

# MORE THAN GOOD CITIZENS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND CHARACTER EDUCATION



by

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## Introduction

**I**n the early 1960s, a 6 year old African-American girl named Ruby Bridges participated in a school desegregation effort in New Orleans. Robert Coles, a Harvard educational psychologist, became fascinated by the moral heroism that Ruby demonstrated during the months she walked to school through heckling mobs. One teacher related to Coles how Ruby smiled at her antagonists and even prayed for them. When Coles asked Ruby why, she said, "I go to church every Sunday, and we're told to pray for everyone, even the bad people, and so I do" (Coles 1986, p. 23). When Coles probed further, he found more than simple obedience. Ruby stated reasons for her actions: "The minister says if I forgive the people and smile at them and pray for them, God will

keep a good eye on everything and He'll be our protection." When asked if she believed the minister, she replied: "Oh yes...I'm sure God knows what's happening. He's got a lot to worry about; but there is bad trouble here, and He can't help but notice. He may not rush to do anything, not right away. But there will come a day, like you hear in church" (p. 24). Ruby's confidence in God's care and justice motivated her to respond to her racist antagonists with forgiveness, a smile and a prayer.

## **Educating Children to Be Like Ruby**

Ruby Bridges was more than a good citizen, she was a moral hero. Not surprisingly, most Christian parents want their children to believe and act like Ruby. However, they wonder whether teaching character education in public schools will satisfy their desires. Public schools cannot promote a particular religious perspective. However, Ruby's courage and mercy were primarily cultivated by the Christian character education that she received at home and church. Despite these tensions, Focus on the Family believes that if religious perspectives are respected in the classroom, character educators can act as partners with parents in the character education process. For this partnership to be effective, educators will need to comprehend the similarities and differences between the parents' vision for character development and those implemented in public schools.

### **The Commonalities**

Public school and conservative Christian approaches to character education share a number of commonalities. First, both assume that students need to learn more than academics and athletics. They need to learn timeless and transcendent values. When educators teach values clarification or simply avoid the issue of character education altogether, schools communicate to students, parents and society that the development of brilliant students, good athletes or successful professionals is much more important than the development of good *people*. By giving attention to character education, educators communicate that they desire good children as well as intelligent children. This is something that Christian parents have wanted all along.

A second point of consensus is that virtue is not formed without assistance. The Character Education Partnership, a prominent character

education movement, claims in one of its basic premises: "Good character is not formed automatically; it is developed over time through a sustained process of teaching, example, learning and practice" (*Character Education in U.S. Schools* 1996, p. 7). Other writers on character education have also embraced this claim (Kilpatrick 1992, p. 103-107; Wynne and Ryan 1993, p. 97). For children to develop character, almost everyone agrees that teaching, training and modeling are essential.

Additional common ground can be found with the substance and style of character education. Most character education programs teach virtues such as respect and responsibility that are established through a process of community consensus. By finding such common ground, people recognize that most everyone acknowledges a natural moral law (Lickona 1991, p. 42; Lewis 1947). Certainly, Christian parents support the teaching of these virtues. In addition, character educators admonish schools not only to teach certain virtues, but to become communities of character themselves (Etzioni 1996, p. 40; Lickona 1991; Wynne and Ryan 1993). In other words, educators will need to model virtue to students and school policies must sustain and support character development. Likewise, Christians believe their churches should not only teach Christian virtues, but be communities of character.

### **More Than Good Citizens**

Despite these areas of agreement, aspects of the character education movement may prove problematic for religious parents if handled inappropriately. Merely agreeing upon which virtues to teach leaves many questions unanswered, because the virtues are not discussed within a larger context. As a result, if a school agrees to teach virtues such as respect and responsibility, a number of questions will arise: *Why* should the students develop virtue? To *whom* or *what* should they show these virtues? In what *ways* should these virtues be shown? What will *motivate* or *empower* them to attain these virtues?

First of all, educators must recognize that questions about *why* certain virtues should be sought are subject to a variety of religious and philosophical answers. To be fair, teachers will need either to present the various types of religious and philosophical answers or encourage students to explore these issues with their parents and religious groups. If they do not do either of these things, the justifications they offer will

favor one particular worldview. For instance, teaching character to students is often justified on the basis that it is good for a democratic society (e.g. *Character Education in U.S. Schools* 1996, p. 7; Haynes 1991, p. 14-1). The basic message is that children must be taught virtues such as honesty, respect and responsibility if we want American democracy to survive and prosper. It is a pragmatic, rather than a principled, justification for teaching character.

Many Christian parents, on the other hand, want their children to become virtuous for reasons beyond the survival of American democracy. Whether in America or a communist country such as China, their desire for their children would not change. They do not merely want their children to be good citizens; they pray for them to be like Ruby Bridges--individuals who demonstrate high levels of religious commitment through a faith in God which overflows into a love for others and a life of virtue.

Second, to be sensitive to Christian and other religious parents, educators must remind students that their moral responsibilities may *extend beyond those that the school affirms*. This point is of vital importance. For most Christians, it is certainly important for people to demonstrate virtues such as faith, hope and love. However, it is more important that God is the primary object and source of that faith, hope, and love. This truth makes Charles Haynes' (1994) warning all the more pertinent. He states:

Character education can be hollow and misleading when taught within a curriculum that is silent about religion. When religion is largely ignored, students get the false and dangerous message that religious ideas and practices are insignificant for human experience (p. 14-2).

Character educators must remember that for many Christian families, to *whom* one shows respect and to whom one is responsible are important issues.

Third, educators will need to realize that even virtues upon which parents and schools agree can have different applications. For example, even if a school agrees to teach students to be responsible and tolerant, obscurities will remain. Does encouraging responsible sexual behavior require teaching "abstinence until marriage" or "safer sex" ?

Does showing tolerance mean that students must accept homosexual behavior as morally legitimate? To respect conservative Christian parents, educators should focus on teaching those concrete examples of virtues upon which there is general agreement. As the late Ernest Boyer noted, parents distrust schools when they attempt to teach "contentious areas without consensus values" (Johnson 1996, p. 9).

Finally, we believe that while a variety of motivations to be good exist, when confronted with a choice between being virtuous or fulfilling their self-interest, students will need the most compelling reasons and motivations to make the right decision. Many Christian parents believe an understanding and experience of God's love, mercy and forgiveness provides students with the strongest motivation to sacrifice their self-interest for the good of others. It gives them the strength to respond to their enemies and antagonists with a smile and a prayer, just as Ruby Bridges did.

Interestingly, Robert Coles traced the moral heroism of Ruby Bridges and others like her to religious beliefs and teaching. He wrote:

I have tried to comprehend [the moral courage of children such as Ruby]--with little luck, as far as psychiatric characterization goes. If I had to offer an explanation, though, I think it would start with the religious tradition of black people.... In home after home I have seen Christ's teachings, Christ's life, connected to the lives of black children by their parents (Coles 1986, p. 34).

It has been said that the attraction of saints "is their power to lure us beyond virtue to virtue's source" (Woodward 1990, p. 28). Coles followed Ruby's virtue and arrived at its origins. Educators must allow that path to be taken when they teach or when their students ask about motivations and justifications for being good.

Training students to be good citizens does not have to compete with religious teaching. However, if educators are going to form effective partnerships with religious parents, they must learn how to encourage children to be good students and model citizens in ways that are consistent with parents' and churches' efforts to encourage their children to be like Ruby.

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