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Taking Faith Seriously: Philosophical Thoughts on Religious Education

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Religious literacy is essential in a globalized and multicultural world that is characterized by religious resurgence and interfaith tensions. This article offers some philosophical thoughts on this topic by exploring, first, three main approaches to religious education: *teaching for commitment*, *teaching about commitment*, and *teaching from commitment*. Arguing for the last approach, this article discusses the need for parents and educators to provide a stable and coherent ideological framework or primary culture aimed at the child/student's rational autonomy. Further, parents and educators should provide opportunities for the child/student to acquire interreligious understanding through reflection on and participation in interfaith dialogues and activities. The goal is for individuals to appreciate the beliefs and values of one's own faith and those of others so as to facilitate a greater understanding of self, others, and the world at large.

We live in a world where religious beliefs and values have a great impact on actions, policies, and practices around the globe. A countereffect to globalization is a religious resurgence in which people assert their own religious identity, leading at times to religious tensions and conflicts. This process makes a study of religious education and interreligious understanding crucial for individuals, societies, and governments around the world. This article offers some philosophical thoughts on this topic by exploring three main approaches to religious education: *teaching for commitment*, *teaching about commitment*, and *teaching from commitment*. Arguing for the last approach, this article discusses the need for parents and educators to provide a stable and coherent ideological framework or primary culture aimed at the child/student's rational autonomy. Further, parents and educators should provide opportunities for the child/student to acquire interreligious understanding through reflection on and participation in interfaith dialogues and activities.



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A clarification is needed on the use of the term “religious education” in this article. Although some philosophers such as McLaughlin (1984, 1985) have distinguished “religious education” (commonly used in the context of schools) from “religious upbringing” (commonly used in the context of home), this article uses the two terms interchangeably. Such a usage is based on John White’s (1982) position that education is simply upbringing: he asserts that “in asking what the aims of education ought to be, I shall be taking this to mean: what should we aim at in bringing up children or young people?” (p. 5).

TEACHING FOR COMMITMENT

The first type of religious education, known as *teaching for commitment* or the confessional approach, originated from the historical practice of Christian churches in catechizing believers into the faith. Such an approach has been equated with religious indoctrination especially from the middle of the 20th century (Tan, 2008a, 2008b). For example, Anthony Flew (1972) accuses the traditional church of trying to “fix in the minds of children an unshakeable conviction of the truth of its specific doctrines” (p. 114). What is indoctrinatory about the confessional approach—at least for this particular version—is that it aims to close the learners’ minds to other options in an uncritical manner.¹ Such an approach is not educational in any real sense, as it is inconsistent with the value of rational autonomy that most parents and educators in a liberal society desire to inculcate in their children and young people (McLaughlin, 1985; Tan, 2004).

TEACHING ABOUT COMMITMENT

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E__ *commitment* or the phenomenological approach² aims to
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expose children to a wide range of religious views in a neutral and objective fashion. This method is deemed to be most compatible with the tenets of a liberal society, which tends to value neutrality, openness, and pluralism. For instance, Crittenden (1982) speaks from a liberal pluralist perspective when he recommends that schools do not reflect any of the particular value systems or aim to promote specific styles of life within society. Instead, he avers that schools should play a more limited role in critically examining the assortment of inclusive value systems; in his words,

persuasion and the acceptance of beliefs should depend on the strength of evidence and reasons; that any belief and practice in which a serious interpretation of the human or physical world is reflected should be open to criticism and the test of wide human experience. (Crittenden, 1982, p. 328)

Given its emphasis on liberal values, *teaching about commitment* has long been popular within Western liberal societies. For example, Ninian Smart’s phenomenological approach, which teaches about the world’s major religions, became the dominant method in England in the 1970s and 1980s (Bates, 1996). The 1986 Swann Report (Department of Education and Science, 1985) and the 1994 OFSTED report (Office for Standards in Education, 1994) acknowledge the appreciation of religious or spiritual education through the phenomenological approach. Likewise, the U.S. Supreme Court, in the 1963 *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* case in Pennsylvania, ruled in favor of teaching about religion in public schools using a historical and comparative approach (as cited in Bartkowiak, 1999). Such a nonconfessional religious education approach is also adopted in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway (Jackson & Steele, 2004).

The phenomenological approach, however, is unsatisfactory for several reasons. First, because its overarching objective is to avoid advocating for a particular religious point of view, the *teaching about commitment* approach fails to capture the true and essential character of religion as it is often experienced by adherents (Tan, 2008a, 2008c). Relying on a largely descriptive method of teaching, it highlights segments of different religious traditions in a way that may become meaningless and distortive of any real understanding of religion (Carr, 1996). Moran (1994) observes that such an approach creates “an artificial notion of objectivity and gives over the language of

teaching religion to many people who indoctrinate rather than teach” (p. 45). This very critique led to growing dissatisfaction and subsequent rejection of Smart’s phenomenological method since it appeared to distance children from a direct apprehension of religious experience (Bates, 1996). In other words, without a minimum level of personal interest in religion, it may not be desirable for children and young people to learn about religion. Second, by sharing a number of liberal assumptions such as neutrality and subjectivity, the phenomenological approach is subject to the same criticisms that plague liberal ideology in general. In this regard, Prakash (1983) trenchantly points out the inconsistency on the part of the liberals as follows:

Today, religious groups, with good reasons, it seems, question an interpretation of neutrality which clearly favours the “secular” humanists, denying to others the official allocation of time to practice their faith. Indeed, one might note a certain irony in the belligerence of the liberal stand to keep religion out of the schools. For, unlike their conservative contemporaries, liberals have always strongly emphasised that the government is neutral between the varying conception(s) of the good life envisioned by different groups. Yet, the success of the liberal barrier against religion is essentially keeping one conception of the good life systematically barred from the schools. (p. 348)

It also is doubtful that indoctrination happens when only one religion is taught. Bartkowiak (1999) rightly maintains that “a teacher could, deliberately or inadvertently, teach comparative and historical material on religions in a manner that amounts to the teaching of a particular religion” (p. 199). Hence, the phenomenological method that emphasized neutrality and pluralism may not provide a form of religious education that is nonindoctrinatory. In fact, some have countered that advocates of the phenomenological method can be as dogmatic as religious conservatives. For example, Alexander (1997) asserts that “religious liberals are attracted to their own dogmas, from the secularist denial of any value in theological discourse, to claims that [the] ultimate authority for one’s religious posture lie(s) in individual autonomy or the positivist historical study of tradition” (p. 385). For these reasons, then, the phenomenological approach, by presenting a truncated version of religious beliefs, ultimately proves untenable as a model for religious education.

TEACHING FROM COMMITMENT

Teaching from commitment deliberately avoids the shortcomings of the previous two approaches and offers an appealing alternative for religious education. There are two equally important components to this approach. The first is introducing the child to an initial ideological framework or primary culture, and the second is developing the child’s rational autonomy from within the primary culture. The following sections expound on these two components.

The first step is to introduce the child to a “primary culture” (cf. Ackerman, 1980; McLaughlin, 1984). A primary culture is an ideological framework or tradition comprising a substantive set of beliefs, values, and practices that are essential to the preservation of one’s culture. These beliefs, values, and practices could be religious or secular in nature, depending on one’s upbringing. For religious believers, especially those who take their faith seriously, their primary culture is largely underpinned by beliefs, values, and practices that are inherently religious in nature. For instance, it has been noted that Muslims in Britain favor Islamic schools for their role in transmitting religious beliefs that are intricately tied to their cultural and linguistic heritage (Ameli, Azam & Merali, 2005; Parker-Jenkins, Hartas & Irving, 2005). Thus, the primary culture plays a formative role by providing the “cognitive map” (Runzo, 1989) or “developmental structure” (Puolimatka, 1996) for the child to make sense of the world.

From this perspective, the initiation into a primary culture is not *necessarily* indoctrinatory, although it may be so in some cases. It could be argued that such an initial commitment is necessary for children to develop their critical faculties for reflecting and evaluating different alternatives that are later presented (Tan, 2004). Given that a rational discussion of any issue presupposes acceptance (at least for the duration of the discussion) of some framework of beliefs—in virtue of which truth assessments can be made—the elimination of such frameworks from discussions “not only cannot ensure autonomous rational assessments of the issues involved, but it actually renders such assessments impossible” (Laura & Leahy, 1989, p. 263). Such indifference is undesirable if a primary goal of liberal education is to cultivate the capacity of future citizens to think for themselves through deliberation, judgment, and reflection (Carr, 1995). Noting that a great threat to children in modern liberal societies is not that they will believe in something too deeply but

that they will believe in nothing very deeply at all, Galston (1989) exhorts parents to foster strong convictions in their children so that the rational deliberation among ways of life is far more meaningful.

It also should be emphasized that strong belief/value commitment to a particular way of living is not confined to religious conservatives. For example, Spinner-Halev (2000) posits that liberals also raise their children in a primary culture where sanctioned values are inculcated, even though they may be diametrically opposed to those of religious conservatives. Consider the value of autonomy. Although Spinner-Halev agrees that particular community traditions may support autonomy, such autonomy is not the absolute and abstract concept that many liberals take it to be. As he elaborates,

Living in a community can support autonomy; it also shapes the choices we have in our lives. This is true for liberals and religious conservatives alike. Community can be thought of as an “enabling constraint”: it enables us to be autonomous just as it restricts the choices we have. . . . People raised in a community are given values and a way of life that they can reject or revise when they are older. To say that children are raised in a community with a tradition, and not exposed to all the alternatives, is not to argue that they are not autonomous or to argue against community. Growing up within a secure tradition gives people the background to examine their choices and the choices of others. (Spinner-Halev, 2000, p. 77)

To be sure, not all “secure traditions” are supportive of their members’ desire, potential, and quest to examine or reflect on their choices and the choices of others. Some secure traditions may in fact be indoctrinatory by paralyzing the children/students’ capacity to rationally justify their beliefs, consider alternatives, and make autonomous decisions in life. An indoctrinated person is incapable of independently inquiring into the worthiness of his or her own beliefs or those of others based on relevant evidence (Tan, 2005). Such a person holds tenaciously to exclusive views and is unwilling to seriously entertain alternatives. Characterized by closed-mindedness or a dogmatic style of belief, the indoctrinated person is correspondingly incapable of making decisions that are informed by plausible alternatives. With such individuals, the conditions for human agency to form intentions, evaluate desires, and make or execute decisions have been undermined (Alexander, 2005). Thus, it follows that the nature of a particular “secure tradition” or “primary culture” is a legitimate area

of inquiry in its own right since all are neither equal nor compatible with a *teaching from commitment* approach, which requires that members actively and demonstrably are encouraged to develop and exercise rational autonomy and critical reflection from *within* that tradition/culture. Without the latter component, *teaching from commitment* can become indoctrinatory and thus incompatible with the approach to religious education that is envisioned here. In other words, *teaching from commitment* requires not only immersion within the religious tradition(s) that characterize the primary culture but also a second component that is no less integral to this approach: in short, educators and parents also need to cultivate the rational autonomy of students and children by encouraging them to reflect on and justify their beliefs, actively consider alternatives, and make autonomous decisions in life that are deeply informed by but not necessarily determined or even prescribed by the culture or tradition in which *teaching from commitment* occurs.

Take, for example, the religion of Islam. A primary culture in the Islamic traditions that is compatible with our approach is one that develops the members’ capacity to understand Islamic teachings rationally, consider alternatives, and apply these Islamic teachings to their lives autonomously. Regarding the first point on rationality, the Qur’an frequently calls for the use of reason and the search for knowledge. As al-Attas (1999) observes, Islam defines a human as a rational being with “the capacity for understanding speech, and the power responsible for the formulation of meaning—which involves judgment, discrimination, distinction and clarification, and which has to do with the articulation of words or expressions in meaningful pattern” (p. 15). Second, it also is important for Muslims to be aware of the legitimacy of other Islamic and non-Islamic traditions and be willing to learn from these different and competing worldviews. Such processes of inquiry are not meant to imply that Muslims should abandon or question their own doctrines, just that their confidence in their own beliefs should not lead them to become closed-minded or judgmental; instead, they should remain well informed and open-minded about other religious traditions. Third, from the standpoint of primary culture, Muslims are empowered to apply Islamic teachings to their lives by making their own decisions and adapting to changing times and places. In full recognition of underlying human agency, Islamic education should aim therefore at helping “all Muslims to enter into personal growth and, consequently to become autonomous in their lives, their choices, and, more generally, in the management of their freedom” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 129).

In short, as suggested by the previously mentioned illustrations from Islam, two primary components characterize the *teaching from commitment* approach (a) immersion in the religious tradition(s) of the primary culture and (b) active and demonstrable reflection on the beliefs and values of self and others. In all case, the overarching goal is to encourage children and students to reflect gradually but critically on the committed perspective into which they have been nurtured, knowing that they are—and must be—empowered to make a personal choice for or against the religious commitment(s) that characterized a specific primary culture (Thiessen, 1993). Some practical ways for educators and parents to achieve such means and ends include teaching children and young people that religious doctrines are not universally and publicly agreed-on beliefs but are primarily grounded in and derivative of religious faith, preparing and inviting them to ask questions, being willing to respond to the questioning honestly and in a way that is compatible with their developing cognitive and emotional maturity, and nurturing their attitudes of tolerance and understanding regarding religious differences (see McLaughlin, 1984).

So when is the appropriate time for educators and parents to develop such rational autonomy in the children? This question parallels the debate among philosophers on the appropriate age for a child to engage in moral reasoning. For example, Beehler (1985), commenting on Rousseau's view that children can be reasoned with and challenged intellectually long before 12 and 14, puts the age at between 3 and 4. However, Sher and Bennett (1982) agree with psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg that children of age 13 still rely on nonmoral reasons for their actions and argue that midadolescence is the turning point. Yet another philosopher, Phillips (1989), counters that the age of reason should be "rolled back a long way" (p. 350). Compounding the problem is that different children attain cognitive and emotional maturity at different times, depending on their gender, culture, life experiences, upbringing, and other contingent factors. Given the lack of consensus on this issue, what is important for our discussion is that educators and parents should be cognizant of their children's cognitive and affective development and their readiness to engage with religious issues.

REFLECTION FOR INTERRELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

As emphasized previously, a *teaching from commitment* approach requires educators and parents to develop the

rational autonomy of children and young people by encouraging them to reflect on and beyond their own religion in order to acquire interreligious understanding. In so doing, schools may partner active with parents in order to develop such religious literacy. At this point, some real-world examples of *teaching from commitment* may be helpful. Consider first the learning experience of primary school Muslim children in a madrasah (Islamic school) in Singapore (see <http://www.irsyad.sg>). A compulsory subject in the madrasah is "Islamic Social Studies" targeted at primary schoolchildren aged from 7 to 12 years old, with religious harmony as one of its curriculum objectives (Tan, 2009). Here, primary 2 students (8 years old) explore other religious and cultural festivals such as "The Festival of Lights" or Deepavali for the Hindus and "Mooncake Festival" for the Chinese. Such appreciation of other religions is based on the following justification: "Islam teaches us the importance of respect for other people's culture and practice." In this way, "we learn and know Islamic ways of treating others" (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura [MUIS], 2004, p. 22). The students' active engagement in the learning process is underscored by activities such as Internet and library searches and interviews with non-Muslims to understand their lifestyles and values. For instance, students have to complete an individual project work where they submit a photo portfolio of their neighborhood to demonstrate their appreciation of Singapore as a multicultural society. Likewise, the upper primary students also reflect on potentially sensitive topics such as violence from the Islamic perspectives. Alluding to terrorist acts carried out by some Islamist groups worldwide, primary 4 students (10 years old) are asked, "In groups, discuss what you think can happen if we do not take care of the peace and harmony. What are the ways in which we can show our neighbours that Islam is a religion of peace?" (MUIS, 2005, p. 19). As a final example, the primary 5 students (11 years old) read about "many instances of fighting and unrest all over the region" and "aggression by irresponsible groups" and the need to "play a part in enjoining good and propagating peace among our multi-racial and multi-religious communities to ensure that Singapore remains safe" (MUIS, 2007, p. 82). These students thus examine the example of the prophet Muhammad in promoting Islam as a peaceful religion and discuss how they can appreciate other civilizations and be a blessing to others.

Another method for promoting interreligious understanding is to ask students to reflect on the diversity within a particular religion so as to avoid stereotyping its

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adherents as inward looking, intolerant, or militant. For example, in reflecting on the growing movement by mainstream Christian groups to advocate for environmental stewardship (e.g., [Grim & Tucker, 2009](#)), it could be highly instructive for students to ponder on the role and stance of Christianity historically and currently in relation to the prescribed nature and role of human beings within the natural world. Likewise, in Islam, students could critically discuss the teaching of pluralism and respect for all religions in some Islamic traditions (Moten, 2005). They could also consider the critical humanist tradition in Islam, which is a branch of Islamic thought that seeks to be open to new knowledge through the exercise of human reasoning while remaining rooted in Islam (Azhar, 2008). Older and more mature students could also explore and question different and competing religious concepts, the foundations for these beliefs, and their validity (Tan, in press). Interfaith dialogues should be based on the common understanding that there exists a variety of moral traditions and legitimate moral differences (Runnymede, 2000). Reflections on the ambiguous, controversial, and even dangerous (Ipgrave, 2003)—such as issues of salvation, proselytization, and suicide bombing in the name of religion—may be salutary to prepare the students and young people to encounter the real world from a thoughtful and informed perspective.

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Another real-world component of this approach—“reflection in action”—can be introduced when students of various faiths participate in school or community projects where they are invited to practically reflect on their learning experiences. Through working on shared projects, such as environmental or service learning endeavors, they will be able to build friendships with those of different religious worldviews. Such experiences help students and young people to encounter cultures and belief systems of others and move beyond their preconceptions of other faiths, dispelling prejudices and stereotypes and cultivating greater rational autonomy along the way. One of many potential examples is a service-learning course, “Interreligious Dialogue and Practice,” at the University of Toronto (see http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/community/courses/interreligious_dialogue.htm). By requiring students to complete 3 hours of service each week in community agencies and organizations, the course aims to help students acquire and demonstrate sympathetic familiarity with at least one religious tradition

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as with contemporary issues and initiatives in interreligious dialogue [and] reflect critically on personal experiences of interreligious collaboration and develop strong connections between theoretical understanding and practical application. (University of Toronto, 2008)

Another pedagogical method is for schools to introduce specific curriculum that focuses on interreligious education through reflection. One example is “(Re)embracing Diversity in New York City Public Schools: Educational Outreach for Muslim Sensitivity,” which fosters dialogue and processes for high schools in New York (see <http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/mei/research.shtml>). The curriculum aims to address and prevent intolerance toward Arab American and Muslim American students in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Among other goals, the program promotes interpersonal and intercultural dialogue based on tolerance and respect for ethnic and religious diversity by raising students’ critical understanding of and sensitivity toward Muslims in America (Kenan, 2005). Through activities such as problem solving, critical thinking, and collaborative learning, students learn about topics such as “Towards Understanding Islam and Muslims,” “A Common Language for Discussing Bias and Hatred,” “Reflections on Prejudice,” and “Field Trip to an Islamic Institution.” According to Kenan (2005), evidence suggests that this curriculum is promoting and restoring the values of tolerance, peace, and diversity in public school communities. At the same time, it should be emphasized that this program in its current form is tailored for urban and multicultural society such as the United States and may need to be modified to suit the needs of students and young people in more rural or isolated homogeneous communities. For example, non-Muslim children in rural areas and/or homogeneous societies can learn about Islam from talks by overseas religious leaders, exhibitions, movies, and other activities organized by international interfaith organizations. With sufficient financial support, they can also embark on field trips or exchange programs to visit people of other faiths and religious institutions outside their country.

TEACHING FROM COMMITMENT AND LIBERALISM

With its emphasis on critical reflection, the *teaching from commitment* approach may be particularly helpful in mending the patchy relationship between liberals and nonliberals, especially with respect to religious education

in a liberal democratic context (Tan, 2008b). In no small part, that is because “modern liberalism has its historical roots in the overthrowing of a predecessor culture that was manifestly religious” (Lorberbaum, 1995, p. 273). Since a primary culture—in the sense of a shared framework of fundamental beliefs—is essential to the preservation of one’s culture, such considerations are especially relevant to religious minorities in liberal societies since their culture may be threatened by prolonged exposure to the intense expression of liberal values (Halstead, 1995). In such communities, there is a subsequent need for education to maintain this shared framework of fundamental beliefs. In this regard, it may be instructive to reflect on Halstead (1995), who is not surprised (from a nonliberal perspective) that liberalism is viewed as oppressive and undermining of particular religious traditions; as he observes, “What Western educationalists see as universal liberal values may well be seen by others as secular and reductionist” (p. 267).

Liberals, the likes of Anthony Flew, however, have their own worries about religious indoctrination, as discussed previously. Feinberg (1995), for example, expresses the liberal concern that fundamentalist Christian parents are curtailing their children’s future ability to choose from the array of alternatives provided by the larger social order. On the one hand, the *teaching from commitment* approach can allay the fears of parents who want to preserve their own religious heritage since one component of this framework supports the duty of parents to impart the dominant religious beliefs of the primary culture to their children. At the same time, with reference to the criticisms of liberals and secular intellectuals, our approach avoids the pitfalls of religious indoctrination by some parents who want to instill a primary culture that suppresses and imperils the rational autonomy of students and young people within that culture. Instead, as highlighted previously, our approach requires parents and religious educators to help the members of their community to reflect critically on their own traditions as well as alternative worldviews and counterarguments. In this regard, balance between these two components is perhaps the best defense against the excesses that are feared by adherents to either end of this socioreligious continuum.

The *teaching from commitment* approach also effectively rejects certain false assumptions held by liberals and nonliberals alike about the effects of exposure to a variety of religious/spiritual values and beliefs. Many religious conservatives and fundamentalists have overrated the negative

effects of such an exposure; it would behoove such individuals to be aware that *mere* exposure does not constitute indoctrination. As pointed out by Blake (1983),

To a person who already has the central beliefs of one creed, an incompatible creed seems likely to appear at best interesting, deserving of respect but wrong. Young Muslims in church schools can learn a lot about Christianity but seem unlikely to learn to be Christians. It seems equally unlikely that the comparative study of world religions in a maintained school might alter the religious affiliation (or resistance to religious affiliation) of any child who is being brought up outside the school with a particular set of religious or anti-religious beliefs. (p. 241)

Liberals, on the other hand, may have overrated the positive effects of exposure to the avoidance of indoctrination and promotion of tolerance. As Bartkowiak (1999) asserts, exposure to a pluralistic culture can result in children becoming intolerant as well as religiously dogmatic. Noting that students can easily be taught to criticize the practices of others—and become less tolerant when the exposure they have to the views of others is one that is negative—she argues that if “teachers have dogmatic religious views, or even views that are opposed to all religious beliefs, they may teach about religions in a derogatory manner” (Bartkowiak, 1999, p. 197). The point here is that exposure, qua exposure, does not eliminate indoctrination, nor does it automatically lead to open-mindedness. Rather, as argued previously, exposure to alternative worldviews should be accompanied by the genuine intention and consistent efforts of educators and parents to develop the child’s rational autonomy over time.

Liberals also have been unduly concerned about the possibility of indoctrination from a conservative religious upbringing. As Schrag (1998) notes, secularists believe that Christian fundamentalist educators disparage progressive pedagogy and propagate blind adherence to monolithic fundamentalist doctrine concerning the good life. However, in at least one study, the majority of students in a fundamentalist school do not agree with the doctrines of the school, although they conduct themselves with “absolute acceptance” and “unquestioned obedience” outwardly (as cited in Peshkin, 1986, p. 254). In other words, fundamentalist communities may be more permeable than liberals expect, and indoctrination, especially in a liberal society, may be harder to discern.

Consistent with such findings, Callan (1988) recom-

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the initial stage in religious education. Rejecting what he calls “the rational critical principle,” where the cogency of one’s religious beliefs must be proportionate to the strength of evidence available, he claims that one cannot examine a faith from a disengaged perspective if one wants to reject or accept it. Instead, the inquirer needs to enter into a way of seeing the world where some central beliefs are sustained by something that is not based on empirical evidence and scientific argument. Alternatives to empirical evidence and scientific argument may include experiencing God’s presence through what theologian John Calvin calls the *sensus divinitatis*, or the innate knowledge of God (Plantinga, 1983; Tan, 2008a), relying on revelation, or appealing to other sources of inspiration within various religious traditions. For Callan (1988), herein lies the central conundrum for liberals since *teaching from commitment* presumes the ability to regard the rational-critical principle as just one possibility among many for discovering the best way to live. In view of the previous discussion, he cautions that if “we educate our children in such a way that they never develop that ability, their rejection of religion may indeed be as unfree an act as the acceptance of faith by the indoctrinated zealot” (Callan, 1988, p. 192).

Rather than bifurcating the liberal and nonliberal positions on religious education, then, the *teaching from commitment* approach seeks their reconciliation. Toward this end, the idea of religious education in a liberal society has been endorsed by Christian educators such as Cowell (1983), who advocates that Christians should join nonbelievers in a nondefensive search for an agreement about the proper grounds on religious questions. By doing so, she maintains that

they would not only escape the first horn of their dilemma—the fear of indoctrination—but, eventually, turn it to profit; for, they must suppose, anyone who is really clear about the proper grounds would, when properly educated, come to the conclusions which they themselves favour. (p. 163)

Such an approach requires the believer not to sacrifice or compromise his or her exclusive religious claims but rather to engage in a shared search for common ground that *already* exists between the believer and the nonbeliever.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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of this article, we must temper “rootedness” with greater “openness” in religious education. Openness—for liberals and nonliberals alike—may in fact be the touchstone of the *teaching for commitment* approach to religious education. That is because an ethos of openness is needed for students to explore critically the domains of religion. From the perspective of Alexander and McLaughlin (2003), “openness” refers to “the range of traditions and perspectives considered, the attitude that is invited toward them, and the forms of autonomous judgement and response sought on the part of students” (p. 365). “Openness,” therefore, is accompanied by “rootedness,” in which students are given the opportunity to acquire an insider perspective through an empathetic awareness of and critical approach toward religious traditions. Arguing along similar lines, Leirvik (1999) avers that “religions need to be approached both from the ‘insider’ as living sources for faith, morals and life orientation—and from the ‘outsider,’ as objects for critical investigation” (p. 83, as cited in Leganger-Krogstad, 2003, p. 179).

Ultimately, the *teaching from commitment* approach seeks a balance between “openness” and “rootedness” as well as “insider” and “outsider” perspectives. As McLaughlin (1984) observes, the short-term aim is to develop faith within a stable primary culture, although such faith should not be impervious to change or rejection in the future. The overarching goal of this approach is for individuals to experience maximal autonomy when grappling with questions of religious faith. To do so optimally throughout life, children and students should acquire “religious literacy”—an intellectually informed and empathically grounded appreciation of the beliefs and values that are central to their own faith and those of others—in order to facilitate a greater understanding of self, others, and the world at large.

NOTES

1. In this article, I have adopted a pejorative meaning of the confessional approach to refer to a form of religious education that is indoctrinatory. It is interesting to note that Thiessen (1993) interprets the confessional approach differently in his book. He argues that the confessional approach, which he equates with “teaching for commitment,” is non-indoctrinatory and supportive of the development of rational autonomy. If the confessional approach is interpreted in this manner (i.e., compatible with rational autonomy), I agree that it can circumvent the charge of indoctrination. For further discussions on the concept of indoctrination, see Tan (2004, 2005, 2008b).

2. The theory of the phenomenological approach should be distinguished from its practice (Tan, 2008c). The phenomenological approach, as conceptualized by Ninian Smart, aims to develop an empathetic awareness of religions as living phenomena through imaginative projection into the believers' perspectives and experiences (Bates, 1996). However, as Grimmitt (2001) has rightly noted, "in popular understanding of the 'phenomenological approach,' the broad, liberal educational value that the model attributes to the study of religion, including its capacity to address the personal and existential concerns of the pupil, is largely absent and that it has become a byword for a narrowly descriptive and content-centred approach devoid of pedagogical sensitivity" (p. 6).

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- [AuQ1] Author: In the second paragraph under “Reflection for Interreligious Understanding,” please update Tan in press throughout.
- [AuQ2] Author: In the References, for Crittenden 1982, please supply page numbers and city and state of publisher.
- [AuQ3] Author: In the References, for McLaughlin 1985, please supply page numbers and city and state of publisher.
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