

Conference

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Citizenship in liberal democratic societies is often presented in terms of rights although much more is required for citizens to possess a willingness to volunteer, initiate and participate in society. Many would argue that these values are grounded in religious affiliations. The question of how liberal democracies should relate to affiliation-based schooling however becomes increasingly urgent in light of funding issues and questions concerning the public purse. One view holds that religion is essentially controversial in pluralistic societies and as such should remain outside the arena of public support. Another view holds that liberal democracy in fact needs a large group of citizens who espouse theories of what is "good" that also embrace modernity, such as liberal Protestantism and Judaism. According to this position, it is in the interest of the state to fund education associated with a particular kind of affiliation, because the future of democracy depends on citizens who hold strong identities no less than it does on citizens who think critically or exercise autonomous choice. Yet a third view argues that groups as well as individuals should be allowed to exercise rights, such as the right of survival in a pluralistic society. The right of minority cultures or religions to enjoy an opportunity to survive, it is argued, should be exercised by offering state sponsored education since this is significant for the survival of the community.

There is a clear need to open, widen, enrich, and focus the above debate on questions these positions raise. With moral development on the one hand, fanaticism and intolerance on the other, and billions of dollars being spent on faith-based education across the Western world, the question of how liberal democracies should relate to affiliation-based schooling becomes increasingly urgent. Although these issues, which are extraordinarily complex, have been at the heart of a growing number of debates among educators, philosophers, theologians and social scientists over the recent decades, they need to be reviewed with great clarity and intellectual vigor. The conference in Cambridge providedÂ a cutting edge scholarship on religion and education and gathered key opinion makers for an exchange of views that with the impending publication of its' proceedings, could result in far-reaching effects on the ways in which affiliation-based schooling is conceived by the public and governments. Â

The main themes the conference were:

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An overview of religion, spirituality and character in education.

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Complexities of religious and spiritual education.

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Democratic schooling and the demands of religion.

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Exploring belief and unbelief in democratic schooling.

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Common schools and inter-religious education.

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Religious schooling and the formation of character.

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Religion and character in the curriculum and in teacher education.Â