Childhood, Faith and the Future: religious education and 'national character' in the Second World War

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Stephen Parker and Rob Freathy have published widely on the history of religious education. In this chapter, they explore how ideas of childhood were implicated in the national imaginary during the Second World War. Concerns about the parlous state of children's religious education lent weight to arguments for a reform of the (religious) educational system in England in order to preserve the nation's Christian identity. The chapter concludes by making some remarks about how childhood has been conceived of in relation to religious education and national religious identity in the UK since 1945.

Introduction

'Among the incidental results of the evacuation scheme has been the discovery that large numbers of town children are being brought up with no religious knowledge at all [revealing] the grim fact that in a country professedly Christian, and a country which at the moment is staking its all in defence of Christian principles, there is a system of national education which allows the citizens of the future to have a purely heathen upbringing […]. Yet education with religion omitted is no education at all […].The basis of good citizenship is character, and a man's character depends upon his beliefs. Yet if the war has emphasized the deficiencies of our educational system, something more than wartime expedients will

be needed to remedy them. More than before it has become clear that the healthy life of a nation must be based upon spiritual principles…Christianity cannot be imbibed from the air…The highest of all knowledge must be given frankly the highest place in the training of young citizens. It will be of little use to fight, as we are fighting to-day, for the preservation of Christian principles if Christianity is to have no future…'[1]

Whether British national character is Christian or not has been much debated since the 1960s, an observation to which we shall return in the conclusion of this chapter. However, as Matthew Grimley has shown of the inter-war years, the intimate connection between English/British character and Christianity was widely understood if not accepted, being circulated and reinforced by the arts, the new media of film, and by the radio programmes of the BBC (Grimley 2007).[2] Likewise, that national character had been fundamentally influenced by, in particular, a 'common religious heritage', especially a Protestant and Puritan one, found intellectual acceptance amongst authors as divergent as D.H. Lawrence and Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (Grimley 2007: 895).

The distinctions between British national character and that of other nation's identities became one spoken and written of increasingly through the 1930s and into the Second World War, as nationalism in the political form of Communism, Fascism and Nazism became ominous threats. According to Grimley, it was argued that, in contrast to Germany, the British peoples were united by a common religious heritage which, since Cromwell's Puritan revolt, had been imbued with a sense of liberty and opposition to civil and ecclesiastical control (Grimley 2007: 900-901). Religion rather than race was espoused as the defining factor in the formation of the British national community.

Wartime rhetoric in general reinforced the notion of Britain's standing as a Christian nation (see Parker 2006, 2012, Freathy 2007, 2008). From politician to parish clergy, much was spoken and written of national Christian character, of the war being both a test of this, as well as presenting an opportunity to reaffirm it. Adult citizens were encouraged to attend to the 'Big Ben minute', a brief time of prayer before the nine-o'clock news on the BBC's Home Service, and to displays of civil religion such as National Days of Prayer (Parker 2006: 92, 110). Children were not considered exempt to similar calls to prayer, the flagship children's radio show, *Children's Hour*, establishing its own Epilogue, Children's Hour Prayers, in 1940, in addition to a new BBC *Religious Service for Schools* (Parker 2010).

In line with what Gordon Lynch has observed of the sacrality of the Irish Catholic nation in the twentieth century, British (Protestant) Christian character was similarly valorized (Lynch 2012: 66-70). Moreover, the 'long childhood', which was becoming the norm across societies with a state-funded education system, including Britain, led increasingly to a view of, what Lynch has called, the 'sacrality of the care of children' (ibid.: 70-73). In this context, children were seen as 'vulnerable to poor social conditions and corrupting moral forces', their protection and moral nurture taking on an increasing imperative (ibid.: 72). The cultural imaginary of British national character and the sense of the sacrality of the care of children combined to create a heightened sense of moral panic when at the outset of the Second World War, in September 1939, some 800,000 children were evacuated from towns and cities to the countryside in anticipation of aerial bombardment. This mass evacuation provided evidence which ran counter to notions of a Christian society, a matter which resulted in anxiety amongst religious educationalists in particular. This galvanized their sense of the importance of a more thoroughgoing Christian education in the future.

Evacuation

Writing of the results of a national enquiry into this evacuation, published in the British journal *Religion in Education* in 1940, Canon Tissington Tatlow, an Anglican cleric, and founding Director of the Institute of Christian Education, summed up the report's alarming findings as this: 'No religious influences in the home, no ordered home life nor discipline'.[3] The report went on:

> Reference to fish and chips as the staple fare is frequent, also the novelty of knives and forks. The slum child in many cases attends Sunday School, but there are no indications that such attendance is of religious value to him. Three things are constantly mentioned together […] very little is done for children in the way of home training by parents in the majority of homes; church-going is the exception rather than the rule, and religious teaching is left almost entirely to the school […] We find very little religious influence of an effective kind in the majority of homes. There is a definite minority in which religion counts; but it is rather pathetic to see the ignorance of many children of the simplest Bible stories […] a higher proportion of children from working-class than from middle-class homes receive some systematic religious teaching. This is due to the number who attend Sunday school. But the great majority of these children when they leave school at fourteen also leave the Sunday school, and such contact as they have had with the Church comes to an end.' [4]

These shocking discoveries were contrasted with the children's responses to life in the bucolic settings of their reception areas, where it was reported they had been taken to church, some for the first time, and liked it. As a result, Tatlow asserted, 'dirty little heathens have been turned into

decent little Christians in a matter of months.'[5]

In the same issue of *Religion in Education* R. B. Henderson, Headmaster of Alleyn's School, Manchester, felt able to conclude that the existence of prayers and a 'Divinity' lesson at the beginning of the school day in many schools were having little effect and 'nearly the whole of England has gone pagan — pagan elementary schools, pagan secondary schools, and pagan universities.'[6] The only remedy as far as he was concerned was a renewed understanding that 'all education is religious' and to focus more systematically on making it so.[7]

Tatlow's and Henderson's anxiety about the situation, and their judgement concerning its remedy were echoed in *The Times* leader quoted at length at the head of this chapter. If there was to be a necessary renewal or reaffirmation of Christian national character, and it was thought there clearly there had to be given the appalling physical, moral and spiritual situation children were reportedly growing up in, then greater prominence needed to be given to children's religious education in schools. The reported national scandal of a childhood lived amidst such turpitude was staged in such rhetoric in order to create a sense of moral purpose at home for the war being fought abroad. There was clearly no point in fighting the 'heathen' overseas, if only 'heathens' were being nurtured at home.

Religion in Education

Over the next few months *The Times* leader, and the 400,000 copies of it circulated as pamphlet, elicited much correspondence in the newspaper's letters page, and debate elsewhere (Parker 2012). Likewise, religious educationalists publishing in the pages of *Religion in Education* at the height of the blitz over Britain, in 1940 and 1941, wrote with candour and urgency of the opportunities wartime presented for religious education in the present, and its future place in the school

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curriculum. Christians in the south of England united, according to the editor of *Religion in Education*, Basil Yeaxlee, to declare that 'our case in this war is spiritual, not just political'; he went on 'this is the accepted hours in which to claim for the Christian faith its fundamental place in British education.'[8] Indeed, F. A. Cockin, Canon of St. Paul's, reflected that 'the most encouraging by-products of war conditions' was the interest in the teaching of religion in school.'[9] The headmaster of an evacuated school wrote that evacuation to a rural area had presented teachers and children with freedoms and opportunities to engage in activities which laid the foundations of what he deemed to be 'real' religious education. Rehearsing plays, engaging in debates, listening to gramophone records, chopping wood, cultivating fields, were cited as 'in the deepest sense 'religious,' since any real initiative within an individual is a spiritual activity'.[10] Another author, a teacher, Arnold Lloyd, wrote of a qualitatively different kind of religious education, and the need for young people to be able to debate ideas in lessons, not just accept what their teachers told them.[11] Because children were in 'peril', he argued, then schooling needed to take on a different tenor. It followed that teachers needed to be given the opportunity to develop an understanding of adolescent psychology; schools should offer an assembly in which quiet reflection is possible; and education professionals needed be an example to the young.[12] Moreover, Maxwell Garnett, the internationalist and long-time General Secretary of the League of Nations Union, wrote stridently of the contrast between Nazism and the values of Christian England. Decreeing that 'there is no reason why the schools of Christian England should not be seeking to make Christians with the unanimity and fervour that is shown by the schools of Nazi Germany'.[13] He contrasted the clear way in which the Nazis pursued the education of their young people with the British education system, within which 83 per cent of children received no further religious education beyond aged 14.[14] Total Christian education would provide a bulwark against Totalitarianism.

When in 1941, the Archbishops of Canterbury, York and Wales published a statement calling for Christian education in all schools, their 'five points', it must have been scarcely believable that all of these would be achieved. But in the end, on a wave of ostensibly widespread and popular support, which wished to reassert British national character as indisputably Christian, it was precisely these five goals that constituted the religious settlement of the 1944 Education Act. Specifically these were: (i) a daily act of collective worship in all schools; (ii) compulsory religious instruction in all schools; (iii) taught by teachers competent to deliver it; (iv) inspected in line with other subjects; and that (v) religious knowledge should be an optional subject in the teachers' certificate of qualification.[15]

Of course, in all of this few asked children what they thought of religious education. When one educationalist did so, Irene Showell Cooper, the resultant responses were not entirely satisfactory to her. One response from a 14 year-old in particular piqued her. When asked what she liked and disliked about her scripture lessons the girl replied:

> Personally, I do not think that the teaching of Scripture should be compulsory in schools. If the children or their parents feel a need or desire to study the works in the Bible, a church or chapel is the best place to attend. Here [in church] the Bible is learnt and discussed in the right atmosphere. Scripture cannot be just a study of the Bible — it becomes a set book in which passages must be studied and learnt by heart.[16]

Irene Cooper's rejoinder was: 'there is some muddled thinking here, and it is obviously the remark of someone who has been badly taught,' but she also concluded that, 'actual religion is always needed', and that there is a 'necessity for teaching religion all the time'.[17] Thus in the 1940s, where one child at least could see the distinctions in what might justifiably be taught in

school, home and church, the majority of educationalists writing in *Religion in Education* took the view that, for the sake of the nation's spiritual health and moral character, children should be nurtured in an ethos reflective of Christian values, experience a daily act of worship, and be taught Christian education.

Conclusion

The social imaginary of the interwar and Second World War years asserted British national character to be Christian. This imaginary was mediated in multiple ways, which fed directly into a mass emotional climate supportive of the morality of war and in sustenance of civilian morale. Because of this, moral panic ensued when it was found that the majority of children did not exhibit the necessary morality and religious knowledge which would guarantee a future Christian society. Compulsory Christian education, it was thought, was the essential means by which a more fully Christianized society could be achieved; prominent educationalists, churchmen and politicians agreed upon this. The end result was a long-lasting settlement for religious education forming part of the now iconic 1944 Education Act.

Whatever the veracity of the claim that British national identity is Christian, this national religious imaginary has become much more vocally contested since the 1960s. Moreover, religious education, still perceived as being one vehicle by which national religious identity is formed, has been often been implicated in these debates (Parker and Freathy 2012). In the face of increased religious diversity and secularity the nature and purpose of religious education in Britain has gradually altered to take into account the diversity of perspectives present within society and its schools, but not without a good deal of contestation (Freathy and Parker 2013). Even so, the religious settlement of 1944 remained and remains the basic legal framework within

which the subject operates. At times when it has been challenged, national character and identity have been invoked in the face of purported internal and external threats. In a House of Lords debate on 'Religious Education in [County] Schools' on 15th November 1967, for example, Lord Butler of Saffron Walden, who had been President of the Board of Education when the 1944 Education Act was passed, called upon parliament to remember the 'sentiments and the emotion' of the time of this 'religious settlement … in the flush of war … in Church House with the bombs actually raining'. To challenge the religious clauses of the Butler Act was presented as tantamount to challenging the cause for which Britain had gone to war.

It is a moot point whether this original settlement was representative of the social reality of the 1940s, or whether it merely reflected a Christian social imaginary of politicians, religious leaders, educationalists and others. Regardless, dissatisfaction with the representativeness and effectiveness of this settlement has grown recently amongst many religious educationalists and stakeholder groups, such that a series of reports in 2015 have called for a wholesale review of this historic settlement.[18] Within these reports children are thought of as deficient in, and therefore requiring, an education which fosters the development of a 'religion and belief literacy'.[19] In a cultural context fearful of religious extremism, children are seen on the one hand as vulnerable to being led astray by radical religious ideologies, or to an intolerance of particular religious groups, and on the other to be pioneers of a new, fairer and more inclusive society. Whereas in the Second World War Christianity was seen as the bulwark to political extremism, arguably today the values underpinning the Western/British socio-political order (so-called British values) are seen as the bulwark to religious extremism.

Commenting upon the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life Report of 2015, the Chair of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, Professor Trevor

Cooling, has written that:

> Britain is a changing society, becoming more diverse and increasingly plural. In this
> context, finding ways of nurturing national identity is urgent. We need a positive ongoing
> national story which reflects this new future.[20]

This begs the questions, what kind of national story; what national religious character should be nurtured (if any)? The history of British religious education points to a British religious identity which is continually in negotiation. Although clearly defining itself as Christian in the interwar years, appealing in particular to a Protestant heritage, the nature of this Christian character was flexible enough to include Christians of a variety of hues, and in practise a Jewish community also. Although this Christian character reasserted itself in debates over national character between the 1960s through to the 1980s, there were gradual moves towards one which was multi-cultural and multi-faith (Parker and Freathy 2012, Feldman 2011).

In this context, religious education takes on a different form and content. A thoroughgoing knowledge and understanding of the Bible and Christian belief has given way to the need for an essential knowledge of a range of different religions and philosophies. These religions and philosophies are taught in schools without prejudice as being equivalent in value and as potentially informative of pupil's personal development, religious literacy, and civic awareness. Even so Christianity is still afforded special status in the religious education curriculum (Parker and Freathy 2012).

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