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Manfred L. Pirner

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A Social Theory Framework for Relating Human Rights and Religious Education

Manfred L. Pirner

Introduction

Public education in liberal democratic, pluralist, and increasingly globalized societies suffers from a weakness in normativity that is due to the diversity of lifestyles, worldviews, and moral attitudes among their populations. Just as it is difficult in general to find a consensus that can facilitate societal coherence, it is difficult in pluralistic contexts to agree on the major goals and guiding values of schools or other institutions of public education. It is my contention that in this situation international human rights can provide orientation and a basis of ethical values, as they have met with wide approval across cultures, worldviews, and religions worldwide. I advocate that public education in pluralist societies should more explicitly and emphatically ground their objectives on the ethics of human rights. However, in current human rights discourse two major paradigms of interpretation can be distinguished that lead to different consequences if applied to the field of education.¹

The first one, which I call the *secularist reading* of human rights, emphasizes that the concept of human rights is a purely secular one and must be so to ensure the priority of universal human rights values over the particular values of certain religions or worldview communities. In this perspective, even if human rights may have roots in, for instance, the Jewish-Christian tradition, the decisive development was the secularization and universalization of such elements or aspects, in order to make human rights accessible and acceptable for all irrespective of their religious or worldview orientation. For the current promotion of a culture of human rights, religions in this view are not considered necessary or

¹ This is a short version of the publication Pirner (2016) that was delivered as a collegial paper at ISREV XX.

helpful, but even as impediments because they undermine the universalistic claims of human rights by particularistic interpretations. Religions, therefore, are deemed rather as part of the problem that human rights try to solve (especially by the human right of freedom of religion or belief) and not as part of the solution. This is an attitude that is not only prominent in human rights discourse but also among human rights activists (see, e.g., Freeman, 2004) and in human rights education (see, e.g., Osler & Starkey, 2010).

By contrast, the position I call the *pluralist reading* of human rights not only emphasizes that our international human rights have roots in diverse religious, worldview, and philosophical traditions, but also maintains that, because of this, it is a legitimate and promising undertaking to interpret and further develop human rights from such diverse perspectives. While this position would uphold the universalistic and cosmopolitan claims of human rights, it would at the same time argue that these claims can only be fully met, if human rights are successfully enculturated into diverse cultures, religions, and worldviews. Otherwise this diversity would be in danger of being levelled or dissolved – which would, of course, violate the spirit of human rights.

Public reason and overlapping consensus (John Rawls)

The most convincing concept of interrelating universal human rights and particular religions has, in my view, been put forward by John Rawls (1999, 2001, 2005) and further developed by Jürgen Habermas (2001, 2007, 2008, 2012). Rawls' idea of 'public reason' conceptualizes the medium and place by which societal discourse about basic common values and political principles is possible. In his later writings, Rawls emphasized that public reason is not to be mistaken as 'secular reason', but is open to arguments and concepts from religious backgrounds as well – which, however, must be translated into political concepts if they want to exercise influence on the level of policies and legislation (Rawls, 1999, 547). He uses Martin Luther King's civil rights movement and Catholic social teachings as positive

examples of religiously grounded contributions to public discourse that have significantly promoted and further developed the political values of the United States. However, Rawls insists that the basic political values and principles in a democratic, pluralistic society – such as human rights – can be justified ‘pro tanto’ as ‘freestanding’ concepts that need no justification by certain worldviews or religions. Yet, Rawls goes on, their justification gains depth, breadth, and endurance, if they can be linked with diverse ‘comprehensive [e.g., religious] doctrines’. This is because, on the one hand, these political values are then tied to people’s deepest convictions; and, on the other hand, their deepest – for example, religious – convictions may be influenced by relating them to basic political values and may be shaped toward them (Rawls, 2005 [Reply to Habermas], 389). This is what Rawls calls the development of an ‘overlapping consensus’ of diverse ‘comprehensive doctrines’ – which is, however, not just the consequence of an empirical stocktaking but rather a result of the challenge posed by freestanding political values. To illustrate this point by the example of human rights: It is a matter of fact that many people can endorse human rights as politically sensible without relating them to their religious views. But we can also see that, for instance, Roman Catholic and most Protestant Churches during the course of the twentieth century came to endorse and support human rights for their own theological reasons, and have also been changed by them, for instance concerning equal rights of men and women or the inclusion of disabled people. Human rights expert Jack Donnelly has recently voiced the estimation that ‘[F]or their own varied reasons, most leading comprehensive doctrines now see human rights as the political expression of their deepest values’ (Donnelly, 2013, 59).

Complementary learning processes (Jürgen Habermas)

Jürgen Habermas agrees with Rawls on these basic concepts but goes on to argue for more justice in public discourse between secular and religious citizens. He contends that it would be unfair to expect religious citizens alone to split up their identity and translate their

religious convictions into a non-religious language that is accessible to all. In order to be fair, non-religious citizens should also be required to ‘preserve a sense of the articulative power of religious languages’ (Habermas, 2001, 21; my translation), and many even be expected ‘to take part in the efforts to translate relevant contributions from religious language into a publicly intelligible language’ (Habermas, 2008, 113). Therefore, Habermas develops the idea of a ‘complementary learning process’ for secular and religious citizens. While the latter must learn to link the basic political values (such as those of human rights) to their religious views and bring their religious perspectives into public discourse in a language understandable to all, secular citizens must learn to accept contributions from religious perspectives they do not share, and acknowledge their potential to promote the common good. For his own philosophical discipline and from his own agnostic position, Habermas himself has repeatedly shown appreciation for the ‘semantic potential’ and humanizing intuitions of religious traditions.

Conclusion

It is highly significant that John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, probably the most influential political philosophers of our time, have both in their later works come to revalue the role of religious traditions and communities in pluralistic societies and a globalized world community. Their concepts emphatically recommend a pluralist reading of human rights and allow for a well-reflected balance between the universalistic claim of human rights and the specific rights and values of particular cultures, religions, and worldviews.

In this social philosophy framework, learning processes are of pivotal importance. Both Rawls and Habermas are very clear about the fact that basic political values cannot only be guaranteed by law but must also be supported by the majority of citizens. This is why the institutions and communities of civil society, in which political values (and values that are compatible with them) are disseminated and passed on to the next generation, are so

important. This goes for Churches and other religious communities, as well as for secular NGOs and especially for schools.

Both Rawls and Habermas assign an important role to the internal perspectives of religions. They regard it as crucial that believers can justify and interpret political values such as human rights *from their own religious views with theological arguments*. And they should also be able to *bring in their religious perspectives to public discourse* because they have the potential of relevant contributions. For school education in general and for human rights education in particular this means to open up to religious perspectives and acknowledge religious contributions to human rights discourse.

In this context, public religious education (primarily at schools) gains special significance. This is the genuine place where pupils can learn about specific (diverse) religious ways of understanding, justifying, and interpreting human rights so that, for instance, Christian students can endorse human rights for Christian theological reasons and Muslims for Islamic theological reasons. They will, however, also learn about secular and merely political justifications of human rights. They will learn to respect the interpretations and contributions to human rights discourse from diverse religions and worldviews, and learn about the challenges these political values pose for their own and other religions and worldviews. In Habermas' terms, religious students will learn how to translate religious views into the language of public discourse, and secular pupils will develop a 'sense for the articulative power of religious languages' and their potential for a humane society, and also look for ways of translating religious contents that seem relevant to them into the language of public reason. (Diverse) religious and (diverse) non-religious students will thus engage in dialogue and mutual learning processes.

In this light, it is quite obvious that human rights education and religious education can beneficially complement each other. Ideally, they should go hand in hand by substantially

integrating human rights education into religious education classes and by integrating religious perspectives into human rights education in other school subjects or public educational institutions. As former UN Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief Heiner Bielefeldt put it, the history of human rights discourse can be conceived of as a common learning process of people from various cultures, religions, and worldviews. And this learning process is not completed but open. It goes on and depends on further contributions by those various cultures, religions, and worldviews (Bielefeldt, 2009). At the core of this learning process seems to be the virtue of self-reflection that helps to realize the limits and particularity of one's own worldview – whether secular or religious – and thus to become open to the worldviews of others, and to acknowledging the consensus of basic political values that have been already reached, such as the international human rights as a common ground.

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