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religious education in state schools

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this pamphlet, like all publications of the Fabian [Society, represents not the collective view of the Society but only the view of the individual who prepared it. The responsibility of the Society is limited to approving the publications which it issues as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement. Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London SW1. April 1967

1. religion by Act of Parliament

If the parish church of St. Jude the Obscure at Rustica Parva doesn't want to hold a service next week, it needn't. If it chooses to hold a service but the inhabitants of Rustica Parva choose not to attend, they in their turn needn't. They are not obliged to give notice to anybody of their unwillingness; they can just stay away.

It is true that the Act of Uniformity of 1559 makes clergymen bound to hold services in the form set out in the Book of Common Prayer; and it also obliges "all and every person and persons inhabiting within this realm" to attend service every Sunday and holy day—in default of which, anyone who doesn't possess an adequate excuse is liable to a fine of twelve pence, payable to the churchwardens, for each absence. However, the Act of Uniformity, though it is still sometimes printed at the front of prayer books, is no longer observed. You can safely live in Rustica Parva all your life without once setting foot in the church, and the churchwardens of St. Jude's will never dun you for all the twelvepences you owe. Equally, the vicar of St. Jude's is in practice left quite free by Parliament to decide when and whether to hold services. Even though St. Jude's is part of the established church, in some of whose affairs Parliament still does intervene, Parliament now leaves this particular affair between the vicar and his bishop or whatever other internal authority the Church of England cares to set up.

The independence Parliament allows the established church is *a fortiori* granted to Rustica Parva's Baptist Chapel, to its Catholic Church, to its Friends' Meeting House, to its Spiritualist Hall and to the First Church of Christ Scientist, Rustica Parva. No Act of Parliament says worship must be held in these buildings; any compulsion there may be will come solely from

their own internal authorities. Indeed, in the entire village or ribbon development of Rustica Parva, there is only one building where religious worship must, by force of statute, take place—and take place, during the greater part of the year, on every week day. It is a building which does not belong to any of the religious organisations and which was not designed for worship. The fact is—the bizarre and anomalous fact is—that in the whole of England and Wales regular religious worship is not enforced anywhere except in the state schools.

The Act of Parliament which enforces this is not a leftover like the Act of Uniformity. Neither does it date, as that does, from a period when it was widely believed that men could please God by legislating that he be worshipped. It is the Education Act of 1944. This puts every state school under two compulsions: the school must hold, every school day, an "act of worship," for which, if the premises permit, the whole school population must be assembled together; and the school must give lessons of religious instruction.

contracting out

Strictly interpreted, the Act does not compel any child to attend either the worship or the religious lessons. What it does is empower his parents to compel him. And then it further assumes that his parents *are* compelling him unless they make a point of getting him exempted. A child—even a child of eighteen years old—has no power to contract himself out: or, for the matter of that, in.

The school as such, however *is* compelled. Even if every pupil were contracted out by his parents, the religious worship would have to take place without a congregation and the religious

lessons would have to be given to empty classrooms. Indeed, the worship and the lessons would have somehow to go on even if all the *staff* had contracted out. So far as I know, neither of those eventualities has ever happened. But then the Act is making pretty shrewdly sure neither of them ever will.

To consider the staff first : on the statistical face of it (to judge, for example, from the fact that teachers form about one-fifth of the membership of the British Humanist Association), it is not utterly improbable that chance might assemble a whole staffroom of unbelievers or sceptics, all of whom might contract out. But it is very improbable that the headmaster or headmistress would be a person who had contracted out. This is not to imply bias in the selection of heads. The Act specifically says no teacher is to be barred from promotion on account of his religious opinions or his religious attendances or non-attendances. But it is hard to see how this quite *can* apply to promotion to the job of head. Tradition says the head is the person who presides over the school assembly; the Act says that the one daily purpose for which the whole school must be assembled is for worship : it is hard to see how a person who has, for conscience' sake, contracted out of worship is likely ever to be the best qualified candidate for the job of head. The Act is making pretty certain that for the headmasters and headmistresses of our state schools we shall always get either good Christians or good hypocrites.

The likelihood of all the children's being contracted out is even smaller. Indeed, it's fairly unlikely in practice that even one child will be contracted out on the grounds that his parents don't want him to receive religious instruction of any kind. The Act makes elaborate provision for parents who

want their children contracted out in order to receive a different sort of religious instruction. But if you are a simple unbelieving parent and you happen to know you have the right to contract your child out and you decide to use it, your experience will probably be this. You inform the head of your wish. You inform your child he has been contracted out. You then take your child, who is five or six, to school for the first time and are obliged to leave him there. Presently, his form-mistress lines the children up, doesn't tell them where they are off to and ushers them into the school hall—for, it turns out, religious worship. Your five-year-old would have to be a pretty precocious child—indeed, I think he would have to be a pretty obnoxious child—if he's now to stand up in front of the whole school and say "Please is this religious worship? If so, I've been contracted out." But once he has attended, a precedent is set. Should he want to go back on it, he doesn't know how to explain or whom to explain to. He probably notices that no one else from his class stays out of prayers—though in fact, unknown to him, several of them may have been contracted out, just as he has.

Should he decide to have a shot at actually staying out, your child will discover that it's no one's job to keep an eye on him or tell him what he's meant to do while the others worship. It is rumoured he's meant to come in to the assembly when the worship is over, so that he shan't miss the school notices which are given out at the end; but he has no means of telling when the worship *is* over; he doesn't know if he's expected to slip in and stand at the back of the hall or conspicuously walk across it to join his own class. If he blunders, in carrying out the procedure no one has explained to him, he will blunder—which is one of the grand nightmares

of childhood—in the sight of the whole school.

Few parents are heartless enough to insist their children go through with it. Those parents who do insist are usually the ones whose own religious belief or whose own religious organisation impresses on them that to let the child go in to prayers is to risk his running into worse discomforts and dangers—heresy, perhaps—than he would by staying out. However, the religious sects most likely to impress that notion on parents are also the ones most likely to press parents to send their children to schools run exclusively by the sect concerned. Indeed only a third of the Catholic child population is in the ordinary state schools (Margaret Knight, "Should the state back religious education," *New Society*, 21 July 1966). Practical probability is against there being, in an ordinary state school, many children who stay out of prayers for religious reasons. The child whose parents contract him out for irreligious reasons is likely to be virtually on his own. And his parents are the very ones least likely to insist on his going through with his martyrdom, precisely because they are the ones without a belief in hellfire as the alternative.

In practice, the right promised to parents by the Act does not exist. All that exists is a right to expose your child to embarrassment and misery. The fault lies with the Act, which, while it is so free-handed with compulsions on the school in favour of religious worship, neglects to place any compulsion on the school to protect the elementary democratic rights of children whose parents contract them out. There is not a word in the Act obliging the school to give them so much as a room to pass the time in. The school can dump them in the cloakroom or playground for all the Act cares.

That is the situation met by parents who actually try to use their right. Nobody can know how many parents *would like* to use their right—because it is probable that the majority of parents have no idea the right exists even in theory. And of course a parent who doesn't know of the existence of his right to contract his child out is automatically taken to have contracted his child in. Though it compels the school to hold religious worship, the Act puts no compulsion on the school to inform parents by so much as a murmur at the preliminary interview or a notice posted in the school porch that they are entitled to contract their children out. Two minor but immediately urgent steps could be taken towards justice even while the 1944 Act is in force, if the Ministry of Education were to advise local education authorities to ensure that all schools (i) inform parents that religious worship does take place in the school (which some parents, accustomed to state non-interference in religion, may not realise) and that they, the parents, have the right to contract their children out of it, and (ii) make decent provision for the children who are contracted out.

which religion?

If you read it carefully, the 1944 Act makes it tolerably clear which religion it is obliging schools (at least in England, except Monmouthshire) to teach. Religious lessons are to follow an "agreed syllabus" (a separate one for each local authority). The body which is to agree on this syllabus is anatomised in the fifth schedule to the Act. Teachers' associations and unestablished religious sects are to be represented on it if the local authority thinks that, in the local circumstances, they ought to be; the authority itself must be represented; and so, except in Wales and

Monmouthshire, must the Church of England. Since this conference must reach "unanimous agreement" on the syllabus to be taught (if it fails, the Minister will appoint a conference of his own), it is clear that, at least in England (except Monmouthshire), the Church of England holds at least veto rights over the religion taught in state schools. Presumably, therefore, the religion will be Christian and in a form not distasteful to Anglicans.

Curiously, however, the Act is much less specific about the worship which it makes as compulsory as the lessons. Nowhere does it name the recipient of the worship. It does not say the worship must be Christian. It is even possible that it is forbidding it to be Christian. For the only guidance the Act gives is that the worship must not be "distinctive of any particular religious denomination." When it speaks of "religious denomination" (it does not speak of "Christian denomination"), does the Act mean one of the overall religious categories, such as Christianity, Buddhism or Mohammedanism? If that is the Act's intention, it is probably contravened on most days in most schools. Every time a prayer finishes "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," and every time the school choir sings the Christmas carol that proclaims "Christ is born in Bethlehem," worship is being offered which is distinctive of the Christian religious denomination.

Such worship quite often does take place; so evidently the schools themselves usually interpret "denomination" in the smaller sense of "sect." If that is its meaning, the only limitation the Act lays on the schools is not to worship in a manner distinctive of any one sect. Let them find a mode of worship endorsed by two sects and that, though no doubt highly displeasing to both

sects, will satisfy the Act. The two sects need not be Christian sects—just religious sects. An inventive headmaster could shake down the religious provisions of the 1944 Act in a week, simply by doing what it permits him to do. On Monday morning he could require the assembly to tell its beads, because (he would have to be careful not to specify the prayers that went with each bead) the use of a rosary is common to Roman Catholics and Buddhists. On Tuesday, he could pray "O God who permittest polygamy," that belief being shared by Mohammedans and Mormons. On Wednesday, he might pray "O God who forbiddest the eating of pork," that rule being shared by Mohammedans and Jews. On Thursday, consulting the Christian Scientists and the Jehovah's Witnesses, he might begin "O God who hatest blood transfusions." And on Friday he might abandon the "O God" formula altogether and, this being a point agreed on by innumerable polytheistic religions, pray "O Gods and Goddesses."

To shake down the Act in this way and expose its silliness might in the long run be the greatest benefaction a headmaster could offer the children of Britain. Unfortunately, since it would risk giving also a severe shaking to the minds and hearts of the pupils actually attending school during the process, the method is unthinkable. There is in practice small danger of a headmaster sardonic enough to exploit the Act's elasticity. The danger is rather that "undenominational" worship will be taken to mean "least common denominator" of worship, and that worship forbidden to be distinctive of any particular sect will end up being distinctive of nothing in particular. At a London primary school of which I have some experience, prayers, which are offered not only at the compulsory assembly but, for good measure, in each class-

2. state-supported sectarian schools

The worship and religious instruction I have been discussing take place in the ordinary state schools (in the jargon, "county" schools). There is, however, another category (jargon name "voluntary" schools). These look like state schools to the parents, who pay no fees, and also to the tax and rate payers, who have to bear in some cases nearly all and in others quite all the cost of supporting the schools.

The voluntary schools are those which were not founded by the state. Most of them were originally church schools, started by one or other of the Christian sects. However, the state began to take on the financial responsibility for them as early as 1902, when it undertook paying the teachers' salaries. Since the state had already made itself financially responsible and could not shift the burden, the voluntary schools had to be fitted in to the 1944 Act; and no doubt it was also felt that, since the state's own network of schooling could not be immediately completed, the existing church schools, which the state had to support anyway, could be used to fill in the gaps. But the 1944 Act shows no sign of ever intending the state to build *new* church schools.

Although the state now pays all or most of their costs, the voluntary schools retain their affiliation with whichever sect it was that paid their expenses before 1902. How close the affiliation is depends on the status of the voluntary school. In a "controlled" voluntary school, the status of about half the Anglican but only two of the Catholic schools, the state pays everything and the sect nothing; but the sect appoints a third of the governing body (*op cit*, *New Society*, 21 July, 1966). Worship and religious lessons are of the non-denominational kind found in ordinary county schools, unless the parents wish them to be according to

the sect to which the school is affiliated; for the children of those parents who do so wish, the teachers are at hand, since a fixed portion of the staff in a "controlled" school must consist of persons competent to give religious instruction according to the sect concerned.

Apart from the small group of "special agreement" schools (which have, precisely, made their own special agreements with the state), the other status a voluntary school may have is "aided." This is the status of most of the Catholic schools; by 1961 more than half a million children were at "aided" Catholic schools. In an "aided" school, the sect makes a small contribution to the maintenance of the structure of the building (the sect's share has gone down, in two successive stages, since 1944). In return, the sect gets complete religious control. It appoints two-thirds of the governing body, which in its turn appoints the teachers—and may dismiss them. In 1966 a teacher at the Anglican primary school at Ide Hill, near Sevenoaks, expressed agnostic opinions at a parent-teachers association meeting held at another school, resigned her job and was told that, had she not resigned, the school managers or the diocesan authorities would have insisted she did (letter from teacher concerned, *New Statesman*, 30 December 1966). All the religious worship and instruction in an "aided" school are according to the sect which controls the school.

single school areas

One of the injustices which result from propping up sectarian schools as part of the state network while allowing them to remain sectarian is that in some areas a sectarian school is the only free school available. The Anglican school

at Ide Hill, for instance, which would not tolerate an agnostic among its teachers, is the only primary school there—it is simply the village school (*The Freethinker*, 16 December 1966 and letter from J. Wood, *New Statesman*, 6 January 1967.) To have no choice except to plunge their children into a sectarian atmosphere is an obvious moral hardship alike to unbelieving parents, to the many indifferent parents who might be prepared to accept a bit of non-denominational uplift but don't want their children reared in ardent sectarianism, and to religious parents who belong to a sect other than the one that controls the school.

Less obviously, it may even be a moral hardship to parents who do belong to the same sect as the school. Lay opinion is not always correctly represented by clergymen of the same sect. Not a few Catholics have lately published their misgivings about the wisdom of segregating children in an all-Catholic school society (letter in *The Guardian*, 3 May 1966). Religious parents may have misgivings but, should they live in a single-school area, they have no choice.

“exaggerated” anxiety

The Secretary of State for Education declared on 4 November 1966 in his opening speech on the 1966 Education Bill that commentators have shown “exaggerated anxiety” about single-school areas. However, his department was unable to say how many single-school areas there are. This ignorance is not altogether culpable because of the difficulty, which was pointed out by the Minister of State during the committee stage of the Bill, of deciding when the nearest non-sectarian school is too far away, and the public transport to it too unserviceable, for parents to have

a genuine choice. Single-school areas are often villages where the only primary school is a church school. It has been knowledgeably estimated that the number of single-school areas is quite substantial, if one adopts the moderate and practical criterion that a five-mile bus journey is not a feasible proposition for a child in at least the earlier reaches of primary-school age to undertake alone twice a day or for a parent with a job and/or other children to undertake four times each day on escort duty.

It is hard to see how anxiety can be “exaggerated” while even one child is being indoctrinated with sectarian religion against its parents' wishes through the accident of living in a single-school area. At Cuckfield, Sussex, the only primary school is an Anglican “aided” school. There is a “controlled” Anglican school four miles away and a county school five miles away. A couple of, say, Mohammedan or atheist parents unable to undertake such journeys would have no choice but to send their child to the church school—whereupon they would receive a notice beginning “Now that your child has begun school you would no doubt like to know something about the school and its aims. In close co-operation with the Vicar, who is the Chairman of the Managers, we do our best to bring up the children as practising Christians.”

Many of the people who have been expressing the “exaggerated” anxiety know, simply from their personal acquaintance, of more than one child who is being sectarianly schooled contrary to its parents' wishes in a single-school area. And it is possible for sectarian schooling to be imposed not just against the wishes of a single, odd-man-out parental couple but against the express wishes of the majority of the parents. Recently during the committee stage

of the 1966 Education Act (23 November 1966), Mr Peter M. Jackson cited the single-school area of Wheat-hampstead, Hertfordshire, where, at a parish meeting, the majority of the parents voted for handing over the church school to the local authority. The church refused. The school is being rebuilt, still as a church school and still as the only free school in the area.

purpose

The injustice of single-school areas is not to be remedied simply by making contracting out work. A sectarian school intends its whole atmosphere to be saturated with the doctrines and mental attitudes of the sect. There can be no contracting a child out of the school's entire climate. And because the school's aim, in creating such a climate, is to prevent the child from ever developing the faculty to make, as an adult, his own free decision about whether or not to contract himself out of the sect, there can be no justification for the state's continuing to support sectarian schools in *any* areas.

A sectarian school is an institution for indoctrinating children. To do this is its only reason for existing, for drawing state funds but declining, if need be even in defiance of the parents' wishes, to merge with the state system. Its purpose is to seclude its pupils from the contamination of mixing with children and teachers who do not belong to the sect and subscribe to its opinions—all except, of course, those children who get swept into the sectarian school by the geographical accident of living in a "single-school area;" contamination from those is presumably swallowed up and neutralised by the sectarian atmosphere they are submerged in. Then, having cornered its pupils and cut them off from the rest of the community, the

sectarian school bombards them with the propaganda of—exclusively—its own sect.

pro-sectarian apologies

I have heard it seriously urged that, because the churches pioneered popular education before the state got round to seriously thinking of it, they should be allowed, as a mark of society's gratitude, to keep control of the schools they founded. By all means the churches deserve credit for their pioneering. That matter is simply settled: by a commemorative stone above the school door. Since, however, the state has paid most of the church schools' expenses since 1902, to say the churches "deserve" to control the schools now is like saying that, though the state should finance British Rail, control of the railways should be, as a mark of historical respect, left, to this day, to the LMS, GWR and LNER. Like most analogies, this isn't, of course, exact. One has to make this dire addition: that, when a church controls a school, what it is really controlling is the minds of children.

Defenders of sectarian schools sometimes represent the sects as public benefactors, on the grounds that they help the state out with the cost of education. But if the state fulfils its obligations, the truth is more like the opposite. The sectarian schools are merely putting the state to the expense of eventually building a new state school in every area where at present there is only a sectarian school, while continuing to support the sectarian school as well.

The contribution the sects make towards supporting their own "aided" schools is smaller than their apologists sometimes imply. The sect does not pay the running costs; it is exempted, by

the 1944 Act, from the cost of repairing playgrounds, playing fields and the interior of school buildings. The sect is involved only with repairing the structure of the buildings, and towards even this maintenance the sect receives a grant from the state.

By the 1944 Act the state grant was 50 per cent of the cost of the structural maintenance of the school buildings. A Roman Catholic action committee presently set to work to improve on this, and in 1959 the state complied by putting up its own share of the maintenance grant to 75 per cent and undertaking to pay the grant not only for existing schools but also to build new church secondary schools if they were to receive children coming up from already existing church primary schools. By the 1966 Education Act, the state's contribution to the maintenance costs rose to 80 per cent, and the state made a new departure in policy by agreeing to make this enlarged grant available for building altogether new church schools. Though the Act exercises some control over new building of church schools, it does not make it technically impossible for the building of a new church school to create a new "single-school area." The House seems to have been satisfied by a statement, read out by the Member for Barking during the second reading debate, in which a canon of the Church of England affirmed that "we" have no intention of using the new facilities in this way. During the committee stage, the Member for Saffron Walden said he "understood that the same applies to a large extent" to the Roman Catholic schools too.

The sect makes a minor contribution towards the expenses of sectarian schools. What it purchases with its contribution is not simply the right to indoctrinate children but the right to

have children indoctrinated by the state, yet to the sect's prescription.

a deputation and its critics

When (in February 1966) the government announced its intention of making the latest increase and extension of the maintenance grant (which now became also a building grant) to sectarian schools, it announced that this policy had resulted from representations made by the Church of England, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the Free Church Council.

As a rule, one body you can rely on to object to the indoctrination of children by a sect is another sect. But in this case the three main Christian sects had evidently come together to press largesse out of the state and then parcel it out between themselves. They seem to have behaved like 19th-century European powers getting together to parcel out Africa.

However, there is another body in the community well known for its objections to sectarian indoctrination: the freethinkers. Their objections are impartial, in the sense that freethinkers dislike indoctrination by all the sects equally, and they are also disinterested, inasmuch as freethinkers have never demanded that the state provide them with schools in which to practise freethinking indoctrination. In the consultations which led to the government's new policy, the freethinkers were dealt with very straightforwardly: they were not invited. There are two freethinking organisations, the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association. Neither of them knew the consultations were taking place.

When it was announced the consultations had not merely taken place but

resulted in a new government policy, the freethinkers sent a deputation to the Minister of State for Education. They didn't stomp off to the Ministry in the spirit of a colonial power left out of the carve-up of Africa—that is to say, they did not demand what, by the churchmen's standards, they were perfectly entitled to demand, namely an 80 per cent public subsidy towards building and maintaining, plus a 100 per cent public subsidy towards actually running, schools designed to indoctrinate children with militant atheism.

The freethinkers had two strong reasons for making no such demand. The lesser was that it's bad enough that Christian sectarian schools are sometimes imposed on non-Christian parents or Christian parents of a different sect—a situation which evidently doesn't worry the churchmen or they would not have persuaded the government to perpetuate it and to risk creating even more "single-school areas" by the new measure: but it would worry freethinkers if building atheist schools were to create even one "single-school area" where atheist schooling was imposed on even one child of religious parents. This consideration is, however, drowned out by the major reason, which is that it would worry freethinkers, to the point where they do not contemplate and would not countenance anything of the sort, if atheist indoctrination were to be imposed on a single child of *any* parentage. Freethinkers are vehemently unwilling to impose their beliefs on any children, their own included. Indoctrination in freethinking is a contradiction in terms. To freethinkers it is an abhorrent idea that you should hold a child in isolated ignorance of other beliefs while you pump him full of your own.

Accordingly, the freethinking deputation simply protested against the new

policy. The government is trying to rid our schools of social segregation: what on earth is it now doing, the deputation politely asked, in suddenly switching public money into building new schools segregated according to religion? If some Christians are so intolerant of, or so frightened of, beliefs different from their own that they want to keep their children away from contact with them, those Christians are, of course, entitled to their opinion—but not to a public subsidy for putting it into practice.

News of the freethinkers' deputation excited some public comment. The freethinkers were called a pressure group. Not a word about the group of Christians who had made representations in the first place and persuaded the government to change its policy. The freethinkers were called intolerant. Not a word about the Christian sectarians who demand and get public finance for keeping their sectarian children secluded from contamination by the children of their fellow citizens. Because I had been a member of the freethinking deputation, I received some interesting letters from persons unknown to me, telling me that I was talking intolerant rubbish, exerting an evil influence on my daughter and behaving like Hitler and Stalin. The letter I liked best said simply "There is no place for people like you in a Christian country. Go back to Ireland." (I don't think the writer of it can have been very well acquainted with Ireland.)

In a newspaper article, Mr Auberon Waugh made play with numbers, declaring that the freethinking deputation had been saying that the five million Catholics in the country must either accept what he called "the gospel according to" a few thousand freethinkers or pay for their children's

education. This is a curious argument, often advanced in defence of publicly-financed Catholic schools. Why is it supposed that, if public money were withdrawn from Catholic schools, Catholic parents would have no alternative but to pay for their children's education? The ordinary state schools would still be, as they are now, open to the children of Catholics. If Catholic parents don't like the non-denominational religion practised in them, as I don't myself, they have the right to contract their children out. If contracting out is good enough for the children of unbelievers, it is good enough for the children of Catholics.

In point of fact, of course, it is not good enough for either. The public opinion of five million Catholics would be very well applied were it directed towards getting the system amended—or, better still, towards amending the whole theory (if any) and practice of religious worship and instruction by the state.

3. why state religious education is an abuse

When you scrutinise it our whole system of state religion in schools turns out to be an abuse of democracy and tolerance, and an offence against the moral duty we as a society owe to our children. The ordinary state schools and the sectarian ones differ only in the depth of the offence they commit. The sectarian schools segregate and indoctrinate. The state schools proper don't segregate but they do, though usually in a more wishy-washy mode, indoctrinate. Their religious lessons are intended to inculcate the beliefs of one religion, Christianity. ("Dealing with the non-believer" was the heading of the "RE page" article in *The Teacher* of 1 July 1966.) Their "act of worship" inculcates belief not necessarily in Christianity but in a religion of some kind. The worship may be offered to a vague and non-denominational deity, but it is offered to a supernatural being of some description. The 1944 Act is elastic, but it is not elastic enough to make room for the notion that perhaps there is no god and that perhaps an "act of worship" consists of talking without an interlocutor.

The schools are doing this not just on public money but on public authority. An Act of Parliament which decrees that all our schools must worship a god is giving our children a guarantee that a god exists to receive the worship. Parliament has no authority to issue such a guarantee. What's more, Parliament knows perfectly well it hasn't. It is quite simply imposing on our children.

The sincerity with which a person holds a belief is no criterion of whether his belief is correct. I don't myself believe that the sincerity of any of my convictions gives me a right to impose them on others, even if the others are my own children—and least of all if my method of imposing them consists of

withholding from the child the knowledge that other equally sincere convictions exist. Like most freethinkers, my husband and I are at some pains to present to our child other points of view and not impose our own. However, there are people who think that, if a parent conceives it to be his duty to impose his own beliefs on his child, he has the right to do it. But I am quite sure that, by *anyone's* theory of democracy, a parent who undertakes to impose his beliefs on his children must do so on his own authority. The sincerity of his own conviction, and the sincerity with which he believes it his duty to pass his conviction on, do not give him the right to call for an Act of Parliament to guarantee to every child in the kingdom that his convictions are correct.

I am a sincere—indeed, I am a paid-up—member of the Labour Party. As it happens, the very last educational fate I would wish for my daughter is that she attend a school exclusively for the children of paid-up members of the Labour Party, there to be saturated in Labour Party propaganda. But were I to take leave of my senses and start screaming that I did want that and must have it at public expense, and were the Labour Party to take leave of its senses, too, and start endorsing my scream, then I trust the rest of the community would quickly point out to us that we were suffering from a folly, that what we demanded would be an intolerable imposition on the public purse and the public conscience, and that it would be an even worse imposition on our children's right to a fair presentation of the facts and to free and equal access to the varieties of belief and opinion floating round the world. And it would, incidentally, still be an intolerable imposition if the three main political parties came together, as the three main Christian sects did, to scream for it in

unison and then parcel out the lolly between them.

subsidising intolerance

It's all very well for me and other freethinking parents to be convinced that our first duty towards our children is one of tolerance and fairness and of bearing in mind that we ourselves may be wrong. But other parents have equally strong convictions in a different direction, and they, too, have certain rights vis-à-vis the state. To their view, the urgent necessity of making sure that as many children as possible get eventually into heaven over-rides any duty of tolerance towards children—though they are so one hundred per cent sure that their own opinions are correct that they do not even see it as a matter of over-riding tolerance; they will tell you that "tolerance does not mean tolerating evil" (though as a matter of fact, if you will tolerate only what you are sure isn't evil, it is hard to see how you are being tolerant at all) and will invite you to agree that anything which might lessen a child's chances of eternal salvation is evil, quite as though the existence of eternal salvation were not a disputable matter which makes demands on other people's tolerance.

Obviously, a tolerant state must be equally tolerant of these parents and of the freethinkers. Indeed, that is the duty of a tolerant citizen, too. I know that many Christian parents conceive it to be their duty to pass on their faith. I know the churches conceive they have a mission to catch and save children's souls. My imagination can even take in that they may conceive their mission to be so imperative that they hold themselves justified in pressing for every last ounce they can push the state into granting them towards

the fulfilment of what they conceive to be their mission.

However, religionists are not the only people with a concept of their duty. The state has one, too. And when the religionists push, there comes a point where the state is not merely entitled but in duty bound to dig in its heels and say "No, your concept of your mission is in your own head, and you must take the responsibility for acting on it. You are quite entitled to act on it in your private capacity and entitled to protection while you do so. But you must not oblige the state to endorse your notion of your mission by Act of Parliament, and you must not seek to fulfil your supposed mission by taking over the part-time use of public premises which public money supports for a quite different purpose."

When Catholics argue "If the state ceased supporting Catholic schools, I should have no alternative but to pay for my children's education because my conscience or my religious organisation forbids me to send them to the ordinary state schools," it is time for the state to reply "Your conscience and the obedience you believe you owe to your religious organisation are matters which you decide in your own head, and you must take the responsibility for what you decide. The state will protect you in practising your religion and in getting your children indoctrinated, if you see fit, by the officers of your religion, and it opens the state schools to your children along with everyone else's. But if your faith tells you your children must not mix with children of other faiths or no faith, the state cannot abet you in effecting segregation, because then it would be acting unfairly towards other children and towards the future of the community as a whole, which by democratic consent we hope will grow into a tolerant and unsegregated com-

munity. The state is not obliged to indoctrinate and segregate your children for you, at the dictate of your conscience, when it has no warrant for indoctrination and when segregation is against its own conscience."

A segregated institution for indoctrinating children is an intolerant institution. The state is not being intolerant if it declines to subsidise intolerance.

the proper place for religion

The churches have their own premises. No one is proposing to take away their premises or their freedom to attract children onto them and there save their souls. No one is threatening their freedom to use the notice-boards outside their premises to solicit the children's attention on their way to and from school. No one is tampering with a parent's right to take his child to church. In a school day there are only seven hours of schooling. In a school year there are only 191 school days. That leaves 174 days clear, not to mention the before and after school hours, for any parent who so chooses to take his child to church and have him indoctrinated. It really can't be pretended that the churches need to move into the schools and turn educational premises into part-time places of worship, or that, if the schools were to use school time only for the urgent and necessary business of schooling, this would infringe the the churches' freedom and opportunity to carry out their mission.

anti-educational

In using the schools as we do at present, namely as substitute churches, we are using them for a purpose not merely irrelevant to education

but indeed directly contrary to its purpose.

The modern world has inherited from the ancient a number of fabulous, more or less anonymous and uncorroborated narratives. One of these relates how a virgin was overshadowed by a spirit and gave birth to a god. Another, perhaps even more charming, relates how a girl called Danae was impregnated by a god incarnate in a shower of gold and gave birth to the hero Perseus. At present, we tell one of these stories to our children as fable, always provided there's room for it in the crowded curriculum, and we guarantee the other to them as fact, laying it down by law that, for *this* lesson, time *must* be made in the school week. To make such a distinction between the two stories is a quite arbitrary proceeding which is in itself likely to confuse the reasoning faculty it is the purpose of education to develop. Of course an individual is entitled, if he likes, to choose to believe either of those stories and discard the other. But the state should have some good grounds for its choice if it is going to guarantee the truth of one and the untruth of the other. The only grounds we have for making any distinction at all between the credibility of the two is that Greek religion has died out (it died a partly natural death, being already moribund before it was finished off by the intolerance of Christianity), whereas there are still people living today who believe the Christian story.

But there are plenty of people still living who, with the same sincerity as the Christians, believe equally unlikely and unproven stories to the exclusion of the Christian one. In guaranteeing the Christian one, but not guaranteeing the Mohammedan and Buddhist ones that would contradict it and contradict each

other, the state is being merely arbitrary.

“we are a christian country”

This arbitrariness is sometimes justified on the grounds that “we’re a Christian country.” Of course we’re no such thing—at least if you take “Christian country” in the only sense in which one has ever existed to be put to the test, which is the historical sense. The short answer to my correspondent who bade me go back to Ireland is that Ireland *is* a Christian country; Great Britain is a tolerant country. It even tolerates third-generation Irish immigrants like myself who profess their atheism in public. How a country that really was a Christian country would react to behaviour like mine can be seen by consulting the first Christian country—or, to be precise, empire—in history. When the Roman Empire was converted into a Christian empire, Justinian began its new legal code by ordaining that no one should dare to dispute the Trinity and the Catholic faith in public. That is not the legal code observed in Great Britain now.

Christendom, which was probably the first and almost certainly the longest-lasting example of systematic ideological intolerance in history, can be historically defined as the area where, for some twelve centuries, it was physically unsafe to say in public that you doubted the divinity of Christ. Great Britain, where I have more than once publicly doubted the divinity of Christ without suffering worse damage than assault by letter, has now left Christendom. We used to be a Christian country—when you could be fined for not going to church: but we are nowadays a tolerant country, and probably not even a tolerant country with a practising Christian majority.

A *professing* Christian majority we almost certainly do possess. But that is an extremely different matter, because it is impossible to tell what people mean when they profess to subscribe to a religion. It is possible they mean no more than that they, like most of us, are on the side of the good. Perhaps it is the state’s endorsement of religion in the schools which has impressed on them the notion that religion and the good are inseparable. But many of them evidently have the equally strange notion that religion and a god are separable, and it is this which makes it so hard to assess their real intentions. In an opinion survey conducted by Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd. for ABC Television, in 1963-4, 94 per cent of the people questioned named a religious denomination as the one they belonged to, yet only 42 per cent of the people questioned were prepared to say they believed in a personal god (*Television and Religion*, University of London Press, 1964). Quite a large number, therefore, must profess to subscribe to a creed but refuse to subscribe to that creed’s prime tenet.

The actual practice of a religion is probably a less shaky criterion by which to assess majority opinion. In the same survey, only a quarter of those questioned said “that they go to a place of worship even as frequently as ‘about once a month.’” Asked if they had gone to church on the Sunday before the question, only 10 per cent said “Yes.” If these figures should be, as their compilers claim they are, anything like representative of the population as a whole, it is quite clear that, even if Britain worked on crude majority rule, which it doesn’t, a 42 per cent belief in a personal god would be no foundation for compelling the worship of a personal god in every state school, and a 10 per cent voluntary weekly church attendance no foundation for compel-

ling every school to function as a church every school day.

However, not only do we not work by crude majority rule but we try to some extent to work by commonsense. The biology we teach in our schools is not the biology believed by the majority of the population (a biology that might well consist of such statements as that cakes baked by menstruating women never rise) but the biology which seems reasonable to biologists and the one they are prepared to defend by reason to a non-expert who enquires.

Biology, of course, is factual and empirical. And as a rule we do not teach as fact (though we may report the fact that some people hold them as opinions) any hypotheses for which reasonable grounds can't or can't yet be discerned. If we taught as fact any opinion that might at any given time be held by the majority, we should have achieved a formula whereby opinion, except by irrational methods, could never change. As it happens, if the popular press is anything like right in its estimate of its readers, the supernatural belief which is most probably entertained by a majority of the population at present is belief in what the stars foretell. But commonsense and the recognition that such an opinion can't be adequately defended by reason inform us that the most overwhelming majority conceivable would be an insufficient foundation and authority for an Act of Parliament compelling every state school to give horoscope lessons.

the immorality of inculcating faith

However, the Christian religion has one peculiarity which makes it directly anti-educational in a way that even astrology isn't. It holds that faith in it is a virtue. Naturally, it also holds that to lose

or refuse your faith is a non-virtue. It has established "loss of faith" in the very idiom of our language. Why not "liberation from faith"? When we inculcate Christianity into our children, we are making a definite attempt to fix in them a feeling that to stop believing in Christianity, on no matter how good evidence (because no one can know in advance what evidence may one day be produced), would be disloyal and wrong.

This is really a deliberate attempt to emotionally buy the child's belief in advance of his hearing the evidence for Christianity and in advance of his arriving at an age to weigh the evidence. Were it not so, the religionists would not insist that we teach Christianity to small children; they would be content to start putting their case to children of, say, fourteen, who were reaching a position from which they could assess the case.

Of course, the facts we teach our children in *any* school subject may be, through a simple mistake, wrong. Our history books may be full of errors. The physics and chemistry we teach this term may be proved incorrect by next term. But if we make such mistakes, at least they are honest mistakes; and, because we admit the possibility of making honest mistakes in all these subjects, at least we do not tell our children that it is virtuous to believe the physics and chemistry they are taught, and that it would be disloyal to discard them when better evidence or better reasoning comes along. We do teach precisely that about Christianity. That is what is meant by teaching religion; and that is why religionists are so anxious that we should go on teaching it. If the churches care and dare to take the responsibility of trying to pre-empt a child's belief, then let them take the responsibility. It is a responsi-

bility which we—which the community—has no authority to bear.

who must contract out?

The community carries one responsibility which it dare not, for the sake of its own future as a community, shirk; it must educate our children. It is because of this educational responsibility that we can't simply solve the religious education problem by improving the contracting out system.

One of the defects of the system, which would remain even if the system were put into working order, and which can't be cured so long as religion is taught by the state at all, is that a child who is contracted out of religious indoctrination receives virtually no factual information about religion. The facts are at present available only in a package deal, along with the inculcation of belief in them. To be an educated person, you need to know *both* the story of Danae *and* the story of the Virgin Birth. Otherwise you will be baffled if you so much as walk round an exhibition of old master paintings, where you are liable to come on paintings of both subjects. Much of our culture was created by, under or in terms of Christendom. As our schools are run at present, a parent who contracts his child out of religious propaganda risks contracting him out of an essential part of our culture. The state has a duty to contract properly *in* to the cultural education business; and in order to fulfil that duty, it will have to contract out of the religious education business and leave it to the people who genuinely believe it is their—divinely appointed—business.

As things are now, while Christianity holds a privileged place in the schools, the schools have a tendency, which is

more or less forced on them in order to justify the arbitrary privileges given to Christianity, to play down or actually suppress the facts that Darwin, Tom Paine, Gibbon, John Stuart Mill, Sir James Frazer and Sigmund Freud ever existed. But the cure for that is not to perform the equally deplorable suppression of the facts that St. John of the Cross, Bunyan and Martin Luther ever existed. Our children have the right to stop being indoctrinated with belief in one religion and to start being told, in a factual way, the content of the myths and doctrines of as many religions and objections to all religions as the teacher's general knowledge will run to.

teachers' neutrality

I surmise it's quite possible, for a teacher who is willing to try, to give a tolerably unbiased account. After all, that is what we already expect of our teachers in the matter of politics. They can't teach the history of the 19th century in England without giving an account of both Liberal and Tory political philosophy. Why not the history of the 18th century with an equally factual account of Christian and free-thinking philosophy?

And if some teachers of deep conviction either way couldn't help but introduce a hint of bias, the least we can do for our children is make sure they have a fair chance of encountering a fair cross-section of different biases.

the only way out

We are at present in a thorough tangle about the whole matter of religious education. The state is behaving immorally towards almost everyone concerned, and most of all towards the

children. In the past, the state seems often to have thought its duty done if it could stop the three most vociferous Christian sects screaming against one another. Recently, the sects, whether through oecumenical good feeling or because, in a world where the power of religion generally seems to be shrinking, each sect would rather see the other two secure the power to have their children indoctrinated than forfeit that power over its own children, have made an alliance. The state, which must have grown to expect tiresomeness from the sects' squabbling with each other, seems so taken by surprise on seeing their united front that it capitulates to their every demand and may even be under the impression that, because *they* have at last achieved, for practical purposes, tolerance of one another, *it* is being tolerant in ceding them whatever they ask, even when what they ask is intolerant. But even though they have secured religious indoctrination of some kind in every state school, the religionists are still dissatisfied, on the grounds that the indoctrination doesn't always work. Unbelievers are dissatisfied on the grounds that it sometimes does.

Indeed, the only people who are satisfied with the present arrangements are one or two cynics. Since religious belief seems to be declining in spite of all this religious education, they argue, it is obvious that religious education goes in at one ear and out at the other, so no harm can come of continuing to give it. And they sometimes add that nothing is so sure to turn out atheist pupils as a religiously fanatical headmaster.

That is an appeal, of course, to education of the kind Bernard Shaw called homeopathic, on the principle whereby homeopathic medicine administers small quantities of noxious material in order to provoke resistance. The difficulty, as Shaw pointed out, is that the

homeopathic principle, if it works at all, works only if you know how to calculate to a nicety the exact dose of noxious matter required, the correct dose may be different for each person, and many persons, instead of reacting against the noxious matter, may succumb to it. Even those who do react have not necessarily done anything of much value to them. The pupil who turns atheist because he's taken against the headmaster is not a freethinker or any sort of thinker, but simply someone who cannot control his reflex reactions. You might expect me to rejoice because, in his reaction, he's jumped my way; but if I did I'd do so irresponsibly; I won't rejoice when he reacts against another belief taught at school, that it's wrong to murder. By the same token, you may cynically rejoice that religious teaching goes in at one ear and out at the other; but are you cynical enough to rejoice if the same is true of the history, geography and arithmetic teaching?

If you regard the inducing of religious faith in school children as harm, you can't be assured religious education is harmless merely because it doesn't always produce the particular form of harm the religionists hoped it would. There's no limiting the harm set in train when Parliament guarantees to children the truth of something Parliament knows perfectly well it can't be sure of. If it fails (which it doesn't always) to indoctrinate them with faith, religious education may nonetheless be, at the best, boring our children to the point where they undertake non-thought on all questions of the kind, as a deliberate policy of escape; at the worst, it may be breeding up a perfect race of infant cynics.

Before either of those results has a chance to proceed any further, it is important and urgent to extricate our-

selves from the tangle. Nothing will release us short of scrapping all the religious provisions of the 1944 Act. If the state is to honour its moral obligation not impose on children opinions for which it has no warrant, state schools can only be, in matters of religion, tolerant and neutral: open to the children of people of all religious and irreligious denominations, but offering worship and instruction in none, pursuing simply the proper business of schools, education, which includes giving a neutral report to the children of the facts of the various religious beliefs and disbeliefs held in the world.

The sectarian schools are entitled to be offered this choice by the state: either let them hand over control, as they have already handed over the financial responsibility, to the state and become genuine state schools (there could be no question of "compensation," as though the schools were being nationalised; any bill the sects might present to the state for the value of the premises would be swamped by the bill the state could put in to them for the running costs over the earlier part of this century); or, which they are quite at liberty to do so long as private education exists at all, let them re-assume the financial burden and become private schools.

what should replace religious instruction?

The often-asked question "What would you put in the place of religious education?" has a short answer: "Education." The question is usually put with a special reference to moral education. And quite often, when painstaking free-thinkers begin to answer by sketching a syllabus of moral education, a Christian interrupts to say "But all you're proposing is a social morality which amounts to the Christian precept 'Thou

shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,' so why not just go on teaching Christianity and have done with it?"

Well, let's for a start dispose of a widely-accepted piece of plagiarism. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" is not exclusively or by origin a Christian precept. It is a Christian quotation. It comes from the Old Testament—*Leviticus XIX, 18*. So the argument ought to read "Why not teach Judaism and have done with it?" If the Jews were as exorbitant as the Christians they'd be demanding an Act of Parliament decreeing that only kosher food be served in all state schools.

But of course the argument is nonsense anyway. Anyone has a right to find himself in accidental agreement with the ancient Jews about social morality without being obliged to have the supernaturalism too. We are entitled to teach our children morality—and incidentally this is precisely where I would recommend starting to teach them morality—by reading them a translation of the account of the death of Socrates, without pretending that, because Socrates died ordering the ritual sacrifice of a cock to Aesculapius, we ought to pass an Act of Parliament guaranteeing that Aesculapius exists and ordaining that every state school start the day by sacrificing a cock to him.

If you tell children that the reason they must love their neighbour is that God says so, you are already in a difficulty about explaining how atheists love their neighbour (a difficulty not insuperable by ardent Christians, whom I have heard illustrate the power of God by the theory that he even works through atheists), and you may be at least poised at the top of the slope which leads towards a slipperiness that half-conceals from children that there are such things as atheists, including exceptionally

moral ones. And certainly you run the risk that if the child presently comes to the conclusion, which you must admit is a risk whether you yourself think the conclusion correct or incorrect, that there is no such thing as a god, he will assume that there is also no reason to love his neighbour.

Happily there are, of course, other and more than adequate ways whereby a child may arrive at a social morality. One of them is through that branch of the imagination we call the intellect. Morality begins to arrive when you realise that, to other people, you are "other people," just as to foreigners you're the foreigner. Your reason comes up with the humbling thought that the marvellous state of being you doesn't confer on you any rights which being him doesn't confer on your neighbour. The other way is through the more purely literary imagination and consists simply in being able to imagine what it would be like to be your neighbour.

So the full answer to "How shall we teach our children morality?" comes down to the same thing as the short answer: "By education"—that is, "Exercise them in reason, and turn them loose on works of imaginative literature."

I don't think we can pretend our state schools are yet wildly successful at doing it. The schools are making noble progress in extremely difficult circumstances. But we haven't yet passed the point where we often turn our children out so haltingly literate that they can't make anything of imaginative literature even when it comes their way. We can hardly claim, on the results, that our schools have so much superfluous lesson-time on their hands that they can afford to let the churches encroach on it. To let the churches encroach on

it is merely to make matters harder for the schools. Think of all the subjects which for want of time aren't so much as started in most of our primary schools, beginning with French and going on to Latin, Greek and Formal Logic—any one of which I'll happily take as a way of passing the hours at present spent, by Act of Parliament, in religious worship and instruction.

Our best hope of teaching our children morality is simply to teach them. And our worst hope is to behave immorally towards them ourselves. It is an immoral hypocrisy to compel worship to take place in the schools when we don't compel it in the churches, and when so few of us go to church ourselves. Think what a fuss there would be if the equivalent compulsion were applied to adults—if an Act of Parliament required all adults who didn't contract out to attend a religious service every working morning. And it is an immoral imposture to claim that we, as a community, are so certain of the existence of one of the gods who claim people's belief that we dare guarantee it to our children. Let us give our children works of fiction; and let us stop telling them lies.

fabian society the author

The Fabian Society exists to further socialist education and research. It is affiliated to the Labour Party, both nationally and locally, and embraces all shades of Socialist opinion within its ranks—left, right and centre.

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