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Religious Education in England and Wales*

Religious education is the one compulsory subject on the curriculum of schools in England and Wales. However, whether it is taught at all in a particular school depends very largely upon the attitude of headmasters, and its effectiveness upon the skill, knowledge and enthusiasm of the teachers. In this latter respect it is on a par with all other subjects, of course. With regard to the former it serves to remind us that because a study of religion has to do with beliefs and values it is often subjected to unprofessional influences either from hostile atheists and indifferent agnostics or zealous adherents of one of the religions to be found in Britain today.

The legal position of school religion as laid down in the 1944 Education Act, which is still operative and governs Religious Education is briefly as follows: 1) The school day shall begin with an act of worship on the part of the whole school. 2) All pupils shall receive instruction in religion. 3) The content of this instruction shall be laid down in a local Agreed Syllabus drawn up by representatives of the religions, educationists and elected representatives (i.e. local councillors). In this paper I shall ignore 'School Worship' for two reasons. First, it is becoming more and more distanced from what is happening in the religious education lesson. Secondly, it is itself undergoing considerable change. Worship is being replaced by a variety of activities some having religious content, some not. It deserves a separate article.

To understand the unique place of religion in the schools of England and Wales it is necessary to remember that until 1870 almost all elementary education was provided by organizations and institutions which were religious in origin and inspiration. From 1833 until 1870 governments gave financial support to these. When the government took steps under the 1870 Education Act to provide elementary (pri-

* Scotland is covered by separate education acts.

mary school) education for all children, the Church of England expressed fears that the non-church schools would be 'godless'. In response to these anxieties Bible-teaching and school worship were permitted. The situation up to 1944 tended to be that primary school children were told Bible stories and had daily assemblies; in secondary schools the day often began with an act of worship but Religious Education lessons were more random and spasmodic, depending on the whim of the head teacher and his colleagues. The present writer attended three secondary grammar schools in Bradford, New castle, upon Tyne and Heckmondwike during the period 1941-1945. He received no religious education but every day without exception began with an act of worship. His wife, as a school girl, attended a grammar school in Cardiff where she learned something about religions of Indian origin and Islam as well as Christianity and took part in daily worship. Wales always seemed to take the teaching of religion more seriously than England in those days.

The 1944 Act, in practice, regularized what was already happening. Its chief consequence was probably the production of Agreed Syllabuses by all major local education authorities. Schools seem to have continued what they were doing or not doing regardless of the Act. Outside schools the Act led to Biblical Studies/Theology... (a host of names were used) courses developing in local authority teacher training institutions whereas previously they had been found earlier mainly in denominational colleges.

The story from 1944 to 1984 is one of considerable syllabus changes resulting from much heart searching and details on the part of specialists in religious studies. It is to these changes and the reasons for them that we must turn.

The period 1944 to 1967 was characterized by two developments. One was the attempt to make the teaching of the Bible more interesting and intelligible by relating it to the child's tasks and conceptual development. The name associated with this trend is Ronald Goldman (*Religious Thinking from childhood to Adolescence*: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1964). The other was to make secondary school Religious Education more interesting and relevant by relating it to the issues which concern adolescents—personal relationships, meaning in life, the problems of disease and death, social issues, (for example, *Teenage Religion*, by Harold Loukes, 1966), was extremely influential. How-

ever, also of considerable importance was changing social and theological attitudes. In 1963, the Bishop of Woolwich wrote *Honest to God* (SCM Press). For many British non-conformists there is nothing new in it; but coming from the pen of an Anglican bishop, and published in paperback, it was regarded by many as revolutionary. Indeed, it did represent to some extent the spirit of the age, openly questioning and apparently agnostic. Social attitudes to religion were also changing. It was no longer considered necessary to be conventional and quietly accept Christian beliefs and values. Consequently, Loukes Christian-based suggestions were adopted by many teachers, with open discussions about sexual behaviour, drugs, and other aspects of personal and social relationship. The religious elements sometimes disappeared, agnostics or atheists, quite properly, not being willing to teach children to conform to beliefs and values which they did not hold. The result was a kind of moral education.

It should be pointed out that until this time the content of religious education was almost exclusively Christian and its purpose that of commending the Christian faith to children. The view of many nineteenth century Christians that the day school was an extension of the Sunday School and should be a place of Christian nurture had not yet been seriously questioned.

Round about 1967 parliamentary attempts to repeal the religious clauses of the 1944 Act were made but support was slight. However, there were misgivings among religious education specialists, most of whom were Christian, about the propriety of using the classroom to advance the claims of any particular religious, philosophical or political belief. The concern of the school was with knowledge in the fullest and broadest sense, not with nurture. Its aim was to produce autonomous human beings. The revolution in Religious Education was about to begin.

In 1967 the new Lancaster University advertised for a Professor in Religious Studies who might be a 'member of any faith or none'. That in itself was an innovation as usually it was assumed that only believers in religion would teach religious studies. The man appointed, Ninian Smart, was a Christian but he brought to the post fresh ideas about the content and purpose of religious studies. About this time a number of specialists in Religious Education began to look for ways of reintroducing the religious dimension into Religious Education

objectively, and a wider base where the religious elements existed. Professor Smart's views, for he is a person who is very interested in Religious Education in school, were extremely influential. In 1969 an organization called the Shap Working party on World Religions in Education was set up. Its aims are to encourage the study and teaching of world religions (its name is simply derived from the place in the English Lake District where the initial conference of the Working Party was held). During the intervening fifteen years between then and now, the study of Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism alongside Christianity has become accepted. All Agreed Syllabuses include them and they form an integral part of examination syllabuses in Religious Studies at ordinary or advanced certificate level.

The revolution in Religious Education has not merely to do with content. It has three aspects;

1. Whereas the old aim was nurture into a faith (usually Christianity) the new one is to help pupils understand the place and function of religions in the lives of individuals and societies.
2. Whereas the content was exclusively Christianity it now includes the study of other religions and sometimes Humanism and Marxism.
3. Most important of all, the role of the teacher is no longer that of commending a particular faith or even a religious view of life to pupils, it is to be a partner with the children in their study of religion. Instead of being a defender of the faith he seeks to share the studying experience with them. The enthusiasm he wishes to communicate is for knowledge and understanding, the attitude he wishes to create is one of empathy, a sensitive readiness to set aside value judgements and one's own personal beliefs in an effort to understand such things as what Hindus believe about rebirth and why, how Jews celebrate the Passover, why Sikhs consider the Turban and 5 Ks. so important, or what Christians believe the purpose of the Crucifixion to Jesus must have been. Hopefully, the child will no longer feel it necessary to say to the teacher, 'Please sir, do you believe . . . ?' and the teacher will no longer feel that he must be a Christian in order to teach the subject. The one commitment needed by both is to the worthwhileness and importance of religion and other ideologies which seek to give people purpose, values and answers to ultimate questions.

Of course, much remains to be done. One can go into some schools and find no Religious Education taking place. The present writer visited a primary school five years ago where he thought he was walking back into his own childhood. Nothing had changed, the diet of Bible stories and children's hymns was still given to the children daily. There are issues to be faced by those who are in the forefront of change. One is, how can children's understanding of religion be deepened. To study more religions is not necessarily to study religion better. Another is related to dialogue, inter-religious encounter, and the questions that pupils might still ask, and do, 'Is any religion true?' 'Is my religion true?' In making Religious Education objective we may be in danger of forgetting the pupils for whom it is subjective—the Muslim, the Christian, the Hindu child. For him religion is not just an academic matter. Thirdly, there is the place that should be given to non-religious studies for living. Some work on teaching about Marxism and Humanism in Religious Education has taken place but not much. A fourth matter of debate, and the last one to be mentioned here but there are others, is what responsibility religious educators have for the morals, values, and beliefs of their pupils. If their task is not to produce believers it is not to produce atheists either. In the realms of morals and values there is much agreement that the Religious Education teacher has the same responsibilities as the head teacher, the physics teacher, the physical education teacher, or the history master—no more and no less. Unfortunately, schools spend little time discussing the values which the schools should uphold, and government ministers put forward suggestions which only show how little they know about the children growing up in our comprehensive schools. At its best it may be argued that Religious Education is assisting pupils in becoming thoughtful, responsible, tolerant, autonomous human beings but these are not always people appreciated by a society which regards the highest virtue as that of being docile and obedient to the politicians who think they know best.

Though Religious Education has distanced itself from organized religion and is not unduly influenced by Muslim, Sikh, Jewish, Hindu or Christian pressure groups, it does suffer from the low status which religion has in British society. The pupils who respond most enthusiastically to it are usually those who come from fairly liberal, middle-class homes. Those who resent having to study the subject (besides those who resent studying anything) are those whose parents dismiss

religion as 'rubbish' or sometimes those who hold very conservative religious views.

The future of Religious Education is safe as long as it is protected by the 1944 Education Act. There is no political pressure to amend the religious clauses though they cause some embarrassment to those of us who would like to see the subjects standing on its own feet like history or geography, for example. Whether teachers and parents have enough understanding of school religion for it to be freed from legal support and survive is uncertain. However, it is not an issue that anyone is likely to put to the test in the near future.

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