
Raising Resident Aliens

BY PERRY L. GLANZER

As Christians we are also “citizens” of another kingdom. If faithful disciples experience life as “aliens and exiles,” then a good Christian education must include helping kids understand as well as practice what it means to be resident aliens.

My oldest son, in kindergarten at the time, casually informed me of this identity label at the dinner table one evening: “Caley calls me an alien.” “Why?” I asked. “Because she says I’m weird,” my son replied. Usually, it pains me to hear about my son being called names, but this time I decided to reinforce Caley’s point. “You know, Bennett, we *are* aliens.” “Really?” he asked.

This occasion produced merely one of the many conversations my wife and I hope to have with my son. We want him to understand that choosing to be a faithful disciple of Christ will identify him as one of the “aliens and exiles” on this earth (1 Peter 2:11). Or to use the terminology of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, Christians are “resident aliens.”

Of course, what it means to be a “resident alien” can be subject to some misunderstanding, as we have learned in our family. When talking about the paperwork for renewing my wife’s resident alien card, our youngest son exclaimed, “Mommy, you can’t be an alien. If you’re an alien you have to be from outer space.” I chimed in that during my first Christmas in Canada (my wife’s country of citizenship), it actually felt as cold as outer space (minus twenty-five degrees Celsius for five straight days to be exact), but I do not think that my son or wife thought that comment was helpful. My wife then patiently explained that being a resident alien means you are a citizen of another country.

The Apostle Paul reminds Christians “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). Thus, good Christian education, at the very least, involves helping kids understand as well as practice what it means to be resident aliens. As with most Christian parents, we are not always sure

what it means to raise resident aliens. Nonetheless, we have gained some insight into the process from the presence of a literal resident alien and two dual citizens in the family.

IDENTITY-SHAPING STORIES

We enter the world as strangers not knowing who we are. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, we should allow children to learn about themselves naturally. In fact, the best kind of education, according to Rousseau's philosophy, involves protecting children from society's corruption by taking them out to nature. Not surprisingly, Rousseau never raised his own children and had his mistress take those he sired to an orphanage. Spending time in nature may do many things, but neither educated human beings nor resident aliens are cultivated naturally. Children need help and guidance to discover who they are.

In this endeavor, resident aliens realize they cannot depend solely on the majority political community for help. Since my wife remains a Canadian, our children are dual citizens (members of two kingdoms as Augustine would describe it). I do not believe my son has learned more than a few facts about Canada in the three years he has attended an American public school. His Canadian identity has simply not been addressed or nurtured. Of course, we are not surprised by this fact. American public schools seek to create productive Americans and are not designed to produce good Canadians. We recognize that the cultivation of his Canadian identity will take a special effort.

Resident alien Christians face a similar challenge. We should also not downplay the challenge or shrug it off. Education can inform children of their identity but it can also warp their self-understanding. Without some educating from members of our family, my son would know nothing of his Canadian identity, Canadian history, or Canadian special rituals, practices, heroes, and particular cultural achievements. Christian resident aliens face a similar danger. One study of high school texts books found, "The underlying worldview of modern education divorces humankind from its dependence on God; it replaces religious answers to many of the ultimate questions of human existence with secular answers; and, most striking, public education conveys its secular understanding of reality essentially as a matter of faith."¹ Young resident aliens may lose their identity unless parents and the resident alien community, the Church, carefully cultivate it.

One of the primary ways that children develop an understanding of themselves and their world is through narratives or stories. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, "Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."² My son will learn what it means to be a Canadian by learning Canadian history and literature.

Christians have been graced with a similar kind of orientating narrative through Scripture. Thus, just as Israelite parents were instructed to pass

along God's law (Deuteronomy 4:9-13, 6:7, and 11:19; cf. Psalm 78:5), they were also told to tell the stories of God's saving works to their children in order to orient their lives and provide context for rules. Rules can provide some degree of guidance for children, but children will always need to know the reasons for the rules. These reasons are rooted in identity stories. Before giving the Ten Commandments, God reminded Israel of their redemptive story, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Similarly, Christian parents and educators must teach children to understand the moral life as well as all of education in light of the overarching Christian story of God's creation, humanity's fall, and God's redemption and ultimate restoration.

These stories provide a holistic understanding of identity that my child will never receive through politically controlled forms of education that tend to downplay or avoid competing identities and allegiances. Just as public schools do not help my son understand his true Canadian identity, they also will leave him without an understanding of his wider human identity and worth although they may try. For example, left-leaning educators have often attempted to bolster students' self-esteem using positive affirmation techniques such as "think happy thoughts" while some conservative traditionalists have argued for grounding a child's self-worth on academic competence. Either approach neglects the Christian understanding that all humans have worth and dignity because they are created by God in his image. The mentally or physically handicapped child and the cognitively or athletically gifted student have worth, value, and dignity apart from what they can either accomplish or not accomplish. Their dignity and worth also does not depend on whether they "think happy thoughts." If we fail to impart this identity story to our children, we have neglected to tell them the truth about who they and others really are.

Identity-shaping stories do more than provide a sense of human worth; they also shape our affections and desires. My son suddenly wants to visit New York City because he has learned about the Statue of Liberty in school. He knows nothing about Ottawa, Montreal, or Toronto.

Similarly, in my own public school experience I was trained to think and desire like a citizen of this world and not a resident alien. For example, while pondering the overwhelming array of occupational options during my senior year in high school, I eliminated the alternatives with a simple question: What career will fit my interests, provide long-term job security,

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and generate a high salary? I decided upon engineering for the simple reason that there were numerous job openings promising plentiful pay. In retrospect, I cringe at the thought of my earlier reasoning. Why did longings about salary and security guide my decision about a college major? Fundamentally, I forgot who I was and how my Christian identity story should guide my life purpose and desires. Instead, I let myself be shaped by a different story. Neil Postman in his book, *The End of Education*, labels it the narrative of Economic Utility: "The story tells us that we are first and foremost economic creatures and that our sense of worth and purpose is to be found in our capacity to secure material benefits."³ I longed for financial success and security in this kingdom and not treasures in the kingdom of God.

CURRICULUM AND ETHOS

In the three years my dual-citizen child has attended American public schools, I have been continually struck by the role American identity plays in structuring the whole educational experience. Within those three years, my son learned about American history, the American Constitution, and American heroes such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. He saw icons of George W. Bush on the wall and often came home with questions about him (e.g., "Will he die when he stops being president?"). He heard debates about presidential candidates, learned about democratic practices, and even practiced being a democrat by voting in a mock presidential election. He also learned the Pledge of Allegiance, "The Star Spangled Banner," and information about major American wars. He drew pictures of the Statue of Liberty and the Capitol and now, in addition to New York, wants to visit Washington, D.C. He even completed an assignment in which he was to answer the question, "What makes you proud to be an American?" Clearly, more than simple teaching about basic reading skills or social studies takes place in American schools. Educators help students cultivate and prize certain identities through their school's curriculum and overall ethos. In fact, the integration of American democracy and learning is amazingly thorough and effective in our public schools.

Not surprisingly, resident aliens take different subjects and imbibe a different ethos. My wife took six years of French, Canadian history, and Canadian literature, studied Canadian politics, and learned to sing "O Canada" (which to this day I have not fully learned). Thus, at home, my resident-alien wife engages in another form of education. She buys books on Canadian history, we celebrate Canadian holidays such as Canada Day with Canadian icons (e.g., the flag) and special foods with significance (e.g., we drink Canada Dry), and my children are learning to sing "O Canada" (better than their father).

In a similar manner, as Christian resident aliens, we must recognize the need to teach our children an alternative curriculum and help them live in another ethos. Interestingly, I find that Christian educators often mimic the

wider culture when it comes to the curriculum they use when educating their children. In my own study of the curriculum of Christian colleges and universities I found that most do not require students to take a course in church history although they do require students to take a course in American history or Western civilization. Students are taught literature based on national categories (e.g., American, English) and not based on the redemptive nature of the works. We fail to realize that our different citizenship should alter our curriculum.

Heroes do (and should) vary by the identity celebrated. After first grade my son could already tell me loads of things about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. He knew nothing about the first or even the most recent prime minister of Canada. Christians will need to teach their children about a whole different range of heroes such as the martyrs, the church fathers, and the saints. For Christians, the importance of this point goes even deeper. Since we believe we are made in the image of God and that God has become incarnated in Christ, we gain the best insight about what it means to bear God's image and be fully human through Christ. By imitating Christ's sacrificial love, humility, servanthood, forgiveness of enemies, and acceptance, we learn how to be more fully human. Stories of other saints can also help, and I believe much more should be done in this area. When I ask Christian students—even those educated in home or Christian schools—the names of the first five presidents of the United States, almost everyone can list them. When I ask if they know about famous church fathers such as Augustine, Polycarp, and John Chrysostom, they shake their heads. Yet for Christians these characters in the Christian story of the church should be more important than the presidents in the story of the American nation-state.

Much of what it means to be a citizen gets transmitted through a school's ethos and not its formal curriculum. My son's classrooms have been filled with icons of presidents and American flags. The public school where we live starts the day with pledges of allegiance to

America and Texas. Other holidays and rituals also serve to reinforce identity. My son came home one day from first grade and asked, "Dad, did you litter today?" Surprised by the question, I said, "No, why?" He replied, "It's Earth Day today." The holiday calendar he imbibed shaped his moral outlook. In fact, my elementary son's learning often revolves around various national and secularized holidays, as does his artwork.

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Resident-alien homes and communities must embody a whole different ethos with different symbols, icons, and calendars. I have mentioned some ways we familiarize our dual citizen children with Canadian symbols, icons, and calendars, but more importantly we hope to pass along a familiarity and understanding for Christian symbols and icons and the Christian calendar and conception of time. We celebrate not just Christmas but Advent, and we seek to find periods for Sabbath rest when we do not engage in work. We want our children to live by a different calendar and a different understanding of time rooted not in the preservation of an earthly nation but in the preservation of citizenship in the kingdom of God.

IDENTITY CONFLICTS

While everyone has multiple identities and often must juggle conflicts among them, resident aliens tend to experience identity conflicts even more. For example, when my wife reads our local library's books about heroes of the Revolutionary War or the War of 1812, she does not always empathize with the laudatory tone of the books – especially when it comes to the attempted invasion of Canada or the need for a revolution for independence. She reads history as a Canadian in light of Canada's story.

Young resident aliens will need to recognize the many ways in which such conflicts of interpretive perspective may take place. Some of these may appear trivial. My wife always wants to play Christmas music before Thanksgiving. Of course, she tells me she is not playing Christmas music before Thanksgiving, because Thanksgiving in Canada takes place in October. Christian resident aliens should recognize that how we interpret history, structure time, and give meaning to holidays are vitally important. If we lived in a culture that ordered time differently, such as Islamic culture, we would understand this point even more. Recently, a group of Muslim scientists and clerics even called for the adoption of "Mecca time" since they argued that the Western calendar is a colonial imposition.

Certainly, some remnants of our Christian culture still remain. Our dating system centers on the life of Christ and our understanding of the seven-day week stems from Genesis 1. Likewise, schools still often break for major Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Nonetheless, teaching a Christian conception of time and Christian rituals may become more difficult for resident aliens. Public schools largely secularize holidays.

Here again are places we must make the effort to tell the Christian stories about the heroes behind certain holidays, like Saint Patrick. Indeed this saint, who was a former slave who returned to his place of enslavement to spread the gospel to Ireland, exemplified what it means to live as a resident alien. In this respect, however, we try to use possible identity conflicts as teaching opportunities. After all, we want to form our sons' ability to choose. Just as at age eighteen they will choose their national identity, they will also have to make other identity loyalty choices that at times may be mutually exclusive.

In light of some of the conflicts mentioned above, Christians often discuss whether forming their own schools would be better for educating resident aliens. We should be wary about giving a simple answer to this question. After all, the Christian story reminds us that the corrupting influence of the Fall shows up in unexpected places, as does God's special grace. In this regard, we can observe possible weaknesses with any form of education. Public schools may lead a child to love being a *resident* too much while home or private schooling may not adequately train students to live in this world (though as an *alien*).

Still, resident aliens realize that those options that place less control of education in the hands of the state and more control in the hands of parents or resident-alien communities will be more conducive to educating resident aliens. In this respect, religious or home forms of schooling will provide greater opportunities for children to encounter an education formed by the story of Christian resident aliens. Among public schools, charter schools provide the greater opportunity for parental input.

Not surprisingly, highly centralized and repressive political states, often communist or totalitarian (e.g., China, Vietnam, Cuba, and Burma), outlaw home and private schooling and mandate public school attendance for all. They fear alien forms of education. Interestingly, the emergence of young forms of liberal democracy in countries such as Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine went hand-in-hand with the legalization of home and private schooling.

Even public schools in liberal democracies, however, hold a danger for resident aliens. As legal philosopher John Robinson astutely notes, "Even the well-intentioned state tends to homogenize its citizens, delegitimizing all loyalties except those

that bind the individual to the state."⁴ With all the focus on American identity, stories, heroes, rituals, holidays, and traditions in American public schools, I am worried that my son will not remember what John Howard Yoder says about being a resident alien: "the ultimate meaning of history

will not be found in the course of earthly empires or the development of proud cultures, but in the calling together of the 'chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation,' which is the church of Christ."⁵ I see my son being trained to love America first and foremost, having his other identities neglected and being tempted to embrace earthly success instead of Christ. Thus, Christian parents who send their children to public schools must seek

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to supplement the education their children receive from the state with education for another form of citizenship.

A CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR

In a search for educational models of how resident aliens should approach education, I set before my own students the model of one of the fathers of modern education, Jon Amos Comenius (1592-1670). He provides an excellent example of many of the qualities mentioned above. If anyone knew what it meant to be a resident alien—in both the political and theological sense—Comenius knew. Brought up in present-day Czech Republic during times of political and religious strife, Comenius was forced to flee from his homeland, to which he was never able to return. He lived in seven different countries, and near the end of his life he wrote, “My life was a continuous wandering. I never had a home. Without pause I was constantly tossed about. Nowhere did I ever find a secure place to live.”⁶

Despite leading the life of a resident alien, Comenius became one of Europe’s most well-known educational reformers. His educational ideas were deemed revolutionary from the simple fact that he conceived that all education—in its purpose, structure, curriculum, and methods—should be influenced by the Christian story. For instance, with regard to the structure of education, he became one of the first educators to suggest the radical idea of “providing education to the entire human race regardless of age, class, sex, and nationality” including “young and old, rich and poor, noble and ignoble, men and women—in a word, of every human being born on earth.”⁷ The basis for this amazingly progressive and humanizing vision sprang from Comenius’s view of humanity as made in God’s image. “All men are born for the same main purpose; they are to be human beings, i.e., rational creatures, masters over the other creatures and images of the Creator,” Comenius wrote. “God himself often testifies that before Him all things are equal. Therefore if we educate only a few and exclude the rest, we act unjustly not only against our fellow men but also against God who wishes to be known, loved and praised by all.”⁸

In many other ways, Comenius gave himself to developing a whole vision of Christian education from which we can learn today. In his magnum opus, *The Great Didactic*, it is noteworthy to observe the fundamental basis for this vision. Comenius believed “the ultimate end of man is beyond this life.”⁹ He understood that Christian education *begins* with remembering that we are resident aliens.

Furthermore, a Christian educator should remind us that in the *end* one day we will no longer be aliens. In this respect, Christian education should directly contradict what is depicted in the well-known movie, *Dead Poets Society*. In the movie the teacher Mr. Keating (played by Robin Williams) takes his students into the school lobby on the first day of class. There, like most good educators, he places their learning and lives in the context of a

wider story. Yet, there is something disturbing about the story he tells. He reminds students that they are “food for worms” and that some day they will grow old and die. End of story. Therefore, he encourages them to “seize the day.” In the end, one should not be surprised that when the father of one student prevents his son from fulfilling his life’s passion, the son commits suicide. After all, without being able to seize the day today and with little to hope for beyond this fallen world, life becomes hopelessly tragic.

Education for Christian resident aliens should take place within the context of a different story. For resident aliens, the shattering of a dream does not lead to despair. Resident aliens have a dual citizenship. They also belong to another kingdom under another king, and so hope can never be extinguished.

NOTES

1 Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 160.

2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 216.

3 Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 28.

4 John H. Robinson, “Why Schooling Is So Controversial in America Today,” *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy*, 3 (1988), 519-533, here quoting 532.

5 John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 13.

6 Jon Amos Comenius, *Unum Necessarium*, 10, 10. Reprinted in *Johannis Amos Comenii Opera Omnia*, volume 18 (Prague, 1974), 127.

7 Jon Amos Comenius, *Comenius’s Pampaedia or Universal Education*, translated by A. M. O. Dobbie (Dover, UK: Buckland Publications, 1986), 19.

8 Jon Amos Comenius, “Selections from the Great Didactic,” in *Three Thousand Years of Educational Wisdom*, edited and translated by Robert Ulich, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 343.

9 Jon Amos Comenius, *The Great Didactic*, translated by M. W. Keatinge, second edition (1910) (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2005), 27.



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