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Wisconsin v. Yoder: An Equality in Diversity Perspective

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sees equality at the heart of democracy. In response to white religious leaders of the South who questioned his non-violent civic reform ideas, MLK argues in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that equality does not exist as it should in the United States; it does not exist as described in the founding documents. To Martin Luther King Jr., equality means that all people no matter their race, religious affiliation, gender, etc. have the same opportunities, freedoms, and rights and this is essential in upholding democracy as it upholds the moral code. Years later, the Wisconsin v. Yoder case arises in which there is dispute as to whether Amish children should be mandated to attend public high school after eighth grade. The state of Wisconsin argues that Amish children must attend public schooling or else their families will be charged with a violation of the state's compulsory education law. The Wisconsin point of view comes from the perspective that in order to create an intelligent and effective citizenry and community, advanced education is needed that goes beyond eighth grade curriculum. On the opposite side, Yoder and other families argue, by way of the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment made applicable to the states by the Fourteenth Amendment, that Amish children should be free to participate in vocational training at home and follow their religious community after eighth grade in place of mandatory participation in the public education system. By considering this case through the lens of equality as the most central value to creating an

effective democracy as Martin Luther King Jr. maintains, I will argue in agreement with the court's decision in favor of Yoder and Amish vocational training. Rather than constructing my argument as the court did in support of vocational training as appropriate means to prepare Amish children to become self-reliant and pragmatic political citizens, I will adopt a perspective similar to Dr. King's in terms of fundamental human equality. I will begin my argument by presenting Dr. King's work and his perspective of equality in America. I will investigate how democracy is related to MLK's perspective of equality and support his claims about equality being vital to maintaining effective democracy. I will then consider the Wisconsin vs. Yoder case and the values each side appeals to. I will then attempt to sort through the dispute using King's sense of equality as the dictating value, leading eventually to an outcome that agrees with the court's decision.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a social activist advocating and fighting peacefully for racial equality in America. To Dr. King, equality is the state where all people have the same status in rights, opportunities, services, goods, and freedoms. MLK defends the need for equality in the United States in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail", wherein he emphasizes that he is appalled that this topic provoked any sort of disagreement in the first place. King initiates a discussion at the top of Page 3 of the letter about just versus unjust laws and morally correct versus incorrect actions. He argues that equality among people is a just law and "squares with the moral law, or the law of God" (King 3). Further, he supports this assertion by stating that equality "uplifts [rather than degrades] human personality" (King 3) and does not distort the soul. King seems to convey that morality is a value universally attempted to be maintained in democracy, political affairs, and generally among the people, so the creation and implementation of true equality, a morally correct principle, will in the end enhance democracy. King says that in

1954 the U.S. Supreme Court made a decision to outlaw segregation in places such as public schools. Therefore, to adhere to the moral/God's code which includes equality among people, democratic decisions such as the 1954 Supreme Court must be followed without exception. At the close of Page 2, Dr. King writes a moving paragraph which strongly appeals to readers' emotions and pathos. He presents striking human experiences of African American people, and in particular children, encountering segregation and inequality. This passage emphasizes sentimentally the sameness of the white majority and the oppressed minority. The feelings invoked place all humans on an even, equal, emotional field. This was hoped to lead people to take action and actualize equality "politically, economically, and sociologically" (King 3) to form a true democracy which includes all humans.

In the *Wisconsin v. Yoder* case, different human/democratic values were emphasized by each side in constructing their respective argument. Neither of the two sides directly called upon equality in their presentation. The problem at hand was whether Amish children should be required to attend public high school after the eighth grade as opposed to home vocational training within the Amish religious community. The state emphasized self-sufficiency and self-reliance in addition to meeting the state's goals as the main motive for enforcing mandatory public education. Wisconsin argued that public schooling is necessary for Amish children to develop into intelligent and pragmatic citizens. Otherwise, lack of such formal education would create "ignorant" members of society. The response from Yoder's perspective was that, historically speaking, vocational training had in fact led to and created law-abiding, productive, and self-reliant citizens, so the state's claims were unwarranted and Amish ill-preparedness is merely speculative. Further, Wisconsin asserted that a multifaceted and modern education is needed which vocational training cannot provide in order to help the state's collective goal

beyond self-reliance. This includes the ability to “participate effectively and intelligently in the open political system” (Wisconsin v. Yoder 3) and have a meaningful contribution to society and how it is run. The response in defense of the Amish community included consideration of “members of religious orders [in the Middle Ages of the Western World] who isolated themselves from all worldly influences” (Wisconsin v. Yoder 4). These people’s way of life was odd and uncommon but interfered with no rights or interests of others and in fact provided new perspectives, ideas, values, and beliefs to society. Obscurity in lifestyle should not be condemned, Yoder argued, especially if different and significant contributions are made to the public. In brief summary of the clashing values defended, the state of Wisconsin’s defense of mandatory public education included appeal to lack of citizen self-sufficiency created due to solely Amish training and an inability to reach the state’s broader goals of effective political participation. Yoder and Amish families emphasized the importance of personal freedoms, defended their right to free exercise of religion, and pointed out the insufficient evidence supporting state claims.

Martin Luther King Jr. defines equality on the basis of three categories which should be the same for all people: opportunities, rights, and freedoms. In terms of opportunities, it does not seem that an argument can be made for the Wisconsin v. Yoder case as the same is being offered for all children, public education for the Amish and non-Amish. With respect to rights and freedoms, the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (Constitution). Yet, there is a direct conflict between this amendment and the state law of Wisconsin which mandates public high school education since the exercise of the Amish religion temporally clashes with such school attendance. The state does not explicitly disallow any

religious practice, but the provision of mandatory schooling singles out the Amish community and *implicitly* prohibits them to practice their religious to its full extent. Therefore, by accepting the mandatory public education of Wisconsin there would exist unequal treatment among people since only some people would be able to exercise their religious freedom completely under the state law, while others would not.

A strong and common counterargument may include that Wisconsin is in fact considering equality as a value in that the state is trying to prepare everyone equally with a uniform education to participate ‘effectively’ in democracy. However, since it has been established that the public schooling system inhibits the holistic practice of some religions, namely the Amish religion, a valid refutation can be proposed. Religious practice is often necessary or plays a vital role in establishing and cultivating one’s morals, ideas, and perspectives. Diversity of such is needed to lead a properly functioning democracy as is claimed by the state itself. By impeding religious practice and forcing children to partake in the public education system instead, the state does not necessarily make progress in this goal. The desired citizenry diversity may better be cultivated for some outside the conventional timeline of school.

In conclusion, using Martin Luther King Junior’s ideas and definition of equality as a basis for sorting through the disagreement on whether public high school should be mandatory for all children after eighth grade in the Wisconsin v. Yoder case, one can arrive at the same outcome as the court ruled. This alternative approach in argumentation to the one the court used related to the cultivation of self-sufficiency, effective citizens, and freedom of religious practice, considers equality as the central value in maintaining proper moral democracy. A counterargument that can be proposed in favor of the state’s position considering equality in the uniform preparation of citizens for future political contribution can be dismissed by arguing that

forced schooling and its inhibition of religious practice diminishes democratic diversity, a fundamental goal of the state and country as a whole.

Works Cited

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