



Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence: An Overview

John Tillson¹

Accepted: 10 September 2021 / Published online: 20 October 2021
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2021

This brief summary of my book, *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence*, serves as the introduction to the present symposium, which includes commentaries by Alexander Carruth, Jane Gately, Ben Kotzee, Neil Levy and Sam Rocha, followed by my response to them.

In *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence*, I develop a theory concerning which kinds of formative influence are morally permissible, impermissible or obligatory. Applying this theory to the case of religion, I argue that religious initiation of children is morally impermissible whether conducted by parents, teachers or others.

The theory of moral influence that I develop proposes that for each prospective ‘formative trope’ (e.g. belief, ability or attitude) which a child could adopt, influencers have the following options: they can ignore it, promote it, demote it, or ‘float it’—that is, draw attention to it as something worthy of consideration to develop or adopt. I argue that for each prospective formative trope, it ought to be promoted, floated or demoted respectively, where one of the following sets of criteria apply. Where none of these apply, it might be fairly ignored:

1. (a) It is momentous (i.e. it makes a significant difference if one fails to have it); (b) it might well not be adopted without intervention; (c) failing to have it is irrational.
2. (a) It is momentous; (b) it might well not be understood and rationally evaluated without intervention; (c) neither having nor failing to have it is irrational.
3. (a) It is momentous; (b) it might well be adopted without intervention; (c) having it is irrational.

The book argues that the second set of criteria obtain in the case of religious initiation, and that consequently, religious initiation in childhood is morally impermissible whether conducted by parents, teachers or others. The reason is that, very plausibly, religious initiation in childhood comes at a high opportunity cost—that of having a rational set of formative tropes, sensitive to shifts in rational support for the purpose of planning lives in ways that are sensitive to their moral duties and that have a good enough chance of flourishing. This cost is compounded by the fact that ‘religious traditions are so comprehensive and all-encompassing in their claims’ (Taliaferro 2013), and so both guide and constrain further belief and attitude formation. Further, it very plausibly comes at the further cost of

✉ John Tillson
tillsoj@hope.ac.uk

¹ Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

collateral errant belief formation (i.e. beliefs formed on the basis of premises which don't simply disappear when one later rejects the premises instrumental to their formation).

Instead, I argue that children have a powerful interest in being made aware of range of religious and non-religious answers to the questions of how we have most reason to live, what we have most reason to value and how we ought to treat one another, developing the capacities to appraise these for themselves. They have these interests both because it is important to understand how others have and continue to orient themselves to life, and because it is important to inform their own orientations which may, without violating any rational requirements, be religious.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.