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Religion and the State

Why Moderate Religious Teaching Should Be Promoted

Should the US government and the international community actively promote religion overseas, especially in the Islamic world? Such an approach may seem wrong on all grounds. Religion is a major force driving jihadists in the Middle East, and separation of state and religion is one of the cornerstones of US democracy and the type of regime the United States promotes abroad. And, as the young people say, religion is so “yesterday”; the march of history, starting with the Enlightenment, has been toward secularization and the dominance of reason.

The case of religious education in the Islamic world suggests, however, that all these assumptions are erroneous and that the United States should actively promote religion overseas, albeit not in any and every form. The United States is involved in changing schooling in several Islamic countries, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. One may oppose such an active US role, but as long as that role exists, the question remains: how should the US government affect the religious content of education overseas?

As with many other matters concerning education, the issues involved are much broader than deciding which books children should read and what teachers should teach. The key questions are determining which, if any, values ought to be part of public education and what kind of society educators

should seek to advance—one that promotes secularism, in which religion is relegated to the private sphere; one that promotes moderate but not fundamentalist religion; or one that promotes whatever form of religion the community favors, even if it is extremist.

The Need for Reform

In several Muslim countries a large number of pupils are enrolled in madrassas. The education given in many of these schools promotes an extremist version of Islam. It is discriminatory against women, abusive to non-believers, and supportive of terrorist activities. In addition, madrassas and many other Islamic schools are often criticized for being counter-productive in their teaching methods for relying heavily on rote memorization. Religious education is the main subject and little room is provided for subjects such as math, science, computer skills, and civics, not to mention English, which is becoming increasingly essential. In short, madrassas do not educate for modernity.

In India, for instance, madrassa studies are largely limited to the Qur’an, the Hadith, and Islamic philosophy and jurisprudence. The Indian government as well as secular-minded Muslims have come together to push for the modernization of the educational curriculum in hopes of curbing the poverty and social conservatism that they believe

madrassas are breeding, but past government attempts to incorporate science, math, and English into these schools have essentially failed. The same holds true for madrassas in many other Muslim countries. They are shutting their graduates out of modern economic and political development.

One may grant that madrassas promote extremist values and behavior, both directly (by the content of the education they provide) and indirectly (by keeping their graduates out of modern life). However, one must also ask whether the United States or other Western nations should be involved in changing these schools and hence the way that millions of Muslims are educated. While political liberalism would argue that the United States ought to allow citizens of the nations involved to select which education they prefer for their children, this argument must be rejected. Citizens of other nations have a strong and legitimate interest in discouraging education that predisposes graduates to hatred, terrorism, and human rights violations. The United States, other Western nations, moderate Muslim nations, and the global community have a strong interest in ensuring that people in all nations are raised to respect rights, to participate in democratic politics, and to be able to function in a modern economy. The main reason has been often cited: such people are much less likely to bring war on one another and oppress their own people.

This key observation does not grant the United States or any other country license to impose their educational preferences by sending in troops or imposing economic sanctions. The willingness of Middle Eastern nations to accept foreign aid, including educational aid, does not justify US efforts to promote an educational system that is compatible with economic and political development. If one accepts the normative proposition that rich nations ought to provide foreign aid, few would disagree that the nations that provide grants are entitled to decide what they wish to fund. Thus, the United States is unlikely to choose to fund madrassas given their current state.

If not madrassas, where should educational aid be directed? Should it be used only for secular education or for some kinds of religious education? The issue runs much deeper than choosing who obtains which funds or even what the content of textbooks, curricula, and teacher education ought to be. The question is what, if any, kind of society the United States should promote by peaceful means in Muslim nations where extremist interpreta-

tions of Islam are rampant and are predisposing citizens to extremism at home and abroad.

The Need for Value Education

One major argument against replacing madrasa education with value-free education—teaching only math, science, English, and modern skills—follows from the fact that many of the countries that have madrassas are, or have been until recently, police states. This was the case for Iraqis under Saddam Hussein and Afghans under the Taliban and remains the case for Saudis and to a lesser extent the Pakistanis. Some of the world's poorest countries, such as Bangladesh, Somalia, Yemen, and Indonesia, also have the largest madrasa enrollment.

When the United States and its allies removed the Afghan and Iraqi regimes—or when police-state regimes such as the former Soviet Union collapsed under their own weight—there was an explosive growth in almost all forms of antisocial behavior, including violent crime, white-collar crime, inter-group violence, drug abuse, alcoholism, child abandonment, and prostitution. These severe antisocial trends are not, as is often assumed, self-correcting or reversed by the introduction of free markets and elections.

What these societies need are the kinds of informal moral codes that underlie the pro-social behavior found in free, civil societies. These moral codes underlie the kind of informal social controls that promote the social order and

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minimize the need to rely on the state. To put it succinctly, social order is not self-sustaining. It is either provided by a police state at great human cost or by a firm social fabric that entails a shared moral code.

Education of the next generation is one effective way to introduce informal moral codes. Teaching only math, science, English, and other normative-neutral subjects does not provide the needed education for weaving or restoring a social fabric. This is illustrated by the fact that when pictures of Saddam Hussein and pro-regime statements were removed from Iraq's old textbooks, they were replaced with nothing. US officials recruited Fuad Hussein, a former Iraqi professor and Middle Eastern scholar, to assist with reviewing Iraqi textbooks. Hussein visited Baghdad schools and chose 67 teachers to make up a textbook revision team.

The Viable Alternative

Theoretically, it is conceivable that the United States can try to replace a fundamentalist school system with a fully secular one that teaches rich normative content through civic ethics. However, forming a civic ethics education program entails much more than removing totalitarian or fundamentalist parts of textbooks and curricula and re-training teachers not to follow these lines of value education. It requires the recasting of histories. In Iraq, it would mean replacing the glorification of Saddam Hussein with either narratives about courageous Iraqis who died trying to unseat him or stories of civic leaders who served their nation before Hussein. It would entail scanning Iraqi, Arabic, and Islamic literature for novels that provide students with empathy for people of different social backgrounds and political leanings

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Meeting at the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) offices, the team faced the task of “de-Ba’athifying” the textbooks but were at a loss as to which new texts to provide. More broadly, the issue was not merely the introducing of better ways of teaching math, science, or English, although this is surely needed. The question was which values should be promoted through the various tools of education, including textbooks, the curricula, and the training and selection of teachers.

A political liberal's first response to such an agenda is that value education should take place at home, in places of worship, or should be provided by other private civic entities. Public schools should not be involved in what is called moral, value, or character education.

However, one must take into account that in nations that have long-standing police regimes, whether fundamentalist or secular, these private civic entities are often very weak. They either barely existed (as in voluntary associations), have been weakened (communal bonds), have been mobilized to support the state (favored ethnic groupings), or themselves support one form of authoritarianism or another (various warlords or sectarian leaders). Hence, there is a need to assist the development of a new, post-totalitarian core of shared values to unite various communities through public education. Otherwise the normative vacuum will further feed social anarchy that will lead people to favor the restoration of a strong-leader regime, as we currently see in Russia and in large parts of Afghanistan and as we will likely see emerge from Iraq.

and adapting civics classes to draw on examples from Arab and other histories. One would have to start from nothing. Although parts of the current materials could be salvaged, after decades of oppressive regimes, most narratives would need recasting. All in all, preparing such a fully secular educational program is a huge task that would take many years and manpower to advance.

Most importantly, while some parents in the Muslim world, especially in the larger cities, would send their children to secular public schools, such education would be adamantly rejected by most Muslims. This is true for many Iraqis, especially the Shi'as, most Afghans and Saudis, and many Pakistanis, most prominently in the regions bordering Afghanistan. Therefore, to reach most of the population—specifically those hostile to economic and political development and inclined to religious extremism—some kind of religious schooling must be provided.

This observation should not come as a surprise to US citizens, given that nearly ten percent of US children attend religiously affiliated schools. A significant subset of parents sends their children to such schools in order to reinforce their children's religious beliefs. The difference between the United States and several key Muslim nations is that large majorities in Muslim nations hold this view. Hence either most children will be educated in private schools, in which religious education—often of the madrasa kind—will prevail, or public schools will have to provide some religious education because those parents who cannot afford private schooling will demand public schools to remain religious as well.

Religion is Not “History”

The Enlightenment still guides the reflexive response of many political liberals and secular policymakers to the question of whether religion may be taught in public schools. In the wake of the rise of the age of reason, rationality and science were glorified, and religion was considered by the elites as a relic of the dark ages. It was expected that religion would be replaced by secular thinking. Indeed, for generations it seemed secularization was spreading over ever-larger parts of the world as people became less religious, relegated religion to the private sphere, or gave up on it altogether. Secularization acquired the aura of being part of the march of history; only the uninformed or the bigoted would resist such progress. However, religion continues to be a major source of ethical and spiritual guidance for billions of people. Other hundreds of millions, especially those in secularized places such as the former Soviet republics, China, and Turkey, are returning to embrace religious beliefs. Religion fills the vacuum left when values previously promoted, such as communism or fundamentalism, wane or are found unfulfilling.

In short, separation of state and religion, and in particular avoidance of teaching moral and religious values, may be possible in nations whose informal moral fabric, along with the civic entities that nurture it, is intact. But this is not the case in most, if not all, newly liberated countries or politically and economically underdeveloped ones. The separation clause can hardly be applied.

It is crucial not to treat all religious beliefs and education as if they were cut from one cloth, as Enlightenment thinkers did and many still do. The main fault line, relevant to analysis and policymaking for Western nations and new civic groups, lies not between religion and secularism but between fundamentalism on the one side and moderate religion and secularism on the other.

The main reason is as basic as it is important. It is not religion, but fundamentalism, that is incompatible with human rights, democratic societies, and tolerance of others. This point was driven home to me when I was the guest of the Iranian reformers at a 2002 meeting organized by the Center for the Dialogue of Civilizations. The reformers stressed that they were fighting not for a secular civic society but for a religious one, in which people would be free and encouraged to pray but not forced to do so, where modesty for men and women would be fostered by moral arguments but not imposed by moral squads.

The debate over whether Catholicism could be compatible with a free society was often similarly misframed. A better question would have been, what kind of Catholicism? After all, the kind that leaves political choices to the voters and seeks to persuade rather than force its adherents is very much compatible, but the kind of Catholicism that led the Church to support the Inquisition, appease the Nazis, and assist the Argentinian generals is not. The same fault line that separates the persuasive versions of religion from the coercive ones is found in Judaism between the Reform Jews and some ultra-Orthodox groups. It is also found between fundamentalist forms of Islam and more moderate varieties, as practiced by most Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Mali, Kyrgyzstan, and elsewhere.

Here the principled and practical lines of reasoning converge. It is inconceivable that the overwhelming majority of Shi'a in Iraq, and most Afghans, Saudis, and Pakistanis, among others, would send their children to public schools that teach only normatively neutral subjects or provide only secular civic and moral education. In short, there is neither a principled reason nor a practical reason to impose on other nations the model mainly followed by the United States and France: the opposition to any and all religious teaching in public schools. Moderate religious teachings not only are compatible with free societies but also provide a major source of the informal moral codes for countries that do not yet have them. Thus the United States should promote moderate religious teaching in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. ■

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