness'). The ideal of critical openness, according to Thiessen, is confused, ambiguous, vague, and unrealistic. We are by nature finite, contingent and therefore our ability to be open and critical is limited. A new conception of normal critical openness is needed (p. 155).

How is this capacity to be described? Displaying critical openness is to have a disposition to form and revise one's views in the light of evidence. It is characterized by an ongoing willingness to assess traditions critically. And normal critical openness, so Thiessen stresses, clearly involves a rejection of *blind* faith in tradition or authority (p. 164). The open-minded person is aware of this fallibility and displays such intellectual virtues as honesty, humility, courage and impartiality. And this ideal is not only compatible with Christian faith, but is in fact advocated by orthodox Christianity: "Open-mindedness is clearly a biblical ideal" (p. 166).

Is Thiessen not skirting the real issue? The very idea of absolute truth and of a revelation from God authoritative seems to be incompatible with critical openness. Thiessen firmly rejects this view: "is this any different from a scientist who has opted for a certain theory to explain some phenomena and who then commits her- or himself to proving this theory for the remainder of her or his life?" (p. 167). Here again the comparison with science fails. As I indicated before with relation to doctrines, speaking about 'theorizing', 'explaining' and 'proving' in the context of religion often causes unnecessary confusions. Despite my doubts with regard to his last line of reasoning, I tend to agree with Thiessen that critical openness is not necessarily incompatible with Christian faith. But whether the same applies to the orthodox-Christian faith is still an open question.

5. THIESSEN'S CONCLUSIONS

In this study two main lines of arguments can be distinguished. After having analyzed the criteria of indoctrination Thiessen concludes that the charge of religious indoctrination is less strong than generally assumed. In his analyses science and religion are continuously compared, and it is demonstrated that either science is in many ways as irrational as religion or that religion is as rational as science. As I have indicated before this first line of arguments is not too convincing. The second line of his defense is to show that it is logically possible for Christian nurture to meet the ideals of a more defensible form of liberal education. Here Thiessen's arguments are often illuminating. According to him it is possible for Christian parents and teachers to aim for both autonomy or critical openness and Christian nurture. Christian upbringing does not necessarily involve indoctrination. But again the crucial question is: does this also apply to an orthodox Christian nurture? However, Thiessen's arguments simply do not justify the conclusion (or the empirical statement) that "the probability of indoctrination in Christian nurture is lower than is often assumed" (p. 210).

One of Thiessen's main conclusions is that the concept of indoctrination is unclear and that consequently the charge of religious indoctrination itself is confused. Therefore he makes it his task to reconstruct both this notion and the ideal of liberal education. Thiessen's objective is not to replace liberal ideal and values but to improve them (p. 215). His very brief reconstruction or rescriptive analyses of the assumptions underlying the ideal of liberal education actually comes

down to a summary of the paradigm of the 'normal' ('normal rationality, autonomy and critical openness'). One point in Thiessen's expose certainly deserves special attention. According to him, the contemporary ideal of liberal education is very much grounded in a naturalistic metaphysics. What he proposes in his reconstruction of the ideal of liberal education is "that we do not beg any metaphysical questions and that we therefore allow for the possibility of a broader metaphysics which acknowledges a transcendent reality. This is not at all to suggest that liberal education *must* include initiation into a particular religion. (...) I am therefore calling on liberals to be true to their liberalism and to avoid making dogmatic assumptions in defining the metaphysics underlying the ideal of a liberal education" (p. 217). Here Thiessen touches on a issue that is of crucial importance in the conception of *political* liberalism as it is conceived by Rawls (1993). I will return to this subject later.

How then is the ideal of liberal education to be reconstructed? For Thiessen socialization, which according to the primitive traditionalist approach is the heart of education, and the contemporary notions of liberal education must not be understood as two radically different concepts of liberal education, but rather as two equally important and necessary phases of a more inclusive concept of liberal education. In this two-phase approach the early transmissionist component will be evaluated as a positive necessary dimension of becoming human. A stable and coherent 'primary culture' (Ackerman) is a precondition of a subsequent development into autonomous liberal citizens. What is needed is a *developmental* understanding of liberal education (p. 227, 232).

This reconstruction of the ideal of liberal education necessitates a redefinition of the notion of indoctrination. Thiessen acknowledges that his reconstruction is rather incomplete and that he therefore can only make some suggestions about how indoctrination might be understood best. It has been indicated that Thiessen does not take much interest in conceptual analyses, and his "aim is not to present a careful analysis of the concept of indoctrination in terms of logically necessary and sufficient conditions. (...) Given the theory-ladenness of language, it would seem more appropriate to aim for a "theory of indoctrination", rather than an analysis of the concept of indoctrination" (p. 232). Nevertheless, Thiessen comes up with suggestions that closely relate to past analyses of this concept, and he justifies this move by stating that '(G)iven the pervasiveness of the present understanding of "indoctrination", it would be unwise to propose too radical a reconstruction of the concept...' (p. 233). (Thiessen has mixed feelings about analytic philosophy of education, but in my opinion it is precisely his analytical bent that makes this study worth reading.) The core idea of indoctrination, so it is stated, is "*the curtailment of a person's growth towards normal rational autonomy*". This description also refers to *growth toward normal rational autonomy*, and therefore argues for a development view of indoctrination. Indoctrination is connected with the hampering of the development of the mind. (p. 234, 235). With this Thiessen agrees with those authors (Hare, Siegel) who stress the consequence criterion. He then spells out some valuable pedagogical consequences of this view and in this way sketches a first outline of a recon-

structed theory of indoctrination. One of these is that the development of the mind at its early stages requires initiation into, or the acquiring of a primary culture. What is also important is that the child acquires "a degree of procedural independence in making decision(s) of substantive dependence. Indoctrination stops growth towards such procedural independence and limited autonomy" (p. 237; in my opinion the terms 'degree' and 'limited' should have been omitted). Thiessen also points out that in the past too little attention was given to societal influences, like advertising and other influences of television, on the development of the mind.

On the basis of his analyses Thiessen concludes that it is possible to avoid indoctrination in Christian nurture. Christian upbringing does not necessarily entail indoctrination. Despite the marginal notes that I have made, Thiessen has achieved the task he has set himself and that in general his rescriptive analyses are instructive.

According to Thiessen his outline of a theory of indoctrination provides us with a sharp enough instrument to distinguish between true religious education and cases of indoctrination. So in the final chapter some practical implications and suggestions are presented. The Christian parent and teacher, as well as the Christian church and school, must boldly and openly initiate and socialize into the Christian tradition. Their goal should be both Christian commitment and normal autonomy. Where, so Thiessen emphasizes, the latter goal is missing, the charge of indoctrination is justified. Growth towards normal rational autonomy includes progress in understanding one's faith; for example, training children to give pat answers to pat question serves to be condemned (p. 260). Thiessen raises several debatable issues, for example, the statement that in Christian schools "*forms of knowledge can and should be interpreted as a revelation of God's truth*" (p. 267), but lack of space does not allow for further discussion of these matters. At any rate, the quote has a certain fundamentalist overtone.

6. LIBERAL EDUCATION IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY

One of the fundamental conclusions of his study, according to the author, is that it is a mistake to understand liberal education primarily in terms of liberation from the present and the particular (p. 273). Children need also to be nurtured into a conception of the present and the particular and therefore we need a plurality of schools. A truly liberal society allows for and supports a variety of educational institutions, each committed to fostering growth toward normal rational autonomy. Thiessen tentatively suggests that this educational pluralism is an implication of the arguments he presented in his study. But he rightly observes that many people will object that such a system of educational pluralism will only breed fanaticism and intolerance (p. 276). It is true that teaching for commitment does not necessarily imply the fostering of the mentioned perversions. But this reassurance alone simply will not do. Fanaticism and intolerance are central characteristics of fundamentalism and Thiessen should have dwelt longer on the question how in an orthodox Christian upbringing the risk of the development of a fundamentalist mentality can be prevented.

'Fundamentalism' can be described as the attitude of '*There are no open questions*' (Beck and Merks, 1994). Absolute certainties are either dictated by the literal content of the bible or by the doctrinal authority of the mother-church. Protestant fundamentalism is characterized, among other things, by the absolute infallibility of the bible. The bible is the conclusive norm for all domains of life and offers the truth, not only with regard to issues of human salvation, but also with regard to scientific and historical data. The central feature of fundamentalism is of course that one must stick to the traditional central truths of faith: the (substitute) Passion of Christ, the virginal birth and the resurrection of Christ. Consequently, fundamentalist ethics is marked by a conservative-regressive attitude: human beings are sinners and there is only one salvation. And with that the domain of social ethics is often almost omitted (De Knijff, 1994). Though '(Christian) orthodoxy' and '(Christian) fundamentalism' are two different concepts, they certainly share some necessary conditions. Therefore, it looks to me that the main challenge for an orthodox Christian, who endorses a (reconstructed) ideal of liberal education, is to indicate how in Christian nurture the teaching for commitment does not necessarily imply the promotion of a fundamentalist mentality. I myself am not in the position to come up with an outline of an answer. Instead I shall approach this issue from a different perspective and rephrase the challenge.

Western liberal democracies are pluralistic societies. Thiessen acknowledges that in liberal democracies there is common ground between Christians and non-Christians. In this context Rawls speaks about overlapping consensus. Implicit in the public political culture of liberal democracies is the shared fundamental intuitive idea "of society as a fair system of social cooperation between free and equal persons" (Rawls, 1993, p. 9). Citizens in our society, being free and equal persons, are regarded as having a determinate conception of the good, as having a relatively encompassing conception of the meaning, value and purpose of life. Secondly, citizens are supposed to have a capacity for a conception of the good, that is to say, the capacity of developing such a conception, of pursuing it rationally, and of revising and changing their conception on reasonable and rational grounds. A third and last quality of citizens consists of a complex capacity for a sense of justice. From the above we can cautiously conclude that religious nurture in a liberal democracy should never go against or undermine the common ground of our public political culture. This common ground does not comprise, and I quote Thiessen, "dogmatic assumptions in defining the metaphysics underlying the ideal of a liberal education" (p. 217). Without an overlapping consensus our societies will soon fall into a 'religious balkanization'. As we have seen, the suppression of the capacity for a conception of the good can be called indoctrination, and it is in the interest of the state to pay special attention to schools, in particular, that religious nurture does not violate the right of the child (as a future citizen) to develop this capacity.

But, according to Rawls, our role of citizen also implies that we have a determinate conception of the good. In a liberal democracy parents also have the duty to help and support the child to develop his (personal) conception of the good. Because a liberal democracy is characterized by a relatively thin or small moral-

ity, in particular by the basic liberties (freedom of speech, freedom of press, etc.), it leaves much 'free space' to develop and pursue different conceptions of the good.² But this also implies that this liberal framework indicates, as it were, the limits within which practising conceptions of the good is allowed. To use the words of Rawls: 'the Right' has priority over 'the Good' (Spiecker and Steutel, 1995). Let me give an example. In some families in The Netherlands values are transmitted that conflict with the liberal principle of justice. I have in mind particularly those families in which a strict-orthodox or a fundamentalist religion is imparted to children. In these families it is not unusual that the separation between church and state (or mosque) is rejected, which is contrary to the principles of freedom of religion or liberty of conscience. And in these circles women are sometimes denied certain political rights. For example, quite recently the general committee of the Dutch Reformed Political Party proposed a motion in which women were denied membership of their party. According to the committee, party-membership of women had to be considered a violation of biblical texts. They claim that the bible says that the 'office of ruler' is reserved for men only. In a private meeting of the party, in September 1993, the motion was carried. This decision led to considerable national and international uproar. Parents who transmit such religious-moral doctrines offer their children a religious and moral nurture that clearly conflicts with basic liberal rights. According to Macedo, liberal justice exerts the positive requirement that every citizen's 'good' includes certain features, including a willingness to respect the equal freedom of others, commitments to impartial rules of law, and to persuade rather than coerce: "Liberal justice could not be affirmed by a Protestant who believes he should fight to the death rather than live in peace with Catholics, and it could not be acknowledged as morally supreme by a citizen prepared to advance his interests through political means at the expense of the rights of others" (1992, p. 213).

I can now rephrase the challenge that I formulated for the orthodox Christian ('Is it possible to teach for Christian commitment without promoting a fundamentalist mentality'): in teaching for orthodox Christian commitment, the bounds of our common ground are not to be exceeded and our thin liberal morality should not be undermined. After all, a distinctive feature of a fundamentalist is that he or she has not acquired the liberal virtues, like tolerance, broad sympathies, and an altruistic regard for one's fellow liberal citizens. And so the central question remains: can an orthodox Christian ever be a liberal Christian at the same time? Thiessen, so I assume, will take this challenge seriously, for his study also demonstrates a deep commitment to (a conception of) liberal education.

NOTES

¹ According to Carr "But surely ought to be considered a quite unacceptable high price to pay for the defence of religious enquiry as a valid pathway to human knowledge to call into question the objectivity of those forms of natural science investigation which have standardly been regarded as so successful with respect to the explanation and understanding of just such an order of independent objective reality?" (1994, p. 224).

² Some of the basic ideas of political liberalism are succinctly summarized by Moon: "The basic answer that political liberalism gives to the question of pluralism is to limit the authority of the state to a distinct "public" sphere in which a person's activities necessarily impinge directly upon others. Within that sphere, relations must be governed by principles that everyone can accept; beyond it, people are free to direct their lives as they wish. (...) In a political community whose scope is limited in this way, "space" is created within which people can follow diverse values and interests (Moon, 1994, p. 36, 37).

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Fanaticism and Christian Liberal Education: A Response to Ben Spiecker's "Commitment to Liberal Education"¹

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Ben Spiecker and I are roughly in agreement as to what indoctrination means. Spiecker defines indoctrination in terms of the suppression of the disposition for critical reflection (p. 288; Spiecker, 1991). I define indoctrination as 'the curtailment of a person's growth towards normal rational autonomy' (p. 233). My notion of normal rational autonomy includes the ideal of critical openness and I too prefer to think of this ideal in terms of attitudes and dispositions rather than in epistemic terms (pp. 118f, 148f, 160, 163–8, 236, 240). Spiecker correctly senses that I have a deep commitment to the ideals of liberalism and liberal education (though with proper qualifications), and hence I am as opposed to indoctrination, fanaticism and intolerance as he is.

There are two important differences in our understanding of indoctrination, however. Spiecker finds it unnecessary to qualify the ideal of rational autonomy with the adjective 'normal,' a qualification which is essential to my analysis. He fails to appreciate why we can achieve only a *limited degree* of autonomy and independence (p. 288). Communitarians and postmodernists have taught us that the liberal ideal of rational autonomy arising out of the Enlightenment is fundamentally flawed, as I argue at length in my book. Here we must be careful, though, not to carry the critique to an extreme, but instead seek a reconciliation between modernism and postmodernism, between individualism and communitarianism (54, 215, 293n5). My qualification of "normal" to the ideal of rational autonomy is based on such a reconciliation.

Spiecker and I also differ with regard to the content criterion of indoctrination. Spiecker wishes to retain a connection between indoctrination and doctrines, which then leads him to draw the commonly made conclusion that indoctrination typically occurs in religion, but not in science. One underlying problem here is that Spiecker adopts a non-cognitivist approach to religion which I reject for reasons which cannot be reviewed here. Orthodox Christianity is profoundly theoretical and empirical, and it simply will not do for Spiecker to suggest that "different language-games are being mixed up," when I make such a claim (p. 283). Such a criticism rests on a very particular interpretation of religion in accordance with the gospel of Wittgenstein, who can hardly be classified as an orthodox theologian. Of course Spiecker may prefer a Wittgensteinian approach to Christianity, but to use this "fallible" interpretation of Christianity to object to an orthodox interpretation (admittedly fallible) is to beg the question. I refer the reader to my book for some of my reasons for rejecting a non-theoretical, non-empirical interpretation of Christianity (pp. 83–4).

Spiecker also tends to treat science as an idealized abstraction, a tendency which I specifically critique in my book (pp. 81–3). In the end, science is practiced by scientists. And scientists, as persons, can be (and often are) as dogmatic as some adherents to religion – dogmatism is one feature often associated with doctrines (p. 64). And there are in science basic presuppositions or epistemic primitives – a feature which I consider to be definitive of doctrines (p. 78). These presuppositions are often not held up to critical scrutiny by scientists, or by, the all too often, gullible public that has been indoctrinated in science and into the religion of scientism, thanks to the dominant *Weltanschauung* of Western societies.

Here it is important to focus on the *basic presuppositions* of science, not on “the formulae from nuclear physics or astronomy” which obviously don’t concern the meaning of life or give rise to irrational feelings (Spiecker, 1996, p. 283). Obviously formulae in science are not doctrines. Formulae grow out of theories which ultimately rest on basic presuppositions about the nature of reality. And interestingly (and sadly), it is at this deeper level of science that scientists do often become quite irrational – one has only to think of the zealotry behind the promotion of the speculative doctrines of macro-evolutionary theory! And such doctrines have profound implications for the meaning of life.

There is however one difference between the doctrines of science and the doctrines of religion which Spiecker frequently alludes to, and which I failed to address specifically in my book – the doctrines of religion are based on revelation (pp. 283, 286, 289). Clearly, the doctrines of science do not rest on a divinely inspired revelation (though it needs to be stressed that there are gurus in science whose writings seem to be given this lofty status by the public). Now the question of revelation clearly raises some new and interesting philosophical questions which can only be dealt with very briefly in this paper. Here it should at least be noted that there have been some sophisticated philosophical defenses of the possibility of divine revelation, as well as of criteria to use in assessing such a revelation (see Mavrodes, 1988; Abraham, 1981; Swinburne, 1981, ch. 7).

There are two key questions that need to be addressed with regard to revelation. How does a believer come to accept the doctrines of revelation in the first place? This need not be an irrational or non-critical process, but can be carried out in such a way as to satisfy the criteria of procedural independence, which are essential to autonomy (Thiessen, 1993, p. 133). Second, it is most important to distinguish between revealed truth, and the human understanding of revealed truth, a distinction which runs parallel to a “secular” distinction between absolute truth and the human search for and grasp of absolute truth (see my quote from James, p. 108). The latter is fallible, as is the human understanding of revealed truth (p. 138).

Any normal thinking Christian will on occasion have doubts as to what she believes, and will from time to time raise questions about even the central tenets of the Christian faith. Of course, if as Spiecker notes (p. 283f), these doubts and questions eventually lead a person to challenge some basic tenets of Christian belief, such as the divine status of Jesus, then that person is no longer an orthodox Christian. But this is just a matter of classification. A so called “Newtonian scientist” who challenges the law of gravity is no longer an orthodox Newtonian either. We must allow a school of thought to define its own orthodoxy.

Clearly, there are some differences between the doctrines of religion and the doctrines of science. But to limit the meaning of “doctrines” to features which are unique to religion is arbitrary. It would further be inadvisable to define “doctrine” in terms of beliefs acquired by revelation because it is generally recognized that political beliefs also are susceptible to indoctrination and these obviously are not based on divine revelation (cf. Thiessen, 1993, p. 76).

My central argument of chapter 3 therefore still stands – doctrines, defined as the basic presuppositions of a belief system, which are not directly verifiable or falsifiable, and which are broad in scope and of central importance to that belief system – such doctrines are found in science as well as in religion (p. 78). Even Spiecker is forced to admit that the distinction between doctrines and non-doctrines has become blurred in a more philosophically defensible conception of science (p. 283).

The above problem touches on Spiecker’s primary worry about my position – the slide towards fundamentalism. “Is it possible to teach for Christian commitment without promoting a fundamentalist mentality” (p. 290)? Is Christian nurture compatible with such liberal virtues like “tolerance, broad sympathies, a willingness to experience, and an altruistic regard for one’s fellow liberal citizens” (p. 290)?

Here we need to put aside one possible interpretation of this challenge which would make it impossible and futile to attempt an answer. It might be argued that Christian nurture is *logically* incompatible with liberal values. Orthodox Christianity is then by definition illiberal. I do not think that Spiecker wants to frame the challenge in this way – he admits, for example that a system of educational pluralism with schools teaching for commitment would not *necessarily* imply the fostering of such perversions as fanaticism and intolerance (p. 288). But not all writers are as careful as Spiecker, and hence I draw attention to the danger of ruling out, by arbitrary definition, the very possibility of a reconciliation between Christian nurture and the ideals of liberalism and liberal education.

The term “fundamentalism” obviously carries very pejorative overtones for Spiecker, as it does for many people today. Emotionally laden terms call for special caution and here again we must beware of arbitrary definitions. Unfortunately, Spiecker fails to distinguish clearly between orthodox Christianity and fundamentalism, saying only that “they share some necessary conditions” (pp. 289).

One central meaning of fundamentalism is that one must “stick” to the fundamentals – a Christian fundamentalist must therefore adhere to the traditional central truths of the faith, e.g., the substitute passion of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection of Christ (p. 289). Clearly this is part of what it also means to be an orthodox Christian – though a lot hinges on *how* one *sticks* to these fundamentals.

Let me respond here to Spiecker’s quite legitimate reminder that Christianity is not all of one piece and that I therefore need to identify more clearly where I would place myself on the theological spectrum (p. 282). Although I adhere to the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith, I would want to stress the importance of “sticking” to these fundamentals in a rational, openminded manner, humbly

acknowledging that I may be wrong, and respecting those who differ from me. It was never my intent to defend an unthinking and closed-minded approach to Christian nurture which leads to fanaticism and intolerance. As an evangelical Christian, I share with fundamentalism the acceptance of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, but I would distance myself from unthinking, narrow-minded, and intolerant attitudes often associated with fundamentalism.²

I would argue that believing in certain fundamental doctrines cannot in itself be considered suspect or be seen as the source of the pejorative overtones inherent in the term fundamentalism. Every school of thought, even in the sciences, can be defined in terms of certain fundamentals (e.g., quantum theory, behaviourism). And it is no accident that Spiecker describes liberal democracies as sharing a "fundamental intuitive idea" of societies as needing to be characterized by fairness, justice and equality (p. 289).

Part of Spiecker's concerns with Christian fundamentalism (and orthodox Christianity) would seem to be that he simply disagrees with some of the fundamentals, e.g., he sees some doctrines of Christianity, such as the doctrine of sin, as giving rise to "feelings of irrational fear, guilt and despair" (p. 285; cf. pp. 283, 289). But what makes guilt irrational? And who defines what is irrational? The question raised by MacIntyre in the title of his book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is most appropriate here (1988). Clearly for orthodox Christians, feeling guilty before a God who will someday hold us accountable for our actions is not at all irrational. One may disagree with this, but liberals, according to Rawls must accept the "burdens of judgement," allowing that reasonable persons may affirm differing reasonable doctrines (1993, pp. 12–3).

Another aspect of Spiecker's concerns about fundamentalism has to do with the source of these fundamentals. Obviously revelation plays a key role in defining the fundamentals of Christianity. But an appeal to divine revelation should not in itself be seen as a ground for holding fundamentalism (and orthodox Christianity) suspect, as I have already argued. Rational and critical approaches to revelation are quite in keeping with the evangelical version of Christianity with which I identify.

This is not to say that there are some very immature attitudes towards the bible on the part of some Christians. I agree that some Christians go too far in stressing the literal truth of the bible, failing to appreciate the complexity of biblical language, with its use of metaphor and poetry, but such naivety is not a necessary characteristic of orthodox Christianity. I have already dealt with the problems inherent in talk about the bible as providing "absolute certainties." Christians have only a finite and fallible understanding of what God has revealed in the bible. We may of course use the label "fundamentalism" to refer to these distorted and naive attitudes to the bible, but we must be careful not to paint orthodox Christianity with the same brush – a tendency of Spiecker's (p. 289).

The same point needs to be made about the risk of fanaticism and intolerance, two other characteristics which Spiecker associates with fundamentalism (p. 288). I too agree that fanaticism and intolerance are evils, but orthodox Christianity and Christian nurture are not in and of themselves fanatical and intolerant, unless one again makes the association by arbitrary definition.

One of the problems that we face here concerns the definition of "intolerance." Misconceptions about intolerance abound in the modernist/liberal worldview (Newman, 1982; Thiessen, 1987). It is often assumed, for example, that the exclusivism of orthodox Christianity is by its very nature intolerant. Spiecker seems to fall prey to this misconception when he objects to fundamentalist claims that "there is only one salvation," and when he stresses the need for "broad sympathies" (pp. 289, 290).

I would argue, however, that any truth claims are by their very nature exclusive. Spiecker himself makes an exclusive claim when he condemns fundamentalists – they are wrong and he is right. His Wittgensteinian interpretation of religious language is again a very particular exclusivist position, which leads him to reject an orthodox interpretation of Christianity as mistaken. A liberal theological position might sound more tolerant, but we must not be misled by appearances. A refusal to allow orthodoxy to define itself displays a profound lack of respect and tolerance which is unfortunately all too common among liberal theologians, as well as among those who defend liberalism generally.

What is needed is a proper understanding of the ideal of tolerance which allows one to have convictions, even strong convictions, which will inevitably lead to disagreement with others. But having strong convictions can still be combined with a love for and an appreciation of people who differ. Protestants with strong convictions can, and should, live in peace with Catholics, and vice versa (cf. Spiecker, 1996, p. 290). To fail to do so is not only to fail to be tolerant, but it is also a failure to follow the injunctions of orthodox Christianity.

The cure for intolerance is not found in a relativistic elimination of convictions, but in a sensitive approach to liberal education which combines teaching for commitment with the encouragement of respect for others who differ, and an awareness of human fallibility and finiteness. This, I believe is possible in orthodox Christian liberal education. After all, few will dispute the fact that Jesus combined the making of exclusive claims with an attitude of tolerance (cf. Luke 9:5, 51–56). True, he was most intolerant with religious self-righteousness, but there are limits to tolerance, as most liberals recognize.

Religious commitment also should not be confused with religious fanaticism. Paul specifically warns against the danger of religious commitment leading to dangerous fanaticism. This can occur if commitment isn't accompanied by reflection. "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Romans 10:2). All too often, fears about breeding fanaticism and intolerance are based on a failure to distinguish these evils from normal conviction and commitment. The former are perversions of healthy commitment, as has been so ably argued by Jay Newman (1986). It is true that teaching for commitment can foster these perversions, but it need not. And we must not let the fear of such perversions make us miss out on the benefits of healthy commitment. Love has its perversions too, but we do not let this stop us from praising the virtues of love.

It is time to focus on the liberal portion of Spiecker's fundamentalist/liberal dichotomy. Can an orthodox Christian ever be a liberal Christian at the same time (p. 290)? Is it possible to teach for commitment while at the same time

upholding the ideal of liberal education? It all depends on what is meant by a liberal Christian, or by liberal education. If a liberal Christian is defined in terms of not making exclusive claims, then it is impossible for an orthodox Christian to be a liberal Christian. But this is an arbitrary definition.

A major thrust of my book is to examine carefully some of the typical liberal virtues such as rationality, open-mindedness and autonomy. I argue that there are problems with the way in which these virtues are typically defined by liberals. I therefore introduce some important qualifications to these virtues – and hence the preface “normal” before each of these liberal virtues. Rationality needs to be defined so as to recognise its limits – it is always to some extent tradition bound. Open-mindedness cannot mean empty-mindedness. The individuality inherent in the liberal ideal of autonomy needs to be balanced with an emphasis on community, and it needs to be recognized that no human being is completely independent from others. Once these liberal virtues are properly qualified so as to be more coherent and philosophically defensible, then – yes – orthodox Christians can be liberal Christians.

The same approach needs to be taken with regard to liberal education. If liberal education is seen as precluding teaching for commitment, or if the initiation into a present and a particular (e.g., orthodox Christianity) is viewed as inherently suspect, then again the two ideals are logically inconsistent. But, a major thrust of my book is to argue that today’s reigning paradigm of liberal education, which views the initiation into a present and a particular with suspicion, is fundamentally flawed. Nurture is the necessary cradle of liberal education (p. 225). What is needed is a major reconstruction of the contemporary ideal of liberal education so as to see initiation and liberation as two equally important and complementary phases of a good liberal education (see my ch. 8). Once this revised and more defensible ideal of liberal education is in place, then again, orthodox Christian nurture is compatible with liberal education. The basic conclusion of my book therefore still stands, contrary to Spiecker (p. 286) – the charge of indoctrination is less strong than is generally assumed because the charge is typically based on a misconception of the ideal of liberal education that fails to see nurture as a necessary and foundational ingredient of a liberal education (p. 210).

Spiecker suggests that I need to elucidate, from this perspective of a revised and normal ideal of liberal education, “what conceptions of Christian nurture could be called mentally unhealthy, authoritarian, anti-liberal and undemocratic” (p. 285). I do this in the final chapter of my book, but let me provide a quick review. Unhealthy Christian nurture fails to have as its goal, the freeing of the child to make an “independent” choice for or against Christian commitment – though, here we must be careful to acknowledge that we are not quite as independent as is typically assumed by liberals (p. 255). Unhealthy Christian nurture “forces” children to become Christians via the practice of infant baptism and “automatic” confirmation, thereby discouraging growth towards normal rational autonomy (p. 259). It also fails to cultivate a rational grounding for Christian convictions (p. 263). It fails to encourage children and students to grapple with the questions that ine-

vitably arise with regard to the faith in which they are being brought up (p. 263). It fails to expose the maturing child to alternate belief systems and other religions (p. 266). It fails to teach students to respect people who are committed to other worldviews. It fails to encourage curiosity and the broadening of horizons. Finally, in Constantinian fashion, it uses a state-supported system of education to impose Christian beliefs and values on all students regardless of their individual upbringings (p. 12). Such failures deserve to be labelled indoctrinatory.

But, having said all this, it needs to be stressed that I would at the same time want to emphasize the legitimacy of boldly teaching for Christian commitment in Christian homes and Christian schools (pp. 244, 250). But this needs to be done in such a way as to cultivate the "normal" liberal virtues described above. And such nurture will not lead to fanaticism, intolerance and closed-mindedness.

In the end, I suspect Spiecker will not be satisfied with my description of Christian liberal education. He will argue that I am simply not liberal enough, and that my version of Christian nurture will in fact lead to fanaticism and intolerance. Is there then a way to resolve our residual differences? I suspect not. Spiecker's version of the values that are necessary for a liberal democracy are still too thick. Rawls, in his latest version of liberalism is trying to avoid the imposition of some general moral doctrine, such as Kantian autonomy on the diverse subjects of a pluralistic democracy (1993). Instead, he tries to locate a family of political values within an overlapping consensus among all extant ethical views held by reasonable citizens (Rawls, 1993, pp.11–22, 63–4). The rub, of course is, who is classified as a reasonable citizen? I believe that orthodox Christians can be rational, open-minded, critical, broad-minded, and tolerant. Indeed, their Christian beliefs call them to display these characteristics, as I point out in various places in my book. And Christian nurture should boldly seek to inculcate a healthy commitment to such normal liberal values.

What do we do with those Christians (and other religious fundamentalists, including dogmatic liberals) who go beyond orthodoxy, and want to teach values which will lead to narrowness, fanaticism and intolerance? This is a central problem which has haunted the liberal tradition since its inception. It is quite beyond the scope of this paper to address this problem, except to suggest that there is a desperate need to set aside the strong reaction to any sort of religious commitment which modern liberalism has inherited from the Enlightenment, and to appreciate the importance of, and perhaps even the need for, some sort of healthy religious commitment among the citizens within a liberal pluralistic democracy. Rawls is struggling with a redefinition of liberalism which would accomodate orthodox religious commitment, but he still has some way to go in order to bring about a full reconciliation (see Jackson, 1991). Spiecker too is in danger of imposing liberal orthodoxy on orthodox Christians and thereby becoming illiberal.

I am indebted to Spiecker for his most careful review of my book and for quite legitimately pushing me to clarify the nature of a Christian liberal education which does not lead to religious fanaticism.

NOTES

¹ Where the context clearly refers to my book (Thiessen, 1993), or to Spiecker's review of my book (Spiecker, 1996), I will simply provide page references to these sources.

² For an excellent academic treatment of the distinction between fundamentalism and evangelicalism, see Marsden (1987).

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