

Debate organised by Farnham Humanists, Nov 8th 2005 :

‘Faith -based schools should form no part of a State education system’

Secunder’s speech

Supporting the motion :

Proposer : Marilyn Mason, Education Officer for the British Humanist Association

Secunder : Revd Dick Wolff, United Reformed Church minister

Opposing the motion :

Proposer : Rt Rev Christopher Hill, Bishop of Guildford

Secunder : Lord Ronald Dearing CB, Chairman of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s ‘Church Schools Review Group’ 2000 - 2001

Chair : Alec Leggatt (Farnham Humanists)

‘Faith-based’ actually *means* ‘local church or mosque with vested interest’

When the government talks about a ‘faith-based school’ what it actually means is giving power – power over admissions and appointments criteria, power over a school’s ‘hidden curriculum’, power to spend large sums of taxpayers’ money – to a particular church, or a mosque committee or whatever. Now, a world faith is a huge, often turbulent, often creative, enormously *wide* variety of beliefs and practices. Religion is far too important, too wide and too *interesting* a subject for one church or one mosque to control, especially since (for all its undoubted good intentions) it cannot help but have its *own* vested interest – namely, that of its own survival or growth as an organisation. (Indeed, in Lord Dearing’s report, ‘The Way Ahead’, the Church of England has made that vested interest explicit)

It’s about power

I read Lord Dearing’s Report in preparation for this and was amazed. Commissioned by Anglicans, drawn up by Anglicans (with a couple of Roman Catholic observers) from the work of sub-groups composed entirely of Anglicans, it proposes further strengthening the control of Anglican churches over ‘their’ school, and developing a specifically Anglican ethos. There is hardly a hint that there is a Christian world outside the Anglican Church, no hint of a feeling of mutual *accountability* to the wider *Christian* community or even a desire to work with it. I’m afraid that tallies with my own experience of being kept on the margins of a church school in a community I served.

The lack of awareness of how the Church of England’s power is perceived outside of itself makes the report sound complacent and patronising to the wider community : “We

have your interest at heart because we're Christians and we love everybody – but we don't want to give you any power or influence in our schools”(1).

Look : I've nothing against Anglicans *per se*. Some of my best friends and colleagues are Anglicans. I spent ten years working at a cathedral, for heaven's sake. My point is about *power*, and what happens when particular groups are given power and privilege. I have little reason to believe my own Reformed Church would behave any differently given the same historical privilege and cosy relationship with power that the Cof E has – I only have to look at Reformed Church history in Northern Ireland or South Africa to see *that*.

Power tends to become self-serving and restrictive. We need power to be shared, not concentrated in fewer hands.

Since Lord Dearing's report claims that the drive behind Anglican schools' inclusiveness is Jesus Christ's call to love, I might note that the single greatest act for which Jesus is celebrated was the humble act of allowing others to have power over him – *they* defined the terms in which that love was to be expressed, and it wasn't comfortable.

The policy is short-term political problem-solving, not radical leadership with children's interests at heart

Religion is, I admit, a tricky thing for the State to handle in a society as pluralist as ours which has so far dealt with religion by burying its collective head in the sand and leaving it to the church as a sort of private hobby club. The existence of (on the one hand) so many church schools and (on the other hand) secular schools that covertly raise two fingers to OFSTED and keep religion and

faith at arm's length ("we don't 'do' God *here* if we can help it") is symptomatic of this problem.

It's led inevitably to the growth of many private Muslim schools operating behind closed doors, which in the present climate is a source of alarm to the Prime Minister, who, understandably, is keen to get them out in the open, into the state sector, accountable, and more inclusive (2). But, given the choice, would he choose *this* mess as a *starting* point? Whilst the policy is understandable in the short term, really it's an exercise in limiting the damage caused by years of the education service's gross neglect of religion as if it were some mildly interesting private foible. It isn't; but 'Religion-controlled schools' cannot be a *long-term* solution.

What is the Government's *real* agenda here? Is it because it thinks 'parent power' is a vote-winner? Or is it, really, part of the 'War on Terror'? I thought education was about the *children*.

Power-sharing

No, the Government's primary political duty in a plural society is to ensure that, in the long term, school governors' power is somehow *shared* between all the locally appropriate groups and organisations with a legitimate interest – religious and ethnic groups in particular – and insist on proper dialogue and accountability. That is achievable albeit hugely difficult – but this desperate 'faith-based schools' policy is going in the opposite direction, and could backfire disastrously.

With *power-sharing*, who knows what goodwill and support could emerge from local communities?

'Objectivity' about religion is impossible and leads to alienation

A good school is a precious place because it's where children can safely explore their world independently of their parents. It's where our future society is being born.

That *doesn't* mean (as the *Institute for Public Policy Research* advised last year) making vulnerable children put their parents' religion (as it were) on a sociologist's laboratory bench and pull it to pieces. I wish I had time to read you Archbishop Rowan Williams' devastating and witty critique of *that* approach (see appendix) . That arrogant 'secularist' approach has worked really well for integrating disaffected young Muslims in France hasn't it?

Bishop Christopher is quite right, I feel – it's true that 'people of faith' can connect with each other, even across the faith divide, better than people of no religious faith. But that's not an argument for giving control of schools to one particular religious organisation. One place where that dialogue could most *usefully* happen is round a governors' table, as equal partners.

We need schools which honour 'their' parents and enable religious specialism with breadth

Parents need to be able to trust a school not to be patronising about their faith position and thus undermine their children's respect for them – *that* is their human right, Lord Dearing; no one has a 'right' to expect the taxpayer to fund a school that can restrict admissions to people of their particular brand of religion – but they also need to trust their children to really explore the variety in religion. Why shouldn't they start by being enabled to really explore the full depth and variety in their own? (3) Why not have a curriculum course in 'Shari'a law

and its implications for British society' in non-affiliated state schools, taught by people who really live it from the inside? But we need schools also to enable children of Christian or Muslim parents to see that their *parents'* culturally-bound version of Christianity or Islam is only one of many and not short-change them with silly, simplistic ideas that "all Christians believe x, all Muslims believe y". Vital, then, that schools are prised away from control by particular religious groups, which are always (as the Dear- ing report makes clear) tempted to reduce 'faith' to their particular version of it.

Schools must allow religious insight to shape their ethos

But if this is to be achieved (and this is a crucial last point) we need schools which are humble enough not just to *tolerate* different religions (4) but actively *learn* from them and *allow their school ethos to be challenged and changed by them*. Has Islam *nothing* of value to teach us? For example, doesn't the witness of many Muslim girls that modesty in dress gives people more *freedom* raise an interesting challenge that all teenagers might at least usefully reflect on?

If this vital mutual exploration and renewal doesn't happen in our *schools*, what chance of it happening on the streets where our children can no longer play safely together?

In response to the debate from the floor :

I've heard various expressions of hurt and bewilderment : "We're doing such a *good* job in church schools, and we pioneered schools in the first place. How could anyone want to undermine that?" It put me in mind of the period of decolonisation, when it was becoming clear that for all Britain's efforts in owning and running large swathes of Africa, Africans themselves were starting to say (with varying degrees of politeness) "Thank you for all you're doing and have done. But we think it's time you handed over power now." And yes, some of them made a bit of a fist of it, and others didn't. And there were colonialists who were bewildered and hurt, and couldn't understand why the Africans were so ungrateful. Some of them were born and bred in Africa and knew no other life.

In this country, following church initiatives in setting up schools, the State (as we've heard) eventually threw in its full backing in 1871 (5). 134 years later, the Church of England is still in colonial control of over a quarter of our schools and, as the Dearing Report makes clear, is increasingly staggering under the 'white man's burden'! They can't find the staff, and their vicars are cracking up under the strain.

But look – why the *defensiveness*? No one's talking about closing church schools down, or driving the church influence out of schools. In fact I'm arguing for the exact opposite of the latter. We're not calling for revolution, and we're not calling for divisiveness – the divisiveness, the polarisation, is *already there* in the system as it is now, and the government's proposing to make it *worse*. I've made it quite clear that what we want is a gradual, long-term, sharing of power by the current 'colonial power' in our education system – a gradual ecumenism (in

the widest sense of the word). OK, encouraged with a bit of legislation from the DfES if the colonisers find it hard to share power.

To the Methodist governor of a CofE school I would say – I'm delighted to hear of the breadth of power-sharing in your local school. It wasn't my experience, but I'm glad it's been yours. But I don't see why that's an argument for 'faith-based' state schools. All it demonstrates to me is that what I'm arguing for is *good*, and *works*. Why not make it *policy* – for *all* schools?

I have to confess I can't grasp Lord Dearing's argument that I'm wanting to drive the church out of schooling for the poor. Presumably, he's thinking that if the state refuses to fund CofE schools (which no one here has suggested) they'll have to go private, and therefore become schools for the rich.

Look, the Church has a passion for the poor. It always will, its in its bones. We're not running Africa any more, but the Church in Britain is probably more engaged in Africa than it's ever been, and all of that energy is now focussed on anti-poverty work instead of running the country. What's more, there are millions of African Christians enthusiastically sharing the work. A Church of England freed from controlling schools could focus all of its considerable expertise (not least in inter-faith dialogue) on working with all state-sponsored schools, developing meaningful RE and working out *with other partners to share the work* how to really 'do God' in a school's ethos. Who knows, we might find others catching the vision?

One speaker talked about the Christianity in church schools being the medium for passing British values and culture on in a multi-ethnic society. Er – what? In my church building four congregations worship : a Brazilian

pentecostal group, a Punjabi Evangelical Church, a Korean International Presbyterian Church, and our church (which includes a significant contingent of Ugandan former refugees). One of the great strengths that Christianity and Islam in particular have to bring is that these faiths *cross the ethnic divides*, and provide the ground for creative multi-culturalism. But there's *less* chance of that happening if a school is controlled by one particular church or mosque, because they tend to be dominated by members of one ethnic group – for reasons of language as much as anything else.

Down the ages, the Church (of all denominations) has been a great innovator. We invented hospitals, but we're happy not to have to *run* them any more. But we're still in there, innovating – didn't the Church pioneer hospices (a welcome recent addition to the NHS's services)? Freed from the total responsibility for owning and running schools wouldn't the Church be freed up to innovate?

To my United Reformed Church colleague who is (I think she said) a deputy head in of a CofE school, and who greatly values the Christian ethos because it supports the ethos she's wanting to develop at home : that is precisely why I am so passionate about this issue and want to see an end to faith-based schools (i.e. schools controlled by one church or mosque). I'm envious of her, because I wasn't so lucky. The comprehensive school that my children went to did nothing whatsoever to support *my* hopes that my children would be given space to explore faith questions. It was one of those many state schools that effectively raise two fingers to OFSTED and say "We don't 'do' God here". The bishop's story of crass insensitivity to religious faith in secular education is, sadly, all too common.

One speaker has pointed up the problem in his use of the phrase 'Non-Faith Schools' (meaning, schools that are unaffiliated to a religious organisation). The problem is precisely that polarisation has already happened, and if this misguided policy is pushed through will be made worse. Thus on the one hand there are 'faith schools' and, on the other hand, other schools some of which then take the existence of the faith schools as a licence to be 'non-faith' schools. As Marilyn said, schools are not like baked beans – I didn't have much choice over which school my children went to. And besides, as some of our humanist speakers have said clearly, the British Humanist Association doesn't want 'non-faith schools' either.

I certainly don't want *any* school to be a 'non-faith' school. I want *all* schools to be schools of faith where students can explore and deepen their own inherited religious tradition as well as mixing with others on parallel paths. But why on earth does a school have to be *owned and run by one church or mosque* for that to happen?

I think it was Bishop Christopher that told the story of the Church of England school headmaster who had won respect from Muslim young people. Precisely. What is far more effective in conveying a sense of faith ethos to children is not who's on the governors, but inspirational teachers of religious faith and integrity, who are freed up to allow their faith to be explicit instead of kept secret because "we don't 'do' God here". The problem with religiously-affiliated schools is that, as long as they exist, and as long as there are schools that think of themselves as 'non-faith' schools, teachers like that will be tempted out of secular schools and the problem will only get worse.

Dick Wolff, November 2005

Disclaimer

The speaker wishes to make clear that these are his personal views, and they should not be taken as representing the official policy of the United Reformed Church, either nationally or locally to Farnham.

Footnotes

1 *Way Ahead* 3.35 - 3.36 (the 'Dearing Report') : "In its educational role, the Church is working to serve that common good, and to develop greater mutual understanding, and is not aiming to promote a sectarian endeavour. This understanding leads us to conclude that the notions of distinctiveness and inclusiveness are not mutually exclusive. A distinctive approach to education needs to be matched by openness to all elements of society if introversion is to be avoided. That is the strength of the community of Church schools . . . Our own vision of inclusiveness is based on Christ's commandment to love all people."

2 "Mr Blair is said to be determined to end the current system which sees private Muslim schools operating behind closed doors, offering a religion-dominated education little different to the madrassas of Pakistan. An important condition of state funding will be that Muslim schools operate an open admissions policy and take children of other faiths." *Telegraph*, 7th August 2005

3 "RE as a benign tour of picturesque forms of life in which – it is tacitly assumed – no-one around here is likely to be involved is of limited educational benefit." . . "My own sense of the inadequacy of some RE in our schools has little to do with a fear of indoctrination one way or the other; more with precisely the lack of 'thick description', to borrow the language of the anthropologists, the lack of a strategy to help people see how religious traditions cope with difficulty. The inevitable projects on religious festivals, on rites of passage and on what different religions think about a scattering of moral issues will not on their own deliver much feeling for living with difficulty or of the concrete personal resources of a faith"

(Rowan Williams, *ibid.*)

4 Rowan Williams, 2003 : "the secular trend for teaching tolerance all too often showed itself in teenagers as an incurious co-existence, even a bland acceptance of mutual ignorance and non-understanding, in the name of not passing judgment"

5 incidentally, it is my understanding that it was only at that point that Jews, Roman Catholics and Non-Conformist Christians were admitted to higher education, from which the Church of England up to that point had excluded them.

Appendix

Part of a paper by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, entitled 'Belief, Unbelief and Religious Education' presented at Downing Street, Monday March 8th 2004

". . . religious activity is simply one of those things that human beings characteristically do. Humans pray or meditate just as they sing, swear, tell jokes, bury their dead, do pure mathematics or write plays. While praying is distinctive in that it purports in most religious traditions to relate to a reality not contained in the catalogue of things you can see or sense lying around inside the universe (though the pure mathematician might have something to say about that, come to think of it), it is not easily reduced to the level of the sort of thing you need a reason for doing.

I agree that this doesn't settle the question of truth; but it suggests at least that this question is not as straightforward as it might look to an observer whose main concern is to start from the question of whether there is enough evidence to make addressing a divine agent a 'rational' thing to do. And in spite of some sophisticated arguments from certain Christian philosophers in recent decades, it is at least awkward to assimilate the act of faith and the practice of prayer to a decision based on a positive balance of probabilities. . .

The sense of fit, the sense of compulsion by a story of authoritative and total transformation of the world's self-definition, the sense of personal address or vocation, of personal and corporate liberation and so on – all these things are habitually involved in retaining or acquiring religious belief, but are significantly different from a process of evaluating evidence. . .

Neutrality may look like liberation within the basic framework of enlightenment views of human nature; but the absence of God is a darker and more complex cultural matter than that."

Outcome of the debate

79 for the motion, 65 against, 14 abstentions. (Speakers and chairman not voting) Farnham Humanists have 20 members.