FAITH IN SCHOOLS? AUTONOMY, CITIZENSHIP, AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE LIBERAL STATE. By Ian MacMullen. Princeton University Press 2007. Pp. 240. $35.00. ISBN: 0-691-13091-4.

In *Faith in Schools?*, Ian MacMullen sets out on an ambitious task. He seeks to answer the question of what role religious schools should play in the American educational system. Once he identifies this role, he examines not only whether religious schools should receive public funding, but whether they should be subjected to special regulation and even prohibition.

To address the role of religious schools in our educational system, MacMullen begins with the most fundamental of inquiries: namely, the identification of the basic goal of educational policy. In identifying this goal, he dismisses a consumerist model of education and focuses instead on the civic function of education, arguing that education serves the social goal of defending, propagating and reproducing its institutions and values. According to MacMullen, "Liberal democratic regimes need a particular type of civic education." (17) This particular type of education must instill within a citizenry particular habits of mind and commitments, such as toleration and mutual respect. Essentially, as MacMullen argues, in order for the liberal democratic state to perpetuate itself, the civic goal of education must be to develop and encourage children's ethical autonomy.

Perhaps the most ambitious argument asserted in *Faith in Schools?* is that the cultivation of individual ethical autonomy must lie at the heart of liberal education policy. Autonomy is defined as "the capacity for critical rational reflection about one's ethical beliefs and values, including those that are foundational, and the commitment to practice this reflection on an ongoing basis." (23) According to MacMullen, the exercise of ethical autonomy is the best way for individuals

> to detect false or inadequately supported beliefs, root out and resolve inconsistencies in their ethical doctrine, adjust their goals to suit their particular character and aspirations, guard against exploitation and manipulation by others, and prosper in a modern society whose social and economic institutions require and encourage the exercise of individual choice. (111)

MacMullen recognizes the numerous objections to an autonomy-based education. These objections involve issues relating to parental

rights, fairness to traditional cultures, and most particularly certain religious organizations or beliefs that place other values higher than individual autonomy. For instance, as MacMullen concedes,

> A major source of religious parents' objections to common schools is the fact that these institutions inevitably tend to encourage children to think autonomously about their own religious beliefs at the same time as teaching the virtues and capacities of liberal democratic citizenship. (54)

As asserted in the cases of *Wisconsin v. Yoder*[1] and *Mozert v. Hawkins*,[2] the goal of individual autonomy could have the effect of extinguishing certain traditional and religious ways of life and values that are incompatible with personal autonomy. (124) By encouraging a kind of independent critical judgment, schools could be teaching children a value or practice that is directly at odds with the parents' system of values. However, MacMullen seems relatively unconcerned about this threat to religious values and traditions. Even though an autonomy-based educational system may sound "the death knell for certain traditional religious ways of life," such ways of life, according to MacMullen, have no essential right of survival. (127) As MacMullen explains:

> Children from some traditional families may suffer as they are torn between the attitudes at home and school, but that suffering can reasonably be seen as a necessary and short term evil. Because children are not regarded as having settled ethical identities and convictions, the state may legitimately require that they be exposed to ideas and arguments that offend their embryonic values: childhood is the phase of a person's life during which the liberal state can and should act paternalistically to teach both the capacity and inclination for autonomous ethical reflection. (136)

With regard to educational policy, MacMullen argues that the cultivation of individual autonomy should override the objections of parents wherever necessary. According to MacMullen,

> The distinctively rational nature of autonomous reflection has certain decisive advantages over other ways of shaping one's values and beliefs, and that these advantages are sufficient to justify liberal democratic states in adopting the cultivation of children's personal autonomy as a goal of public education policy, even against the wishes of some religious parents. (86)

To further this goal of individual autonomy, the state should require that

1. *Wis. v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).
2. *Mozert v. Hawkins Co. Bd. Educ.*, 827 F2d 1058 (1987).

all children be educated in a way that teaches and encourages them to make their own rational decisions and exercise rational ethical reflection. For the development of individual autonomy, reason is much more important than, for instance, religious obedience and doctrine.

After exploring the need and value of an autonomy-based education, MacMullen then examines the suitability of religious schools to provide that kind of education. To MacMullen, religious schools are not necessarily well-equipped to serve this function. The relative homogeneity of its membership, as well as their failure to encourage educational interaction with those outside their faith, diminishes their ability to provide an autonomy-based education. In addition, according to MacMullen, religious sects are

> [I]ll-suited to prepare students for democratic citizenship because they do not govern their internal affairs in accordance with the principles of public reason and justification that are required of participants in the political sphere of liberal democratic societies. (33)

As MacMullen argues, the more a school's curriculum is infused with religiously-based reasoning, the less students can be expected to engage in the kind of secular reasoning required in the public sphere of a liberal democratic state.

A primary argument against religious schools, according to MacMullen, is that they retard the development of children's autonomy, since the inculcation of faith is directly at odds with the encouragement of autonomous critical scrutiny of their own beliefs and values. (162) As MacMullen states,

> To be compatible with the goal of educating all children for autonomy, a religious secondary school would have to manifest a commitment to secular reason-giving inside and outside the classroom [and] balance religious instruction with critical perspectives on the faith. (175)

In addressing the issue of public funding of religious schools, MacMullen does not advocate an outright prohibition of such funding. In fact, he states that "It is arbitrary and unjustifiable to say that religious schooling is to be provided always and only . . . when the child's family is willing and able to pay." (50) In many cases, the state should fund private religious schools if only to alleviate the hardships on families who desire such education and who are unable to pay. The degree to which a religious school qualifies for such funding, however, depends on whether it can adequately provide the kind of autonomy-based education that MacMullen sets forth. Thus, one concession MacMullen

makes to religious schools is to not automatically deny them funding; however, he then goes on to propose a rather elaborate regulation scheme over religious schools.

MacMullen articulates an elaborate regulatory scheme of religious schools—a scheme that treats religious primary schools differently from religious secondary schools. This regulation exists because "liberal education policy must take seriously the possibility that certain types of religious schools might pose an unacceptable threat to children's future autonomy." (157) MacMullen's argument that religious primary schools should be regulated differently and less extensively than their secondary counterparts stems from his view of the best ways in which children of different ages can be taught autonomy. Regarding his regulatory stance toward secondary schools, MacMullen argues that all such schools need to adequately expose children to ethical diversity and provide them with the skills and inclination to respond in a critical rational manner to such diversity:

> Children of religious parents need to attend secondary schools that encourage students to achieve a degree of critical distance from the familial religion if they are to have a fair chance of developing as autonomous persons. (182)

Not only does MacMullen propose a regulatory scheme over religious schools, but he also suggests the possible prohibition of them. As he argues:

> Not only should liberal democratic states be ready to fund religious schools when they are favored by the balance of educational values, they should also be ready to prohibit religious schools when the civic costs of their operation clearly outweigh the private benefits to families. (51-52)

Thus, he is not simply interested in whether the government funds or does not fund religious schools; he is also interested in whether religious schools that do not sufficiently foster autonomy are even allowed to function. As MacMullen argues,

> We cannot allow religious groups to operate the kind of schools that simply indoctrinate children by immersing them in a comprehensive ethical view, stifling their potential to develop as autonomous persons who can employ their own rational faculties to try to find and lead the best lives for themselves. (178-179)

Faith in Schools? focuses on the public policy question concerning the funding and regulation of religious schools. This policy question, in MacMullen's hands, depends upon a more fundamental inquiry into the

principles that should govern liberal education policy. It also depends on determining the correct division of authority between parents and the state in the education and upbringing of children. After concluding that the educational goals of the liberal state should be the cultivation of children's capacities and inclinations for autonomy, MacMullen then analyzes the types of educational institutions that are likely to foster that autonomy. Once these types of educational institutions are identified, a regulatory scheme can then be imposed to govern those institutions. Religious schools that fail to meet the regulatory requirements should be prohibited. However, those that do meet the requirements should also be eligible for public funding. Moreover, this funding should be mandatory out of fairness to religious parents who may not be able to afford a private education. (208) To MacMullen, the greatest danger posed by religious schools is that they will neglect to perform the civic function of cultivating a child's autonomy.

MacMullen is correct in assuming that many people will disagree with the goal of education as being primarily to instill individual autonomy. Indeed, there is much to disagree with in MacMullen's book. One can disagree with the way in which he appears to dismiss the harms that a state enforced autonomy-based education might cause to traditional religious communities. One may argue with his notion of how powerful the state should be in enforcing this goal of autonomy-based education. And indeed one may disagree with his proposals for regulating and possibly prohibiting certain religious schools. But despite these objections, one does have to admire the ambition and breadth of this book.

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