

VALUES IN EDUCATION

A Talk for the Nottingham Secular Society – September 26th 2011

INTRODUCTION

Education is recognised across the world as important for life. I am not here just thinking about schooling but also pre-schooling, further, higher and adult education. Additionally we increasingly recognise that lifelong learning matters for us all. This is true for people across the globe, rich and poor, female and male.

There is however a difference between school age education and all the rest; it is simply that for us, in Britain, as in many other nations, it is compulsory. For the vast bulk of school age children this is fulfilled through attendance at a school, though the number choosing to 'home school' has risen in recent years. For the large majority of children also this schooling takes place in State funded schools; and even those that are independent have regulations made by the state that affect how they are run. Education matters to us as a society and as a nation. It is hardly surprising therefore that it continually creates debate across our political parties, amongst our academic world, and in the midst of local communities.

During the Church of England General Synod's debate on 200 years of the National Society held this last July I was called to speak. Parts of that 3 minute speech led to finding myself at the centre of some attention for a short while. I was interviewed by the BBC for Radio Nottingham, by the local press and the Sunday Telegraph and a report appeared a few weeks later in the Sunday

Express. I apparently gained some notoriety with the National Secular Society because, under a banner headline 'Christianity should dominate all lessons' Keith Porteous Wood, the Executive Director said: "Ideology, in this case religious ideas, being drummed into children at every opportunity is what we criticise North Korea for. Taxpayers should not be paying for this brainwashing in what is often the only school in a neighbourhood."

Now when Dennis asked me some months ago to speak at one of your meetings we agreed that I would settle on a subject nearer the time. So at the end of July it seemed appropriate to pick up on the theme of education, and specifically that of values in education. I do so because I believe we share a commitment to the importance of education in our nation and world. I believe also that in exploring the specific theme of values in education we will find that there is some commonality, though inevitably some differences as well. I do so also because it gives me an opportunity to explore with you the thinking that lies behind a part of a three minute speech in the context of General Synod; the response to which I found rather knee jerk than thoughtful. I believe if we want a truly tolerant society careful listening and reflection is required rather than knee jerk reactions.

So what I want to explore with you is the following:-

First why seeing religion as purely a private matter is not consistent with true tolerance and misunderstands religion anyway.

Second to explore just what education is for

Third to examine the issue of values in education and finally to explore a little about Christian values in education and why they cannot be dismissed as clutter nor as indoctrination.

THE PUBLIC NATURE OF RELIGION

The debate surrounding faith schools in the UK rests on a number of important distinctions. The first concerns the wider issue of the role of religious faith in public life. If I understand correctly, the position of the National Secular Society is that religion is a private matter for individuals and should play no part in public life. To quote from your Society's web site: *'We are not anti-religion. We oppose discrimination against religions and discrimination by religions equally but we believe that religion is a private matter for individuals and that the privileged (sic) position of religious organisations and the self-interest of religious leaders is one that should be challenged.'* This clearly leads to a belief that prohibits publicly funded schools with any kind of religious ethos, not to mention an established Church and Bishops sitting in the House of Lords.

The division between public and private goes hand-in-hand with the general thesis of secularisation which, until relatively recently, was popular amongst sociologists. The story runs something like this. Around the seventeenth century, the rise of modern science, governed by the objective reason of the Enlightenment, began to roll back the Christian theological world-view which, up to that time, had been the basis of government, education and society at large. As the debris of religion is cleared, what remains is a neutral territory of rational and objective enquiry which, in a pluralist society, everyone can share. Religion is driven back into people's homes, behind closed doors into the private sphere, and the clean air of neutral secularism fills the public domain.

It seems to me that this story of secularism is problematic. Many philosophers and sociologists now recognise that, as modernity takes hold and secularism drives religion into the private sphere, what remains is not a neutral and objective territory. It is still a territory which is filled with competing interests

and various accounts of truth. It is a territory populated by versions of reason which emerge from particular traditions, and particular and contestable accounts of what it means to be a human being. In short, the notion that a particular account of truth or reason can be labelled 'objective' or 'neutral' is increasingly discredited. Moreover, the secular domain still makes theological claims. The idea that religion belongs in private, that it is a matter of personal preference, is a theological claim that religion is not rationally defensible. The religious communities beg to differ.

This leads me to say that the religious communities of this land do not want to be driven into the private domain. Why? First, because we do not agree that religion is indefensible. It may be the case that religion is indefensible in the face of certain accounts of reason and truth, but then we'd want to contest those accounts. For example, if we think that truth really only pertains to what is empirically measurable and quantifiable by scientific means, then of course religion will fare badly and theologians – and countless philosophers – will wish to contest this account. Secondly, we don't want to be driven into the private domain because, of course, religion is dangerous. Like any human activity, the history, principles, traditions and practices of religion can be used as ideological weapons in the pursuit of wicked and murderous ends. At its very heart, the world's religious traditions have always diagnosed this darkness at humanity's core. But to say that religion is dangerous is a bit like saying that politics is dangerous. Of course it is, but this also means that religion should always be open to collective public scrutiny. Putting religion behind closed doors gives it the opportunity to develop in unaccountable and potentially dangerous ways. As things stand, the faith schools of this country are constantly – and not merely occasionally – accountable to statutory public bodies including Local Authorities and Ofsted. They negotiate about what is

essential to their identity and what is peripheral, about what education is for and how young lives are to be fashioned.

This process of conversation and negotiation is part and parcel of the on-going and genuinely pluralist debate about the formation of values which combine, rather than separate, the public and the private. I say 'genuinely pluralist' quite deliberately, because it seems that a policy of the public funding only of secular schools is not pluralist; it's as partisan as the view that we should have only Christian schools. As it is, what we have in this country is quite a mix of publicly funded schools which is not born of religious privilege – privilege in the sense of an unearned and restricted benefit – but born of the long historical involvement of the Church and religious groups in the provision of education, particularly for the poor, long before the State.

As well as the distinction between public and private, another distinction is often mentioned in relation to the debate concerning faith schools, namely that between facts and values. It is suggested that education should be primarily concerned with the teaching of the historical and scientific facts about the world. If you like, this is what belongs within public discourse. Values, on the other hand, are largely subjective and belong more readily within the private sphere. Science makes no value judgements; it deals only in verifiable facts.

The division between facts and values, while popular amongst eighteenth century philosophers, is now highly contested. I think it's probably safe to assume that we agree that an education that does not deal in values is no education at all. At the very least, we're committed to the view that education itself *is of value*. But why is it of value?

WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR?

With so many leaving higher education now struggling to find any kind of employment, and with the still nearly 60% who never enter higher education struggling even more it is not surprising that many of these young people and adults themselves ask what their education has really been for. There is a widespread and common thought that education exists as preparation for employment. This is certainly the regular and constant rhetoric from Governments of whatever political persuasion. We educate people to prepare them for work; we educate so that people can become economic contributors to society. This is usually expanded further into talking of educating people to be good citizens, although it is clear that the usual underlying thread is that a good citizen is one who contributes economically. Economics, expressed through the continuing growth of the consumer society, tends to trump all in these comments and discussions.

In his comments during the emergency debate on the riots in the recalled Parliament this summer the Archbishop of Canterbury raised this very point

Over the last two decades, many would agree that our educational philosophy at every level has been more and more dominated by an instrumentalist model; less and less concerned with a building of virtue, character and citizenship - 'civic excellence' as we might say. And a good educational system in a healthy society is one that builds character, that builds virtue.

In the wake of the financial crisis a few years ago, we began to hear more discussion than we'd heard for a very long time about the need for a recovery of the virtues. The need for a recovery of the sense of how character was to be built in our society, because character my Lords, involves an awareness not only

of the connection between cause and effect in my own acts, but a sense, a deepened sense of empathy with others, a deepened sense of our involvement together in a social project in which we all have to participate

It is my view, and that of the Christian faith, that education is primarily for the exploration of what it means to be a human being. This is therefore about self understanding, and the understanding of others; it is about exploring the questions 'Who am I?' 'What am I here for?' 'Where am I going?', 'Why am I here?' and also 'Who are you?' 'What are you here for?', 'Where are you going?' and 'Why are you here?'. These must lead into the corporate questions 'Who are we?' 'What are we here for?' 'Where are we going?' and 'Why are we here?' In order to answer these questions we will always find ourselves asking questions of our origins 'Where did I, you, we come from?' and lead us to ask questions about 'How?' 'How do we work / function?' 'How might I/we work / function differently?'

This means that education always enters the realms of philosophy and theology if it is to be truly educational.

VALUES FREE EDUCATION?

Now before exploring this line further I want to reflect a little further on the idea of values free education; or what is often referred to as 'objective' education. In this line of argument, highlighted particularly by Professor Richard Norman, religion and religious ideas are seen as clutter which get in the way of an objective approach to values in education. The argument is that there are some agreed values which are objectively arrived at without reference to religion and which also disparage any contribution from religion

(any religion not just Christianity). There are some who describe this as values free education, though not professor Norman himself who does recognise that values matter.

Given this last point I think we can readily agree together that value free education is neither realistic nor desirable. It is unrealistic because the very nature of being human involves us in having some values. We can go further together in agreeing that for the well-being of human life and society there needs to be some agreement about a coherent set of values by which we live alongside one another, and that these will shape what happens in education. It is quite simply not possible to have education which is value free.

However where disagreement arises comes with both the idea that there can be discerned an agreed set of values entirely derived independently of belief and the idea that religious beliefs and values are merely clutter.

A strictly humanist / secular set of values can be arrived at but they are premised on a set of beliefs about what it means to be a human being, and what it means to belong to a society; if we are all simply autonomous creatures it is very hard to argue for anything other than everyone being free to do what they like except for the argument from the self interest of that individual to take at least some cognisance of the existence of other people. As soon as any values arise about the significance of others there is an assumed value on others and on the interaction between people. One can argue that individual autonomy is only possible through recognising the existence and autonomy of others which therefore requires some way of recognising, respecting and working with others but it will always be to the end of sustaining the autonomous self; if this can be sustained without others then they can be gone. It becomes highly utilitarian. More importantly for my current comment

it is based on beliefs not some entirely independent objective observable value system.

So why are the values derived from a set of religious beliefs dismissed as 'clutter'. Whilst many want to argue that religious beliefs are entirely a matter of subjectivity such an assertion is simply untrue to the religious convictions of many. I will focus here as a Christian leader purely on Christian beliefs but I know my Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and other friends would want to say some things which would be similar. Christian beliefs are not derived from a set of subjective feelings or thoughts; they have been arrived at through rational reflection and debate, whilst also having the humility to recognise the possibility that human rationality may not be all that matters, or all that counts in determining truth. The first followers of Jesus did not set out to create a new religion or set of beliefs. It was their experience of Jesus of Nazareth as a teacher, preacher, healer, miracle worker and their experience of his death and the subsequent events of an empty tomb and encountering him as alive beyond the grave which led them to reach the conclusions that they did about his identity, his significance and his purpose. They reflected on what they heard, saw and experienced to come to the conclusions that they did. So convinced of the truth of Jesus as risen and as Lord were they that they were willing to face prison, persecution and death rather than deny the truth of who they had come to believe Jesus was.

The values that arise from Christian conviction are arrived at through serious rational engagement, debate, research and practice. They are not simply clutter any more than those arrived at from an atheistic or humanistic faith base. They are however more than simply rationalistic as they arise from the conviction that human beings are not solely rational beings, and that to restrict

them to this is to actually make us all less than human. Human beings are emotional beings as well as rational beings. We are spiritual beings too and in determining values the reality of emotions and spirituality has to be taken seriously. It cannot simply be dismissed.

CHURCH FUNDED STATE EDUCATION – HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Before moving on to explore this further I want to insert a little bit of history as to how we have arrived where we are in regard to State Education in this country. Understanding this history is I think important in understanding where we might also go. It is 200 years since the National Society was founded. Its full title was,

"National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church in England and Wales". Its aim was clear, "the National Religion should be made the foundation of National Education, and should be the first and chief thing taught to the poor, according to the excellent Liturgy and Catechism provided by our Church."

It also aimed to establish a school for the poor in every parish in England and Wales. At this time there was no state funded education. The church led the way in seeking to provide education for the poor. It grew rapidly. It inspired others to follow its example. The national government became increasingly aware of the importance of education for all, at least for a few years of their lives. The first state funding came in 1833 for the help with the construction of schools; this was the main state support until the Forster Education Act of 1870 which introduced compulsory education initially to the age of 10 but this was raised to 11 & then 13 through the 1893 Act. So throughout the 19th

century education was provided by a mixture of private schools for the rich and church schools for the poor with a growing engagement of the State in providing funding and guidance about ages and the curriculum. Once Government became involved it was always a partnership, not always an easy one, between Church and State.

It was the 1902 Balfour Education Act which introduced Local Education authorities and provided for the funding of all State schools through local rates. Further Education reforms happened through the next decades of the 20th century. It was however the 1944 Education Act which established national education for everyone from 5-15 with the clear division of Primary & Secondary Education and the Secondary phase divided between Grammar Schools and Secondary Modern / Technical High Schools. It also established the clear dual system for how Church schools were part of the provision of national education. I'm sure that I don't need to remind you that it also made RE and daily worship in all schools compulsory. The dual system for church schools has been foundational ever since although there have been many changes to the system more widely – notably the increase of the school leaving age to 16 in 1964 and now to 18 and the introduction of comprehensive education – although not entirely across the whole country. The current reforms being pursued by the coalition government are the most widespread reforms since 1944. With the move to the possibility within the next few years of all schools becoming academies the dual system is effectively being broken up. However the government remains heavily committed to the existence of what they call 'faith schools' making it clear that these are not just church schools, either Anglican, Roman Catholic or Methodist but also Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh. The idea of 'Free schools' has also been taken up by some churches, other faith groups and those of no faith. At present there are only 24

of these schools but it is probable that more will open in the coming years. These too will be founded by a wide range of groups.

I outline the history briefly to show that it is impossible to understand the development of free national education for all in England & Wales without recognising the major contribution that the churches have made throughout the past 200 years; without them national education would not exist as it does.

Today in England 25% of Primary schools are Church of England schools. They are responsible for educating around 20% of all primary aged children. This discrepancy in the percentages is because many of these are in villages and are the only school serving that community. Their doors are open to everyone. Just over 6% of secondary schools are C of E with also 42 academies, making the C of E the largest single provider of academies. These were mainly established under the previous 'academy' system so are situated largely in areas of urban deprivation and have a focus on providing high quality education for the poor. In villages, towns and cities church schools continue to be rooted in their foundation documents which nearly always refer to education for the poor and are open to all.

It is widely acknowledged that Church schools in this country are very successful and achieve high academic standards with good reports from the statutory inspection bodies. Church schools are extremely popular, and I take it that this provides such schools with some kind of democratic credibility – people want to send their children to these schools, parents from non-Christian faith traditions frequently show a preference for a Church school over a community alternative.

However a common charge made against them is that they foster sectarianism and division. It is further charged that they lead to monochrome and largely middle-class school communities. This is a serious charge. To discover whether this charge had any weight, in 2009 the Church of England commissioned an independent report from Professor David Jesson of the University of York. Using Ofsted data, Professor Jesson found that the community cohesion fostered by religious primary schools and community primary schools is very similar. The picture with respect to secondary schools is slightly different: using the Ofsted data, faith secondary schools scored on average 11% higher for the fostering of community cohesion than their community school counterparts. The question is, why do faith schools not foster sectarianism? One could come up with a number of reasons, but one reason might be that religion is a fundamental part of communities, and faith schools treat it seriously in the sense that it is not a matter merely of private preference. In short, a pupil at a Church of England secondary school may or may not be a committed church-goer, but, because of her experience at school, she knows that religion is a serious matter of reason, practice and faith which forms the whole of people's lives, not just the private sphere. Having seen Christianity in this light, she is better able to understand the central importance of the religious convictions of Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. That's not to say that a community school with a secular ethos will not respect religious traditions, but a state-funded education sector which funds *only* this kind of school will not take religious convictions seriously in the same way as a sector which also has faith schools in the mix.

Church schools are part of the fabric of our national education system and valued for being there. They are not separated out from local communities or

the wider society, but actively part of them and engaging in serving the communities in which they are set.

VALUES OF CHURCH SCHOOLS

So I finally return to the question of values in education and specifically what values will shape a Christian school. The Church of England schools website offers a complete package of materials on these values. I will simply give you the 15 that are named and explored. They are

Reverence, Wisdom, Thankfulness, Humility, Endurance, Service, Compassion, Trust, Peace, Forgiveness, Friendship, Justice, Hope, Creation & Koinonia (or Fellowship / Community). Now I have no doubt that you will want to disagree with some of these, or perhaps the language used. However I believe that they speak profoundly to all people regardless of their religious belief / unbelief. These are values with which many will resonant and share. Let me explore 1 of those with which you are most likely to take issue and explore it a little.

One of the key differences of opinion between atheists and religious believers concerns creation. In short, a Christian will maintain that the universe is created while the atheist will claim that the universe is simply all there is and has, in some form, always been. Christians, along with Jews and Muslims, say very little about what creation entails because it's not just another event in the universe. They will, however, wish to describe creation as a gift. In other words, there is a giver – whom we call God – and a recipient, the creature. To live the Christian life is to live knowing that your life is not a brute fact or a right, but first and foremost a gift. The way we treat gifts is very different to the way that we treat other possessions. We treasure gifts as reminders and

signs of the giver; we use gifts wisely as a joyful privilege rather than a right, and so on. More specifically again, for a Christian, life is a gift which we somehow abused, but which God in Christ helps us to receive again and use for our good and God's glory. These convictions are expressed in the depths and riches of Christian tradition and worship; in the paintings of Michelangelo, the poetry of Milton, the music of Mozart and the science of Newton. Imagine a school with this ethos at its heart, namely that life is a gift to be treasured rather than a brute fact or a right to be claimed and protected. It's an ethos that can be explored and discussed through centuries of literature, art and learning, and it will affect greatly how one understands the purpose of education, one's relation to one's community and the goals one will set in life. One cannot say how every individual member of a school will articulate their sense that life is a gift, but the school will put each member of its community in conversation with the Christian tradition and this provides a measure of cohesion and shared identity- common focus, if you like – which is often cited as a reason for Church schools' success.

Now, this is not to say that a community school with a secular foundation could not have a shared ethos of this kind. Of course it could, but the basis of that ethos would be very different. The point is that the community school could not have such a shared ethos without reference to *some* common tradition of human thought and enquiry. The alternative is simply to allow every individual member of the school to foster his or her private convictions and values, but this will hardly lead to an adequate understanding of common goods and a shared identity. In this context, it is perfectly legitimate for a Church school to discern its ethos through the Christian faith which lies at its very foundation, and that, in a genuinely pluralist democracy, this can play a legitimate and vital role in public life.

Nor does exploring values in this way mean that a child is being indoctrinated. They are rather being invited to explore their own life, the life of others and the world from within that value. Some students in church schools, quite possibly the majority in many, engage as critical 'fellow travellers' while, for others, this is part and parcel of a full life of Christian faith. The very values of reverence (respect), humility, friendship and trust must lead to an openness and expansiveness in how education is carried out. Any move to indoctrinate or coerce would in fact be false to the very Christian values on which a church school is built.

CONCLUSION

It is of course impossible to cover everything in the space of 1 talk and I am deeply conscious that you are likely to disagree with much of what I have argued. However it is my conviction that there is common ground for us to work on in relation to wanting the very best education to be available for all children in our nation. The values in which children are raised matter greatly for the common good of our land. Whilst these are primarily formed in the family / home context what happens in our schools matters a great deal. I believe a continued partnership between the church and the state is an important contribution to the educational life of the nation and should not be thrown away.