

Religious Education in a Secular Pluralist Culture*

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For those of you who are British, the state of affairs with regard to Religious Education (RE) in this country will come as no news. It is widely paralleled in other Western European countries, as well as in New Zealand, parts of Australia and some Canadian states. To those who come from Eastern Europe, however, the situation here may seem strange and even bizarre. So I will rehearse a little of the history behind the current position, and try to explain its rationale. I will then, speaking as a lay Christian theologian, offer some comment on why I wholeheartedly endorse this policy, not in spite of, but because of my Christian commitment. And I will argue, in case it needs arguing, the merit of the fact that the vast majority of RE teachers are laypeople.

Though there are some significant differences between English and Scottish practice, the broad intentions behind the most recent (1993) Education Act for England and Wales and the 1992 Scottish Curricular Guidelines are identical, so I will use the language of both interchangeably for the purposes of this lecture.¹

Until the 1960s legislators in the UK were unembarrassed about the idea that schools were appropriate places for Religious Instruction (RI); schools had already been providing it as a statutory requirement for many decades. The relationship between church and state in both England and Scotland was sympathetic if not symbiotic, so that even in schools which had no explicitly confessional religious foundation it was virtually taken for granted that Christianity was the nurturing context of teachers and pupils alike.

When I was a child, at primary school in the 1950s, every day began with the whole class saying the Lord's Prayer. The timetable slot at secondary school was more likely to be called RI (Religious Instruction) than RE (Religious Education). Sometimes it was even called 'Scripture'. In my primary school, and even in my secondary school, all class teachers, except those who had a conscientious objection, were expected to undertake this task as part of their role as form-teacher, whatever their subject specialisation. This led to an amazing range of possibilities, from the Classics teacher who was a committed church member and took us travelling with St Paul round the classical world of the Eastern Mediterranean to the freethinking English teacher who encouraged debate between believers and sceptics.

As Colin Johnson documents,² as late as the 1950s and 1960s education com-

*This paper was first presented at the conference 'Reflections on the Laity – a Focus for Christian Dialogue between East and West' at Leeds University, 30 June–3 July 1998, organised jointly by Keston Institute and Leeds University Centre for Russian, Eurasian and Central European Studies (LUCRECES).

mittees were introducing their syllabuses with explicit and untroubled Christian intentions: 'that the boys and girls in our schools should be helped by worship and class teaching to grow up into the knowledge and love of God as we see him in Jesus Christ' (Hertfordshire, 1954); '... a truly Christian education ... leading to the knowledge of the Creator whose nature and character are made known in Jesus Christ our Lord' (Bristol, 1960); 'In the light of the teaching of Jesus Christ, we shall surely achieve our greatest aim when our pupils become full and practising members of a Christian Church' (Surrey, 1963).

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, however, a sea-change was taking place in British society, and more specifically in thinking about education in general and RE in particular.

Firstly, Britain was becoming an increasingly diverse society. The religious identity of many communities, especially in large urban centres, was no longer monolithically Christian. First- and second-generation immigrants from the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere meant a significant presence of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh worshippers in many cities, and of their children in many schools. What then did it mean for such children to be educated in a context of Christian worship and teaching about 'Jesus, *our* Lord'?

Secondly, the 1960s saw an explicit shift to 'child-centred' modes of education. This much-maligned commitment is currently represented by the Chief Inspector of Schools as an anarchic left-wing conspiracy to subvert decent standards of literacy, numeracy and morals. It was, in my judgment, merely the formal articulation of what all good teachers know: that education is primarily a mutual and relational process between persons, not primarily about the communication of subject matter (this is not, of course, to deny that there *is* proper curriculum content); that no educational progress can be made unless children are recognised not as empty vessels to be filled, but as particular selves whose life-experience, vocabulary, culture and intellectual curiosity are hugely variable; and that this diversity needs to be noticed, attended to, affirmed and built on in any educational task. In Britain today there is a ferocious debate running about the character of true education. This paper is not the place to discuss this debate as such, but it may emerge that at least some of the issues at stake in defining what the nature of RE should be are determined by views about education as such in the wider context.

Thirdly, the late 1960s precipitated a passionate critique of authoritarian attitudes in many areas of life. It would take greater sociological skills than I have at my disposal to explain why this should be so, but certainly it was an era of radical questioning. In the educational field the writings of radicals like Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire were widely translated.

Fourthly, there was a marked decline in church membership. The dominant empiricist and analytical philosophical climate put many religious believers on the defensive, while humanists felt confident enough to challenge structures of secular education which gave Christianity a privileged position. It was no longer a matter of social stigma, or even of eccentricity, to admit that one was a non-churchgoer or an agnostic.

Fifthly, seminal work was being done at university level. Ninian Smart at Lancaster was mapping the world's living faiths, not as competitors with Christianity, but phenomenologically, as comparable worlds of myth, ritual, doctrine, ethics, and so on. Alongside traditional theology faculties new departments of religious studies sprang up all over the country, committed not to the task of Christian apologetics but to the conscientious presentation of each faith as it would

be expressed and understood by its *own* believers. The suspension of judgment, or 'epoché', was a methodological principle, allowing the different faiths to be understood in their own terms. Until the late 1960s, if 'Comparative Religion' appeared at all on the school syllabus it would be only at the upper end of the school. There might be the odd reference to 'heroes and benefactors', including people like Gandhi or Anne Frank; but the idea that faiths other than Christianity might make a positive educational impact all through a child's development was unheard of. As early as 1969, however, taking up the Ninian Smart approach at school level, a group called the SHAP working party began campaigning for education in world religions throughout the whole curriculum, and public certificate examinations in Religious Studies were introduced on a par with those in History or Music. (Traditionally, RE, though compulsory, had not been examinable or liable to inspection.)

By the early 1970s there was a ferment of working parties, curriculum consultations and commissioned reports, fed by a growing literature of seminal writing.³ The outcome of these deliberations was a major change in the language of policy documents for RE. It was recognised, firstly, that there was an important distinction between the task of any faith community, including the Churches, and that of the schools; this was often expressed as the difference between 'nurture' and 'education'. In their dealings with young people the churches could encourage and invite their allegiance to specific forms of faith and worship; but this was not appropriate in school. Secondly, it was recognised that the teacher's professional role was to present all faiths to pupils in ways which would not distort the self-understanding of those within the faith community in question; it was not to express judgment on them. Thirdly, it was recognised that, just as a competent French teacher need not be a native French speaker, so a competent RE teacher need not be a Christian. There are, in fact, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, humanist and agnostic as well as Christian primary non-specialist and secondary specialist teachers of RE.

What this amounts to is a demand that RE be given its place in the curriculum on educational rather than religious grounds. It is not because it might be a matter of religious liberty that children should have access to religion in school, far less be constrained to some kind of confessional participation. Exposure to religion is seen as a matter of *educational* need, for all children, of whatever persuasion.

Certain ideas and phrases recur in the relevant literature. 'Religion raises questions of meaning, value and purpose'.⁴ 'Religious and Moral Education deals with the development of the person in relation to self-awareness, relationships with others, and the realm of beliefs, values and practices which go to make up a religious element in life.'⁵

Perhaps the most important contribution made by the study of world religions is that a religious education is offered which makes some sense educationally. This breadth of content enables religious education to present itself to the curriculum as a study which comprises many of the hopes and fears of the majority of people today, and thus a subject worthy of the most humane and scholarly attention.⁶

In a 1995 commentary on the *Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education* (England and Wales), the Christian Education Movement links the different aspects of the subject by defining how 'religiously educated school leavers' are to be identified. They will be people who are aware of their own beliefs and values and have a positive attitude to the search for meaning and purpose in life, who can identify those experiences common to all human beings which give rise to questions of meaning

and purpose, who are aware of the ways in which living belief systems have sought to answer such questions, and who are able to supply the insights of a living belief system to their own search for identity and significance.

Several things need to be noticed about these criteria.

Firstly, they transcend the cognitive. When the 'World Religions' movement in schools was peaking in the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a tendency to treat Religious Studies as merely a matter of objective information about faiths: 'Muslims believe the following things ...'; 'Sikhs have the following rituals ...'; 'Christians have the following ethical code ...'. Though it was never part of Ninian Smart's intention to reduce the study of religion to the assimilation of mere data in this sense, it was possible for teachers to misunderstand the nature of the phenomenological method, and to concentrate on externals at the expense of helping pupils understand what it was like to be inside a faith community. More recent studies have recognised that at the same time as imparting accurate knowledge RE is helping pupils to form attitudes, to acquire skills, to evaluate, to empathise, to mature in various ways. Many of these skills are also fostered by other areas of the curriculum, but the input of Religious and Moral Education (RME) relates them specifically to the world's living religious traditions. Pupils learn *from* religion as well as about it.

Secondly, they assume that Christianity does not have privileged status within the RE classroom. This is not entirely true, because in recognition of the fact that it has been the dominant cultural force in European history Christianity is given significantly more *time* in the curriculum than the other religions. (In Scotland, Christianity is given roughly a third of the RE curriculum time available between the ages of five and 14, while the other living faiths together are allocated about the same time.) But the RE teacher as teacher, whether Christian or not, is not meant professionally to be an *advocate* of Christianity over or against other religions. (The question of school worship raises rather different issues, but these are quite distinct from the issues raised by religion in the curriculum.)

Thirdly, they mean that children of all faiths learn *together* about all faiths, and from all faiths. Some have advocated the state funding of separate schools for separate religious communities. (There are some Jewish schools, a handful of Muslim schools and, in Scotland, a state-maintained Roman Catholic sector. In England many church schools (Anglican, Catholic, Quaker and others) exist both in the private sector and under the control of local authorities.) While some schools in the private sector actually separate pupils out into different faith communities both for RE and for worship or religious observance, the intention of the national legislation is that RE be a simultaneous or shared experience. RE is to provide neither a debating forum – there may be occasions for debate, but they would not be competitive faith-against-faith debates – nor a *laissez faire* pick-and-mix supermarket.

Fourthly, they assume that the object of the exercise is neither to generate religious belief nor to undermine it. It may be that pupils who are well taught in the context of the RE classroom may become more interested in or sympathetic towards religion, especially if they have never encountered it through family or friends in a largely secularised culture. It may also be that children brought up in a fairly closed domestic religious context may, as a result of their RE, find themselves asking questions which disturb the faith they have hitherto taken for granted. Either of these outcomes is an accidental by-product of the educational experience. It is no more the task of a Christian teacher to aim by his or her teaching to convert pupils to Christianity than it is of the conscientious humanist to deconvert them. The aim both share as educators is to maximise awareness, sensitivity, accuracy of discernment,

integrity, self-critical exploration and recognition of the contribution, for both good and ill, made to our society by the spiritual traditions which we encounter today. One RE teacher described her vocation as follows: 'I spend my whole working life trying to create conditions in which Hindu children can become better Hindus, Muslim children can become better Muslims and Christian children can become better Christians.' (She might also have said 'agnostic children become better agnostics, and humanist children better humanists'.)

This educational vocation seems to some members of faith communities dangerous, subversive and treacherous. The legislation was hotly contested in the House of Lords between 1988 and 1991, where the dominant negative phrase used was 'a multi-faith mishmash'. It has been one of the central concerns of John Hull to insist that this fear of open access for all children to many faith traditions is religiously as well as educationally deficient. It is educationally deficient because children are not being equipped to live in a pluralist culture if they are allowed to grow up in what is effectively a religious ghetto. Even if lip-service is paid to ideals of tolerance, the signal given by saying 'It is not good for us to learn about your faith, nor you about ours – we can live better without that' is a negative one. But Hull is also concerned as a Christian lay theologian with the *theological* defectiveness of separatism. It argues, he suggests, a tribal attitude towards God and people of other faiths, which is retrograde in the light of the best that Christianity can teach and exemplify. Hull calls his attitude 'religionism' and compares it with racism or sexism. Whereas he believes that the God of Judaism and Christianity invites us to unconditional solidarity with the whole human race in the image of Christ, religionist believers insist on a more limited solidarity: with those who are orthodox, with right believers only.

For various complex reasons, it seems to be difficult for religions to evolve without taking on religionist tendencies. Christianity had already assumed a religionist attitude towards Judaism before the close of the New Testament period, and these religionist attitudes were entrenched by the second century. Islam took on religionist features in its emergence from both Christianity and Judaism. Protestantism gathered religionist features during its early struggle with Catholicism. When reforming movements encounter opposition, they attack in order to defend themselves. These attacks quickly adopt caricature and stereotype as their weapons – so religious reform turns into religionism, and evangelism takes on religionist features. As the theology of a religion evolves under such pressures, religionist elements may be built into the very structure, to the point where the deconstruction will be resisted in the name of the integrity of the religious tradition itself.⁸

In *Christian Teachers and World Faiths* Colin Johnson argues that truth, love and dialogue are the three primary imperatives which emerge from belief in a generous and Christlike God. All three are involved in good RE.

There are some, hostile to all religious faiths, who would advocate multi-faith RE because it appears to reduce and relativise the truth-claims of any one faith. ('Some people like milk in their tea, others don't. A liberal society allows for all tastes unless somebody is being hurt.') But no one could begin to teach *any* religious faith, its stories, its values, its commitments, without making it clear that such things are often, to believers, matters of life and death. Any pupil engaging with the recognition of major faith traditions, then, has to grapple with questions of revelation and

diversity, with the nature of human religious belonging, with points of potential conflict and/or convergence, with critiques of authority and tradition. This process in itself may provide occasions of disclosure for pupils who are sceptical enough about taking *anything* that seriously! The idea that a society where everyone was cynical about truth might be a wounded one might just be novel to them. It would be worth testing the axiom of western liberalism that a society torn by ideological or religious conflict is clearly diseased by looking at the polar opposite sickness. Even a non-doctrinaire exploration of religions, then, must help children, albeit obliquely, to grapple with truth-questions.

Similarly, from a Christian perspective, the encounter is an occasion for earthing the often sentimental notions of 'love' which Christians settle for. It is not 'love' to encourage and endorse religious apartheid in school or anywhere else, especially if one realises that genuine faith is not peripheral to identity but central to it. If we take the line of *laissez faire* permissiveness – you get on with your believing and I'll get on with mine – not only may we be sheltering from the force of the truth-questions: we are not even beginning to enact the corollary of loving, that one takes seriously what is precious to the other.

The need for dialogue arises, then, from the concern for truth and the commitment to love. But dialogue needs encounter. I believe that the skills and lessons we have been learning painfully and all too slowly for nine decades in the Christian ecumenical movement now need to be transferred to the conversation between faiths, and between all the peoples of faith and those who would regard themselves as religionless, or as critics of religion. This is required not just by enlightened self-interest (global survival) but by the hope of finding God present in the other.

Here, finally, I come to the question about the role of the laity. It is, of course, occasionally the case that the school teachers are also priests or ministers. (Usually, however, they are not.) It is not, however, *in virtue* of their ordination that they teach. The fact that they are clergy is not relevant to their professional task. It may indeed be a handicap unless they are extremely clear and conscientious about the differentiation of roles. While no teachers of any faith need disguise the fact that they belong to a given faith, their role in the classroom is *not* the role of an authority, of a custodian or advocate of that faith. They may, of course, commend the faith they profess – or otherwise – by the way they behave, the courtesy with which they treat colleagues or pupils, the integrity with which they answer questions, their willingness to do justice to others who believe differently, and so on. But this is a very different matter from using their professional authority in the classroom to take advantage of the situation on behalf of Christianity (or Islam, Judaism, or any other particular faith). On the contrary, as Colin Johnson puts it, 'We are surely making a more authentic Christian witness when we devote ourselves to the service of other faith communities than when we seek a position of privilege and power for Christianity'.⁹ The fact that by far the largest proportion of RE teaching is done by lay people (whether of Christian or other faiths) seems to me to send several important signals to children. Whatever their home or community contexts, it makes it clear to them that matters of religious and moral identity are not simply of concern to 'insiders'. The range of understandings of life held by RE teachers marks a 'democratisation' of the quest for truth. This state of affairs does not, of itself, rule out the possibility of claims to revelation. There is, indeed, an Association of Christian Teachers, most of whose members would probably want to defend such claims personally, as would many other individual teachers. But the structural impact of welcoming teachers of any faith or none to teach mixed classes of children is a powerful one. It endorses the child's right to

come with questions from anywhere, to be encouraged towards an uncoerced maturing in life-understandings, to be entitled to learn from the plurality of the whole complex world we inhabit.

I am not, of course, suggesting that clergy are incapable of such openness and sensitivity. But it would be extremely difficult to overcome suspicions of protectionism, and even more difficult to disprove them, if it were only clergy who were entrusted with the religious education of their respective flocks, not to speak of the whole school community. It would be ridiculous to suggest that there are not clergy who can respond with positive educational, or even theological, delight to the multiplicity of faiths and understandings of life. But many do not. Quite apart from the fact that they often lack pedagogical skills or concerns, many chaplains, according to well-documented evidence, cannot distinguish educational and evangelical roles, and have little sensitivity to the arrogance of addressing non-Christians as if every sane, moral and humane person must eventually come to Christian belief. Professionally, many clergy spend most of their waking hours in contexts which reinforce their isolation from the diversity and pluralism of the world beyond the church: acting as pastors to believers, attending church committees, reading theological or devotional material which will help them prepare sermons, celebrating liturgies. It requires a more heroic effort on their part, perhaps, for them to reach an instinctive understanding of what every secular teacher knows – that in contemporary Britain, religious belonging is never something to be taken for granted.

In spite of the resurgence of various fundamentalisms in contemporary society, and in spite of the survival of some relatively intact societies which have not so far shared Western Europe's 'Enlightenment' experience, nor learned the characteristic 'hermeneutic of distrust' of postmodern consciousness, I doubt whether the tendencies described above are going to be reversed. While I am sure that the axioms of 'modernity' – a global rationality, a shared liberal ethical consensus, the epistemological virtue of science – cannot be held as complacently as they once were, it is the case that the whole world is now bound up in an inextricable connectedness in which every culture is liable to encounter every other. Global capitalism and global communications systems are but two manifestations of this phenomenon. Many people, especially those with most vested interest in the survival of institutions, are afraid that the opening up of faith-cultures in the course of this process can only be destructive. My hope is rather that the next millennium might see a genuine dialogue of peoples – a lay dialogue in which the human community edges a little further towards maturity, trusted with knowledge, trusted with questions, trusted with decisions, not infantilised by unworthy fears that ordinary people cannot cope with knowing one another far more deeply than they do. The process will need generations of unafraid 'laity', butchers and bakers and candlestickmakers. I believe that the way RME is practised in the UK can contribute to it.

Many people, some Christians and some of other faiths, distrust the religious pluralism of multiethnic Europe. Others can just about cope with the pluralism so long as it remains strictly religious, but balk at the secular or irreligious lifestyles which seem to predominate in many areas of European life. Others again continue to associate all faith-positions with obscurantism and oppression, seeing them as heirs of religious intolerance and barbarity. My hope is that the children we are now educating will be helped by the current practices in the area of religious and moral education to be adult citizens of a more fruitful world than we have so far managed to create. It will be a world which will risk mutual interrogation and even critique; but it will do so on the basis of a degree of shared appreciation and understanding of

the diversity of faiths, ideologies and understandings of life rather than on the basis of fear, ignorance, stereotyping and distancing. As John Hull succinctly puts it:

In myself, I am not particularly holy, and perhaps in yourself you are not wonderfully holy, but the ground between us is holy. The boundary which separates shall become the holy ground, the common ground, the mutuality of response and responsibility which makes us truly human. Holiness is discovered through encounter.¹⁰

This is the creed of one Christian layman. It is also the creed which lies behind contemporary, lay-taught, secular-authorised Religious and Moral Education in the United Kingdom. It is quite different from relativist indifferentism. It is also different from a merely libertarian concession to the right of parents or of religious communities to have their children nurtured in any faith of their choice. It is, rather, the outworking of an educational vision which sees children's spiritual growth being nourished as they learn to cope creatively with the complexity of the global community in the third millennium.

There are many areas left untouched by this paper. The sensitive area of what is called sometimes 'collective worship', sometimes 'religious observance', in particular raises different issues from those raised by RE. Whether non-denominational schools should in any sense be worshipping communities is a hotly contested question. Indeed, whether they *can* be is a matter of much dispute. Which elements of worship or worship-like activity should be legally compulsory and which discretionary is a matter arousing much passion. I took the decision to concentrate on the curricular area of Religious and Moral Education because I believe that explaining the rationale for having REM taught to children of diverse backgrounds by lay teachers of diverse backgrounds points the direction to the solution of problems in other areas. I believe that it is the task of the whole community, pluralist as that is, to work out what, if anything, becomes a convincing analogue to 'liturgy' within the context of current legislation and the kind of REM curriculum I have been describing. That, however, is another long and unfinished story.

Notes and References

- ¹ Throughout this paper I am hugely indebted to the work of John Hull, professor at the Centre for Religious Educational Development and Research (CREDAR) at Birmingham University; and to Colin Johnson, my colleague in the Christian Education Movement and its publications director. In particular, I shall make frequent reference to John Hull, *Utopian Whispers* (Religious and Moral Education Press, Norwich, 1998) and to Colin Johnson, *Christian Teachers and World Faiths* (CEM, Derby, 1996).
- ² Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–10.
- ³ Edwin Cox, *Changing Aims in Religious Education* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966); Ninian Smart, *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (Faber and Faber, London, 1968); Paul Hirst, *Moral Education in a Secular Society* (University of London Press, 1974); J. W. D. Smith, *Religious and Secular Education* (St Andrew's Press, Edinburgh, 1975); and a host of others.
- ⁴ *Moral and Religious Education in Scottish Schools: Report of a Committee Appointed by the Secretary of State for Scotland* (HMSO, 1972) (The Millar Report).
- ⁵ *Religious and Moral Education, 5–14: National Guidelines* (Scottish Office Education Department, Edinburgh, November 1992).
- ⁶ Hull, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
- ⁷ Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁸ Hull, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁹ Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹⁰ John Hull, *Mishmash: Religious Education in Multi-Cultural Britain: A Study in Metaphor* (Univ. of Birmingham and the Christian Education Movement, 1991).