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The Ethicality of Banning Weapons in Public School:
Why Ceremonial Swords Just Don't Cut It

The issue of the place of religion in public schools is one that cannot be addressed with brevity or ease, or concluded upon with rigid decisiveness. It is the duty of such institutions to foster a learning environment characterized by equal access to education, wherein religion is entirely separated from the learning process. Simultaneously, and somewhat incongruously, however, public schools have a responsibility to acknowledge the rights of students to express and practice religion. A paradox of sorts therefore precipitates out of this quandary: public schools must strive to exclude religion from the classroom, while also respecting and tolerating students' right to include religion in their learning processes. Whichever path the public school chooses to take when confronted with dilemmas of religion within its walls, it is ostensible that one of the opposing sides will leave the situation with underlying sentiment that justice was not served.

A specific example of such a situation can be found in the Plymouth-Canton Community Schools in Plymouth, Michigan. On January 31, 2011, the School Board and its attorneys issued a plan permitting children of the Sikh faith to wear ceremonial swords to school, in accordance with numerous restrictions. The School District argued that its plan accommodates the right of students to express religion freely as well as the right of students to learn and interact in a safe environment.

Proffering rationale which gravitates around ethicality and morality, this decision is wrong, in and of itself. Even when considered amid the competing principles endemic to discussions of religion's place in public schools, one cannot help but feel a biting suspicion that the Plymouth-Canton District's plan does not hold water.

Simple pragmatics, essential to the efficient and successful leading of one's life, emanate a resounding tone in this debate. It is common sense that swords, like all weapons, are unequivocally dangerous. They have no practical use in public schools, especially where untrained children can misuse them. Allowing instruments of death to enter the classroom is not only cause for the hampering of learning, but also cause for a more hostile and dangerous atmosphere. It is therefore in the best interest of children, parents, teachers, and society as a whole that objects that can be used to harm others be banned from the campuses of public schools.

It is here that the intrinsic nature of this discussion's religious object comes into play. The mere nature of a sword conveys symbolism of war, bloodshed, and intimidation. Its iconography is strong enough that the images associated with it cannot be unassociated in our minds. This holds true especially for children, who would most likely struggle with the notion of discerning that the swords some of their peers carry are for religious purposes, and not meant to harm them. Swords, ceremonial in use or not, stand for things that are deleterious to the positive and inviting environments that are public school classrooms. The Sikh's ceremonial sword itself is not disruptive, but what it is a symbol for is something that does not belong in schools. Even with the understanding that children wearing the sword cannot remove it to do harm, it is unquestionable that the overall atmosphere of the classroom will change, which is unethical, for many members of society are subsequently disadvantaged.

This claim is not solely grounded on pragmatics, for doing so would be ignorant of the fluid nature of societal precedents. While difficult to envision using our society's current state of mind, it was not too long ago that many deemed it absurd to allow for many commonplace institutions of today. For example, our grandparents' generation, when presented with the notion that black people should not have to drink from separate fountains than whites, probably dismissed it entirely. Why? "Because that's the way it is," they would reason, "we drink from here and they drink from there." Learning from mistakes of the past, it is imperative that we as a people delineate contemporary issues using a framework that is not based only on the idea that "that's the way it is," even as tempting it may be, and relevant to the argument it may seem. Attempting to approach all ends of this particular argument bearing this historical transcendence and respective mindset, I still deem it morally wrong that Sikh children are permitted to carry ceremonial swords to school in the Plymouth-Canton District.

The position that the Board's decision is ethically wrong can additionally be substantiated in light of the rights of the Sikh. While the decision permits baptized Sikh children to carry ceremonial swords in school, it is laden with heavy restrictions. The plan requires students to sew their swords into their sheaths as to prevent removal, limit the blade length to two and one-fourth inches, dull the blade, and wear them in a way that isn't visible. The school's plan further declares that it reserves the right to prohibit the wearing of the ceremonial swords if these guidelines are not met.

Some may see such evidence as legitimizing the decision. However, one is inclined to wonder, if so many burdensome restrictions are required to enact such a policy, why are swords allowed in the first place? It can be rationally ascertained that if bringing ceremonial swords to school was a "good" or ethical thing to do, the enumeration of the aforementioned strict

conditions would not be necessary. Moreover, what place does the Plymouth-Canton School Board have in determining how a faith should carry out its religious practices? Surely it is not the role of the public school to set restrictions on how a group of people should approach their religion. In fact, it is not farfetched to argue that the enactment of such measures by the school is actually contrarian to the rights of students it is attempting to uphold. In other words, the policy may be serving to take religious toleration in a negative direction, opposed to making conditions accommodating for students of the Sikh faith. The separation of church and state, as well as freedom itself, becomes ethically infringed upon when policy makers attempt to codify how it is one's religion should be carried out.

The primary duty of the United States Department of Education is "*to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.*" When weapons of any kind are made permissible in public schools, equal access to learning cannot be attained. Students will be confronting daily with the knowledge that their pupils carry swords, which will undoubtedly interfere with their learning.

How then, should the Plymouth-Canton Schools approach this predicament? I believe a decision of neutrality is one that best serves the interests of the Sikh children and remaining student body. This portended neutrality is not a state of apathy toward what students are allowed and not allowed to bring (physically and religiously) into the classroom, but rather an across-the-board measure that prevents any religion from entering and thereby disrupting a public school. Given the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof", separation of church and state should be carried out in literal terms in Plymouth-Canton Community Schools. By refusing to accept any religion's precepts, the

school will not be forced to delve into interpreting where lies the line between fostering an environment tolerant of student's religious needs and maintaining one that is conducive to learning.

Opposition to the previous claims will take two forms: that all students have freedom of religion even in school, and that allowing the Sikh children to carry ceremonial swords is not of societal concern because the swords themselves are not dangerous. It would also be contended that the ardent refusal of those who disagree with the Plymouth-Canton School Board's decision is grounded in unsound reasoning, as demonstrated by the historical reception of new ideas in ethical treatment. Subscribers to the first opposition purport that it is the school's duty to afford students the ability to exercise religion freely. As specified earlier, this right must be forgone when the religious practice of one hampers the learning of another. The right of students to learn in a safe environment is something that public schools have more of an ethical responsibility to society to uphold. This is an idea that is not subjective to the Sikh religion; any religious practice, pragmatically speaking, that implements dangerous iconography causing for a learning atmosphere in which students feel threatened, is immoral.

This leads to the second line of rebuttal. Even though the ceremonial swords under the Board's restrictions cannot be used to do harm, the disturbing images they represent will affect the learning process negatively. Here it is helpful to draw upon the words of British author Charles Caleb Colton, who reasoned, "In cases of doubtful morality, it is usual to say, Is there any harm in doing this? This question may sometimes be best answered by asking ourselves another: Is there any harm in letting it alone?" While there is presumably no harm in allowing the Sikh to carry ceremonial swords, allowing the decision to stand will lead to immoral rulings

in which the rights of one are disregarded in hopes of benefiting another, a trend that is susceptible to increasing inclusion of the state into religion.

Even when juxtaposed with the valid counterarguments that this discussion creates, as well as when considered in the light of learning from the past and maintaining respect to all religions, the pertinence of having Plymouth-Canton Community Schools overturn its decision regarding children of the Sikh faith's use of ceremonial swords in school remains evident. On top of not making sense in terms of the intended purposes of public school, the inclusion of ceremonial swords in schools does not benefit the most people. It is ethically wrong for numerous reasons, including the resulting obstruction of other students' learning, the tampering of Sikh tradition, and the disregard of ideas found in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Plymouth-Canton Community should adopt a policy that ensures its public schools remain entirely void of all religion, which would bode ethical for all, and create an environment in which all children can learn.

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