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The Church in Education

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A different climate in education is now suffusing the Church of England – or at least it should do shortly. The last major study of the subject, the Durham Report of 1970 under the chairmanship of Bishop Ian Ramsey was, largely speaking, a counsel of despair – give up the distinctive character of Church schools and let them become community schools. By contrast, the recent report, 'The Way Ahead', the result of two years' investigation and discussion under the enthusiastic and efficient guidance of Lord (Ron) Dearing, is a robust call for more secondary schools, more aided schools and more positively Christian commitment in all our church schools – and of this last, not least, one might well say: 'Not before time'. In Dearing's own words, 'Get on with it!'

It seeks to reinstate the Church as a forefront participant in education, as throughout English history it has generally been. The earliest recorded foundation, St Peter's, York, in 627 A.D. indicates its origins in its very title; and it was the church which remained the repository of learning and teaching right through the Middle Ages and beyond. The underlying strength of the educational system as it was known until a generation ago lay in its Tudor foundations, the grammar schools, which gained their impetus from the recognition at the Reformation of the significance of the laity within society, that education should no longer be a clerical monopoly but that laymen, needing to understand as part of the new religious order of things, must also have access to learning. In passing, I have long savoured the slightly amusing irony that, just when the Church changed its liturgy into the vernacular, the new grammar schools under the influence of the Renaissance gave new emphasis to Latin.

Though the grammar schools were established as and remained supposedly 'free', in reality they came to serve the children of merchants and at most the lower middle-class. The increasing population, especially in the towns, and other changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries introduced new pressures even though, like the churches themselves, the response by way of school provision

still left huge numbers of children with no hope or help at all. The pioneers of the Evangelical Revival in some cases met this need by providing basic and usually Bible-based teaching for some of these unfortunates. Names which come to mind include those of Robert Raikes of Gloucester with his Sunday-schools around 1780, Mrs. Trimmer at Greenwich and, best-known of all, Hannah More with her 500 children, who were taught the Bible and Catechism and, as she told Wilberforce, 'such coarse works as may fit them to be servants. I allow no writing for the poor'. We have to remember that in these years of the French Revolution the middle and upper-classes were terrified of insurrection crossing the Channel!

The Church woke up to the need to provide some sort of general education early in the nineteenth century, the State not finally until 1870. In the meantime, secondary education, limited in its clientele, continued in the 'public' and the grammar schools. Many of the former had origins similar to those of the latter, intended to supply local needs but, over the years, some like Eton, Harrow and Winchester had acquired a more exclusive status as boarding establishments for the sons of the upper-classes. Middle-class aspirations, aided from the 1840s by the increased mobility provided by the new railways, allowed other schools to achieve like status. In so doing they took on and developed a different ethos still recognisable as public-school values. This change emanated largely from the work and inspiration of one man, Thomas Arnold of Rugby, a cleric as all public school masters were and continued to be and as all grammar school heads had to be till around 1870. Arnold spelled out his aims in an address to his prefects (and notice the order) – (i) religious and moral principles; (ii) gentlemanly conduct; (iii) intellectual ability. He had no illusions about the inherent 'wickedness of young boys' but, though he punished freely, he exhorted effectually. As one commentator has put it, 'A boy was, essentially, to be loyal, reverent and dutiful. He was to be humble and obedient. He was to be pure and honourable altruistic rather than egoistic and [one] who had chastened his instincts in accordance with Christian principle'.[1]

The most notable subsequent Anglican foundations in the Arnoldian mould were those of Nathaniel Woodard (1811-91) with the expressed intention of developing Tractarian loyalty and practice. Meanwhile those grammar

1 E.C. Mack, *Public Schools and British Opinion, 1780 to 1860*, 1938, p. 254.

schools that were not too far gone in their decline, more and more imitated the public-school pattern and, generally speaking, especially whilst they had clerical headmasters, propagated Christian values as well as the classical curriculum which together formed the essence of public-school education. The real challenge at the beginning of the nineteenth century lay in the need to provide what, until 1944, was known as elementary education. Bishop Hoarsely, with all 'the tenets of Revolutionary France' hovering around him in his 1800 Charge saw fraudulent charity schools and Sunday-schools springing up to poison the minds of the lower orders with atheist and subversive literature in what he called 'schools of Jacobinical religion and Jacobinical politics'. To complicate the situation, just at this time a new system of teaching promoted by the Quaker, Joseph Lancaster, was spreading with considerable success. Mrs. Trimmer accused Lancaster of trespassing on the clergy's proper responsibility; and that it would indeed seem to be proper was supported by the first piece of proposed legislation, namely, Whitbread's Bill of 1807 requiring every parish to set up a school under the governance of the incumbent, churchwardens and parish overseers and entitling every child between seven and fourteen to two years' free education. The Lords threw the bill out, allegedly for its lack of religious provisions.

The Church responded – through the high Anglican group known as the Hackney Phalanx (another irony since the place is now notorious for its left-wing educational sabotage). This group was responsible for the inauguration of the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church in 1811, which, of course, continues to-day as the National Society in the forefront of the Church's educational activities. The Society appointed as its first superintendent Andrew Bell, who had served in India where he had introduced the 'Madras system' of teaching and which he now applied in England. With its pyramidal structure from instructor downwards and its monitorial organisation it does not seem to have been radically different from Lancaster's method. What the National Society did provide was a strict central management, imposing strong conditions and working through grants with strings attached. It made contributions to top up local fund-raising, whilst insisting that, on opening, a school should be free from debt and possessed of undisputed title to the land on which it stood. It required assurance about the quality of the buildings, the square-footage per pupil and in some cases asked for provision, if only on Sundays, for the education of girls. It laid down that schools should give instruction in the

Prayer Book and the Catechism, that pupils should attend the parish church on Sundays and that only books published by SPCK should be used. Secular instruction was confined to reading, writing and arithmetic. Within a year of its foundation the Society also set up its Central School in Baldwins Gardens as a teacher-training centre, followed by some twenty similar institutions in other parts of the country, but sadly with only three of these in the Northern Province where population pressures were at their most severe.

The rivalry between Church and Dissent was acute from the start and would continue so up to the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, church rate alone was a major cause of sectarian antagonism, apart from other perceived preferential status of the Establishment. Nevertheless, the National Society made rapid strides ahead of the Dissenting British and Foreign Schools Society with 690 schools in 1833 against the latter's 190, whilst by 1860 the Taunton Commission found that the Church of England possessed about nine-tenths of the elementary schools with three quarters of the children, proportions incidentally affected by the extent of Church provision in rural areas as against the more strongly urban supply of other denominations.

The first threat (as it was seen) of State interference came with the legislative frenzy of the Whig government after 1833, succeeding a long period of Tory ascendency, and not dissimilar to what we have seen recently with the present Government in Britain. John Roebuck's Bill for universal compulsory education in state schools with elected boards was opposed by Church and Dissent alike, but the state got its foot in the door with a building grant of £20,000 to both societies and then pushed it open by establishing its own inspection system in 1839. By way of compensation, the place of the Church was recognised within the legislative framework accompanied by financial support. The Unitarian, Kay-Shuttleworth, secretary of the Council for Education, was ever ready to interfere, sometimes for good as in his encouragement of the church to pursue its idea of a pupil-teacher system, at others to intrude lay influence into school government through the infamous Management Clause and to allow parents the right of withdrawal of their children from religious education. All this stirred up trouble in the National Society.

The majority on the General Committee were prepared to accept a modified clause, but not George Anthony Denison, Archdeacon of Taunton and veritable embodiment of the Church at its most militant, if anybody ever was.

His character was neatly summed up in the final line of some Latin verses after his death translated thus – 'He lived unchangeable and he died unchanged'. He would have no State participation in what he regarded as a Church presence. The 1849 annual meeting was rowdy, chaotic and in its outcome uncertain, except that it split the Society. Some moderates left and the Management Clause controversy ended without agreement.

The permission to withdraw, which in a later form as the Cowper-Temple amendment to the 1870 Act became known as the Conscience Clause, was not unsympathetically received by some Churchmen during the Management Clause affair. Close of Cheltenham, a leading evangelical, who had left the National Society precisely because it would not embrace Dissenters, to found the Church of England Education Society, saw in the proposed clause some possible protection for non-Tractarian Anglicans in those places where the school through the incumbent might seek to inculcate quasi-Roman doctrine. Meanwhile, the controversy rumbled on with the State until 1870 demanding a conscience clause where it thought it necessary and the National Society refusing grants to any school which accepted. Nevertheless, whatever might be the attitudes at the centre, schools throughout the country were getting on with the practical realities. Their numbers proliferated in the cities with their ever-growing populations, whilst in the country, buildings were erected, repaired or enlarged. There was still, however, one great improvement to be achieved. Children were still required to pay for their education and many parents could not afford even the lowest fees.

The 1868 election, this time destined to provide a Liberal reformist ministry, was largely fought on two issues affecting the Church, one again as in 1832 relating to the Church of Ireland, the other proposing the State's first direct and considerable intrusion into the education system. The 1870 (Forster) Act set up Board schools run by lay governors without any denominational teaching, whilst Church schools had to accept the right to withdraw or else to lose Government funding. To Denison all this was 'a national sin', and predictably the National Society opposed it. Not altogether in vain, be it said, because out of it came the agreement that the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed were not to be regarded as denominational, and as such they have continued to have their place in the Agreed Syllabus for religious education. The big loss was the segregation of religious teaching in the curriculum and the withdrawal of inspection of

denominational religious instruction, both of which served to diminish the significance of the religious element in the child's educational experience. Churchmen despaired, Shaftesbury as but one example writing – 'The godless, non-Bible system is at hand....Everything for the flesh and nothing for the soul; everything for time and nothing for eternity'.[2]

1870 did indeed mark a watershed. Education, an almost exclusively Christian enterprise, was dead. The State was now in control, however benevolently it might choose to exercise its power. The Nonconformists had got their revenge in the long war of attrition against the Church – and precious little they got out of it.

Nevertheless, sectarian battles continued and there was still a bitter last encounter to come. That was about Balfour's Education Act of 1902, two effects of which were provision for universal secondary education with the establishment of many new schools and the introduction of minor scholarships to grammar schools awarded by examination, a system ultimately to lead to the much – and not altogether fairly – maligned 11+.

The main achievement of the Act, however, was to abolish the old School Boards and to bring all State-aided schools under the aegis of the appropriate County or City Council. At the same time – and this was the source of denominational opposition – all elementary schools of approved standard became eligible for support from the locally levied rates. This meant that, beyond receiving State grants for building as hitherto, Church schools now qualified for State help in running them. 'Rome on the rates' was the cry of Protestants in large cities with Catholic schools, usually serving immigrant Irish communities; but more generally, simply because of numbers, it was the Church of England which profited. Dissenters protested, sometimes to the extent of withholding payment of their rates. This proved however, to be the last gasp of significant Nonconformist opposition in the educational affairs of the nation.

The next major milestone was Butler's Education Act of 1944, since when the tension in education has been not that between State and Church but between central and local government – as it continues to be with the State

2 E. Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury*, 1887, Vol. III, p. 266.

assuming an ever more dominant role. It was the 1944 Act which first spoke of 'control and direction' by the Minister of Education. It also formalised the division of the school years into primary and secondary with the break at eleven. The dual system of Local Authority and Church schools was retained, but the latter were divided as between Aided and Controlled. In Aided schools the Church held the preponderance of governors in return for bearing some of the costs of repairs, maintenance and any capital works, whereas in Controlled schools all these costs were to be borne by the Local Authority and the Church had only a minority of governors. The Act also provided for religious instruction in all schools and required them to conduct a daily act of worship (still a nominal requirement reinforced by Circular 1/94 but scandalously disregarded by most secondary schools). In Aided schools where the governors also had the right to appoint teachers, specific Church of England teaching was to be given to all pupils, subject to the right of withdrawal. The last provoked some Nonconformist discontent. Since then, as is still the case, many village schools, run by the Church, were effectively community schools. Any current discontent, however, usually emanates not from our fellow-Christians but from militant non-believers. Overall, the Act was a triumph of collaboration between the Minister, R.A. Butler, and Archbishop William Temple, both giants in their respective spheres.

Despite the provision for religious content in the curriculum the Church found itself in the post-1939-45 War era struggling with the increasing materialism of society, parents with no religious allegiance, fanciful pedagogic theories often allowing children largely to do what they liked, Controlled schools secular in all but name, and teachers themselves, latterly even more, from Church colleges lacking anything discernible as spiritual commitment. The Church itself has to take its share of the blame. The opportunity to gain Aided status was only patchily pursued. Some dioceses, notably Blackburn, London and Southwark, made valiant attempts with some success, but none matched the dedication of the Roman Catholics who refused to let their schools go controlled and by sacrificial effort succeeded with the result that they achieved in the secondary sector what the Church of England barely looked at doing. That is where we are now.

Yet the Church still has much – and much to offer. By Circular 12/65 the then Labour Government established the comprehensive system which by any calculation can hardly be said to have been a resounding success – as that

Government's current successor is increasingly acknowledging. So far as I can discover, the Church was not consulted on that occasion, but, anticipating a new Education Bill in 1970 which with the fall of the Wilson Government never saw the light, the Church of England Board of Education and the National Society set up in 1967 the Commission under Ian Ramsey which reported in *The Fourth R* in 1970. It is a sad document. It proposed three changes. First, there was to be a repeal of the 1944 provision for worship and religious instruction with the abandonment of the Agreed Syllabuses, described (can you believe it?) as 'a relic of the ecclesiastical era in education'. Second, the status of 'religious instruction' as the one legally required subject in the curriculum should go and a more general 'religious education' should be introduced. (We are suffering that now.) Third – and this was the most defeatist suggestion of them all – the continued involvement of the Church in the dual system should be merely 'a way of expressing its concern for the education of all children rather than a means for evangelical 'denominational instruction'. Of course, the Report was not alone then or since in seeing the Church as some vague adjunct of the Welfare State rather than as God's voice in the proclamation of the eternal realities.

What a difference is to be found in the Church's latest official response in the Dearing Report, set up by the General Synod after the passing of the 1998 Schools Standards and Framework Act! Just two quotations – 'No Church school can be considered as part of the Church's mission unless it is distinctively Christian' (1.11), and again 'Church schools are part of the body of Christ, and a visible recognition of the divine within human experience' (3.36). With that vision the members of the Dearing group have challenged the Church to raise £25 million in the next seven years, to get as many Controlled schools as can be to opt for Aided status and to secure one hundred new secondary schools. That is the practical need, but it is based on belief in the spiritual commitment – Christian heads, Christian teachers, Christian worship, Christian ethos and Anglican distinctiveness (4.6). These latter are probably a greater challenge than finding the money and building the schools, but, as Ron Dearing has challenged us, we must 'get on with it'.

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