

No faith in the absurd

Richard Dawkins

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There is something exceedingly odd about the idea of sectarian religious schools. If we hadn't got used to it over the centuries, we'd find it downright bizarre. The Church of England proudly disclaims any intention to convert pupils away from the faith of their parents. But isn't there already something deeply absurd in the presumption that children ought to inherit beliefs from their parents in the first place?

Think of it this way. Many of the subjects we study are controversial. In civil war history, it's Roundheads versus Cavaliers. In cosmology there is the "steady state" school of thought to set against the now dominant "big bang" theory.

In economics, monetarists vie with Keynesians. In literary history "Baconians" and champions of the Earl of Oxford press rival claims to the authorship of the plays normally attributed to Shakespeare.

In my own field of evolutionary biology, neutralists argue with selectionists. Everyone expects that, in a good school, children will be exposed to the different points of view in matters of controversy, and in a very good school they may even be encouraged to develop their own opinions based upon the evidence and strength of the arguments.

Now, just imagine that sectarian schools were set up for the promulgation of rival points of view in each of these controversial subjects. Imagine Keynesian schools playing football against monetarist schools. Keynesian schools preferentially admit the children of Keynesian parents, while reassuring the parents of the minorities (Monetarist or Adam Smithian children) that they would not seek to convert their children to Keynesianism.

It is one thing for parents to have views on the balance of subjects that their children ought to be taught. Some might feel that languages are more important than mathematics, and choose a school that is especially strong in languages. Or vice-versa.

Within a subject like English, parents might prefer a rigorous grounding in grammatical principles over the literary creativity which other parents might prefer. If schools divide along such lines, nobody could reasonably object.

Some variety of choice would seem positively healthy. But religious schools are divided over what children are taught to believe as facts about the universe, life and existence.

The situation exactly parallels my Keynesian/ monetarist analogy, which was drawn up to be obviously absurd. Who will deny that the existence of religious schools, dispassionately seen, is just as absurd? But it is worse than absurd.

It can be deeply damaging, even lethally divisive. Why do people in Northern Ireland kill each other? It is fashionable to say that the sectarian feuds are not about religion. The deep divides in that province are not religious, they are cultural, historical, economic.

Well, no doubt they are, in the sense that Protestant gunmen or Catholic pub bombers are not directly debating the Transubstantiation, the Assumption, or the Trinity. There is a "them-against-us" mentality burned deep into both sides of the Northern Ireland psyche, and we can all agree that it is not directly related to theological disagreements.

But how does each individual know which side he is on? How does he decide whether the victim of his violence is one of "them" or one of "us"?

He knows because of centuries of historical division. And the basis of that division, generation after generation, is to a large extent sectarian schooling.

If Protestant and Catholic children ceased to be segregated throughout their schooldays, the troubles in Northern Ireland would largely disappear - not overnight, but rather precisely in a generation.

But I come back to my main point. The idea that primary schoolchildren could be labelled "Protestant children" or "Catholic children" is as absurd as "Tory children", "Labour children" or "Liberal children" would be.

No sane person would advocate the setting up of sectarian schools for the segregated education of the children of pro-Euro parents on the one hand and anti-Euro parents on the other. How, then, can it be sane to advocate the existence of sectarian religious schools? And who can justify the spending of taxpayers' money on them?

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Backlash against church schools drive
Clare Dean
23/02/2001

The eminent scientist Richard Dawkins is leading a growing chorus of criticism of the Government's plan for more religious schools.

Serious doubts about the proposals among academics and even clergymen have been fuelled by the Church of England's huge financial crisis. Critics have also pointed to dwindling congregations and the difficulties church schools are having recruiting headteachers.

Writing in today's TES, Professor Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene*, who holds the chair for the public understanding of science at Oxford University, said no sane person would advocate setting up "sectarian" schools.

"Who can justify spending taxpayers' money on them?" he asks, warning that religious schools "can be deeply damaging and even lethally divisive".

His concerns were echoed by Anthony Grayling, reader in philosophy at Birkbeck College, London, who said: "Given the great harm that religions do ... in the way of conflict, war, persecution and oppression and preventing the growth of science and freedom of thought. I object profoundly to my taxes being used to this end."

Both Tony Blair and Education Secretary David Blunkett are keen supporters of church schools. Mr Blunkett has said that he wants to bottle the secret of their success.

Nearly a quarter of England's most successful secondaries are run by the Church, although inspectors say selection even purely on religious grounds, helps as it means they are likely to attract well-behaved children from stable backgrounds.

Last week's education Green Paper *Building on Success* confirmed ministers support for the

Church. It came just two months after Anglicans announced plans for 100 new secondaries.

The paper paves the way for more schools provided by the churches and other major faith groups. It announced it would give them £42 million towards capital costs and give faith groups the opportunity to manage and run schools in difficulty.

Lord Dearing, who chaired the review by the Church of England of its schools, had been talking to ministers about their plans. "The Green paper shows that the Government is listening and responding to what we have said," he said.

The paper's proposals have been widely welcomed by church leaders but criticised by the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association (see page 6).

Lord Dearing said: "It is because it is an increasingly secular society that people are saying they want these anchors in their lives.

"If the children aren't coming to us, we must go to them and that means not only through church schools but in community schools."

The move towards more religious schools comes at a time when three-quarters of Anglican dioceses are in the red, according to an investigation by the Church Times.

Earlier this year, a survey for the National Association of Head Teachers found that church schools experience the most problems recruiting heads.

More than a third of Anglican secondaries have to readvertise a head vacancy. More than half of the top posts in Catholic secondaries were readvertised.

Some clergymen have joined Professor Dawkins in attacking the plans. The Rev David Jennings, rector of Burbage and a member of the Leicester diocesan synod said: "I am not sure we need church schools in the society we live in at the moment.

"Churches run the risk in a multicultural and predominately secular society of establishing something that is not entirely real and, at worst, quite divisive."

The Editor
The Independent
London

Sir: Not for the first time, I am represented as more extreme than I really am ("Dawkins leads atheist revolt against 'evil' church schools", and Leading Article, 24 February). Even the view I actually hold -- that the state should not support religious schools and should open no new ones -- goes less far than the Constitution of the most religiose nation in the western world.

In the article to which you were presumably referring, published in the previous day's issue of the Times Educational Supplement (www.tes.co.uk/this_weeks_edition/opinion/story.asp?id=4402) I simply pointed out that, if we hadn't become historically habituated to the idea, we'd find it bizarre to classify small children by their inherited cosmological and ethical opinions.

We'd be aghast at the branding of "Pro-Euro children" or "Neo-Keynesian children", on the basis of their parents' economic opinions. We do not speak of, let alone separately educate, "Tory children" and "Labour children". We presume that children either are too young to know what they think, or if

old enough might disagree with their parents. Why, then, do we accept, without a murmur, the existence and separate education of "Catholic children", "Protestant children", "Jewish children" and "Muslim children"?

Of course it is very convenient for the religions that we do. Indeed, it is probably the main reason for their continued existence.

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