

## Religious Education and Human Rights

### Robert Jackson

Our debate this evening is about religion in schools in Britain. But there's a danger that we get *so* sucked into our own national preoccupations that we lose perspective. My own research on the Religion and Society Programme and in other Warwick projects looks at schools across the UK, but my work also extends into Europe, and it is from this wider European perspective that I want to speak this evening.

Above all, I suggest that – along with key European Institutions – we need to ground our thinking about religious education in a human rights framework. Since 9/11 the Council of Europe, which was set up to protect human rights, and whose remit extends to democratic education, has started to take religion in education much more seriously. I have been involved in this work, and in disseminating the Recommendation from the Committee of Ministers – that's the Foreign Ministers of the 47 states, including the UK -- about teaching religions and other worldviews in schools. What this amounts to is a recognition that every young person in Europe has a *right* to hold a particular view, whether religious or secular, within the limits of the law. I think we can move forward in our own debates if we take this commitment to liberal democracy underpinned by human rights as our starting point, and treat it as, in principle, inclusive of all.

We must not lose sight of the importance of an education which covers *all* areas of human experience - including mathematical, scientific, aesthetic, philosophical (including ethical), linguistic, historical, religious and spiritual, and so on. I wish politicians would go back more to *breadth* in education, related to the whole human person, and not just contemporary utility.

However, instrumental reasons *are* important, whether about students' personal development or about social issues, such as developing cultural understanding or promoting social cohesion. A *combination* of intrinsic and instrumental justifications gives attention to all aspects of human experience, as well as addressing pressing issues.

So what does this mean for religion and education in Britain today?

I'll start with religious education in fully state-funded schools, and then move on to faith schools. When I refer to 'religious education', I am thinking mainly of fully state-funded schools in England and Wales.

### **Religious Education**

Here are a couple of observations based on my team's recent research: First, many adolescents interviewed give strong support to applying democratic principles in classrooms. They see the classroom as a potential 'safe space' for dialogue, and want peaceful coexistence based on:

- (a) knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews
- (b) sharing common interests /doing things together.

On the whole students with a firm religious or secular commitment do not feel threatened by dialogue with others or learning about others; but some (especially those from religious minorities in the classroom) feel vulnerable, and we need to take account of this.

Second, many religious students do not identify with the portrayal of their own religion, especially by the media, by some teachers, and in many books and electronic resources. They find it hard to recognise themselves or their own families in the descriptions given. Too many teaching materials provide only superficial factual information and do not address issues of *meaning* in relation to religious language and the experience of religious people.

From these findings follow various suggestions for improving RE including the following:

1. Great care needs to be taken over the ways in which religions are represented to young people – their internal diversity needs to be indicated and explored.
2. The geographical and social contexts of schools must be taken seriously and sometimes suggest different starting points and approaches in teaching.
3. Competences are important as well as knowledge (although accurate information is crucial). For example, dialogue between students should be taken more seriously. There are some interesting experiments in moderated pupil to pupil dialogue taking place. We have done work on interpretive and dialogical approaches at Warwick, and, the Tony Blair Faith Foundation uses dialogue in its Face to Faith project which a Warwick team is currently evaluating.

### ***Faith-based Schools***

I turn now to the issue of faith-based schools. Linda Woodhead has explained that England has a long tradition of partially state-funded faith based schools. First, in our experience as researchers they are extremely diverse. At one end of the spectrum, they are inclusive and outward looking, introducing young people to religious diversity in society. They do not use their status in order to proselytise, but as a basis for serving the community. At the other extreme, there are faith-based schools which maintain exclusivity. Their core activity is to transmit a particular faith tradition and they avoid contact with other types of school.

But non-faith-based schools *also* vary in the ways they relate to issues of religion. At one end of the spectrum, schools recognise and respect religious and ethnic difference in society. They create links with the community, including with different religious bodies, and are generally inclusive and outward looking. At the other end are schools showing no interest in religious diversity, and giving little support to RE as a subject.

As for justifying publicly-funded faith-based schools in a democratic society, I return to my starting point: We need to refer to international law, based on human rights principles, concerning the rights of parents and the rights of children.

In European law, parents have the right to bring up children in their own religious tradition. Whether the state is willing to fund such education is up to the state. Children, of course, also have rights, but their autonomy is governed by judgements about their maturity. Advice from legal specialists

suggests that disputes between parents and children claiming maturity would need to be dealt with as individual cases.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a European perspective reminds us that the right to hold a particular viewpoint within the law, and parents' right to have their children educated in their religion, are fundamental freedoms which we must respect within the context of our different national histories of education. And – turning back to religious education generally, we need better provision – through strengthening its place in the curriculum, through strengthening and properly resourcing teacher training, and through the provision of high quality resources.

### **Thank You**

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