

SHOULD CHILDREN MAKE UP THEIR OWN MINDS ABOUT RELIGION?

I don't make my kids go to church; I want them to make up their own minds about religion." I overheard the line from a parent sitting at a nearby restaurant table, and have heard the adage countless times.

Freedom of choice is every American's birthright, and Americans have several religions from which to choose. Non-Christian religions have increasing visibility, and Christianity itself has numerous denominations. Teaching our children a particular form of religious expression may seem something like teaching them to eat only one kind of cheese on a smorgasbord of limitless options. With so many religious alternatives, how can we help our children choose?

As the father of a newborn son, my interest is more than academic. Some parents try to foster curiosity in their children about any and all religions. Other parents overwhelmed by the sheer variety make no effort to expose their children to religion at all. Though rationales may vary, there is a sense among many American parents that religious truth is a matter of personal discovery; therefore, children's quests for it are theirs alone. And our exposure to so many religions leaves the beaten paths of institutional Christianity seeming rote and rigid. We want our children free to pursue religious truth in the open air, unencumbered by the stuffiness of stodgy church buildings and institutional religion.

But what if the virtue we have made of religious freedom turns out to be a glass cage? While in divinity school, I had the good fortune to take an ethics course taught by Stanley Hauerwas, who said something I will never forget. "I don't want to hear what you think, because you don't have minds worth making up until they've been formed by this class."

On the surface, this statement sounds absurdly authoritarian, not to mention downright rude. However, underneath it is a whole theory of knowledge—a theory that calls into question the idea that kids make up their minds about religion on their own. Hauerwas wanted to show us that all reason is tradition-based. There is no such thing as neutral or unbiased reason, because all reason springs from a system of practices and beliefs that make reasoning possible. This is true in systems ranging from Christianity to Buddhism to the sciences. In all these traditions, people learn to reason by a process of initiation—by living within the practices and beliefs of those traditions. It is only after they have learned the grammar of a particular tradition that they are able to begin reasoning within it.

The question, then, isn't whether kids are free to make up their own minds about religion with independent objectivity. Rather, the question is which tradition of rationality is shaping children's reasoning. As I contemplate raising my son, my own childhood memories of church begin to stir. I was

not always willing to go. I did have some friends at church, and the hope of playing with them made attendance more appealing. However, children grow quickly (as I'm told I'll soon discover), and my teenage self preferred sleep to Sunday school. While Christianity was in some sense intriguing, church was not. The music seemed boring, the sermons seemed endless, and the kids my age seemed odd. Yet now I reflect on all these experiences as a United Methodist pastor. I am deeply grateful to my parents for taking me to church despite my objections, and to the other members of that church for bearing the burden of my awkward teenage years with indelible grace. In retrospect, I realize I am not a Christian by independent choice, but by training. When I eventually moved out of my parents' house and decided for myself whether to go to church, I made the decision as someone who had learned to think in church; I made the decision as a Christian. Based on my early church experiences, letting my son "make up" his own mind about religion would be misguided, because that conception of freedom fails to recognize how children learn to reason in the first place. Children do not choose religious identity *à la carte*, but by utilizing the traditions of rationality that have taught them how to think.

Letting kids make up their minds about religion implicitly makes up their minds for them, because it teaches them that they have the sort of minds that Enlightenment rationality assumes. It teaches them that their thinking comes before God, rather than the other way around. It reverses St. Anselm's dictum "faith seeking understanding," so that understanding seeks whatever faith it likes, or no faith at all. It renders human reason an impartial arbiter, rather than the imprint of the God who ordered all creation, who is above all and in all, who fashioned the minds with which we think.

We—the Christian parents of America—should not leave our kids to make up their own minds about religion. We need to go against the grain. If we really believe the Gospel, we ought to join the shrinking ranks of those pushy parents who insist their children attend church with them. We make our children eat their vegetables. We make them brush their teeth. Let's make them go to church. In doing so, we will be no more guilty of indoctrination than the parents who let their kids "make up" their own minds about religion, because all reason is tradition-based. After all, we Christians do not think that the Gospel is merely a matter of personal opinion. We believe it is true. What could be a kinder gift to our children than teaching them to see the world as truthfully as we do? What could be a kinder gift to our children than making them go to church?

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