

Children must choose their own beliefs

In an open letter to Estelle Morris, Richard Dawkins calls on the Government to think again about funding yet more divisive faith schools
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Dear Secretary of State,

The Government has decided, reasonably enough, that heredity is no basis for membership of Parliament, and the hereditary peers are either gone or on their way. Yet, in the very same year, you propose increasing the number of faith schools. Having disavowed the hereditary principle for membership of Parliament, you seem hell-bent on promoting the hereditary principle for the transmission of beliefs and opinions. For that is precisely what religions are: hereditary beliefs and opinions. To quote the headline of a fine article in the Guardian last week by the Reverend Don Cupitt: 'We need to make a clean break with heritage religion and create something better suited to our own time.'

We vary in our opinions and our tastes, and it is one of our glories. Some of us are left-wing, others right. Some are pro-euro, others anti-. Some listen to Beethoven, others Armstrong. Some watch birds, others collect stamps. It is only to be expected that our elders should influence us in all such matters. All this is normal and praiseworthy.

In particular, it is normal and pleasing that parental impact should be strong. I'm not talking particularly about genes, but about all the influences that parents inevitably bring. It is to be expected that cricketering fathers will bowl to their sons - or daughters - on the back lawn, take them to Lords, and pass on their love of the game. There will be some tendency for ornithologists to have bird-watching children, bibliophiles book-loving children. Beliefs and tastes, political biases and hobbies, these will tend, at least statistically, to pass longitudinally down generations, and nobody would wish it otherwise.

But now we come to religion, and an extremely odd thing happens. Where we might have said, 'knowing his father, I expect young Cowdrey will take up cricket,' we emphatically do not say, 'With her devout Catholic parents, I expect young Bernadette will take up Catholicism.' Instead we say, without a moment's hesitation or a qualm of misgiving, 'Bernadette is a Catholic'. We state it as simple fact even when she is far too young to have developed a theological opinion of her own. In all other spheres, a good school will encourage her to develop her own tastes and opinions, her own skills, penchants and values. But when it comes to religion, society meekly makes a clanging exception. We inexplicably accept that, the day she is born, Bernadette has a label tied around her neck. This is a Catholic baby.

That is a protestant baby. This is a Hindu baby. That is a Muslim baby. This baby thinks there are many gods. That baby is adamant that there is only one. But it is preposterous that we do this to children. They are too young to know what they think. To slap a label on a child at birth - to announce, in advance, as a matter of hereditary presumption if not determinate certainty, an infant's opinions on the cosmos and creation, on life and afterlives, on sexual ethics, abortion and euthanasia - is a form of mental child abuse.

I do not believe it is possible to mount a decent defence against my charge. Yet infant belief-labels are almost universally accepted. We don't even think about it. Just in case any lingering doubt remains, consider the following: This child is a Gramscian Marxist. That child is a Trotskyite Syndicalist. This third child is a Wet Conservative. This baby is a Keynesian. That baby is a Monetarist. This baby is an ornithologist. Not, 'This baby is likely to become an ornithologist if his father has anything to do with it.' That would be fine. But, 'this baby is an ornithologist'? Unthinkable, isn't it? Yet, where religion is concerned, you don't give it a second glance. Oh, and by the way, nobody, least of all an atheist, ever talks about an 'atheist child'. Rightly so. But why the double standard?

I presume you need no more convincing. For parents to influence their children's opinions and beliefs is inevitable and proper. But to tie labels to young children, which in effect presume and presuppose the success of that parental influence, is wicked and indefensible. But, you may soothingly say, don't worry, wait till they go to school, it'll be fine. The children will be educated in a variety of opinions and beliefs, they'll be taught to think for themselves, they'll make up their own minds. Well, it would have been nice to think so.

But what do we do? We deliberately set up, and massively subsidise, segregated faith schools. As if it were not enough that we fasten belief-labels on babies at birth, those badges of mental apartheid are now reinforced and refreshed. In their separate schools, children are separately taught mutually incompatible beliefs.

'Protestant children' go to the state-subsidised Protestant school. If they are lucky, they won't actually be taught to hate Catholics, but I wouldn't bank on it, especially in Northern Ireland. The best we can hope for is that they will come out thinking only that there is something a bit alien or odd about Catholics. 'Catholic children' go to the Catholic school. Even if they are not taught to hate Protestants (again, don't bank on it), and even if they don't have to run the gauntlet of hate in the Ardoyne, we can be sure they won't be taught the same Irish history as the 'Protestant children' down the street.

Secretary of state, even if I fail to convince you that opening new faith schools is downright insane, may I at least plead for a consciousness-raising exercise in your own department? Just as feminists succeeded in making us wince when we hear 'he' where no sex is intended, or 'man' for humanity, we need to raise our consciousness about the faith-labelling of children.

Please, I beg you, strongly discourage the use, in all ministerial documents and inter-departmental memos, of phrases that presume theological opinions in children too young to have any. Please foster a climate in which it becomes impossible to use a phrase like 'Catholic children', 'Protestant children', 'Jewish children' or 'Muslim children' without wincing. It only costs two words more to say, for instance, 'children of Muslim parents' or 'children of Jewish parents'.

One of the more frightening aspects of human nature is a tendency to gravitate towards 'Us' and against 'Them'. Worse, Us versus Them disputes have a natural tendency to reach down the generations, leading to vendettas of frightening historical tenacity. Where labels are not provided to feed our natural divisiveness, we manufacture them. Children separate out into gangs, often with distinguishing labels. In certain districts of Los Angeles, a young person innocently sporting the wrong brand of trainers is in danger of being shot. Experiments have been done in which children, with no particular reason to sort themselves into gangs, are provided with, say, green or blue labels. In short order, enmities spring up between the greens and the blues: fierce loyalties to one's own colour, vendettas against the other. These can become surprisingly vicious.

That's what happens when you don't even try to segregate children. Now, imagine that you deliberately stamp a green or a blue label on a child at birth. Send this child to a blue school and that child to a green school. Encourage green boys to assume that they will grow up to marry green girls, while blue girls will marry blue boys. Take for granted that, the moment they have a baby of their own, it too must have the same coloured label tied around its neck. Passed on down the generations, what is all that a recipe for? Do I need to spell it out?

The very idea of a faith school is as unjustifiable as the idea of a hereditary House of Lords, and for the same reason. But hereditary peers, though undemocratic and often mildly eccentric, are not dangerous. Faith schools almost certainly are. There remains the pragmatic argument that, notwithstanding the knockdown objection to the principle of faith schools, they get good exam results. Well, maybe. If it is true, by all means let's try to bottle the secret, and share it around. But, bottled or not, careful analysis fails to uncover any real link with faith. The ingredient in the bottle is a school ethos, which can take years to grow and which, for reasons having no connection with

religion, has become built up in certain Church of England and Roman Catholic schools. A high reputation, once built, is self-perpetuating, because ambitious, education-loving parents gravitate towards it, even to the extent of pretending to be churchgoers.

But in any case, where have we heard something like the pragmatic, 'exam results' argument before? Yes, in the debate over the hereditary peers. People were fond of saying that, no matter how undemocratic was the principle of hereditary members of Parliament, they got results. Enough aristocrats worked hard, some were real experts on fly fishing, or windmills; some were doctors who had wise things to say about the health service; many were farmers who could hold forth on foot and mouth or the Common Agricultural Policy; and all of them preserved the decencies of debate, unlike that rabble in the Commons. Undemocratic they may have been, but they did a good job.

That argument cut no ice with the Government, and rightly so. If you gather together a bunch of men of above average wealth and education, raised in book-lined homes for many generations, it is hardly surprising that some expertise and talent will surface. The pragmatic argument, that hereditary peers do a good job, is on the slippery slope to 'say what you like about Mussolini, at least he made the trains run on time'. There are limits beyond which principle should not be dragged by pragmatism. The Government reached that limit over the hereditary peers. The pragmatic case in favour of faith schools is similar, but weaker. The principled case against faith schools is similar, but stronger.

As for what is to be done, of course we don't want to destroy institutions that are working well. The way to be fair to hitherto unsupported denominations is not to give them their own sectarian schools, but to remove the faith status of the existing schools (just as the fair way to balance the bishops in the Lords is not to invite mullahs, monsignors and rabbis to join them, but to throw the existing bishops out). After everything we've been through this year, to persist with financing segregated religion in sectarian schools is obstinate madness.

Yours very sincerely,

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