

Church of England Schools as Centres for Religious Abuse or Avenues for Religious Nurture?

(The rights of children to encounter faith in the school context)

Abstract

After an overview of the British context in 2005 and its ambivalent attitude to Church Schools, this article explores the issues of potential religious abuse, alongside a preferred holistic Christian discipleship. The final section explains how Church schools can operate in a way that encourages Christian nurture and prevent religious abuse. The debate is set within the framework of children's rights.

Key Words

Faith Schools, Religious Abuse, Nurture, Children's Rights.

Current Context

In the period following the 9/11 attack on the twin towers of New York, there has been a renewed suspicion of the value of faith schools. Despite the British government's increased interest to provide 100 more Anglican Secondary Schools (Dearing 2001), the British public is ambivalent. On the one hand there is an articulated sense that Church schools are successful in creating an ethos that appeals to a popular Christian spiritual worldview and that this is conducive to an inclusive yet distinctive form of education. (The last few years have also seen the period in which Islamic Foundation Schools have appeared alongside Anglican Catholic and Jewish Foundation Schools). On the other hand, a mainstream poll in 2005 suggested that 2/3 majority were against government plans to increase the number of state aided faith schools. It is important to note that such polls do not distinguish between faith schools (Church of England, Catholic, Methodist, Islamic, Jewish or Sikh Schools) and Church schools (Church of England, Catholic or Methodist Schools).

The reasons for this public ambivalence are complex, but I would suggest two that are evident and which arise out of recent history.

Firstly, the public increasingly suspect whether faith schools are the reason for faith conflict. Whilst it can be argued that religions can provide the keys to a deeper common value basis (Sacks 2004) many fear that they also cause, or at least fuel, the tribal skirmishing.

It is becoming more apparent that some of the greatest energy of religion lies on the evangelical and fundamentalist margins – places where difference from other faiths

is more important than unity, where separation is more appealing than reconciliation with other religions. In the British context there is a fear that the fundamentalist wings of Islam will lock horns with their Christian counterparts, causing further hostility. It is therefore conceivable to the public that faith schools could be centres of religious abuse where susceptible children are the subject of over zealous adults using religion as a tool for conformity. In this article, I wish to consider this justifiable concern and yet will argue that church schools can promote a global citizenship by drawing on religious energy that emerges from the centre of faith, rather than from the margins.

Secondly, the public increasingly wonder if faith schools are built on faith that is wholesome or beliefs that are based on psychological projection. There is a growing understanding of the way that faith is not necessarily a means for releasing love, justice and clarity but might be a complex web of psychological control whereby the believer is manipulated by the darker forces of the psyche. In this article I will amplify this uncertainty and yet argue that it is possible for faith schools to create a zone in which faith is critically examined, as well as encouraged, allowing for a nurture into wider society and equipping for a life enhanced by positive resources.

In order to identify faith as something that is universal and of value to the child's development on both psychological and theological disciplines, I will also appeal to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child where articles 12 and 14 appeal to the child's right to develop and express their views freely and articles 2 and 36 speak about protecting the child from all forms of discrimination and exploitation.

Religious Abuse

Like others who have explored the area of abusive behaviour in the context of religion, I take the view that abuse constitutes a misuse of power (see Layzell 1999 p108, Rutter 1989 p48, Poling 1991 p23, Walker 1997 p5-9). Power is that energy that enables us to exist and to act and therefore, to some extent, is something that we all possess in different degrees. As a result, at any given time, we are experiencing senses of powerfulness or of vulnerability. There is a relationship between power and vulnerability because we cannot be intimate with another nor can we learn without being vulnerable.

In any educative context, some risk is also present, because our learning opens us up to another intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually. As Layzell writes (1999 p109/110),

“we have to trust to the goodness of another if we ourselves are to grow; we open to them some aspect of our identity – the part of us which is waiting for birth; and we place our hope in their hands as we look forward to what may come to be.”

In the realm of education the relationship between the teacher and the pupil in the school context is biased towards the teacher. Similarly in the love context, it is the parent who has more power. Rutter (1989 p30) says that such power is conferred “as part of an ancient moral bargain” in which the person with power “holds a saved trust” to guard the welfare of the other until what is vulnerable has grown into strength.

Religious abuse occurs when those in power exploit the vulnerability of those in their care in order to further their vested interest. And whatever form it takes (emotional, physical or sexual), abuse always has spiritual consequences.

It needs to be noted that this term 'religious abuse' should not be confined to the widespread notion of sexual abuse perpetrated by church leaders on children.

Interestingly, Walker (1997 p6) comments that it is rare that religious abuse is,

"deliberately orchestrated by unscrupulous persons." He says, "more typically, it results from well-meaning, misguided or deluded authority figures; or simply through the unreflective practice of sedimented traditions and conventional wisdom."

Similarly, Poling (1991 : 31) notes that abuse can happen in 'blind zones' created by communities where "certain relationship systems are regarded as normative and therefore not open to scrutiny."

A well known example of religious abuse in the home context is seen in that style of parenting employed by the eminent zoologist Philip Gosse, a Victorian member of the Plymouth Brethren. Although he clearly loved his son Edmund, Philip Gosse prevented him from reading poetical works of imagination and forced him to rather consider his own scientific insights set within a fundamentalist worldview. The pain that this caused was to emerge in the book 'Father and Son', by Edmund Gosse (1907), in which this form of religious abuse is seen to vex and subdue a creative and sensitive child in his early spiritual exploration.

Bunge (2004) details six different worldviews arising from scriptural interpretations that offer ways in which the church has considered children. They are;

- 1) Gifts of God and sources of joy,
- 2) Sinful creatures and moral agents,
- 3) Developing beings who need instruction and guidance,
- 4) Fully human and made in the image of God,
- 5) Models of faith and sources of revelation,
- 6) Orphans, neighbours and strangers in need of justice and compassion.

Of these, interpretations 2 and 3 have been known to lead to brutal parenting or abusive educational systems.

Some of these are documented by Julius Rubin in his book, ' Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America' (1994) where he notes the 'soul murder' of protestant parents attempting to break the will of their children. Similarly, Alice Miller's ' For Your Own Good' (1984) traces the harsh discipline towards children found in Germany in the early part of the twentieth century.

The details of child sexual abuse in the Church are covered more thoroughly by Parkinson(1997) and Parsons (2000).

Within the education systems, any 'closed world' way of teaching religion that is not ever open to critique or investigation, may also be considered to be abusive.

Clearly a faith school would be considered abusive if it operated with physical or sexual abuse as has been proved to be the case in some well publicised cases within certain Roman Catholic or Anglican orphanages. What is less clear is how a faith school might be abusive in emotional or spiritual terms. In one sense, all educational establishments operate from a set of values, whether religious or secular and with their own set of assumptions, as has been demonstrated by Jack Mezirow (1991) and his work in transformative education.

If it is accepted that all education has its own inner assumptions, then what is required is for the educational provider to specify the hidden curriculum from which they operate. To do this, a religious school needs to clarify the particular religion and brand of that religion in which it functions. If this is transparent and the underlying assumptions laid open to scrutiny, with the full set of inspections that are now customary, religious abuse is less likely to take place.

In the British school system, Church of England schools are either Voluntary Aided (VA) (largely governed by Church appointed governors) or Voluntary Controlled (VC) (equally governed by Church and LEA appointed governors). The VA school will teach a separate RE syllabus and have a separate section 48 inspection at around the same time as an Ofsted inspection. A section 48 inspection will always follow the government (Ofsted) inspection by a short period and be conducted by inspectors appointed by the Church. The section 48 inspection will scrutinise RE, Christian ethos and collective worship. The VC school, at the time of inspection, will not be separately inspected for RE (which will be covered by the overall inspection) but it will be scrutinised by an individual inspection of Christian ethos and collective worship.

This public inspection, alongside a Church inspection, has the effect of keeping religion transparent and in an open domain – the place where religion is less likely to become abusive.

In the church school, RE is taught as a professional subject. As Hull (1998) writes, defending Religious Education as “the utopian whisper of the curriculum into the ear of Britain,”

"It is taught by the regular teachers to the normal classes. Churches and other religious bodies have no formal influence on the selection and training of religious education teachers. In primary schools, the subject is taught by the ordinary classroom teachers, while in secondary schools, graduates in religious studies and theology are trained as specialists, just as are specialists in geography, mathematics and other subjects. In fact, religious education is a completely secularised branch of religious studies. This is one of its unique strengths. Moreover, it is taught to all children in the common classroom, regardless of any religious background which the children may or may not have. If Christianity were to be taught to Christian children by Christian teachers, and if Islam were to be taught by Muslim teachers to Muslim children, the public would soon start to ask why this should go on at the taxpayers' expense. The only justification for a publicly funded subject of this kind is that it is available to all children without distinctions of class, colour or creed. It is a contribution to the general educational and personal development of the pupils. After all, Christianity, like Islam and the other religions, has educational gifts to offer everyone, not only to the particular adherents of each faith."

The placing of RE as an educational subject alongside other subjects, allows for it to remain professional rather than confessional (Hull 1998). If the faith is to find a worshipful domain, it will do so in collective worship or in the school's ethos – which are also places for scrutiny. Further than this, there exists the realm of extra curricular activity where a more evangelistic or pietistic form of belief is free to operate in an open climate.

To explore this further, I will examine Christian nurture of young people as an activity of the Church before then reflecting on whether this is an appropriate activity for a church school and how it can be performed with integrity.

Holistic Christian Nurture seen as Youth Discipleship

There is a clash of cultures by the very mention of youth and discipleship. Christian nurture, as the process of learning and growing with the intention of deepening Christian faith, further focuses the divide between an ancient Christian culture and an emergent youth culture. Of course, there is an even deeper conflict between the human being (not just the youth) and discipleship as being the ancient battle between the divine way and the mortal way. In this instance I wish to show the seismic earthquakes that exist if late modernity (seen in British young people) is to engage with the ancient call to accept the rule of Christ, in a way that is not coercive nor abusive.

In late modern society it is increasingly clear that the loss of a grand narrative means that fragmentation is the inheritance for our young people – a fragmentation of certainty, of authority and of selfhood itself. Their 'gift' in all this is the apparent presentation of choice whereby every value or commodity can be offered without moralising. The individual is expected to choose whatever they want without recourse to tradition or to society and this is not deemed to be selfishness, rather self-expression. In the making of such a choice, be it a direction in life, a value, a market purchase or just a way of spending the evening, the individual is offered a plurality of gods. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional monotheistic understanding of a God who sets the standards and offers morality as a given norm. Gallagher (2005) describes this as causing a three-fold wound,

"From a pastoral point of view, postmodernity of the street wounds people in three dimensions of their humanity: a wounded imagination, a wounded memory and a wounded sense of belonging. Imagination, which according to Newman is the high road of faith, can shrink into superficiality. Memory, which is the receiver of the Word through a living tradition can be replaced by an alienated immediacy of the present. Belonging with others to some kind of community is undermined when spiritual lostness goes hand in hand with frenetic lifestyle. In this light, I think the expression "cultural desolation" a fruitful one."

As the two worlds come into contact, there is the possibility of collision or avoidance because of the huge differences in being. Put in a diagrammatic way, figure 1 shows the meeting or missing of worldviews as young people encounter Christian faith.

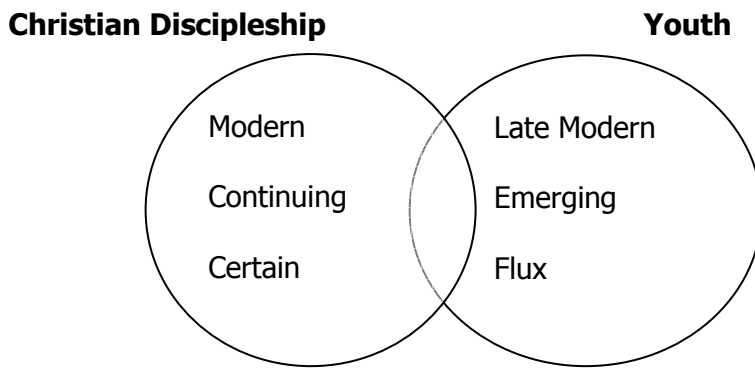


Fig 1 The meeting/missing of worldviews

The shaded area is that place of possible engagement between the two worlds. It is the place where the church, engaging with the world, can be less certain and more humble, in a position of learning as well as nurturing. It is also the place where the other face of late modernity can be seen, where the late modern youth can see themselves as spiritual, if not religious. This area of overlap is further shaded by the fact that it is parents who transmit the spiritual and cultural values to their young people.

It seems that there is a post-materialist quest for an anchor in meaning and a shift from rationality to affectivity.

Those in the church who are most effective in engaging the two worlds of youth and discipleship, will tend to follow the routes of ecclesiology which are evangelical, catholic or liberal.

The evangelical route has tended to favour the high octane input of events such as those offered by Soul Survivor with a packaged worldview that resonates culturally in music, activity and idealistic appeal. Evangelicalism has also traditionally offered a range of Christian outdoor experiences, camps and youth organisations that reduce the Christian message into bite-size units. Such groups are Scripture Union, Youth for Christ, Crusaders, C.P.A.S etc. Other such events are Spring Harvest and New Wine Conferences.

The Catholic route has always recognised the value of inclusivity by giving young people jobs to do within the Church structures, such as the role of crucifer, acolyte or chorister. Theologically, Catholicism has attempted to articulate an inclusion of the young person via baptism or in the eucharist and it will use the notion of pilgrimage to gather a wider sense of belonging. In this sense the large gatherings at Taizé, Lourdes or Walsingham mirror the evangelical conferences at Spring Harvest or New Wine Ministries and the teaching of the catechumenate mirrors the alpha course.

The liberal and radical routes have followed the well-trodden path of social justice, engaging with the natural optimism in young people that they might change the world. Thus the 'Make Poverty History' campaign of recent years has been effective in catching the attention of youth in the churches.

If we are to stand back and look at the various ecclesiological routes that engage with young people, whether through evangelism, education or nurture, it is clear that

there is considerable overlap in style. All of them notice the need to encounter young people through;

- a) The big event (conference or pilgrimage)
- b) The developed curriculum (alpha or catechumenate)
- c) Social Action (the joining of faith and justice)

Such points of overlap are both tribalising (effective to a particular youth culture) and globalising (evocative of the wider church culture in the world). In this sense they are places of nurture and evangelism. Figure 2 shows the overlap of the effective meeting of Christian discipleship in young p

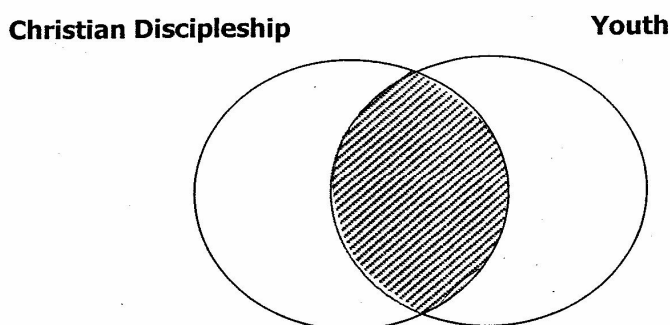


Figure 2. Overlap in the meeting of worldviews.

These observations would not be surprising to the American psychologist and educationalist James Fowler who offers a theory for Faith Development in his book *Stages of Faith* (1981).

He sees the teenage adolescent to be coming into a conforming period of life seen in terms of a conforming self-image and faith. He calls it stage three or the synthetic-conventional stage. The report "How Faith Grows", published by National Society comments of Fowler's stage 3,

"People at this faith stage provide very exciting opportunities for the Christian educator. They are capable of reasoning in a new and more powerful way, and are much more able to cope with arguments and discussions about theology" (Page 26).

It is an in between stage, a stage when authority views can be heard before they fragment in the next stage of adulthood when choice becomes the dominant motif.

These ideas are further worked through in terms of discipleship in Graham Cray's helpful booklet, "Postmodern Culture and Youth Discipleship" (1998).

Church Schools as Avenues for Appropriate Christian Nurture

This final section returns to the initial location of the Church school to consider whether it is a suitable venue for Christian nurture. As an initial premise it can be noted that faith (as a broad construct) is universal (Fowler 1981) and that functional faith is resourceful to the human being (Worsley 2000).

If faith is to be a resource, it needs to operate in three ways;

- a) intrapersonally – allowing the individual to live with themselves
- b) interpersonally – allowing the individual to live with their neighbours and
- c) globally – allowing the individual to live with their world (Worsley 2000 p35)

But can Church schools be places where children's spiritual rights for exploration of a resourceful faith take place without exploitation or abuse? The case first needs to be made that this in itself is an appropriate pursuit, even a right for the child, given that secularism is beginning to exert an influence on education that perceives itself to be universal and true. As a priori to this discussion therefore, is the assumption that a religious heritage is at least equal to a cultural or a philosophical heritage and needs to be explored in an appropriate educational way in the school context. To ignore the religious background or to superimpose a secular one, is itself to be neglectful and to contravene the child's right to freedom, exploration and development.

This assumption is open to debate in that conflict occurs when the convictions of the child are not compatible with the parents – a situation in which the law is less than clear.

Parker-Jenkins (2005 P40) argues that,

“faith-based schools can be viewed as an important element of the educational system to provide for parental rights, but these institutions may also be seen to conflict with children's rights.”

Into this debate some clarification takes place in the European Charter on the Rights of the Child which states: “the child must no longer be considered as parents' property, but must be recognised as individuals with their own rights and needs.”

This all points to the child as being the focus for an ideological battle over how an adult's worldview is passed on. The British Humanist Association (BHA) maintains that faith schools result in children receiving a limited type of education that shows parental preference and which segregates the child from the wider community (Castle Report 2001). However, contemporary research into faith schools will strongly refute this to show that these schools are often highly representative of different ethnic groups and very aware of being a part of the wider community (Parker-Jenkins et al 2004, CES 2003).

The case is being made currently that Church schools can be appropriate and self aware institutions because they bear the imprint of British history in bringing education within a clearly stated religious ethos. The current debate over this is more fully articulated in the compilation of essays “Faith Schools, Consensus or Conflict” Gardner et al 2005).

a) **Intrapersonal faith**

Resourceful religious nurture must initially operate when an individual can find a personal 'shalom' – reconciling their developing self alongside the sense of self that is passed on to them by their family and their prevailing culture.

In a faith school, this will allow for the inherited faith to be seen to echo beyond the family home in a way that is both affirming and questioning, because it is in a broader sphere. Lord Runcie is attributed to have said that faith schools intend to "nourish those of the faith, encourage those of other faiths and challenge those of no faith." (Dearing 2001 P.4)

Although the BHA (2002) see this as a breaching of the right to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion" as countenanced in human rights law, and to be discriminatory against non-Christians (P32), it seems to me that it is an open and honest expression of intent that will tend to be broadening the faith experience of the child from a mono cultural background. Runcie's intention for Church schools firstly opens it up for all Christians (immediately assuming the ecumenical spectrum and departing from internal denominational dispute). Then he affirms other faiths (assuming an inclusive understanding of the Christian faiths) and finally challenges the humanist or atheistic worldview. In this he has established the Church school alongside all Christian denominations and faiths in resisting secularism as a separate ideology in the classroom. It clarifies faith in a way that plans for any internal faith pathway to meet a wider road as it continues. In this way it is opening the way for faith to be interpersonal.

b) Interpersonal faith

If religious nurture is to be resourced beyond the inner sanctum of the spirit, it must operate relationally. All religions have always emphasised this, giving priority for moral and ethical reflection. The Church school does not operate in a climate that is remote from the rest of society and currently has to respond to the pressures of wider categories (extended schools, specialist status, trust foundation, other faith schools etc). However, the Anglican faith school will operate from one of three paradigms of Christian education in fulfilling its task. It will either see itself as educating into Christianity, educating about Christianity or educating in a Christian manner. (Astley 2002)

In identifying such an educational paradigm, the school will in turn be responding to political demand from New Labour and to parental demand for more faith school places (which is not necessarily a call for more faith nurture, but could be a hidden desire for selective education offered traditionally).

The school itself will also have its own particular model of mission that might be termed as tribal, outreach, threshold, prophetic, partnership or the ark of salvation (Worsley 2005). Such reflection leads to the school's understanding of itself in a global context.

c) Global faith

If religious nurture is to be resourceful beyond the tribal level (so often the accusation of the BHA who wish to impose an equal and opposite worldview that is hostile to faith) then it must be globalising. This is the big viewpoint that considers faith as a unifying factor and looks for the universal desire for harmony and reconciliation. It is the position referred to at the final stage six of Fowler's faith

developmental perspective as that place where self immerses itself in the other and is no longer concerned with personal ambition nor identity. Educationalists occasionally glimpse this as a place where global citizenship can be taught, giving children an opportunity to see themselves as being joined to the whole human race.

At its best, this is where Church of England schools can operate, working alongside the inspections of wider community schools but offering a faith distinctiveness that is the spiritual right of the child who wishes to explore faith. It is not a narrow place because it recognises the influences of wider society and endeavours to embrace it. It is not tribal because it sees faith as being ultimately global, a force for reconciliation.

However, it does allow for appropriate religious nurture within the free choice of individual students working outside the curriculum (the zone of the church or the home) as well as within the curriculum (the zone of the transparent and the tested).

Conclusion

To summarise, children's rights to be able to access faith in a way that is nurturing, empowering and holistic, can be most thoroughly offered by way of a church school. Church of England schools are well embedded into the historical, legislative and educational strata of England and are able to combat religious abuse as well as secularising worldviews. In this they bridge that complex divide between the parental worldview reflected in the Church and an emerging worldview of the next generation, allowing articles 12 and 14 of the UN Convention on Rights of the Child to be most fully expressed.

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