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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Churchman

EDITORIAL I

It is a paradox of our times that as official society becomes ever less 'religious', the demand for spiritual things grows stronger by the day. The media naturally concentrate on the more bizarre aspects of this, leaving the impression that the current thirst for metaphysical values can be reduced to 'New Age' mysticism on the one hand, or dangerous fundamentalism on the other. But although both of these trends undoubtedly exist, neither has much influence beyond a very restricted circle of adherents. Even Islamic fundamentalism, which is undoubtedly the most widely supported form of religious extremism, is nothing like a majority creed, as recent events in Afghanistan have demonstrated. Even in that country, a fundamentalist regime was toppled in a few weeks, and there is no sign that anyone wants it back; whatever support it may once have had has evaporated like water in the desert.

Secularist intellectuals may not like it, but the broad mass of spiritually minded people is a good deal more level-headed than the extremists who grab the headlines. Most of them are decent, hard-working folk who realise that making money and being comfortably off are not the main reasons why they have been given life on earth. They may not be the most articulate of theologians, but somewhere deep down inside they know that they have been made in the image and likeness of God, and that without Him in their lives, nothing else has any real meaning. They look around them and see that a society which had gained the whole world in material terms has lost its soul, and it is that which they are most anxious to recover.

People like them are usually about as far removed from extremist fundamentalism as it is possible to get. They have no intention of trying to indoctrinate anyone, because they sense that the values which they profess cannot be forced down other people's throats. They would never dream of persecuting others, let alone of putting them to death, merely because they happen to disagree about what the right priorities in life are, and how they should be attained. Furthermore, and contrary to what some secularists would have us think, these people are in no sense obscurantists, either. They do not believe that a superstitious acceptance of outmoded beliefs is an acceptable substitute for rational, scientific inquiry, nor do they think that something like faith healing is an appropriate alternative to medicine. They are not against inoculations on specious religious grounds, and would be

horrified if someone were to tell them that no attempt should be made to help the poor and needy, on the ground that God has made some people worse off than others and matters should be left that way.

On the positive side, what these people want is fairly clear. They want a society in which the moral values traditionally preached by the Christian churches continue to be upheld both in public and in private. They want to feel safe when they walk down the street, knowing that they are most unlikely to be robbed by a drug addict who needs the cash for his next fix. They want to believe that other people will respect and practise a high standard of honest behaviour, so that the many small things in life which depend on mutual trust can continue to facilitate and enrich our common lives. Last, but not least, they want to feel that they have access to God at important moments in their lives, even if they are not the most regular of churchgoers.

These people are not heroic, and many of them may find it hard to commit themselves to a regular pattern of prayer and worship, but in their hearts they know that there is a God whose laws must be respected if life is to continue in a way which is beneficial to everyone. Committed Christians sometimes find these people exasperating, because they seem to be so near to the kingdom of God and yet for some reason, they fail to take the steps which would seal their belonging to it in a clear and unambiguous way. The committed tend to think that this broad mass of half-believers is a dead weight which drags the church down, because it blurs the boundaries between the saved and the damned, and makes it hard for many people to understand why it is so necessary to be seen to be on one side rather than on the other. In the past generation, a good deal of evangelism has been directed towards precisely these kinds of people, encouraging and at times even browbeating them into a more explicit commitment to Christ. This is not a bad thing, since by themselves, good intentions and unformed belief are not enough, and those of us who are born again in Christ can see all too clearly what a great gulf separates us from those who merely mean well and hope for the best.

Nevertheless, we also have to recognise that people of that kind form a very large percentage, perhaps even a majority, of the population, and that this too, is not necessarily a bad thing. The light of the gospel shines in power only in a minority of people, and that has been true ever since the beginning of the Christian church. But that light radiates and illumines a much wider

circle, and it is in this sense that Europe and Britain in particular, have been 'Christian' societies for so many centuries. This is of course well known, and it would be unremarkable, except that the churches have recently been given a new opportunity to minister to this broad band of the uncommitted in the form of a vastly expanded network of church schools.

No-one who knows anything about church schools would say that they were training camps for religious indoctrination, though criticisms of that kind have been made by the secularist lobby which dominates so much of the media, and which advertises its own brand of intolerant fundamentalism under the guise of 'freedom' and 'equality'. People who would abolish any kind of 'age of consent' and who would willingly permit almost any obscenity as a legitimate form of self-expression turn pale at the thought that anyone might be forced to remain silent while someone at the head of the class says a prayer, especially if that prayer is directed to the God of Jesus Christ. Do we not know that that is the first step down a road which will lead to a new holocaust? Can we not see that activities of that kind are an invitation to irrationality? Far better, in their view, to distribute real drugs to pupils, than to let them be exposed to religion, which as Marx said, was merely a popular substitute for opium.

This kind of thinking may seem outrageous to some, but a glance at the media will soon show that it is by no means an uncommon view in the newspapers or on television. The chattering classes who pass as our intellectual elite are often totally amoral, and see no reason why their own hedonism should not be made available to everyone. They justify their position by claiming that, of course, nobody will be forced to engage in any activity which they believe to be immoral, but the reality of life is a good deal less subtle than such arguments would suggest. Adolescents in particular do not find it easy to buck a trend, and it is probable that most of those who have been trapped in drugs or sexual abuse got involved on a dare from their peers, without giving any thought at all to the probable consequences of their actions.

It is the widespread breakdown of traditional values in many schools fuelled, as that is, by the application of such 'liberal' values to them, which has turned so many of the half-believers in our society away from the state's educational institutions and towards those of the church. So much has this been the case recently that the church is unable to cope with the demand, and needs more

resources to provide schools, especially secondary schools, where Christian values and discipline will govern the general ethos of the institution. State support for them is necessary, because it is particularly important that such schools should not discriminate on the basis of family income or intellectual ability, but be accessible to all who want that kind of education for their children. Of course, the church will want to encourage parents to support this education by regular attendance at worship and open Christian commitment in the home, but desirable as that undoubtedly is, it cannot be made an essential condition for the admission of children, many of whom would not be exposed to Christian teaching in any other way.

By and large, most Christian educators understand these things and many of them are excellent practitioners of their craft. Not all church schools are good, and nobody would suggest that there is no room for improvement in even the best of them, but their overall performance and popularity are a sufficient refutation of the critics who see them as socially divisive and obscurantist. The real danger does not come from poor performance, but from something else altogether. In a recent study of Church of England schools, Norman Dennis (*The Uncertain Trumpet*, London: Civitas, 2001) has pinpointed exactly what the problem is. After looking at the way in which church schooling has evolved over the years, he concludes that church schools have failed to make the mark which they could and should have made on society mainly because those responsible for constructing their ethos have been content to copy what the state schools have been doing. Rather than apply specifically Christian values to the curriculum, they have allowed the 'Christian' element to be reduced to daily assemblies and occasional visits to the local parish church. In other words, claims Mr Dennis, it is perfectly possible, even quite likely, that a pupil will go through a church school without ever being made aware of the claims of Christ, in whose name the school theoretically operates.

Mr. Dennis attributes this, no doubt correctly, to a wider malaise which affects the Church of England as a whole. Our church leaders are so busy trying not to offend outsiders that they do little or nothing to strengthen the faith of those who already believe. Despite the fact that nobody is likely to portray any Anglican bishop as an extremist fundamentalist, those who play that role seem to think that that is the image which they have to disown, regardless of the cost. Translated into Christian education, the result is a

curriculum which would rather inculcate respect for other faiths (not in itself an undesirable thing) than train a child in basic Christian beliefs. Church schools are not, and should not be, agents of conversion to Christianity. It is impossible for any teacher to do the Holy Spirit's work for Him, and to try would only make everything that much worse. What a church school can do, is provide an atmosphere in which believing children can grow in their faith, and come to the maturity of adulthood in a sympathetic environment. It can also give the uncommitted child the awareness that there is a God with standards which he expects of us and for which we shall one day be held accountable. That will be unlikely to produce conversion, but it will at least prepare the ground for that conviction of sin and judgement which is the necessary prelude to it.

Church schools are essentially a ministry to the half-committed, to those who want to do the right thing but who are unable or unwilling to go as far as we would like. They are a way of strengthening the weak, of protecting the smoking flax until it is ready to burst into flame once more, of letting the light of the gospel reflect its rays in dark corners which would otherwise be overlooked. We know that God will raise up to Himself witnesses from the most unlikely places, and nothing we do can prevent Him from acting according to His sovereign will. Even if every church school in the land were to be closed, there would still be young believers and vibrant Christian communities somewhere. But how many outsiders would have the opportunity to hear the Word of life? How far would Christian values penetrate the half-believing majority of the population? How safe, indeed, would the truly committed minority be to profess and practise its faith unmolested, because their commitment would at least be understood by the majority, even if the latter were not prepared to emulate it? It is here that church schools have a vital role to play, and it is for this reason that the Christianity taught in them should be robust and unapologetic. They will not of themselves fill the pews, but they can and should contribute to a society in which the values of those who do fill them are honoured and respected as the norm to which all should aspire, and by which all will one day be judged.

GERALD BRAY