Secularism as a closed world structure and its effect on religion related school choice

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1. Introduction

Modern Western society has certain principles and norms in accordance to which it lives. In many societies, such as France and Turkey, secularism forms the normative basis of that society. In France for example, secularism is embodied in constitutional law. Furthermore, relations between the religion and the state are regulated by the French “loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l’État” (9 December, 1905 French law on the Separation of the Churches and the State). This is the foundation of the French laïcité (Dericquebourg, 2013, p. 113). France is thus a secular state with laïcité being born in the time of the French revolution out of conflict between the Catholic Church and the state (Wijnen & Miedema, 2013). The motivation of “republican” education was essentially very little different from that of the Catholic Church in setting up its schools under the Old Regime: to bring up children in the Faith, in the expectation that they would continue faithful adults (Glenn, 1989, p. 13). The concept of laïcité has connotations which go even far beyond the English word “secular”. It is itself an expressive of a worldview that rejects the right of competitors to have any influence upon public life (Legrand and Glenn, 2012, p. 182). Laïcité thus extends beyond secularism and cannot necessarily be called neutral as it also presents a specific worldview. However, this does not mean that it does not include secularism. Although laïcité consists of much more than secularism does, it is argued that laïcité is an extreme form of secularism to the extent that it views the public sphere as a place that should be void of religion and neutral.

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1 Article 1 of the Constitution of the French Republic, 4 October 1958 states that: “La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale. Elle assure l'égalité devant la loi de tous les citoyens sans distinction d'origine, de race ou de religion. Elle respecte toutes les croyances. Son organisation est décentralisée”. (“France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organised on a decentralised basis.”) Also see, Glendenning, 2008.
Secular principles are also mirrored in public schools and affect the position of religion within these schools. French educational policy is characterized by a blend containing a highly meritocratic system of selection with a strong concern for equality. Parents do not have a lot of influence over public schools and they seldom understand what these schools are or are not achieving. For the defenders of laïcité, the unitary French system ensures equal opportunity, rational planning and uniform quality. Diversity and parental choice on the basis of distinctive character of individual schools are not much promoted in the public system (Legrand and Glenn, 2012, pp. 179-180).

Why has the effect of secularism on school choice been so powerful? In order to answer this question, the first part of this article discusses how secularism has become a closed world structure in many societies and in effect marginalized religion in schools. Secularism has redefined its supporting concepts as ‘obvious’ and ‘normal’ to such an extent that the presuppositions that subscribe them have been completely forgotten. The result: Religion has to disguise itself in a cloak of secularism in order to remain acceptable, ‘obvious’ or ‘normal’ in the public sphere – this is also true for public schools. The second part of this article investigates secularism as a closed world structure and its influence on schools choice. It is also argued that religion in schools had to conform to secularism as a closed world structure and this limited the choice of parents and learners concerning religion in education. Joseph Raz argues for autonomy and value-pluralism. Such autonomy is dependent on not only having choices, but also having adequate choices in forming one’s own life. This in turn results in value-pluralism. In a closed secular society, autonomy (as described by Raz) cannot function properly as such a closed world structure bars any other options or choices concerning religion, except for secularism. It will also be established whether private schools can be qualified as “adequate school choice” within such a closed secular structure.

2. When secularism becomes a ‘closed world structure’

It is not only in France that religion has been affected by secularism. The entire western society and most of the world has been influenced by secularism. In other words we live in

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2 For purposes of this article, religion in education refers to all issues concerning religion in education. It includes, but is not limited to, schools with a religious ethos, the display of religious symbols, wearing of religious symbols, religious instruction from a subjective point of view (confessional) and religious education from an objective point of view (as a mere neutral curriculum subject where all different religions are taught in the same way).
what Charles Taylor (2007) calls a “secular age”. Secularity concerns the West, or the North-West or the North Atlantic world although also extending beyond this world. It is not easy to define secularity or what it entails. The most popular idea is that societies were historically connected to some adherence to God, but the modern Western world is now free from any such connection (Taylor, 2007, p. 1). Centuries ago God was omnipresent in most of the social and political practices of society. The situation is completely different today. Charles Taylor (2007) provides three ideas or versions of what secularity can possibly mean. Firstly, he defines secularity in terms of public spaces – public spaces emptied of God or of any reference to ultimate reality. Secondly, secularity is the turning away of people from God and no longer going to Church. In this sense most Western European countries have become secular (p. 2). The third sense of secularity focuses on the conditions of belief. This includes the move of society from an unchallenged belief in God and unproblematic, to one in which such belief is understood as one option amongst other (p. 3). In its extreme form, secularity seeks to privatize religion and remove it from the public sphere. As will be seen, doing so infringes religious freedom (Scolnicov, 2011, pp. 70-71). Secularism differs depending on the society within which it functions. Taylor is of the opinion that regimes deserving of the label “secularist” can be conceived as those that respond in a principled fashion to the irreversible and growing internal diversity of modern societies. Appropriate responses to such diversity, all of which should seek to maximize the basic goals of liberty and equality between basic beliefs, are bound to be context specific, and there is no algorithm that can determine the shape of a particular secular regime (Mendieta & Vanantwerpen, 2011, p. 7). However, these secular responses in many societies have had the effect of creating closed world structures which marginalizes religion and negates religious freedom and school choice based on religion.

As provided by Charles Taylor in his book A Secular Age, it is argued that secularism (just as any other religion or ideology) can potentially be considered as a closed world structure.

According to Taylor (2007), all beliefs are held within a context or framework often taken-for-granted. This context usually remains tacit and unacknowledged by the agent (p. 13). Having only a singular frame of reference blinds you to a possibly enriching scenario. Even in natural sciences, the wave-particle duality in physics is an example whereby one area of interest (light) cannot be fully appreciated if only one viewpoint is accepted as the whole
truth. If scientists accepted only one side of the coin, (particle theory) the other side (wave theory) would have remained undiscovered, along with all its benefits.³

Similarly, when secularism (or any other ideology) is pursued at the cost of all other ideologies, one is creating a closed world structure which blinds you to all other frameworks, ideologies or possibilities. This scenario will be referred to as a Secular Closed World Structure. Secular Closed World Structures is also qualified by a series of events. Only some of the events are discussed here. New science gave a clear theoretical form to existence which could be understood on its own without reference to interventions from a Creator. The life of an individual, instrumentally effective in secular time, created the practical context within which we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order (Taylor, 2007, p. 543). At first, everything was in accordance with the plan of God. In the nature of a self-sufficient immanent order, things can be imagined without reference to God, but rather Nature. Nature is then seen as identical to God and later as independent from God. A further step was taken towards Enlightenment (Taylor, 2007, p. 543). The rejection of religion has come about through the development of certain practices and theoretical insights. For example, the privileged position of analytical and scientific analysis versus, prayer. If an insight is not emanating from natural science and therefore impersonal, but is rather an insight from, for example personal prayer, it has no value (Taylor, 2007, p. 555). To the men of the Enlightenment religion is called “fanaticism”. The sense of being menaced by fanaticism is one great source of the closure of a world structure (Taylor, 2007, p. 546). In secularism as a closed world structure, religion becomes foolish, naïve and the flight from reality of those without courage to face reality. On the contrary, those who embrace science, the material and that which is secular, have courage to face reality. Consequentially, the ‘death of God’ is preached and religion is marginalized eventually filtering through to the school system.

³ With regard to wave-particle dualism, the electron sometimes behaved like a particle and sometimes like a wave. This impossible duality drove physicists nearly mad. Physics had two theories, based on conflicting premises that produced the same results. This was an impossible situation. In 1926, Heisenberg came up with a compromise, producing quantum mechanics. The uncertainty concerns the fact that we can know the path an electron takes as it moves through a space or we can know where it is at a given instant, but we cannot know both. Quantum physics therefore introduced a measure untidiness that did not exist before in physics. “Suddenly you needed two sets of laws to explain the behaviour of the universe – quantum theory for the world of the very small and relativity for the larger universe beyond. The gravity of relativity theory was brilliant at explaining why planets orbited suns or why galaxies tended to cluster, but turned out to have no influence at all at the particle level.” The quantum theory functions well in one world, but relativity only in another (Bryson, 2003).
This form of thinking Taylor (2007) argues to be a closed world structure and it implies that one’s thinking is clouded or cramped by a powerful picture, preventing one from seeing important aspects of reality. The picture described above has become very powerful, leading to secularism as a closed world structure and restricting our grasp of things. It is restricting our understanding and perception of our surroundings. The restriction extends so far that we might not even be aware of our own self-restriction. Bluntly, we don’t know what we don’t know. “This explains the unjustified force of the mainstream account of secularization, as well as the disinterest in and contempt for religion which frequently accompanies it” (p. 551). When secularism becomes closed world structure, many things, as the example above, will seem obvious to those within it. A “picture” can “hold us captive” (pp. 556-557).

Although the epistemological picture of the secular closed world structure seems obvious, rather, it is experience that was carved into shape by a powerful theory and values which posited the primacy of the individual, the neutral and the intra-mental as the locus of certainty (Taylor, 2007, p. 559). It appears that the Secular Closed World Structure itself is driven by its own set of values. It is not neutral. Secularism which refuses to look beyond itself and functions as a closed world structure cannot claim that it is without preconception. What has been seen as “natural” in secularism can now be seen as “socially constructed”. Those who inhabit these closed world structures see no alternative, except the return to earlier myth or illusion (Taylor, 2007, p. 560).

One such a narrative of building a closed world structure is France. As mentioned above, many argue that laïcité is much more than secularism. Laïcité is itself a worldview that rejects other ideologies to have any influence upon public life (Legrand & Glenn, 2012, p. 182). However, if looking at the definition of Secular Closed World Structures, and the fact that it subscribes a worldview as well, laïcité fits into this definition.

What is the effect of secularism as a closed world structure on school choice? Looking at France, the effect is subtle but vast. The effect has become so “normal” that it cannot even been seen or realized without careful contemplation. The effect has been secular countries being opposed to alternative schooling approaches. These countries aim to achieve their secular interpretation of equality and neutrality within schools by way of marginalizing religion. The effect is a school environment void of religion with parental limited to secular
schools only and some superficial tolerance of religion. These parents or learners do not have access to options that can fulfil their religious educational needs.

3. When a closed world structure causes an inadequate option of religious choice in schools

One view of liberalism is that government should be blind to the truth or falsity of any conception of the common good. The government must conduct themselves in such a manner that their actions neither improve nor hinder the chances of individuals to live in accordance with their conception of the common good. According to Joseph Raz (1986), this doctrine is inspired by the thought that people are autonomous moral agents who are to decide for themselves how to conduct their own lives and that governments are not moral judges with authority to force on them their conceptions of right and wrong. This is called anti-perfectionism. This self-restraint forms the foundation of political liberty under liberal regimes (p. 108). An anti-perfectionist liberal government therefore must be neutral between its citizens. The anti-perfectionist principle claims that implementation and promotion of ideals of the good life, though worthy in themselves, are not a legitimate matter for governmental action (Joseph Raz, 1986, p. 110). Anti-perfectionism will lead to a political stand-off from support for valuable conceptions of the good. “It would undermine the chances of survival of many cherished aspects of our culture” (p. 162). Such a doctrine is also a doctrine of restraint. The fact that anti-perfectionism is based on restraint, on not doing as much good as one can, lends it towards contradiction (pp. 110-111). Joseph Raz (1986) provides the example of two children appealing to their father to intervene in a dispute between them. The father refuses intervention even though the fact that the one child is older and stronger than the other might cause an unfair fight. In this situation to act neutrally is to act unfairly (p. 114).

Within secular closed world structures anti-perfectionist ideals concerning autonomy causes government to remain politically neutral and in doing so marginalizes religion under the guise of neutrality. However, this passivity may cause great unfairness and lack of choice (as in the example of the two children) while pretending to be neutral. The closed world structure of secularism thus presents an unfair situation where parents do not have a choice to send their children to a specific school which accommodates their religion due to the ‘neutrality’ embedded and normalized in the secularism as a closed world structure. Within the range of
duties which the state owes its citizens, failure to help is hindrance. Therefore, the state can only be neutral if it creates conditions of equal opportunities for people to choose any conception of the common good, with an equal prospect of realizing it (Raz, 1986, p. 124). In the secular closed world structure the government has already chosen a preconceived conception of what is good (excluding religion while upholding a specific version of neutrality) and this creates an unequal opportunity for parents choosing religion-free education versus those who choose religion to be a part of education.

The crux of the matter is: True democracy, neutrality and autonomy comes from having the opportunity to choose between adequate options to achieve the common good which any person wishes to pursue – this choice is not provided by pursuing secularism, nor antiperfectionism, nor neutrality. True autonomy and equality can only be realized when parents and learners have the choice between various adequate options to achieve the type of religious education they wish for themselves or their children. Secularism as a closed world structure is, per definition, blind to such adequate options and only presents options promoting its own ideologies, redefining all other choices as “an illusion”.

According to Joseph Raz (1986), the principle of autonomy allows for adequate options and choices not the confinement to one option (p. 155) as presented by a closed world structure - for example, only having the secular schools. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny (p. 369). This requires the presence of, not only options or choices but of acceptable ones (205). Does a school environment void of religion or the absence of religious instruction maintain the standards of acceptable options for autonomy to flourish? Are private schools with specific religious ethos’ acceptable or adequate options as alternatives to secular public schools?

In order for an option to be adequate, the following requirements must be present: (i) the person must not be paralyzed and therefore prevented from taking advantage of the available options; (ii) there should be options with long term pervasive consequences as well as short term options of little consequence, and a fair spread in between; (iii) one should be able to choose long term commitments, projects and to develop lasting relationships; (iv) one should be able to pursue these options by means which we choose from time to time; and (v) there should be a variety of options – variety not number matters - a choice between hundreds of identical situations are not choice (Raz, 1986, pp. 373-375).
Based on these requirements, a private school does not present adequate choice or option for a parent or child to have an autonomous life. In order to have adequate options, one must also have access to and the ability to exercise these options. A parent without adequate funding will not be able to send a child to a private school – unless it is subsidized by government. Even if the private school system is subsidized by government, there has to be sufficient variety of options or choices of schools concerning religion.

Joseph Raz’s (1986) a view of autonomy, as opposed to anti-perfectionism, also leads to pluralism or a variety of conflicting considerations. Pluralism is the view that there are plural forms of life with different virtues which might be incompatible (p. 395). Valuing autonomy therefore leads to the endorsement of pluralism (p. 399). Value-pluralism means that there will be a multiplicity of valuable options to choose from, with favorable conditions of choice (412). Pluralism, as an upshot of autonomy, will then support the notion of a variety of schools based on different ideologies and also provide the ability to access such a school – with or without the financial means.

A closed world structure of secularism will present anti-perfectionist neutrality, inadequate options (due to the lack of seeing beyond itself), as well as a lack of pluralism. A parent and child will have the option of attending a secular school, claiming to be neutral by marginalizing religion. Autonomy will be presented as providing the option to parents not to be coerced into some religion in a secular school. If the parent wishes to send the child to a religious school, private schooling is available, only if there is sufficient financial means. The closed world structure of secularism will be completely oblivious regarding its own presuppositions concerning neutrality, autonomy and equality, since the historical narrative of the coming of age of secularism has set the back-drop to let these presuppositions seem normal and obvious.

Conversely, an open world structure will consider perfectionist principles, value pluralism, and not skepticism, or value neutrality, as the liberal bulwark against uniformity, against a society imposing through its government or otherwise a uniform vision of the ideal form of life on its population (Raz, 1994, p. 20) - in other words a closed world structure. An open world structure will consider autonomy as providing adequate religious choice in schooling,
as well as the means to make these choices. An open world structure will consider a plural form of religious schooling and that there are various forms of life.

4. Conclusion

It is acknowledged that any form of ideology can create such a closed world structure. A specific religion can cause the inability of a person to see beyond the structures of the world created by it. Although any world structure that is unable to realize its own presuppositions will qualify as a closed world structure, focus was specifically placed on the results of a closed world structure of secularism on religion in school choice.

It has been indicated that secularism in modern society is prone to closed world structure tendencies, in the sense that it is unable to acknowledge its own presuppositions and is blinded to these presuppositions by regarding certain stances as obvious or normal, negating all others. For example, certain anti-perfectionist models of neutrality has been regarded has normal - the exclusion of religion from school in order to obtain this model of neutrality has been seen as normal or obvious.

It has been shown that, in order for a person to be truly autonomous, he or she must have adequate options and also be given the ability to exercise a choice between these options and realize them. In a secular closed world structure, such an adequate amount of options will probably not exist due to the anti-perfectionist model of neutrality that has been accepted as the norm. In application to school choice, a secular closed world structure will present secular public schools and, for those whom have substantial financial means, the choice of private schooling based on a specific religious ethos. This is not in line with the attainment of autonomy via adequate choice as well as the resulting value-pluralism.

References


