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Religion and Schooling in Conversation

Abstract

Given the complex and messy contexts of schooling, conversations between religion and schooling can be 'admitted' as examples of the sort of situated conversation that goes beyond the 'false necessity' of universal state-controlled school-based education. There are distinct claims to be made about religion and schooling in general, and about the pupils and staff in the school (implied by a model of school as community, like a household), and about the school curriculum (where religious and related issues are difficult to address without a subject that is, or is like, religious education). The incorrigible plurality of life encourages a lively conversation between religion and schooling.

Keywords: community, dialogue, households, holistic education, inclusion, religion, religious education.

Introduction

Schools are peculiar institutions. Around the world, they are taken for granted, and yet mass schooling has a very brief history – developing mostly over the last hundred years, and in much of the world more recently still. In the UK, large-scale schooling of working class children was first developed by religious organisations, notably the Nonconformist BFSS (from 1808) and the Church of England's National Society (from 1811) (Murphy 2007, p 4-5). It was later in the 19th century that the state got involved, notably from the 1870 Education Act, and to this day there is a mixed economy of schooling in the UK – between 5% and 10% of children are educated in wholly private schools, a further 25% in state-funded schools with a religious character, and a similar (overlapping) proportion in state-funded but independently-owned 'academies' (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2016). In other countries, similarly, mass schooling has often developed through a range of state, religious, charitable and for-profit initiatives. In the USA and in China, the proportion of pupils in private schools is – remarkably – much the same as in the UK (i.e. between 5% and 10% of pupils), whereas in India, 29% of pupils in rural areas attend private schools, with the proportion as high as 70% in some states (http://www.thehindu.com/features/education/school/over-a-quarter-of-enrolments-in-rural-india-are-in-private-schools/article5580441.ece). Yet many people, and many writers on education, give the impression that mass schooling is a wholly state-run process. The taken-for-grantedness of schools and of state-run mass schooling are – I suggest – both examples of what Unger (2004) refers to as 'false necessity'. The impression given is that state-run universal mass schooling is the only option, notwithstanding the many examples of alternatives to purely state-run state-owned schooling, and the many additional examples of education taking place outside schools (http://www.educationotherwise.net/).

Once the peculiarity of schooling in general, and wholly-state-run schooling in particular, is admitted, it becomes possible to have a conversation about schooling that is of a different kind. My first claim is, therefore, that the conversation about schooling must include religion, because religion is so often there in the origin or sponsorship of schools. Schooling needs to be discussed in the messy and complex situations in which it finds itself, intermingled with local and national governmental bodies, religious organisations, industrial and third-sector organisations, family structures, and a whole raft of non-school-based educational organisations. In this article, I want to focus on the conversation between religion and schooling, but I recognise that this is just an

example – a very interesting example – of the messy conversations that could be held about any aspect of schooling. What kinds of relationship could or should there be between schooling and religion? Along with my claim about the importance of context, I would like to make distinct claims about the pupils and staff of the school, and about the curriculum of the school. There may well be more to talk about, but three claims should be enough to start a good conversation.

Pupils and Staff of the School

When pupils and staff enter a school, they enter as whole human beings and they cannot therefore enter stripped of their identity, whether that be religious, sexual, political or any other element of identity. It may seem obvious that those in school are there as whole human beings, but it is not. The philosopher Macmurray distinguishes between two kinds of groups of people. A 'community' is a group of people who treat each other as ends in themselves, whilst a 'society' is a group of people who treat each other as means to further ends. This is not a normative distinction, as each type may be better or worse. A gang (for the sake of argument, carrying out 'evil' crimes) may yet be a community according to this definition, a shop or a trade union or political party (for the sake of argument, selling or promoting 'good' things) will nevertheless be a society. Schools are communities, along with Macmurray's other core examples of communities: families, friendship groups, and religious groups (Macmurray 1991, Stern 2001).

> The adults [in a school] are there for the education of the children: and the basis of the teacher's task is his [*sic*] relation as teacher to the children whom he teaches. It would seem then that the first task we have to face in making the school a community is the relation between teachers and children. But this is a mistake. ... The main task concerns the personal relations between the adult members of the school. ... If the staff is a community the school will be a community. If the staff is a mere society of functional co-operation nothing will make a community of the school. (Macmurray 1946, p 6.)

The communal nature of schools is reflected in the legal and policy frameworks across many jurisdictions, such as the UK legal principle of teachers being *in loco parentis* (acting in the place of parents) (University of Bristol 1998, p 11), or the statutory requirement to promote 'the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school' (DfE 2013, p 5). Similar guidance is common in other jurisdictions and international conventions. It is such approaches that indicate that schools provide 'holistic education' which 'attempts to nurture the development of the whole person', including 'intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual' dimensions (Miller, in Miller et al 2005, p 11). Although it is clear that there are performative pressures on the pupils and staff of schools to achieve functional aims external to the school (such as league tables based on exam results, or skills needed for the workforce), there remains substantial evidence that pupils and staff in schools themselves regard schools as places they come as 'whole human beings'.

Amongst the evidence of schools being communities (in Macmurray's sense) is my own research on 'the spirit of the school' (Stern 2009, 2012). The 144 pupils and staff of schools in the UK and Hong Kong each talked of their school as a community (and in what ways it might become even more of a community) and of the ways in which people connected with each other within the school, and connected with those beyond the school. One of the most striking findings was related to the closeness between members of the school community, crossing generational boundaries and indicating that friendship was central to schooling. Macmurray was in a long tradition, stretching

back to Aristotle, in describing friendship as central to communal life – through its necessity for self-realisation and for freedom.

> Self-realization is the true moral ideal. But to realize ourselves we have to be ourselves, to make ourselves real. That means thinking and feeling really, for ourselves, and expressing our own reality in word and action. And this is freedom, and the secret of it lies in our capacity for friendship. (Macmurray 1992, p. 150)

For Macmurray and for Aristotle, friends are people who treat each other as ends in themselves, and so friendship networks in turn delineate Macmurrian communities. What was striking in my research was that the pupils and staff indicated similar levels of inter-generational as intra-generational closeness. I presented this as evidence that schools are like 'households' (Stern 2012). Schools as households are neither wholly 'private' in the way that modern family homes are private, nor 'public' in the way that many social institutions are public. Instead, they continue to exhibit elements of both the private and the public, just as did large, multi-family, medieval and early modern households. Those households continue in some forms up to the present day, for example, in some communes and kibbutzim and religious houses and home-working 'industrial' households. They straddle the private-public division. Schools do this too – ordinary schools, not simply residential schools or those specialising in building community (such as some special schools), but mainstream publicly-funded community schools. And schools as households cannot ignore or exclude central issues of identity, such as religious identity. This makes the issue one of inclusion.

It is the presence of 'whole people' in schools that is central to comprehensive accounts of educational inclusion. And although education inclusion must, of course, take account of a school's physical limitations, inclusion is a much more significant policy than – say – providing wheelchair ramps. 'Religious inclusion' might be an appropriate term for including those aspects of a person that they identify as religious. For some, this will cover a relatively narrow range of characteristics, such as the observance of religious festivals or the availability of religiously-appropriate food in canteens. For others, religious identity is more comprehensive, affecting all aspects of schooling, including language, curriculum, social interactions, and personal appearance. There are clearly challenges to meeting all such needs, as with all educational needs. But deciding to 'strip' people of their religious identities as they enter school is a form of inclusion that patently *excludes*. On the comparatively simple matter of food, for example, Smith notes that '[s]eparate tables for packed lunches, halal, vegetarian and what some children and staff described as 'normal' food tended to reinforce segregation' (Smith 2005, p 34). In France, the secularist policy known as laïcité has similarly led to food offences such as the effective banning of vegetarianism (Haurant 2011) or the insistence on eating pork (Chrisafis 2015) in schools. There are many who would argue that secularism requires no such bans. (In many respects, I would be happy referring to myself as a secularist: my only reluctance is the term's lack of any 'centre of gravity' of meaning.) Nevertheless, the absence of religious inclusion is often achieved in the name of secularism. An interesting use of language can be used to illustrate the ease with which apparent inclusion can lead to a form of exclusion. The professional body for UK nurses had (but no longer has) a form of words that, I think, excluded as it included. Nurses, it said, 'are personally accountable for ensuring that [they] promote and protect the interests and dignity of patients and clients, irrespective of gender, age, race, ability, sexuality, economic status, lifestyle, culture and religious or political beliefs' (NMC 2004, p 5). For myself, I want my interests and dignity to be protected *respecting*, not *irrespective of*, my gender, religion and politics. The use of 'irrespective of' implies ignoring or being 'blind' to those characteristics that may be central to my identity.

Community schools being real (Macmurrian) communities is therefore the basis of my second claim concerning the relationship between schooling and religion. It is a claim for more religious inclusion.

The Curriculum of the School

My third claim is related to the need for religion to be on the school curriculum. In schools in much of the world, religious education is a distinct school subject. It has a complex history and a constantly changing position in the curriculum (see Davis and Miroshnikova 2013, Kuyk et al 2007). For example, in Germany, religious education is generally taught separately to Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or Muslim pupils, and although the subject is usually focused on one religion, in other ways it is similar to much English religious education in being open-ended and educational rather than merely nurturing pupils into a single denomination or religion. In Sweden, the subject is on the national curriculum, and includes a distinct theme of 'ethics' – in contrast to the common German practice of pupils who opt out of religious education doing ethics or moral education as a *separate* subject. In Australia, more than a quarter of schools are non-government schools and these are mostly Catholic schools providing high-profile religious education and also religious nurture. And in government schools, notwithstanding some variation between states, in general '[r]egular provision shall be made for religious education' (Babie and Mylius, in Davis and Miroshnikova 2013, p 24). Turkey and Israel both have most schools where almost all the pupils and teachers share a single religion (Islam and Judaism), but where the religious education is primarily a secularised subject that is more culturally- and historically-based, and, unlike in England and much of Germany, not so anthropological and experiential. Russian religious education is the newest subject on their national curriculum, introduced in 2010, and there is scepticism – understandable given the history of religion in the country – of anything too religious being explored (Stern 2016, p 161-169). Both France and Russia are countries without significant histories of school religious education (at least since their respective revolutions), but there has been a recent growth of the study of religion in both countries, as also in the countries previously influenced by the Soviet Union – notably Estonia, Latvia, and the Ukraine. Although the USA has little religious education as a distinct subject in its state schools, there is a growing perception of a need for more, notwithstanding the constitutional issues (Nord 1995, Nord and Haynes 1998, Purpel and McLaurin 2004).

The complexity of the position of religious education as a school subject in part reflects the interesting nature of school subjects themselves. Whereas some see school subjects as primarily 'junior versions' of academic disciplines (Stenhouse 1975), others see school subjects as having their own identity and 'purpose' (Beane 1995). The argument over the nature of the school curriculum is too large to address here, but religious education is marked out, in such debates, as an 'education' subject, apparently distinguishing it from the 'academic' subjects.

> When we are doubtful that there is an academic subject and especially when we want a practical result, the word "education" shows up in the curriculum subject itself. Thus, we sometimes have such things as physical education, driver education, music education, moral education, sex education as the names of what is taught. … The implication here might be that in England, for all the talk about phenomenology and objectivity, the British public (and their politicians) think that religious education ought to have some personal and practical effect. (Moran 1989, p 101.)

My own view (Stern 2007, p 37-38) is that *all* school subjects have a role in the curriculum that is independent of the academic disciplines with similar names, but that religious education is interesting precisely because it challenges the idea of school subjects as pure academic disciplines adapted for younger ears.

A useful way of describing some of the complexity of religious education, provided by Schreiner in a study of European religious education, suggests that the subject 'can promote education *into* religion, education *about* religion or education *from* religion' (Schreiner, in Kuyk et al 2007, p 9).

> Education *into* religion introduces pupils into one specific faith tradition. It appears that in some of the central and eastern European countries this form of RE is given a high priority. In a majority of countries this is no longer seen as a task of state maintained schools, but of families and religious communities.
>
> Education *about* religion refers to religious knowledge and religious studies. Pupils learn what a religion means to an adherent of a particular faith tradition: it involves learning about the beliefs, values and practices of a religion, seeking to understand the way in which they may influence behaviour of individuals and how religion shapes communities.
>
> Education *from* religion gives pupils the opportunity to consider different answers to major religious and moral issues, so that they may develop own views in a reflective way. This approach puts the experience of the pupils at the centre of the teaching. (Schreiner, in Kuyk et al 2007, p 9.)

In schools that are holistic, inclusive, communities, and in which the curriculum is made up of subjects that have a value as personally influential, I would expect the second and third forms of religious education to predominate. But it is worth noting Schreiner's comment that '[t]his rough differentiation is idealistic because a good RE should include elements from all these perspectives', and therefore 'it would be more sensitive not to label existing models of RE … too quickly but to look more carefully at theoretical discussions and the practice of RE' (Schreiner, in Kuyk et al 2007, p 9).

One of the questions asked of any school subject might be 'what would the curriculum lose, if this subject were not on the curriculum?' (Stern 2006, p 88-90). In recent years, notably since 9/11, those countries persisting with little provision for religious education in state schools have often asked themselves that question. In the USA and France, for example, there has been much debate and, it should be added, controversy and argument. Even in China, there is evidence that 'religious education … is now in revival', if 'very slow' (Zhou, in Davis and Miroshnikova 2013, p 76). In the USA, the most prominent stated 'need' is for 'religious literacy' (Prothero 2007, Nash and Bishop 2010). Haynes describes how this is demonstrated in the US legal system.

> In Judge Joseph Sheeran's courtroom, religious literacy is seen as an antidote to intolerance and hate.
>
> Last week, the Michigan judge gave Delane Bell two years' probation for attacking two men Bell thought were Muslims. But the judge conditioned the sentence on Bell's completing a 10-page paper on Hinduism, the actual faith of the assault victims.
>
> This was Judge Sheeran's second attempt to educate Bell about religions. At his plea hearing, Bell was ordered to write a paper on the cultural contributions of Islam,

presumably to help him stop viewing all Muslims as terrorists.

As much as I admire the judge's optimism about the power of learning, it's probably naive to hope that writing a paper will inspire remorse in people who beat up Muslims, spray paint synagogues with swastikas, burn down black churches or — as we saw this past summer — gun down Sikhs.

But on the larger question of what Americans need to know in order to be good citizens, Sheeran may be onto something. (Haynes 2012.)

Haynes notes that, 'unlike 20 years ago when the public school curriculum was largely silent about religion, social studies textbooks and standards now include some study of religions', but continues that 'in many history classrooms the treatment of religion remains mostly superficial and incomplete' and therefore '[o]wing to the religion gap in public education, most Americans are illiterate about religious traditions (including their own)' (Haynes 2012).

In France, Massignon and Mathieu note how 'course material dealing with religion is presented in a secular perspective within existing school subjects (History/Geography, French, Philosophy, etc.)' and so '[t]here are no courses on religion only, nor do religious authorities take part in teaching this material' (Massignon and Mathieu, in Avest et al 2009, p 86). Just as in the USA, '[t]he issues was officially formulated as a problem of religious illiteracy' and '[a] secular, informative perspective was stressed, in other words 'teaching about religion'' (Massignon and Mathieu, in Avest et al 2009, p 86-7). The current teaching about religion in France grew '[a]fter the attacks of September 11, 2001', in order 'to promote understanding between pupils with different religious backgrounds' and to 'promote dialogue, rather than conflict, in a society with many different religions' (Massignon and Mathieu, in Avest et al 2009, p 87). These researchers note the influence of laïcité on a teacher, thought by the pupils to be Christian, who 'stripped away' his identity on entering the school: '[t]he teacher insisted upon his need to remain neutral and said to them: "*Here I am neither Christian nor Muslim nor Jewish, I am your teacher,*" without even addressing their categorisation of him as a Christian' (Massignon and Mathieu, in Avest et al 2009, p 102). Yet the teaching of 'religious facts' still has a personal and 'civic' role in France, and '[t]olerance is taught in French public schools as a key skill, to be developed by pupils in order to enable them to live in a religiously and ethnically pluralistic world' (Massignon and Mathieu, in Avest et al 2009, p 108).

Conclusion: Local, National and International Conversations Continue

My first claim was that religion has been so bound up in the development of schooling, and is so bound up in its current sponsorship and in the social contexts in which schools exists, that it should be part of the conversation. My second claim was the account of schools as households, the need to educate 'whole' people and the consequent need for religious inclusion. A third claim was about teaching religion in schools. All three claims address topics that are lively and controversial and argued-over and differently realised around the world. There is no clear consensual global settlement on the ways in which religion is taken into account in schools. But there seems to be a broad movement towards religion being taken more seriously and being taught, in some form, across the world. For example, at school and regional level, religious education is more discussed than most subjects. In the UK, locally convened syllabus committees, made up of education representatives and representatives of religious groups, construct the syllabus that determines religious education in local community schools (http://www.nasacre.org.uk/). In Germany, different states have

different approaches to and policy on religious education. The subject is determined at national level in Russia and in Sweden. International bodies have an involvement, too. An interesting example is the guidance provided by a sub-committee of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (ODIHR 2007). Those principles indicate that where teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools is provided, it 'must be provided in ways that are fair, accurate and based on sound scholarship', and pupils 'should learn about religions and beliefs in an environment respectful of human rights, fundamental freedoms and civic values' (ODIHR 2007, p 16). Furthermore,

> Curricula focusing on teaching about religions and beliefs should give attention to key historical and contemporary developments pertaining to religion and belief, and reflect global and local issues. They should be sensitive to different local manifestations of religious and secular plurality found in schools and the communities they serve. Such sensitivities will help address the concerns of students, parents and other stakeholders in education. (ODIHR 2007, p 17.)

I couldn't have put it better myself. Although the involvement of a security-oriented international organisation in the commissioning and publishing of this document has been challenged as the 'securitisation' of religious education (Gearon 2012), the substance of the 'guiding principles' do not appear to be distinctively 'securitised' (Jackson 2015). And the growing importance of religious education, and debates on the relationship more broadly between schooling and religion, societies, and local, national and international political organisations, is certainly demonstrated in the very argument over securitisation.

The conversation will continue. My own view is that schooling and religion are intertwined consistently and necessarily in holistic, communal, schools. And the nature or purpose of school subjects themselves is 'tested' by religious education. If schooling and religion are healthily-related, then the real purpose of schooling – helping make better people (Noddings 2015, p 1, Stern 2016, p 29) – can itself be prioritised. The situation of religious education, like the situation of religion itself in society, is complex. As the poet says, the world is 'incorrigibly plural' (Brearton and Longley 2012, quoting MacNeice's poem *Snow*), and any conversation between religion and education must take account of the 'stubborn particulars', the social, historical and cultural specificity, of the context in which the conversation takes place (Cherry 1995). The least I can say, amidst all this complexity and in the light of my three claims, is that making religion taboo, excluding it from the conversation, is no solution at all – and is certainly no better than making conversations about sex or money or mental illness taboo. In saying that, I realise I am being rather 'un-English', but then I, too, am incorrigibly plural.

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