

## EDUCATION

David Phillips

Education has become a battleground. Perhaps this has always been the case but over recent years the Government has introduced an extraordinary number of initiatives and regulations, which are intended not only to improve the quality of education but also to determine how children are shaped in the early years of their lives. Some of these initiatives are deliberately intended to propagate particular sets of values, which do not sit comfortably with Christian teaching.

One clear example of this is the issue of sex education. Mainstream education has focussed on contraception. This teaching has within it the implicit and often explicit message that sexual activity for young children is acceptable, so long as they use contraceptives. Anyone with any sense could tell you that such teaching will increase sexual activity. It is no surprise therefore rates for teenage pregnancy and teenage abortions appear to have continued to rise, and that alongside this there has been a meteoric rise in sexually transmitted diseases. Many schools do teach abstinence but my point is that education is an ideological battleground and politicians in particular seem to see it as their job to intervene (or interfere) in the way schools are run and the way children are taught.

All this raises difficult questions for Christian parents regarding our willingness for our children to be taught in a way that may undermine much of what we believe. It may be something to do with my age (having school age children) but my impression is that home schooling by Christian parents has increased in recent years and also that some of the newer churches have begun to set up schools. This all reflects a growing concern about the increased ideological nature of state education. But Christian schools and Christian schooling is nothing new.

In his book on Children in the Early Church William Strange gives some details on the educational views of early Christians. Of course, in general, this meant education for only certain portions of society. Christian schools seem to have first arisen as a fruit of the monastic movement in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. Before this there is no evidence for explicitly Christian schooling. This is surprising because the education of children seems to have been very much part of Jewish culture and identity although in large measure this was because of the need to teach boys in particular to read the Scripture in Hebrew. The evidence of the early Christians is that those who sent their children to school saw no harm in a general education. Origen extolled the virtues of a classical education and John Chrysostom in writing about the education of Children did not suggest that parents should keep their children from ordinary schooling. Indeed this can be said to reflect a distinctly different ethos as between Judaism and early Christianity – to be in the world but not of it was the Christian way, only when being in would involve unacceptable compromise (such as became the case at times for Christians in the Army due to the oaths they had to swear) did they opt out. Strange quotes the anonymous second century Epistle to Diognetus: *‘The Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by country, or by speech, or by dress. For they do not dwell in cities of their own, or use a different language or practice a peculiar life. ... yet the condition of citizenship which they exhibit is wonderful and admittedly strange... Every foreign land to them is a fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land.’*

Despite these beginnings Christian education became an established practice. Not only did Christian parents seek it for their own children where they were able but with time they entered the battleground of general education and sought to influence the lives of the children of others by the provision of schools. In the United Kingdom most older educational institutions are Christian

foundations of one sort or another. Moreover, even today a large proportion of schools are Christian.

According to the Church of England Board of Education more than one quarter of all state primary schools are Church of England. Some schools are **voluntary aided**, in which case the school is actually owned by the Church although 90% of capital costs are paid out of state taxation and only 10% specifically by the local Church. The Church also appoints a majority of governors and the governing body both appoints and employs teachers. It is expected that the worship and education have a distinctively Anglican flavour. Faith based criteria can also be used in admissions criteria. A **voluntary controlled** school is also owned by the Church, but all capital costs are met by the Local Education Authority. More significantly, the Church does not appoint a majority of the governors and staff are appointed and employed by the LEA not by the governing body. Although worship will be Anglican the governors have less control over the education. **Foundation** schools are similar to voluntary aided schools except that a separate foundation rather than the Church owns the school. The Church of England schools educate one in every five children in our land. Roman Catholic primary schools educate nearly one in ten but there are very few other Christian primary schools within the state sector.

In state secondary education the Church of England presence is much smaller with only 5.8% of state secondary schools (for Roman Catholics it is over 10%). However, this is not the whole picture and I suspect that many of our older secondary schools have a distinctly Christian past. When we visited one of our local schools for my sons secondary transfer I was surprised to see that its motto was a biblical text (I forget which one) and indeed then discovered that it had a Christian foundation, although this appeared to make little practical difference to the school today. It is in private education that the Christian influence is even clearer. According to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) there are 2,400 independent schools in the UK of which around 1,300 are members of the ISC. From the information they provide over 500 of these have a Church of England ethos but almost all the remainder are Christian foundations of one sort or another (1,195 out of a total of 1,273).

Church Schools are increasingly popular. In large part this is because on average they do seem to do better than their non-religious counterparts. There could be all sorts of reasons behind this but writing as I am on the day the primary league tables have been posted I noticed one headline in a national daily 'Church primaries are top of class' (my apologies for any who despise league tables). Aside from this, having a Christian foundation, or even a strong Church of England influence, does not necessarily make much difference to the way in which education is conducted. In my experience aside from vaguely Anglican assemblies and statements about caring for the whole child many CofE schools show little difference from their non-religious counterparts. It was partly with this in view that we invited the Principal of Emmanuel College Gateshead to speak at a fringe meeting 18 months ago on the subject 'Christianity across the curriculum'. The speaker, Jonathan Winch, promised me at that time an article in due course on a related subject. I am very grateful to Jonathan for the article that appears in this issue. The Emmanuel Foundation recently opened its third school, this time in Doncaster.

Church Society has always had a small finger in the educational pie although this has been diminished in recent years. Of course there is a tenuous link through the fact that presumably at least one third of the churches for which we have patronage also have Church schools, but Church Society Trust is also represented on the Board of Trustees of a primary school in Blackpool and the Society appoints all the Trustees of Luckley-Oakfield School. Luckley-Oakfield was once wholly owned by the Society but is now a separate trust although in the event of its closure the properties would revert to the Society for educational purposes. At the moment the school, which is a private secondary school for girls seems to be flourishing. (In the past the Society was also involved with

Westcliff School in Weston-super-Mare and in a training college for women called St. Michael's House in Oxford. At the time of writing I could not tell you any more about the history of these latter two but if any readers would like to enlighten me I would be very grateful and will add any details to our website for historical interest and for reference.)

We have been promised some material, which may be of assistance to Church schools, in particular for governors of Church of England schools. We will make this material available on our website in due course. Knowing that there must be great expertise amongst our members who are teachers, governors or parochial clergy with Church Schools we would be pleased to receive any material or information which we can share in a similar way.

What underlay the decision to invite Jonathan Winch to speak was that mature Christian faith carries with it a distinctively Christian world-view. We should not be frightened of secular education because given a level playing field we believe that we can demonstrate that a Christian world-view makes far more sense of the world and is far more coherent than any secular alternatives. What is of concern is that our Christian schools do not seem to shape their education by such a world-view. It feels as if many accept the secular models and then try to add on some faith bits. Indeed this is how many Christians seem to operate in their daily lives. But a reformed Christianity, such as is the Anglican way, involves being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12.1), we are in the world, but we see the world differently and so are not of it. This should affect all areas of our lives, not least the way we teach our children.