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REL 1300 Introduction to World Religions

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The alienation of children: why religion should be restricted

Religion in America is something that every single American is assumed a part of. Whether they are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or any sort of other world religion, it is assumed that members of society hold their own personal religious beliefs. This can be seen most obviously through circumcision. As circumcision rose to popularity and became something of a religious rite in Jewish and Christian sects, a majority of boys in America are entered into this tradition. Alongside this is baptism of young Christians. With the Christian belief being that original sin must be purged immediately, children are entered into a covenant with God so early that they cannot even begin to comprehend what is happening. It will be years before these children can understand the magnitude of this covenant, however it is assumed that these children should do this. I would posit that the early implication of a child into a religion, with special consideration of Christianity, only serves to hinder their experience with said religion, and allowing the child to grow up in an environment with knowledge of many faiths would be more beneficial.

Just off of Hillsborough, a busy street in Tampa, there is a small, Catholic preparatory academy that serves to build upon basic teachings to grow successful young, Catholic men. Jesuit high school in Tampa is a prime example of early introduction into a faith. While I was there I interviewed two students on their experiences, one being introduced early on and one entering the school with nearly no religious background. To respect the student's wishes, some

of the names and dates have been changed. “It’s just that I feel burnt out on the whole thing now, you know,” Josh Turner states about his time at Jesuit. “I know all the prayers and I’ve spent enough time in church, but I think my faith won’t last into college.” Josh is going into his first year at Florida this fall and this would be his first extended period away from home. “Ultimately, I already feel like I am only going to church to appease my mom, so I really can’t see myself continuing in college.” Josh was raised in a Catholic household, where he was baptized as a baby, went through Sunday school and was christened as early as possible. The second student, Tony, was raised with no religious obligation. “My parents are pretty much nothing,” he says with a laugh. “They would answer any questions I had, so it’s not like they were ignorant, they just wanted me to figure it out on my own.” Tony was baptized sophomore year and is going through the process of being christened now. “I think it was just easier for me to enter the faith when I got to learn about it on a critical level. It wasn’t about just following rules or reciting prayers, I really had to work through my understanding of it and accept the facts versus the blind faith aspects.” While Josh and Tony are only two examples of this situation, statistics have shown that these scenarios are prominent throughout America.

Studies have shown that there is a window of acceptance in regards to the Christian faith. The window is approximately from four to fourteen, prompting the question: is this too early? One study showcased that this group makes up eighty-five percent of converts to Christianity. (Brewster) This statistic proves very interesting, especially when coupled with the statistic that approximately sixty-six percent of Christians within the age group of eighteen to twenty-two stop regularly attending church. (Hill) A connection can be drawn between the early admission to the faith, closing off paths of study in other beliefs, and the high percentage of young people losing their faith once entering college age. Presumably, once these young people are allowed to

go into the world and experience new cultures and beliefs, they shed their old religious obligations in favor of new experiences. While college is the time for these experiences, free thinking and allowing for new experiences should not be restricted to this timeframe. Letting children experience religions and faith from all different cultures, at a young age, would allow for a more well-adjusted adult. Simply scrolling through the discussion board posts of the week fifteen discussion in this course shows that many of the students were not raised in an environment where all cultures were represented. Ari Marsh made a post that summarized this concept very well by stating that this class taught him about the important facets of lesser known religions. (“Reflections”) This is why formal education on world religions and other cultures should be experienced before the idea of accepting one true religion is even considered.

While speaking with a former Sunday school teacher, I was informed on some of the problems that inhabit these programs. “Before I started teaching I was a volunteer at the school and I was appalled at what they wanted me to do.” Michaels described the education as “a joke” that he was looking forward to changing once the curriculum was under his jurisdiction. “Essentially they were just passing time while babysitting these kids. They would color in pictures of Moses or memorize prayers without really teaching much of anything.” While it is obviously not expected that these children would think critically about the grander themes of faith, but this is the time for the basics of religions to be discussed. Children growing up in schools like these end up the same young men and women who enter a world religions class with next to no knowledge on world religions.

With public school being so hesitant to include courses dealing in world religions and many religious institutions choosing to take advantage of the four to fourteen window, it is ultimately up to the parents to breed an interest in world religions in their children. Without

forcing any one religion or belief on a child, parents should be responsible for informing their children on beliefs of all cultures. Just as a parent should want their child to have a worldly knowledge on cultural practices and customs, they should also seek a child who can knowingly discuss religions on more than a basic level. It is this kind of atmosphere that fosters critical thinking which will help in more realms than just the religious. “Inventory of experience which is absorbed by infiltration from the environment in early youth often becomes the historically oldest stratum of consciousness, which tends to stabilize itself as the natural view of the world.” (Mannheim 299) Karl Mannheim discusses this in his work “The Problem of Generations”, in which he notes that what a parent actively teaches their child is often less important than what the child learns inherently. When a parent or foster group maintains an air of knowledge that perpetuates certain ideals the child is more deeply ingrained with these ideals.

With these concepts in mind, it is also worth noting the brain does not enter the stage upon which it can fully comprehend and think critically about abstract ideals until it is approximately sixteen to twenty years old. (Fischer 135) This kind of abstract thinking is imperative to further understanding the complexities behind God and eternity. As this kind of critical thinking is so necessary for any real discussion on religion, it is almost impossible to understand how the four to fourteen window is logical. Basic concepts of religion and cultural implications of these bases should be introduced during this age, but the critical discussion and decision of one’s faith should be restricted to the high school and college age. If they were given the option, further study throughout and beyond college should be accessed before making any decision as to one faith.

In an article written for Neatoday.org, Luke Towler speaks on the relationship between memorization and critical thinking. This relationship is symbiotic in that memorization alone

cannot prove intelligence, however having a strong grasp on the basics can help with fostering new ideas in the critical thinking phase. These ideals are so perfectly transitioned into the realm of faith, as young people who embrace many different cultures and beliefs early in their lives are more readily able to discuss and discover new concepts. Allowing for early education of religions and beliefs fosters critical thinking skills that will better aid in the adult transition from religion as some ideal to a reality that is embraced in their lives.

Too much is expected of children in our society, as they are assumed to embrace the religion of their parents without full knowledge of the faith. Many children are only given the option of their parent's religion in their youth, making for many ignorant young Americans. These kind of expectations have been shown to lead to young adults leaving the religion once they are given new options to explore. Had the religious ideals been taught to the child throughout their life, with knowledge of many faiths included, the child may have been more inclined to enter and maintain their parent's faith. The fostering of critical thinking alongside a better understanding of many religions would benefit someone more than the implication of a certain faith early in their lives, which would, in turn, benefit society with more knowledgeable, capable citizens.

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