

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, POSTSECULARITY AND NEOLIBERALISM

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INTRODUCTION

Current arguments about the place of religious education in schooling often appeal to the notion of the post-secular. This notion evidentially alludes to the idea that contemporary society is somehow beyond a previous ‘secular’ condition, and these current arguments for recognising a post-secular turn take two forms: one is descriptive, in suggesting that there has been an empirical shift in governance and policy away from the secular; the other is normative, in prescriptively arguing for such a shift. The salient aspects of the post-secular are a critique of both the notion of a neutral secularity in the education sphere, in that education should take religion(s) seriously since education will be inextricably bound up with religion in some way, and of the notion that religions can be presented neutrally. Post-secularity therefore is about recognition of an inevitable positionality, and this has challenges for those countries which have adopted a non-confessional model of religious education.

However, an understanding of the place of religious education in a post-secular age is likely to be played out within neoliberal governance (Hill and Kumar 2009), especially in seeing the transactional market as the basic model of economic and social organisation. This perspective has come to dominate educational policy around the world, and also has a descriptive or

analytical strand, in identifying where and how it operates, as well as a normative strand, in arguing for its benefits.

This chapter first outlines the post-secular, describing its emergence across the globe, then exploring one set of arguments for its explicit adoption, from Jürgen Habermas, and also considering the implications for religious education. Then, neoliberalism is treated similarly, specifically outlining the effects of neoliberalism on education - and specifically religious education - in England, before considering the ideas of one neoliberal thinker: Milton Friedman. Finally, the interrelationship between these two ideas is considered, hypothesising that confessional forms of religious education are likely to thrive in a post-secular, neoliberal culture of governance, but the pluralistic models may struggle to articulate their value.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE POST-SECULAR

The salient aspect of the post-secular turn is new recognition of the place of religions within the public sphere (Habermas 2008). This is partly empirical, in recognising that the secularisation thesis does not give a full account of the diversity of religiosity and spirituality, and that the traditional polarisation of religion and the secular is simplistic, with nuances of both religion and non-religion within the public sphere (e.g. Berger 1999; Casanova 1994). First, the diversity of different religious beliefs both around the world and within Western societies, including new forms of global Islam or complex patterns of migration from Christian countries outside Europe, as well as the emergence of different forms of non-religion, such as New Atheism or Humanism, has caused many to question increasingly the

claim that religion is on the decline. The Western pattern of secularisation over much of the late 19th and 20th centuries was not - as many imagined - a modernising pattern for all societies, but rather a geographically specific occurrence: Enlightenment rationality was not the inevitable future of all humanity, towards which all human thought would develop, but rather the limited manifestation of one continent – the exception not the rule (Davie 2002).

Moreover, sociologists have long recognised that there was a difference between public and private secularisation (e.g. Casanova 1994). The former was based on separating religion, and specifically the church, from involvement in the what became to be seen as the functions of the state – law, politics, administration, medicine, and education. The latter is found in the loss of faith and weakening of observance by individuals. The United States is perhaps the most obvious example of a state with an ostensibly secular constitution and no established religious affiliation, but which is marked by strong manifestations of private religiosity. Even in France, the development of secularity and ‘laïcité’ during the latter 19th Century was in tandem with new patterns of religiosity - the building of Montmartre, and establishment of Lourdes and Lisieux as sites of pilgrimage (e.g. Raynaud 2019); most recently the public outpouring for the fire at Notre-Dame in Paris shows its ongoing significance in the French national imaginary (e.g. Tesson 2019). Sociologists have also increasingly recognised that there are various non-religious perspectives (Lee 2015). A further facet of this reappraisal of the place of religions was marked by recognition of new forms of religious vitality; Christian missionary activity in China or Korea, renewed religious nationalism in India, Turkey or Myanmar, and resurgent forms of violent militant Islam could not be ignored in making sense of global events.

HABERMAS: RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

This empirical turn is matched by with more normative discussions, since if the assumption that religion has no place in contemporary society is naïve and untenable, then its legitimate place must be identified and determined, and this in turn raises questions about the nature of the secular, secularity and secularism (Habermas 2006; Habermas 2008). These discussions grow out of existing discussions within many Western democracies between broadly multiculturalist arguments for acceptance and incorporation of different religious positions into the public sphere, and more rigid ‘secularist’ arguments for the neutrality of the public sphere and the denuding of religiosity at the public threshold. The former is represented by attempts to create an impartial public space but runs the risk of creating an anodyne undifferentiated multifaith stew, and which can therefore lead to the impulse to then distinguish between multi-culturalism and inter-culturalism; the latter attempts to ensure that the public space is denuded of religious claims and arguments, but run the risk of adopting of either an imperialising rationalism, or else being crypto-Christian, in that European traditions of thought and indeed definitions of ‘religion’ are inevitably infused by a post-Christian lens.

Thus, any proposed solutions to the post-secular dilemma need to convince other theorists both that there is a *new* dilemma, and that their new solution is reasonable. There are differences of opinion in how to address these issues, for instance between Taylor (2011) and Habermas (2006; 2008; 2011; see also Spohr 2015): here we focus on the latter. Habermas’s argument is that religion has a place within the public sphere because ‘enlightened reason unavoidably loses its grip on the images, preserved in religion, of the moral whole...as collectively binding ideals’ (Habermas 2011, p. 19), but that in coming to this sphere, religion

‘must open itself up to the normatively grounded expectation that it should recognise for reasons of its own the neutrality of the state towards worldviews, the equal freedom of all religious communities, and the independence of institutionalised sciences’ (21). If this plea has been largely welcomed by some religious voices (e.g. Schmidt 2011), other commentators have questioned whether this right of entry is rather too determined by secular criteria (Brieskorn 2011; Singh 2008): in coming to the table too much has to be left at the door.

POST-SECULARITY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The implications of both the post-secular condition and a post-secular perspective have been keenly debated with the world of religious education. It is welcomed because it supports the importance of religious education within the public sphere (Bowie, Peterson & Revell 2012; Hannam 2018), but it also raises some questions about the aims and pedagogy of the subject (Carr 2012; Castelli 2012). Countries that had previously eschewed any form of religious education in public schooling have adopted it; the example of France is instructive, in the introduction of the ‘teaching of religious facts’ⁱ (Debray 2002, 2008) as a cross-curricular theme. This was developed both to address a perceived religious illiteracy, in that pupils could not understand much of French history or literature without an understanding of religious terms or beliefs, and to respond to the increasing religious minorities, notably Muslims and Buddhists. Here, a previously secular curriculum became post-secular, in accepting some discussion of religions – even if a contradictory policy banned *hijab* in schools. By contrast, in countries that had previously introduced some form of pluralistic, impartial religious education, it has led to arguments for the inclusion of non-religious

worldviews. Thus, in England, there are moves to relabel it as ‘religions and worldviews’, so that all pupils are better equipped to present their own views in the public sphere (RE Commission 2018).

For faith schools and confessional religious education, the implications are more complex. To welcome religion to the public sphere at least implicitly suggests that they might have a part to play in this. Indeed, Habermas’s model of ‘religious citizens’ who are able to articulate their beliefs in the public space is - perhaps unsurprisingly - compatible with the current Post-Westphalian German model of denominational religious education. German parents select the type of religious education (or simply ethics) they would prefer for their child, who then attends those classes in their state school, with Lutherans, Catholics, Muslims, and non-religious pupils being taught separately. Habermas simply demands that this existing learning could contribute to and be recognised in the public sphere. The only caveat is that if religious citizens are to be enabled to present their values and beliefs in the public sphere, then they should be able to articulate their own tradition in an outwardly presentable form, but they also need to be ready to respond to others’ articulations of their own beliefs. As a result of these parallel demands, Boeve (2012) shows how Catholic education in Belgium was paradoxically criticised for being both too Catholic, in not preparing pupils for diversity, and not Catholic enough in not preparing them properly within their own tradition.

THE RISE OF NEO-LIBERALISM IN EDUCATION

This debate about the post-secular is important, and the consequences of reshaping religious education and schooling in the light of these ideas needs much development, but the argument adopted here is that this needs to be seen alongside other changes in the political and cultural economy of schooling, notably the rise of neo-liberalism. Indeed, an understanding of neoliberal influences on religious education gives an insight not only into one aspect of neoliberalism in education, but also into an understanding of neoliberal governance of religions, which is increasingly of academic interest (e.g. Gauthier and Martikainen 2013; Martikainen and Gauthier 2013).

This can be approached descriptively, in showing how policy has changed, as well as normatively, in considering its theoretical arguments. Neoliberalism is recognised as the key policy driver of contemporary education policy in many countries, marked typically by marketization in and of schooling, a focus on employability as the defining aim of education, high stakes testing within and between states (Hill and Kumar 2009). Stephen Ball (1990; Bowe and Ball 1992; Ball 2006; Ball and Junemann 2012) has charted its history and effects in education policy in England, from Thatcherism to the present day. He suggests that until 1980s, debates in education were between two broad political voices. First, there was a long-standing neoconservative view of education, which valued traditional models of schooling, including its famous elite independent schools and the existing selective three-tier structure of secondary education, and a respect for established disciplines of knowledge in the curriculum. In contrast to this essentially nostalgic perspective, there was also a futuristic progressive view, which was largely leftist and envisioned education as having a vital role in creating a new and fairer future, associated with New Deal policies and Keynesian welfare economics (Kavanagh 1987). In England, this manifested itself educationally in such policies as an attack on the elitism of independent schools, the development of comprehensives in

place of selection, the expansion of higher education, and a more child-centred approaches to learning.

Religious education occupied an ambivalent position. For the traditionalists, religious education was positioned as an important part of English heritage and culture, so that, without being strongly confessional, it had place in sustaining the English constitutional arrangement of religion and state. The existing church schools could flourish, and state schools could promote an easy comprise of inter-denominational church teaching. Religious education was envisioned as an ethical and spiritual formation within the English context, kept uncontroversial by the prohibition on confessional teaching in state schools, but simultaneously the provision of church schools.

For progressives, its place was more complex. On the one hand, the broadly Leftist policies underpinning progressive views were critical of religion and religious institutions, and even if theirs was not Marxist atheism, they often held a degree of agnosticism or suspicion; on this view, church schools and religious education were at least unnecessary. On the other hand, the arrival of waves of colonial and post-colonial immigrants from South Asia and Africa in 1960s and 1970s presented a new multi-cultural challenge. It was some decades before a faith school that was not Christian could be established - excluding the incorporation of the Jews' Free School into London in 1958 (Black 1998) – but religious education in state schools changed rapidly in response to the different communities' religions, notably in Birmingham in 1975.

Into this long running policy debate, neoliberalism erupted under Margaret Thatcher, challenging the consensus between capital and labour (Kavanagh 1987). At policy level, many of the shared assumptions about employment, welfare, public ownership and relations with unions were abandoned. Across education, Thatcherite policies led to several major structural changes. These included the marketisation of schools, in that while they did not become private, parents were given more freedom to choose between different schools:

Our Parents' Charter will place a clear duty on government and local authorities to take account of parents' wishes when allocating children to schools. (Conservative Party 1979, in Gilliard 2018)

Indeed, there were also vouchers to enable parents to send their pupils to independent schools – the Assisted Places Scheme. The introduction of systematic testing with published results at the end of three stages of education meant that parents had information to depend on, as well as inspection reports. Further, schools could opt out of local government control. The introduction of a national curriculum also enabled more comparability in the tests and enabled the government to challenge what it saw as the problem of child-based learning.

However, a striking feature of neoliberalism is that, in the United Kingdom at least, it always occurred with one of the other two policy voices. Under Thatcher, it was allied to Neo-conservatism, as the New Right. This could mean that some policies were contradictory (see Coulby and Bash 1991), such as both the promotion of a traditional curriculum, with strong academic disciplinary structures, alongside the promotion of a more neoliberal vocational education, with more flexible work-focused qualifications. In particular, the end of the period of New Right government was with Blair's accession to power in 1998, but his mandate was not for the straightforward reintroduction of progressive policies, instead it was a New Labour

compromise of progressive and neoliberal policies, for instance school choice was further encouraged with the development of academies, outside the usual local structures, and the promotion of church and other faith schools (Blair 2008). Under the Coalition, Gove's policies were a return to the previous Traditionalist-Neoliberal compromise (Wright 2012), with further neoliberal marketisation through the academies and free schools programme, but a traditionalist return to a disciplinary curriculum. However, schools' autonomy could prove problematic when issues of national security arose (Arthur 2013); moreover, students' religious identities (typically Muslim) could become perceived as problematic if they rejected those neoliberal outcomes of success and employability in favour of a more religious aspiration (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2017).

This trajectory of neoliberalism would have important implications for religious education, and the subject was shaped and framed in complex and often contradictory ways under both the New Right, New Labour and the Coalition. Under Thatcher's government, the key policy voices were either neo-conservative, envisioning it as its traditional role, or neoliberal, sceptical of its value per se, but both were keen to stamp out more progressive child-centred versions (Fancourt 2015). A key policy advisor, Baroness Cox believed that 'teaching about Christianity has either been diluted to a multifaith relativism or has become little more than a secularised discussion of social and political issues' (Cox 1988, p. 4), and this view influenced the wording of various iterations of curriculum guidance on religious education. Because the subject retained its long-standing local governance model, it was outside of the direct neo-liberalisation of much of schooling (Smalley 2019); however, the focus on examinations and testing also shaped the formulation of the subject in policy, with explicit assessment criteria out as a key feature (Kay 2002; Fancourt 2015). Under New Labour, religious education was shaped by a combination of progressive and neoliberal voices. Some

of the traditionalist focus on disciplines and the emphasis in Christianity were reduced, replaced by a progressive focus on social or community cohesion - given new weight by the events of 9/11 - notably through its links to the new subject of Citizenship, though this was not unproblematic (see Moulin 2012); however the principles of parental choice and accountability through examinations remained, so that church or faith school provision expanded (Walford 2008), including Muslim state funded schools (Breen 2018). Under the Coalition, there was a burgeoning of schools with a religious affiliation, whether as academies or as Free Schools. However, religious education was demoted within the curriculum by being excluded from the 'English Baccalaureate' (Farrell 2014); schools were obliged to show their examination performance in this group of eight more valued subjects, and religious education was neither included within the list as a subject or as an option – despite remaining compulsory.

Two points emerge from this brief account of the effects of neoliberalism on religious education policy in England. First, neoliberalism's effects through its compromises with other policy voices should be recognised. The account here focuses on one country, though these effects can arguably be seen across Europe (Fancourt 2013), and specifically in Sweden (Fancourt 2019). Second, any account of changes to religious education needs to consider not only wider structural shifts toward a post-secular approach but also the effects of wider educational policy. Thus, the suggestion that members of religious traditions should articulate their points of view in the public space, would support faith schools, or for teaching about discrete traditions within pluralistic religious education, but such schooling or curriculum would also be subject to wider policy forces.

MILTON FREIDMAN: TRANSACTIONAL FREEDOM

In order to take the analysis of neoliberalism further, and especially in order to be able to consider the inter-relationship between normative voices of neoliberalism and post-secularism, it is helpful to focus on one key neoliberal thinker, the economist Milton Friedman, because of his influence on policy internationally. The key features of neoliberalism are at first sight somewhat removed from discussion of the post-secular, but his wider argument needs some exposition.

Friedman's clarion call, for what he simply termed 'liberalism', was his 1962 collection of lectures 'Capitalism and Freedom' (Friedman 2002); the title identifies the two principles that he considers inextricably linked. He later expanded on these ideas in 'Free to Choose', co-authored with his wife (Friedman and Friedman 1980). His starting premise was that to ensure freedom, 'the scope of government must be limited' (Friedman 2002, p. 2), and he supported this claim with examples of government interventions that were, in his view, unsuccessful, oppressive or coercive. His reputation is largely based on his views on economic policy, and especially the advocacy of a 'monetarist' position, arguing that governments failed when they attempted to regulate value or prices, for example through a commodity standard (e.g. gold) or discretionary authorities; they should simply ensure that a 'free private enterprise exchange economy' (Friedman 2002, p. 13) is in place. His views represented a contrast to the prevailing Keynesian approach, which presumed the role of government in monetary policies (Keynes 1936). His second claim is that voluntary exchange, which would be self-regulating through the pricing mechanism, should be the preferred model for all economic and social interaction. The individual should be free to enter

into contracts for whatever products or services they can offer and want, across any aspect of their life, rather than government deciding for them.

Friedman did not reject the need for government, considering that it had three broad roles. First, it should be the democratic forum for determining the rules of the market, and then to uphold and enforce these rules. His ideas were developed in the context of 1950s and 1960s, when the example of totalitarian rule in the USSR loomed large, so he wanted 'to nudge the change in opinion towards greater reliance on individual initiative and voluntary cooperation, rather than towards the other extreme of total collectivism' (Freidman and Freidman 1980, p. 7); these ideas echoed the other leading neoliberal thinker, Hayek (1944), who condemned any form - Left or Right - of centralised planning. Second, Freidman recognised that in some situations, a truly voluntary market would not operate, either through a technical monopoly, because realistically no-one could ever provide similar services, or through 'neighbourhood effects', when one individual's actions affect others without their consent or so badly reparation is impossible. The third role was in those situations when governments would have to act paternalistically, in protecting those who are considered not responsible: the insane and children. However, he felt that paternalistic reasoning could be over-used to justify a high degree of intervention in education.

The implications for education of this approach are striking, and indeed Freidman addresses education early in both works - immediately after discussing various economic policies. First, he distinguishes between a 'general education for citizenship', defined as a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge...and...some common values', and 'vocational education', defined as 'a form of investment in human capital' (Freidman 2002, p. 86). The difference is

important, in that a child's general education accrues to everyone's welfare in building a democratic society, but vocational education – broadly meaning here higher education - does not. If education is essential for all, his next principle is that parents nevertheless have the right to choose whatever education they wish for their children, but this has been usurped by the state:

For schooling, this sickness has taken the form of denying parents control over the kind of schooling their children receive... power has instead gravitated to professional educators. (Freidman and Freidman 1980, pp. 151-152)

Not only was this a political sickness, they also considered that the contemporaneous quality of teaching was low. Thus, whilst the government should protect basic standards, schools should essentially be independent under whatever broad ethos they choose, and which parents can then choose a school, through a voucher scheme. The law of supply and demand would thereby foster more effective schools as popular schools would be replicated and unpopular schools would close, and 'the development and improvement of all schools would be stimulated' (Freidman 2002, p. 93). Thus, to achieve this, parents would have to know the educational outcomes of the different schools, through league tables.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND NEOLIBERAL THEORY

These principles have important consequences for the place of religions in education.

Religious organisations would be free to run schools, and parents could choose according to their faith. Indeed, their argument for allowing faith schooling pre-empts some post-secular critiques of state schooling:

Public schools teach religion, too – not a formal, theistic religion, but a set of beliefs and values that constitute a religion in all but name. The present arrangements abridge the religious freedom of parents who do not accept the religion taught by public schools yet are forced to pay to have their children indoctrinated with it, and to pay still more to have their children escape indoctrination. (Freidman and Freidman 1980, p. 164)

Here, the lack of neutrality in public education is set out, and the right therefore for parental choice of nurture into a religious tradition within publicly funded schooling. The argument here arises out of the US context, where religious schools are essentially private and there is no religious education in most state schools, but it had significant implications in the English context, particularly in early 1980s, both for supporting the dual system of faith and state schools, which had hitherto seemed outdated,

A neoliberal view of religious education is therefore marked by three features. The first is implicit in Freidman's approach to school ethos, in that it is almost entirely a matter for the school to decide what it might provide and for parents to decide to choose it; the only caveat is that the schools could not offer anything undemocratic or divisive. Second, as noted above, there was a suspicion that the school curriculum in many state schools was not neutral, echoed in the English context by Baroness Cox (1988) in terms of religious education. Third, attention to vocational and professional education as a twin aspect of schooling has implications for curriculum design, and the place and value of different subjects within it. Although Freidman does not spell out the detail of curriculum design, the close coupling of economic freedom with political freedom raises questions about the overall goals of education.

POSTSECULARITY AND NEOLIBERALISM

The current arguments for a post-secular turn in religious education will if realised inevitably be played out within a neoliberal policy landscape, both for schools and increasingly for religious themselves. If these two perspectives are placed together, there are three broad implications. First, arguments for faith schooling find stronger support. From a post-secular perspective, if one cannot realistically choose between religious or non-religious positions, then there can be no fundamental objection to faith schooling. Further, if religious voices are to enter the public sphere in an articulate fashion, then pupils need a well-developed understanding of their own position. From a neoliberal perspective, within a marketised education system, there is even more justification for allowing different ethos-based schools to flourish, and it is no longer the role of the state to intervene beyond ensuring basic conformity. Indeed, this development parallels the neoliberalisation of the governance of religions, in that a spiritual ‘marketplace’ emerges, in which they compete for adherents, who behave as consumers (Gauthier and Martikainen 2013). Provision of successful schooling might well form part of this process, in that popular schools might attract or at least retain existing members of a religion or denomination, and building a school also becomes a suitable project for religious charities to spend their donations on (see Chong 2013), though this (literally) comes at a cost, in that religious schooling and affiliation is now commodified.

Second however, the place of non-confessional religious education in state schools is thrown into doubt because its impartiality is in question from both post-secular and neoliberal

positions. Habermas's argument is that all pupils need to learn how to articulate their own perspectives, so that specifically religious views should not be preferred over other worldviews, so religious and therefore worldview education would be to both nurture pupils within their own tradition and give them the opportunity to develop a sense of debate within the public sphere. Moreover, broadly progressive multicultural arguments that have underpinned much pluralistic religious education are no longer explicitly valued from a neoliberal perspective – indeed Friedman is suspicious of it. While some schools might choose to offer it, and some parents might choose it, it cannot be insisted upon across all schools, given acceptance of freedom of belief. There a difficult balance between allowing a diversity of forms of religious education because parents have the right to choose and insisting on one form of it that provides for the articulation of one's own position and the competences for debate in the public sphere.

Third, the increasingly important neoliberal outcomes of education are performance in high-stakes testing, both for pupils and for schools. This has become increasingly important between countries, through international league tables (Meyer & Benavot 2013), as well as between schools. The success of faith schools is pragmatically to be as much about pupils' attainment as about religiosity (Andrews & Johnes 2016). Therefore, the issue both for pre-secular confessional religious education and for secular non-confessional education is the same, in that they do not offer the examinable performativity required by a neoliberal regime. A post-secular perspective could argue for the importance of religious education within the public sphere, and therefore its inclusion in the examined curriculum, though this is to accept the logic of the neoliberal agenda, about how subjects and to be valued.

Overall, there is an unresolved tension between different conceptions of socio-political interaction. Habermas focuses on the public sphere, as the space where the system of the state and the economy, meets the lifeworld of the community, founded on solidarity and shared meaning; the market is one part of the administrative system, but has no place in communal life (Habermas 1975). Friedman instead replaces this with a network of transactions. Society is a collection of individuals coming together in voluntary exchange when their interests require it; the market is the fundamental model of social relations, so that individuals or schools do not have to over concern themselves with the common good as that is produced by the pricing mechanism.

CONCLUSION

By drawing on two individual theories of the post-secular and neoliberalism, religious education is shown to be caught between interacting forces within the cultural economy of school governance. Any new initiatives, such as responses to the recent report by the RE Commission's (2018), will need to recognise both. On the one hand, a normative move towards a post-secular perspective potentially favours both more confessional religious education and an even wider religions and worldviews education, but on the other hand, neoliberalism favours an agnostic marketplace of schools within which faith schools can flourish given parents' right to choose, but puts little store by any subject lacking in employability skills. The challenge for articulating a post-secular religious education is in responding to both the internal tensions of post-secularity, and to the tensions and parallels within educational neoliberalism.

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¹ *L'enseignement du fait religieux*