

Promoting freedom in religious education

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1 Introduction

1.1 A policy dilemma

The Cornelius Haga Lyceum (CHL) in Amsterdam is the only Muslim secondary school in the city. It has been the focus of controversy for some years. On one hand, the school has been connected with extremist groups: a school board member—who has since resigned—showed support to extremist groups on social media. A second element of the controversy regards the school's religious practices: boys and girls are required to attend class separately, girls are required to cover all parts of their bodies except hands and face, they may be called to mandatory prayer, and are expected to fast during Ramadan¹⁶. Popular media has shown concern that children could be “indoctrinated” through these religious practices, close themselves off from society, incorporate harmful gender roles, and be exposed to intolerance toward homosexuality. In response, the government has opened investigations and some politicians have proposed increased regulations. In turn, this has made other religious schools of various affiliations weary that increased regulations would reduce their capacity to practice religion at school¹⁷.

For the purpose of this article, I will leave the first element of the controversy aside. I will approach only the second, which invites significant questions regarding the liberties¹⁸ that the state protects and promotes. The situation seems to present a policy dilemma where two types of freedoms are in tension. First, the children's freedom of religion: the freedom to adhere to one's religious mandates. Second, the children's freedom from interference: the freedom to choose any version of the good life that one pleases without being indoctrinated into a particular conception of the good. The policy dilemma can be described as follows. If the state is concerned with children's freedom from interference, one would argue it should stop funding CHL or close it altogether. But if the state is concerned with children's freedom of religion, one would argue that the school should remain open and perhaps also funded.

A liberal state has an interest in safeguarding both of the freedoms above. More generally, a liberal democracy is ruled by a principle of liberal neutrality (PLN). This principle requires the state to remain neutral to conflicting conceptions of the good (Snik & De Jong, 2002). According to the PLN, the state should not promote any particular version of the good—for instance, a religious one—it should limit itself to protecting and facilitating freedoms. For a state that is ruled by the PLN the CHL policy dilemma seems to involve two types of freedoms that are in tension.

1.2 Argument outline

My goal is to present a framework by which the tension in the above policy dilemma can be resolved. I argue that the tension can be dispelled by adopting a conceptualization of freedom that is based on Christman (1991). This framework focuses not on what children are free to do or free from but rather on how they develop their preference to act in a certain manner. More specifically, in order to act freely, the process by which one develops a preference to act should respect one's autonomy.

16 <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/4634376/minister-en-aivd-slaan-alarm-over-islamitische-middelbare-school>

17 <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/01/21/vonnis-haga-lyceum-test-voor-onderwijsinspectie-a3987671>

18 Throughout the essay I use the words liberty and freedom interchangeably.

The article is structured as follows: In section 2 I make further distinctions between the two types of freedom that appear in the policy dilemma. First, the freedom to practice one's religion according to its precepts and doctrines—children are free to grow into their religious community, even if their religious practices are somewhat controversial from the outside. Second, the freedom from interference in choosing one's own version of the good life—children are free to grow as individuals without religious authorities dictating what they should value.

In section 3 I present two different frameworks to conceptualize the policy dilemma. The first is due to Berlin (1958) and distinguishes between positive and negative freedoms. The goal of presenting this framework is to draw a parallel between the policy dilemma on the hand, and Berlin's paradox between positive and negative freedoms. This framework is appropriate to characterize the tension and understand it, but not to solve it. In contrast to Berlin's, I present a second framework due to Christman (1991). This alternative, compared with Berlin's, dispels the paradox by identifying freedom with autonomy.

In section 4 and 5 I present possible objections to Christman's framework. The first one is that, since children are not fully autonomous the framework cannot require that their autonomy is respected. My response is that, if one considers that individuals begin to develop their autonomy in childhood, the conditions stated by Christman's framework still apply. A second possible objection is that it may not satisfy the real demands of CHL or some of the religious schools. These could object that the requirement to respect autonomy is too demanding—it means giving up on precisely the kind of practices they want to impose. My response to this second objection is that, for such cases, it may not be possible to solve the tension in the policy dilemma. If a school does not want to concede to basic principles of liberal society more broadly—if it does not accept that the PLN holds for society as a whole—a policymaker may not be able to solve the dilemma. In such a case she could not satisfy both the schools demands regarding children's freedom of religion, and the demands of children's freedom from interference.

2 Two freedoms in education

In this section I further describe the two freedoms that seem in tension in the CHL policy dilemma. My goal here is to make clear what freedoms are involved, and how they are indeed different. I first present freedom of religion and describe what this freedom requires from the state. I then go on to do the same for freedom from interference.

The CHL case seems to place two types of freedom in tension. But are these two types in fact different? One could object that freedom of religion is actually a particular instance of freedom from interference. After all, we can say that an individual would be free to practice her own religion if she is free from the interference of outside pressures—such as a state that pushes for a particular religious affiliation. For instance, Muslim followers in CHL are not forced into Christianity through interference from the Dutch the government. But is this enough to claim that they are free to practice their religion? In fact, an individual may in fact not be forced to abandon his religious affiliation, and still be unable to practice it. Consider for instance, that CHL were to be closed, and that no Muslim school were to be present in the city. There would then be no possibility for a religious education for the Muslim youth. Exercising one's freedom to be educated in the teachings of the affiliation would likely be much more difficult. The freedom to effectively practice a religion according to its teachings, therefore, seems distinct from the freedom to be interfered with in one's beliefs. Another objection to separating the two types of freedoms may be the following. One could agree that these two freedoms are of importance for children, but object that freedom of religion can be practiced outside of school, and that there is no need for this freedom to be expressed in this specific environment. Following this objection, the liberal state could focus on promoting freedom from interference in a particular sphere,

and freedom to practice religion in a different one. However, individuals do not exercise freedom of religion in a void, they do so within a cultural group—a community that holds one's same values and practices. According to Kymlicka (1995), cultural membership is needed for the practice of individual freedoms. Even more, some versions of this freedom require these values to be present in all spheres of lives. Hewer (2001) for instance argues that, within an Islamic worldview, there are no secular subjects, and all aspects of life are permeated by religious values. This makes education an essential sphere in which freedom of religion is practiced.

Now, what does the children's freedom of religion require from the state? Does it imply that the state should tolerate faith schools, or that it should promote them? In other words, does this freedom require the state to allow them to remain open, or to fund them publicly? This may depend on how the PLN is specified. If the PLN is stated as a requirement for the state to simply protect individual liberties, then freedom of religion would seem to require only the toleration of faith schools. If in contrast the PLN is stated as a requirement for the state to promote individual freedoms, then one could argue that it ought to fund religious schools as well. Throughout this article, I am not making a determinate choice between these two formulations of the PLN. The reader could hold one or the other. It is important to notice, however, that the choice of formulation of the PLN does not change the premise I try to establish here: freedom of religion is a distinct freedom involved in faith schooling—whether this means a requirement of toleration or promotion from the state.

My claim here is that, minimally, a state ruled by a PLN is required to tolerate faith schooling. One reason for this becomes clear by making a distinction between primary goods and secondary goods (Rawls, 1993; Snik & De Jong, 2002). Education is usually seen as a primary value, one that is widely accepted by different members of society, no matter their cultural background or the other values that they hold. This is, firstly, because it enables children to participate in society as future adults. Education does not need to be understood as formal schooling, but as any form of relatively structured rules and norms that guide the upbringing of children into society. Indeed, the importance parents give to education seems generally independent from political, cultural or other values that they hold. Parents from different groups in society could disagree on many of their values, but likely agree on the fact that their children's education has fundamental importance. It is therefore difficult to think that any given conception of the good would negate the importance of education. In contrast, specific forms of education, such as faith schooling, can arguably be regarded as secondary values. Secondary values may be dependent on different cultural and political traditions. As Snik & De Jong (2002) exemplify, charity and empathy may be prominent in a religious conception of the good, while a secular tradition may put higher value on personal need-satisfaction. Since secondary goods are specific to particular social groups, they may conflict with each other. We can see this in the context of the CHL: secular outsiders may put higher value in freedom from interference, while religious insiders may place higher value in freedom of religion. This may be the case even while both agree on the primary value of education in general. If we take it as a premise that the state is ruled by a PLN, the requirement of neutrality implies that it should not promote any particular secondary value. If it did, it would be favoring a particular group. At the same time, the neutrality of the PLN also implies that the state should tolerate opposing secondary values in society. On one hand, some individuals may hold secular and atheist secondary values (perhaps more in line with freedom of interference), while others would hold religious secondary values. Under the PLN, the state is required to tolerate these two conflicting secondary values.

In the previous paragraphs I attempted to convince the reader that (1) freedom of religion is a distinct concept from freedom from interference; (2) freedom of religion is relevant in the context of CHL and in religious schooling in general; (3) the state is required to either promote or tolerate expressions of this freedom; and (4) toleration is a minimal requirement, even when it may lead to tensions between groups holding divergent values. I am consciously leaving the fourth statement largely undefined; precisely how much conflict should or can be tolerated is a significant question, but I am putting it aside for the purpose of this article. My point is merely that some degree of conflict is implied by toleration of diverging secondary values.

Let me now move on to freedom from interference. Liberal neutrality is usually invoked against interference from the state advancing any particular conception of the good (Snik & De Jong, 2002). But the state is not the only possible source of interference. Other groups or individuals may forcefully push to advance their particular secondary values. These include institutions like schools or religious associations and churches. Freedom from interference is not restricted based on the source of the restriction. The interference may not necessarily come from distant groups or individuals, it may also come from members of one's own family or cultural group. The requirement of freedom from interference applies to these cases as well. Under this freedom, children ought to be protected from interference even from their own schools and families.

Here a qualification is needed. One may say that freedom from interference cannot be an absolute requirement when referring to children. Parents certainly should be allowed to interfere in some way in the upbringing of their children. I discuss this concern in more detail in section 5. For the moment, the reader may accept at least the less-controversial requirement of no interference from institutions like the church or school.

3 Two frameworks to understand the freedoms involved

In the previous section I attempted to establish two premises:

(1) The state is ruled by the PLN.

(2) Freedom of religion and freedom from interference are distinct freedoms, and they are in tension in the CHL case, and in religious schooling more generally.

We can now address the main question: what considerations should a policymaker have with regard to cases like CHL if they aim to safeguard both of the freedoms that seem at tension?

Liberty may be understood from two different perspectives (Carter, 2003). On one hand, we may focus on the content of liberty, or what an individual is free to do. From this perspective, we may think that the children in CHL have the freedom to receive a religious education. A different perspective focuses instead on the process by which liberty obtains, or how an individual develops the will to act in a certain way. Under this perspective, the children in CHL are free to receive a religious education, as long as this respects a particular procedure.

In the following two sections I present these two frameworks in more detail. The first, content-focused framework due to Berlin (1958) is presented in section 3.1. By presenting this framework I attempt to draw a comparison between the policy dilemma between freedom of religion and freedom from interference, and Berlin's concepts of positive and negative freedoms. This parallel is useful in understanding how these freedoms are at tension, but it is still insufficient to resolve the dilemma. In section 3.2 I present a content-neutral or procedural framework. This framework describes freedom as requiring autonomy and allows to present the dilemma in a new light. In doing this, the tension between freedom of religion and freedom from interference can be resolved.

3.1 Content-focused view: positive and negative freedom

According to Berlin (1958) negative liberty defines the area in which the subject should be left to do whatever she is able to do without interference from other persons. Positive liberty, instead, defines the source of control that determines a person to act in a certain manner (Berlin, 1958). The distinction between these two forms of liberty has since been widely incorporated into political philosophy (Carter, 2003).

Being negatively free involves an absence of obstacles to realize what one could realize. These obstacles, as Berlin points out, are external. Being incapable of performing a certain action or becoming a certain person due to internal factors does not make one negatively unfree. The inability to do or become comes from other persons deliberately interfering with one's ability. A liberal state accepts that children attending religious school have the freedom not to be interfered with in choosing any conception of the good. Consider a person first exposed to her sexuality in her teens. Suppose she realizes that she is attracted to the same sex, and that she decides to pursue this attraction. We say she is negatively free if there are no interferences between her and the realization of this desire. We may say she is negatively unfree if at school she is exposed to intolerance and taught this to be a "mistaken" conception of what is good. This example makes clear a parallel between freedom from interference and negative freedom. With regard to religious education, we may say that children are negatively free if they are not interfered with in determining their choice of affiliation or if they become religious at all. Freedom from interference in the CHL policy dilemma can therefore be described as a negative liberty in Berlin's framework.

Positive freedom, on the other hand, involves the capacity to act in such a way as to fully take control of one's life through self-determination. It involves realizing one's most fundamental and true purposes. Here, liberty is concerned not with the area of control, but with its source. "For the musician, after (she) has assimilated the pattern of the composer's score and has made the composer's ends (her) own, the playing of the music is not obedience to external laws, a compulsion and a barrier to liberty, but a free, unimpeded exercise" (Berlin 1958, 14). One can take this example back to religious freedom. For many children receiving a religious education is essential to developing a relation with their community. They may want to realize themselves by living a devout life and eventually joining their community in all their religious practices. If this is the case, their impulse to follow praying times, follow requirements of clothing, and stop themselves from acting on their homosexual desires, simply because their truest wish is to live by the religious dictum. Note that the freedom of religion that is involved in the policy dilemma, therefore, cannot be described as negative freedom. An individual may find no impediment to live religiously and, in that sense, be negatively free to live a religious life. In contrast, being positively free requires that her wishes are truly her own, and that she effectively realizes them.

So far, I have described the two freedoms involved in the policy dilemma as positive freedom (religious freedom), and negative freedom (freedom from interference). In his article, Berlin (1958) pointed to a fundamental problem between these two types of freedom. This takes the form of a "paradox", in Berlin's words, by which positive freedom carries with it a danger of authoritarianism, and therefore a direct threat of interference over one's negative liberties. According to Berlin, the paradox comes about in two steps (Carter, 2003). First, theorists of positive freedom assume a divided self. One that is truest to one's ultimate desires, aligned with self-realization, and commonly thought to be the rational or higher self. In contrast, the lower or impulsive self is dominated by elusive passions. To illuminate this point, consider a smoker who is genuinely wishing to quit the habit. As she finishes her beer and looks out to the garden, she is overwhelmed with the desire to light a cigarette. At the same time, she has not smoked in weeks, and she fiercely wishes

she could improve her health prospects and stop smoking altogether. If these conflicting desires can be thought of as belonging to different selves, one seems to be truer to her desires, since she wishes she would not even want to smoke. In a second step toward the paradox, this separation of selves can be extended to different individuals. Under this premise, some may be in a position to know what people's rationality or truest realization consists of. In the smoker example, think for instance of a policymaker who claims to know that most smokers, even while they find it difficult to quit the habit, would actually prefer to do so because it aligns with their truest preferences. In the CHL case, think of what proponents of closing the school altogether may claim: that even if children would manifest wanting to receive religious education above all, they don't really know what they want because they are not responding to their truest self. This puts the proponent of closing the school in a position by which she claims to know more about the children's true preferences than the children themselves. According to Berlin, this presents a paradox that can justify some individuals interfering with other's actions, allegedly in the name of their liberty.

What does this mean for the CHL case? What does it say about the mandate of the liberal state? Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberties allows us to frame the tension we observed between freedom of religion and freedom from interference in a new light. We can therefore describe the tension between the two liberties and the threat that the dilemma presents. In an attempt to promote children's positive freedoms, the liberal state could be justifying some individuals in interfering with their negative freedoms.

Although Berlin's paradox of positive and negative freedom helps describe the policy dilemma, it does not give tools to solve it. In the next section, I contrast Berlin's content-focused conception of freedom with the content-neutral conception of freedom due to Christman. This second framework will help us move from describing the policy dilemma, to providing a possible solution to it.

3.2 Content-neutral view: freedom as procedural autonomy

Christman (1991) attempts to resolve the tension generated by Berlin's paradox by developing a different concept of positive freedom. Here, positive freedom is not defined by the content of an action, but by the process that brings it about. In other words, a particular action is not freedom-preserving or freedom-diminishing because of its content (CHL enforcing a dress code, fasting, or exposing children to intolerance toward other social groups). Rather, an action is free or unfree depending on the process by which the agent comes to it.

To understand the distinction between these approaches, Christman presents an example. Consider a woman who acts according to her fundamentalist religious beliefs, one of which dictates that a wife ought to be subservient to her husband and should have only a domestic role. Suppose she developed her values within an oppressive environment: her father was an authoritarian figure. The man she is married to now is abusive. Suppose that, today, her truest desire is to be a devout religious follower and remain subservient to her husband despite the abuse. Suppose further that nothing is stopping her from escaping the situation: her social relations would not be severed, and her family would materially support her if she made the decision to leave. Her desire to remain in the situation she is in is driven by her desire to be a proper follower of the religion.

Berlin's content-focused view of her freedoms tells us that she is seeking to be positively free by living a devout religious life. At the same time, she seems to be negatively free: no one is stopping her from leaving her home and starting a new life. Granted, the husband would not be delighted, but she could still do it

without impediment. Despite this, are we intuitively willing to accept that she is indeed free? She may be truly free in her choice to stay, but she may also be conditioned by her past experience. Christman would reply that she is indeed not free, and that to understand why, we need to observe the process that brings about her preference.

According to Christman's account, for her to be acting freely, her character needs to have been constituted in a particular manner. What we need is an account of how her preferences are formed. Christman's strategy is to identify positive freedom with autonomy in this process. Generally, autonomy is a concept closely related to individual freedom, but it is distinct from it. Freedom concerns the ability to act to make one's desires effective, autonomy refers to the independence and authenticity of one's desires (Christman, 2018). In Christman's account, if an action is free, the agent's preference needs to develop through a process that respects her autonomy. Christman states the conditions for autonomy as follows:

1. The agent is in a position to reflect upon her choices and upon the changes to her preferences.
2. The agent is in a position to resist her preference change if she wants to.
3. Reflection and resistance are not the product of further factors that inhibit self-reflection, such as drugs or alcohol¹⁹.
4. Self-reflection, and the desires that result, are minimally rational in an internalist sense: there are no manifest inconsistencies.

On one hand, this framework captures the idea that one is free when one is the ultimate source of one's action. On the other hand, it guards against the dangers of authoritarianism. It achieves this by providing procedural conditions that a free action ought to fulfill. We see this by noting that, if an agent is in the capacity of meeting conditions 1-4, her actions are coherent with her positive as well as negative freedom. This invites further questions regarding the example above: did the devout follower, who does not want to leave her abusive husband, come to desire her current situation autonomously? Has her upbringing enabled her to self-reflect so that she became aware of her desires as they are today? Was she somehow threatened in the process of making this decision—for instance either by social and cultural isolation or by financial insecurity? Questions like these become relevant in identifying to what degree she is free in her choice.

For the policy dilemma in the CHL case, and generally for religious schooling, this means that we have conditions which a liberal state should impose on the school, if it is to safeguard both of children's freedoms. The students' choice is to receive a religious education through which they incorporate a particular conception of the good. Are they—to a reasonable extent—in a position to reflect on the significance of this choice? Do they have the space to consider different life paths they could take in a liberal society? Have they had the opportunity to resist this choice? How does the school relate to students who do not go on to fulfill devoutly religious lives? Questions like these are naturally very difficult to answer objectively. Even more, there may be no binary answers to such questions. These conditions may be fulfilled only in degrees. One should notice, however, that they are not impossible to answer reasonably. A procedural account of freedom seems capable of providing at least a roadmap for the policymaker to ask these questions and formulate policy decisions in ways that attempt to respect children's autonomy as a safeguard of their freedoms.

There is, admittedly, yet another difficulty. Not only are the conditions for autonomy hard to answer, but—importantly—they refer to children. Children are typically seen as not yet having developed a fully free, rational and autonomous agency, and parents have certain rights and obligations with regards to making decisions in their place (Brake & Millum, 2012). The next section briefly discusses this difficulty.

¹⁹ This is not to say that these effects cannot form part of an autonomous process of preference formation. If the decision to take them was made autonomously, then the process will indeed respect autonomy.

4 Education and children's autonomy

If we accept that children are not yet fully autonomous, how can we require that CHL respects their autonomy? According to Christman (1991), it is indeed possible to evaluate whether a certain childhood favors autonomy. He provides a backward-looking criterion for this: "If I look back on my past and see that much of my character was formed by educational and parental practices that I would not want to have been molded by (...) then I am not autonomous relative to those aspects of my character" (Christman 1991, 349). There are three reasons why such a backward-looking criterion can be problematic. First, one can only identify the lack of autonomy after the fact. Therefore, it is difficult to see how this could be used as a policy criterion. Second, Christman's criterion seems highly personal. Different individuals may indeed look back at their childhood through various perspectives; similar practices may be regarded differently depending on a wide range of factors. Take any particular child attending the CHL, for example; she may think of gender-separated classrooms as harmless and in line with her familial upbringing. This may especially be the case if she, as an adult, reaffirmed her childhood values and those of her environment. For a different child in the CHL, looking back at her experience may be completely different. Consider for instance a child who grew up to become a fervent atheist and who has completely changed her social environment in line with less religious values. Because the practices of CHL did not align with the values she developed as an adult, she may regard them as oppressive. One same practice, then, may be seen as autonomy-preserving or as autonomy-diminishing depending on the agreement to one's own current personal values; such a criterion seems to go against the kind of value-neutrality that is required by the PLN. Third, it seems that Christman's backward-looking criterion could only be applied after the individual has gained autonomy. If someone has had an autonomy-diminishing childhood, and is still constrained in this respect (autonomy conditions 1 to 4 are not met), how could she realize this? How could she look back on her upbringing, and be able to judge it as autonomy-diminishing? For her, Christman's backward-looking criterion seems to fail to identify the problem.

How, then, can a policymaker begin to evaluate if a religious school respects the autonomy of children, when they are not yet autonomous? A possible reply to this objection may go as follows. Education is a space in which children develop their autonomy, even if they are not fully autonomous yet. It seems important that this development is not hampered, but promoted, so that they eventually become autonomous adults. In other words, childhood and teenage years are a domain of preference formation. Individuals at this stage begin to form preferences of their own, and they can, to some extent, begin to do so autonomously. It seems reasonable to assume that some children do begin to think critically about themselves, their beliefs, and those of their family and community. Consider a particular student in CHL: even when most other students may accept the practices imposed by the school uncritically, it would not be surprising to see that one of them forms preferences against, for example, the class separation by gender. The key distinction I wish to make here is that children, even if not yet fully developed, have the potential to act autonomously. Think of the CHL student once again, and how she may attempt to reject some of the school practices. She may voice an opinion against mandatory praying hours, she may begin to prefer learning about other religions, or she may begin to challenge role models imposed by religious practices. How could the school react to this, and what influence would that have on her? If the school tries to mute her critical reflection, we would intuitively accept that her autonomy is being hampered. On the contrary, the school could give her the opportunity to find out more about other religions, while she reaffirms her commitment to her own. In this case, we would intuitively accept that her autonomy is being respected.

If we accept that, to some extent, children begin to show autonomy, the conditions for autonomy stated in section 3.2 may still apply. We only need to change their formulation slightly. Instead of asking “Have children formed their current preferences in accordance with the autonomy conditions?” we may ask “Could children develop their preferences in accordance with autonomy conditions?” If the autonomy conditions 1 to 4 are met, we may answer this question affirmatively. It seems, therefore, that to the extent that children begin to develop their autonomy and self-reflect critically, it is still possible to apply the autonomy conditions stated above.

5 Moderate vs fundamentalist challenges

One may raise a further objection to Christman’s framework. Consider that we accept the premises and a content-neutral approach to liberty. The liberal state may now call upon religious schools and demand measures to safeguard children’s autonomy. Practically, policymakers may instantiate this requirement in various ways. For instance, the school could make gender separation a requirement only in religion classes, plan field trips or sport competitions with other schools, monitor teaching material for intolerant content, make praying times optional, and openly teach about sexual orientation while discussing religious dictates. But—one may contend—doesn’t this miss the point altogether? Some of the schools, in fact, could not want to apply these measures, because they imply a defeat of their religious requirements entirely.

This is the point advanced by Burtonwood (2003), who claims that the challenge for liberals is not to respond to a “moderate” version of religious schooling, which already is in line with the basic principles of the liberal state. Instead, the true challenge comes from “fundamentalist” schools or communities, who may be unwilling to accept basic tenets of liberalism. According to Burtonwood, this puts liberals in a position in which they have to either bite the bullet and admit that liberalism is just one more conception of the good, being imposed by the state, or accept a radical form of pluralism and drop any conditions on religious schooling altogether.

The dichotomy stated by Burtonwood above seems mistaken. The response seems to confuse the role that liberalism, and the PLN in particular, has in moderating the challenges I am addressing in this article. Schools or groups who are entirely unwilling to accept any form of compromise that entails the respect of a PLN may indeed reject any policy that is based on the arguments drawn so far. But it does not follow from their rejection that liberalism is a conception of the good among others. Here, I am following Snik & De Jong (2005) in a similar response. The PLN does not define any particular conception of the good, it defines the scope that freedoms may take, and the limits required so that the freedoms of a particular individual do not reduce the freedoms of another. What the PLN advances and presupposes, is that individuals who have conflicting values and demand different freedoms, are willing to recognize each other as part of the same overarching social group, and to give each other’s liberties the furthest possible scope. In this sense, liberalism both enables and restricts freedom. It restricts the freedom of an individual when this may trample over another’s—regardless of their personal values. In doing so, it also enables the freedom of those who would otherwise be trampled on. The PLN, therefore, frames competing conceptions of the good, making their coexistence possible. It achieves this by conditioning their conflicting freedoms, for instance, on respect for individual autonomy.

Two points follow from the above description of the PLN: First, the fact that a religious school may refuse to accept the common limitations imposed by the PLN, is not a reason for other groups to abandon the PLN altogether, nor to believe that the PLN is simply one secondary value among others. Second, the school’s refusal does not mean that other members of society need to accept a radical form of pluralism in which no conditions are imposed on religious schools either.

If a policymaker is confronted with a situation like the one above, it may indeed not be possible to propose a policy solution that would be accepted by the most fervent religious school. If any particular group is unwilling to see others as members of the same society with an interest in setting mutual limits and enabling mutual freedoms, any dialogue is stalled. In such a case, it does not seem possible to find a principled solution to the tension.

6 Conclusion

Let me take stock. The case of the Cornelius Haga Lyceum in Amsterdam, and religious education more broadly, present an apparent policy dilemma. The children's freedom from interference appears to be in tension with their freedom to receive a religious education. A state that is guided by a Principle of Liberal Neutrality will need guidance on how to safeguard both of these freedoms.

To unravel the policy dilemma, I presented two frameworks. The first, a content-focused framework due to Berlin, allows us to describe the policy dilemma in terms of positive and negative freedoms. Their tension is described by Berlin as a paradox by which positive freedom presents a threat of authoritarianism to negative freedom. This framework is useful in describing the dilemma and its tension but is not enough to provide a solution. This is what the second framework I presented aimed to do. Christman's content-neutral approach identifies freedom with procedural autonomy. In this framework, the children are free not by merit of the content of their actions. Instead, they are free as long as the process by which they develop their preferences respects certain conditions of autonomy.

The exposition allows us to derive policy guidance. What the liberal state should require of religious schools such as CHL is that they protect and facilitate the development of children's autonomy. Practical examples of this may include limiting gender separation only to religion classes, increasing exposure to other schools, monitoring teaching material for intolerant content, and teaching about sexual orientation openly. In Christman's framework, autonomy requires, most importantly, that children are able to reflect upon changes in their preferences, and to resist these changes if they want to.

In the final two sections briefly discussed possible objections to Christman's framework. First, one may view children's autonomy as not yet fully developed. Children may not be in a condition to exercise the kind of self-reflection required by autonomy. I argued that children do indeed have the potential to act autonomously. The conditions stated by the proposed framework therefore continue to hold. The second objection regards the challenge of "fundamentalist" schools who may not want to adopt any requirement regarding autonomy. I argued that the PLN is not a particular conception of the good, but a framing rule to negotiate conflicting versions of the good. If any group—regardless of its values—is unwilling to partake in this mutual compromise and negotiation, there cannot be any principled solution to meet its demands.

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