

HEADMISTRESS' LECTURE 2010

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: SPIRITUALITY, FAITH AND SECULARISM IN EDUCATION.

The spiritual, moral and social challenges we face today are by no means unique in the global or historical context; they are, however, pressing. Scientific and technological advance over the last four or five decades has offered unimaginable benefits to society as a whole but it has also introduced a number of complex issues which increasingly threaten our quality of life.

The quality of life we enjoy as a society or as individuals is necessarily dependent upon the quality of knowledge and experience with which we have been fed and nurtured over time. Civilization depends upon the ability to provide the circumstances in which the best aspects of our humanity are called forth and given expression. It is undoubtedly the task of education and family life to do just this. However, we are facing a time in which the stability of the family unit is suffering and the content of education is increasingly undermined by a results-driven and utilitarian agenda overburdened by government bureaucracy and political purpose.

It is not surprising that as we witness the dignity of human life to be under threat, we resort to the security of our political affiliations, cultural backgrounds and spiritual traditions for moral clarity and direction. Fifty years or so ago we may have found relatively simple solutions, but today our population is very different. The so-called 'multi-cultural' community has brought with it a new challenge: how do we support

the moral and spiritual life of a nation in a manner which is mutually beneficial and conducive to unity?

I am keenly aware that the subject of this lecture is rather large! I can only offer a few reflections on the issues involved and share some findings which have emerged so far in the light of experience at St James. I will begin by considering the nature of spirituality in education; then I will move on to an examination of some of the issues facing faith schools today; following this, I will consider the educational perspective of the secularists. Finally, division between the faith and secular 'camps' will be addressed by considering whether there can be a coming together by virtue of a broader approach to spirituality in education.

Our starting place must be to consider what the human quest is really all about. What is being sought? Unless we can begin to comprehend this, we cannot make suitable provision. I was rather struck by a description given by the Archbishop of Canterbury in his book *'God Happens'* (p.49):

"If we can get to the true depth of the heart, what we find there is the echo of God's creative word. Each one of us is a unique kind of echo of God. ... we are, by the very nature of our humanity, naturally attuned to the reality of God. Our task in growing up in the life of the spirit is to try to recover that attunement."

Language is always so inadequate in its attempt to touch the spiritual, which is, by nature beyond the words and concepts of the mind; however, Rowan Williams delicately describes how a profound consciousness resonates within us, drawing us out of the pain of an apparently separate existence to discover that we were, after all,

never separated but one with God, with all and everything. This is the spiritual journey, diverse in its paths but single in its cause and ultimate home-coming. We discover that the union we have so longed for had never been lost; it only appeared to be so.

Spirituality in education should, ideally, assist this discovery by providing an environment in which the reality of the spirit may become increasingly evident. We will return to this later in the lecture. There is however, an additional aspect which relates to the needs of the emerging adult who is being prepared to assume responsibility for his or her own development and for life as a citizen within society. It will be necessary that the spiritual education offers wisdom which will enhance and provide for this.

It is for these reasons that faith schools were originally created and, as we know, the spiritual and moral aspects of education were considered of prime importance in the history of schools and universities in this country. Until the 19th century, churches and religious charities were the only providers of education. It is not surprising that our religious institutions are keen to support parental demand for an education which will preserve those values and qualities they themselves cherish and which they wish to see magnified in their children's lives. They fear that without this faith-based influence the negative pressures of society will drown and engulf all that is best within the human being. Schools which are known as 'faith' schools are schools of a particular religious denomination. They may be state funded or independent. Since 1944 faith communities have been able to apply to set up schools in the state sector in response to demands from parents. Within the maintained sector approximately 34%

of schools are faith schools. They must meet the same criteria as other maintained schools although they must reserve one fifth of their teaching posts for persons who will support the religious tenets of the school's particular faith. They may give priority to applicants who are of the faith of the school but if they cannot fill their places they must admit other applicants. Of all maintained faith schools in England, approximately 68% are Church of England and 30% are Catholic; of the remainder 0.6% are Jewish and 0.2% are Muslim. Within the independent sector, approximately 42% of independent schools are faith schools. Of these, 83% are schools which have a Christian ethos, 12% are Muslim and 4% are Jewish. In summary, of maintained schools 34% are faith schools and within the independent sector 42% are faith schools; the overwhelming majority are Christian and the next largest number are Muslim schools of which there is a much larger proportion in the independent sector.

The need for spirituality and faith to be supported by all schools was recognised in the 1988 Education Reform Act which required that all schools offer a daily act of Christian-based worship. Evidence from Ofsted inspections suggests that many ignore this and there is significant pressure to move away from the requirement for there to be 'worship' and indeed for it to be Christian. The plea is for 'inclusive' assemblies with a provision for separate optional prayers and worship for those who want them. The idea is that this would overcome the necessity for pupils to withdraw from school assemblies on religious grounds.

During the last couple of years the arguments against faith schools have been receiving much attention in the media. Before we examine the most important of these, some facts will be useful. The popularity of faith schools is growing. *The*

number of dedicated school chaplains has increased by 25% in five years, fuelled by increasing numbers of faith schools in the state sector and, in particular, church-sponsored academies.’ (Guardian, Dec. 2009) And, according to the Times Educational Supplement of April 2009, *‘The Muslim Council of Great Britain said England did not have enough Muslim schools to cater for existing demand.’*

The criticisms of faith schools hinge on the view that they are divisive, socially and religiously. *‘A report by the Institute of Public Policy Research found that faith schools that controlled their own admissions criteria were 10 times more likely to be unrepresentative of their surrounding area’* and were therefore socially divisive. There is a body of opinion which claims that faith schools exacerbate religious intolerance and are liable to be used to feed religious extremism. However, English state-funded faith schools are required to abide by the national curriculum: they cannot teach creationism or bomb-making.

In 2008 the National Union of Teachers campaigned to resolve the need and parental demand for faith schools by proposing that the multi-faith school community should receive religious instruction directly from faith leaders: Headteachers were to invite imams, rabbis and priests to instruct pupils as part of the curriculum and that the daily act of ‘mainly Christian worship’ required of all schools by law, should be liberalised to include any religion. However, the plan enraged the National Secular Society who insisted that religious instruction should happen in the home or in places of worship. Another objection was raised by John Dunford of the Association of School and College Leaders who warned that this opened the door to extremists coming into the school without any overall control.

In the event, these proposals have not materialised, but the debate continues unresolved.

Organisations such as the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society have campaigned for a French or American-style secular education system, confining religion to private life. On the other hand, many like Tahir Alam, the education spokesman for the Muslim Council of Great Britain, say that *'parents should have the right to educate their children according to their faith. The state should not seek to alter their views.'* (*The role of faith schools in an age of diversity* TES 2007 – Madeleine Brettingham)

Ed Balls, the Schools' Secretary introduced new admissions rules for faith schools in 2008 by removing their right to make faith and a commitment to it a deciding factor in admissions. They are no longer allowed to interview for admission or to ask for a priest's reference to confirm attendance at church or at RE lessons. The justification for this was to eliminate the possibility of a school 'cherry-picking' its intake for social status. In fact, interviews were designed to catch out the 'convenience-converts' who suddenly found God when private school fees loomed or the local state school was too much of a bleak proposition. Over the past six months, more than 30 schools have been investigated for ensuring that their intake represents the faith they were founded to serve. Christina Odone writing in the Daily Telegraph on 11th January 2010 makes an interesting point about Mr Balls' motives:

'The motivation for Balls' attacks is plainly political: the Prime Minister looks doomed, and contenders for the party leadership are busily courting their potential

constituents. The ambitious Schools' Secretary is pursuing an anti-faith agenda in order to curry favour with the substantial secularist wing of his party. This regards faith schools as an elitist mind-control experiment, the product of a powerful coterie of religious bigots and snooty middle-class parents.'

The real issue at stake here is that we are moving closer to losing a freedom for parents to choose to educate their child in a manner which supports the values they hold and which they wish to be communicated through school as well as at home.

So, what about the secularist approach to education? Essentially the secularist, by definition, regards the function of education to impart worldly, material knowledge as the prime purpose of education. The religious or faith-based content of education would, at best, be deemed to be misleading and, at worst, irrelevant. The secular movement is gaining momentum in social and educational policy: it regards religion as a wilful rejection of social liberalism and the authority of science.

However, there exists some tension in this area because the Department for Children, Schools and Families has made it part of a school's remit to deliver spiritual and moral education. Indeed, this area of the curriculum has moved close to the top of the inspectorate's requirements on schools. It should nevertheless be noted that the definition given for spiritual and moral education is broad and goes beyond the confines of religious custom and doctrine.

Spiritual development is described as *'the development of the non-material element of a human being which animates and sustains us and, depending on our point of view,*

either ends or continues in some form when we die. It is about the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning and purpose. It is about the development of a pupil's 'spirit'. Some people may call it the development of a pupil's 'soul'; others as the development of 'personality' or 'character'.

The DCSF goes on to describe moral development as being *'about the building, by pupils, of a framework of moral values which regulates their personal behaviour. It is also about the development of pupils' understanding of society's shared and agreed values. It is about understanding that there are issues where there is disagreement and it is also about understanding that society's values change. Moral development is about gaining an understanding of the range of views and the reasons for the range. It is also about developing an opinion about the different views.'*

The real challenge facing maintained and independent schools which are not faith foundations, is how exactly to meet this vast area of education in a multi-faith and no-faith context. The inspectorate is at pains to point out that although spiritual and moral education will not exclude a study of religions, every subject in the curriculum would be expected to offer deeper dimensions and insights.

Professor Chris Woodhead has an interesting point to make on this subject in his recently published book entitled 'A Desolation of Learning'. He maintains that if the subject content of our curriculum had been allowed to preserve the full wealth of our cultural heritage, such riches would suffice in introducing pupils to the subtle and spiritual dimensions of life. He laments the impoverishment which social engineering and political agendas have caused. He goes so far as to state that the present emphasis

on spiritual and moral education coupled to the questionable fashion to include ‘well-being’ classes and lessons in ‘happiness’, is largely a result of paucity in educational content. He explains:

“Why do I think the mastery of different forms of knowledge important? First, because the world is not a given: the world we experience is the world we perceive, and our perceptions depend upon what we know....The more we know, the richer our lives....It is important, moreover, to note that the conversations of mankind involve forms of knowledge that have nothing to do with fact. Why should all children have the chance to experience great literature? Because, read attentively, poems and novels and plays quicken the pulse of our emotional life.”

I have great sympathy with this view which has been held dear by educationists for centuries. ‘Forms of knowledge which have nothing to do with fact’ open the doors of our deeper understanding and speak to the very soul of our humanity. They enrich and inspire our lives beyond the mundane and draw forth the best of our human potential.

So how do we provide a bridge between spirituality, faith and secularism? It has been a founding principle of the St James approach to education that the curriculum should offer young people the best of our culture in the arts and sciences. And so, in a school which is non-denominational but recognises the need to provide for the intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of life, the St James approach begins by ensuring that the subjects taught convey knowledge which is proper to the subject: we would avoid syllabuses which have been doctored or compromised by social and political agenda.

Inspired teachers will be those who can open new dimensions of understanding in their pupils. A sixth-former recently wrote to me on this very point:

'I am very passionate about Biology but I know that the subject would not be the same for me were it not taught in a way that allowed for the spirituality and essence of the subject to be clear. For me, the continual awe and wonder I feel learning about the intricacies of Biology is what inspires me.'

So, I return to the question posed during the introduction of this lecture: 'How do we support the moral and spiritual life of a nation in a manner which is mutually beneficial and conducive to unity?'

At this time of the year I am in the last phase of some 110 'eleven plus' interviews. With every year that passes I am struck by the growing desire of parents to find an education which will support the emotional, moral and spiritual aspect of their daughter's education. They are confident that they can find a school which delivers academically but they are very anxious to care for her 'whole' development. Parents who follow a particular religion are keen for it to be supported but also that their daughters be exposed to a range of religious and spiritual traditions in order to expand their perspectives. They are very pleased to support a unified approach which recognises our common essence or spirit and our single humanity.

Young people are facing tremendous challenges as they grow towards adulthood. We find ourselves in a period of moral confusion and spiritual uncertainty, where loss of trust has produced a climate of scepticism which is most detrimental to positive development. Our children are in need of a wealth of knowledge, wisdom and love to

strengthen them in finding their way and to inspire them with a vision of the greatness of human potential.

At a time when the degree of global conflict seems more to do with religion than race, there is a need for a unifying approach. At St James, we draw upon the riches of our spiritual traditions from across the world, listening attentively wherever we find wisdom spoken. This is a philosophical approach which encourages the love of wisdom. We seek to understand diverse forms of expression, penetrate their deeper meanings, and discern their value in the light of personal experience. We ask questions and learn to appreciate that as questions become deeper and more extensive, answers may not be so easily forthcoming. Above all, we learn to respect each other, to enjoy the diversity of culture and spiritual paths upon which each chooses to travel and yet, most importantly, almost without having to speak about it, there is a powerful recognition that the common thread which runs through our spiritual traditions reflects the simple truth that we are of one being.

This profound truth may be understood at different levels. Opportunity for quietness and silence in which a person can connect with the simplicity of being is very important. This allows understanding to move beyond the limits of words and concepts of the mind, to the immediate experience within the realm of being. Here, everything is simply happening, just as it is. For young people to get a taste of this freedom in their own experience is really wonderful. It opens the door to an appreciation of reality.

The best way to convey the approach we practise at St James is to hear from the girls themselves. I spoke to the school about the subject of this lecture in its largest context and asked the girls if they would like to share their own experience with you. Their generous contributions have been condensed into a short DVD which I hope you will enjoy.

DVD

It remains vital that those of us who share the responsibility of supporting the development of young people should not lose sight of the extensive nature of human potential. Education must therefore seek to meet all aspects of our existence; spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical. However, we are not separate beings: we share our being, our humanity and our dwelling place, the earth. It falls to schools to find a way to support that unity of life and rejoice in the diversity of its expression in a spirit of wisdom and love.

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