

CHURCH SCHOOLS REVIEW GROUP CONSULTATION REPORT, DECEMBER 2000

Analysis by the British Humanist Association

Preface

The British Humanist Association continues to press for fully integrated, inclusive schools, where children of all faiths or none are respected and educated together. It does not think that Church, or other religious, schools can do this as well as community schools, or that religious schools should be publicly funded. BHA considers that current proposals by the Church of England would increase discrimination and divisions in society if implemented.

The widely available abridged summary of the full report published by the Review Group in December 2000 does not give a complete picture of the Church's proposals, which are sometimes confused and in conflict with each other. A BHA summary with commentary follows, but we also suggest that those interested read the full report, and respond to it by February 14th.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Summary

Schools are seen as central to the Church's mission to the nation, reaching out to the young and to parents and communities through the young (1.1). The Church is involved in education in order to: "nourish those of faith, encourage those of other faiths, challenge those who have no faith." (1.3) This entails development to ensure: sufficient numbers of Church schools, distinctiveness in their spiritual life, and sufficient numbers of Christian teachers (1.4). "The present is a time parents and policy makers are showing their regard for what the Church schools have to offer to children of all faiths and none" and so is an opportune moment to develop (1.6).

Comment

- Church schools are popular for a variety of reasons. Most parents choose schools, Church or otherwise, for a mixture of social, practical and educational reasons. Some Church schools are popular because they are academically successful. Whether their popularity with parents would be retained if their missionary purpose became more prominent and explicit is a moot point.
- It seems unlikely that families would willingly choose schools that set out to "challenge" their sincerely held beliefs or to "reach out" to them spiritually.

- Committed humanists would certainly be alienated by this mission, and the proposed expansion would limit their choices and threaten their right to “education in accordance with their philosophy” (Human Rights Act, 1998).

Chapter 2 – History

Summary

The Church has been involved in mass education since the 19th century (2.1). In 1944 the Church accepted increased state funding and control of its schools, because it lacked the capital to invest in them (2.4). Since then the number of children in Anglican primary schools has declined (from 844,000 in 1950 to 790,000 in 1999) and numbers in Anglican secondary schools risen (from 64,000 in 1950 to 150,000 in 1999). Meanwhile, numbers in Roman Catholic schools have risen much more steeply (2.6).

School Organisation Committees, created in 1998, and consisting of representative of the LEA, the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, governing bodies and the Further Education Funding Council, now decide on local proposals to establish, close, alter, or change the category of a school (2.9). “The effect of these changes is to bring the Churches very much into the decision-taking mechanism at local level...At both national and local levels the Church works in partnership with government. This is a partnership that the Church very much welcomes and wishes to develop...” (2.10).

Comment

- Well might the Church welcome its partnership with government, though this partnership would appear to many to be undemocratic and unrepresentative. How many local voters realise who determines changes in status of local schools, or would understand why the Churches have so much say in the matter?
- While the valuable historical contribution of the Churches to mass education must be acknowledged, we are not convinced that the past is an adequate guide to future practice.

Chapter 3 - Why Church Schools: for Whom and What Purpose?

Summary

The Church sees a role in offering “opportunities to pupils and their families to explore the truths of Christian faith” (3.4) and quotes Bishop John Trillo: “The pursuit of truth and the imparting of it are very much our business.” (3.9). The review group considers the relationship between the “general” (or “service” to the general community) purpose of education, which is now well served by the State, and the other main function of Church schools, the “nurturing” of people within the faith (3.10 on).

While acknowledging the clear moral purposes of many community schools, the report says that an attraction of the Church school for parents is the “well grounded basis for its values and moral standards.” (3.13, 3.14) Church schools offer “the gift of Christ” and the widely adopted ethos statement of Anglican schools includes aims to “preserve and develop the religious character in accordance with the principles of the Church” and to “promote Christian values”.

While respecting “the aspirations of those who, like the British Humanist Association, see schools as places where young people ‘develop an active understanding of the shared and absolute human values on which morality is based’”(3.20) the group goes on to bemoan a general flourishing of the “entrenched philosophy of relativism.” (3.21) This section begins to consider admissions criteria in the light of apparently unsatisfied demand from Anglican and other Christians (3.16), but also the need for “inclusiveness” (3.22).

Comment

- The group’s confidence in the truth of Christian beliefs (3.4, 3.9) sits uneasily with its desire to “encourage those of other faiths.” (1.3)
- BHA welcomes the report’s recognition of its stance on moral values, but notes that there appears to be a criticism, by association with relativism, of the humanist ethical position. Few humanists are moral relativists – the refusal to base morality on authority and tradition in favour of basing it on reason and experience is not the same as relativism, and the unthinking and untenable relativism so prevalent today is not ascribable to humanism.
- The BHA suggests other causes for the prevalence of relativism: the lack of Philosophy or “philosophical literacy” in schools; poor teaching of RE, where tolerance of and respect for other world views demonstrates relativism, both epistemological (“It’s true for them...”) and moral (for example, teaching non-judgementally about Christian values, Jewish values etc); the fudging by religions and denominations of differences in truth claims, leading to a general vagueness about the concept of truth (see also 3.5, 3.9).

Chapter 4 – The Provision and Character of Church Schools Today and in the Future

Summary

The report discusses imbalance of provision, between primary and secondary sectors (4.2) and geographically, claiming that “underprovided” dioceses should expand their provision in the light of “identified local need” (4.5) but without “creating surplus places by displacing other schools that are providing valued service.” Change “must proceed by consent.” (4.7) This section also invites dioceses to commit themselves “to expanding provision in places of economic and social hardship” (4.10) and meeting the needs of local communities (4.11) as well as “the concerns of Christian parents that their children have the opportunity to attend a Church school.” (4.57)

The report envisages some difficulty in funding the proposed expansion (4.12) and calls for “negotiation” with developers, Government, local councils, and other donors (4.14 to 4.17). It also points out that less capital is required for taking over existing community schools (4.14).

At the same time, the report calls for Church schools to become more distinctively Christian (4.22), to give some preference to parents with a Christian background, depending on local factors (4.26, 4.40 onwards), and to employ more Christian teachers (4.27). Schools should also proclaim their Christianity in the curriculum, in worship, and in an active relationship with the local church. (4.27). The importance of good RE teaching is highlighted (4.33 to 4.34). There are unfavourable comments about some Church schools which have been lax in these areas (4.28). To avoid exclusion, Church schools should find as much common ground between the faiths as possible (4.30) admitting a proportion of local children to win “the hearts and minds of prospective partners”. “...some places should be reserved for children of other faiths and perhaps even of no faith.” (4.44)

Comment

- The BHA questions the whole notion of unsatisfied demand for Church school places. Unsatisfied demand for good schools does not demonstrate a need for more Church schools – it demonstrates a need for more good schools for all children at all levels.
- There is much anecdotal evidence of parents who have choice but to send their children to Church schools, or who take up church-going only in order to get their children into good local Church schools – are these genuine Anglicans, or even Christians, and do they demonstrate a genuine need for expansion? Many of these nominal Christians would resent the “rechristianising” (4.28) of their schools as much as humanists and other non-Christians.
- Humanists welcome the renewed commitment to those who have least in life (4.10), feeling that the admissions policies of some Church schools have discriminated against them in the past, but note that there is an unresolved tension between this commitment and the commitment to nurture Anglicans, who tend not to come from the most deprived sections of society.
- BHA also reiterates its view that publicly funded schools should be controlled (on curricular matters, staffing, and admissions) by democratically elected institutions, central or local, not by faith groups.
- If the Church succeeds in negotiating lower or no financial contributions towards the costs of Church schools, they should cede control of these schools.
- In mentioning finding common ground between faiths, there is no mention of those of no faith, who apparently can be excluded, except when there is a need to win “hearts and minds” (4.44). This smacks of cynical opportunism, a preoccupation with appearances rather than with doing the right thing.
- The BHA supports the call for better RE, and has always worked for objectivity, fairness and balance in the teaching of RE.
- However, RE in religious schools is often, in fact, Religious Instruction, and far from objective, fair or balanced. The Humanist Philosophers’ Group suggests, in a forthcoming pamphlet, that religious schools should fall into line with community schools and teach a range of worldviews in RE, and that all schools should include some teaching about humanism.

Chapter 5 – Teachers, Teachers, Teachers

Chapter 8 The Church Colleges

Summary

These sections deal with the need to recruit and train more Christian teachers, especially heads, and to improve Initial Teacher Training in the Church colleges.

Comment

- The BHA wonders what the effects on other schools will be of Church schools ‘poaching’ their teachers (5.5).

- BHA is also concerned for the employment and promotion prospects of non-Christians teaching, or considering teaching, in Church schools.
- Discrimination against teachers on religious grounds, hard to justify in any case, becomes even harder when one recalls that the salaries of these teachers are paid for from the public purse, not by the Church.
- The BHA notes the suggestions for improvements to Church colleges, and welcomes the implied intention to retain open admissions policies, and to offer courses specific to Church schools as options or opportunities rather than compulsory elements (Annex to Chapter 8). As long as these institutions rely wholly or largely on public funding, this seems only fair.
- BHA suggests that many of the proposals for improvements (Annex to Chapter 8) are those that would be associated with any well run institution with pastoral responsibilities, and are not uniquely Christian.

Chapter 6 – The Ministry, the Church and the Parish

Summary

This section suggests that the clergy and the local Church become more actively involved in local schools.

Comment

- While humanists and other non-Christians are unlikely to see much harm in being prayed for (6.8), they may not appreciate more active intervention in the education of their children by the local church.
- Parents will be reassured to see that clergy and laity involved in schools are to be trained in child protection policy (6.6), though would probably want to see active vetting as well as training.

Chapter 7 – Leadership, Management and Governance

Summary

This section discusses the roles, induction and training of heads and governors, and the roles, resourcing and accountability of Diocesan Boards of Education.

Comment

- These are mainly internal matters for the Church, as matters stand at the moment.
- However, BHA repeats its argument that it is only fair and just that those who fund education, that is the general public through local and national government, control matters of management, governance and accountability.
- For this reason, we make no comment on independent Church schools (mentioned briefly in 4.50), which are not publicly funded and therefore do not offend against this particular principle.