

Concerning the Religious Education our Orthodox Children receive within the State Education System

It is the vision of Fr Michael Fortounatto that there should be a coming together of all the Orthodox jurisdictions in the United Kingdom to address the crisis in Orthodox religious education. The following was a contribution by the Fellowship's then chairman to a meeting held in the Serbian Orthodox Church, Lancaster Road, London, in May 1997.

St Basil the Great, in the letter to his brother, Caesarius, speaks of two types of knowledge: that which is tangible and therefore discoverable by the senses; and that of the mind, which can best be guided and developed by acquiring faith and by stimulating conversation producing 'an intellect with feet like those of mountain deer, enabling it to scale the most precipitous of places'.

Those of us who are familiar with the tribulations of Agreed Syllabus RE and efforts to inform and enlighten the TV- and video-game child, will understand the chasm that exists between the children of St Basil's time and those submerged in or aspiring to the teen-culture of our present day.

To give an indication of the attitude prevalent in our state schools, here is an account of a personal experience. On a recent Thursday afternoon, I was called in to my school to 'do' RE with a Year 7 class (11-12-year-olds). They were a fairly average group and the old woodwork benches were not very conducive to a free flow of positive ideas (or too great a flow, depending on one's experience). Their usual teacher for RE is the Technology (Woodwork) master, who has no qualifications for RE, but who is a keen member of the local Pentecostal chapel. His intentions are only good, but he has to rely on the ubiquitous and beautifully produced course book, chapter by chapter. My job was to read through and explain about holy books, e.g. the Koran, the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddhist holy book - the Tipitaka, etc. (the order was not important), and then three of the set questions. I had provided myself with a Bible and tried to find out if they knew why it was in two parts.... 'I suppose this is all about that Jesus rubbish', complained one of the more forthcoming girls. Another said, 'He never really existed, you know. It's all just a con-trick by RE teachers, he's just a big con.' And with that the whole class agreed by nodding heads and all clapping quietly (not misbehaving). They then got on to the questions... to them it was just an exercise to pass fifty minutes. In the whole school only twenty children out of 306 had ever been to church on several occasions.

I recount this event because it is into this anti-religious and negative environment that our Orthodox children are being placed. Perhaps in a society where there was a public anti-religious policy this attitude could be understood, but these children (all from fairly affluent commuter village homes) are partly the products of a curriculum which in its efforts to be 'objective' fears to favour any group and has opted to teach about religion/religions as ethnic culture symbols and/or social studies. They often cover similar ground in courses on the New History, Personal and Social Education and Citizenship.

There were many hours of discussion in my county's Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE) on the failure of our new syllabus (the first for forty years) to grasp the nettle and to teach the basics of Christianity. It had to take its place with all the other teachings, festivals, customs and rituals with all their significance and connotations. Every child has to study three religions, one of which has to be Christianity. Our Hindu representative always arrived with his community advisor and complained bitterly that no non-Hindu could do other than harm in the exposition of the Hindu beliefs. He had a

valid point and one with which we Orthodox could sympathise. We could not, however, hope to gain much ground as we 'other faiths' were allowed just one vote....

Is there the practice of worship in schools? Yes, and as in assemblies, the emphasis has to be predominantly Christian. Many Heads and Deputies, however, are openly not Christian and attempts at a meaningful Christian assembly in a multi-cultural situation become focused on general moral issues - what else can be done in all honesty? The school has to provide a framework within the parameters of the 1992 Education reform Acts, to 'develop the spiritual, moral and physical elements in each pupil'. There are many dedicated teachers of RE doing a sterling job, but often seeing each class just once a week. The timetable itself reduces RE to an unexamined slot to fill a space. For the rest, any member of staff with more than their fair share of non-contact time is fair game for a period of RE. The professional RE teacher has little chance of supporting any in-service training for the non-specialists. The school then buys in CD-Roms on the designated topics and issues, backed up by the most beautifully produced course books and reams of other material. All is designed to help the non-specialist produce RE for the year and, if necessary, pass the OFSTED inspection.

My Year 7 class was not to be fooled: they had no context in which to see any relevance in 'RE' of any shade. They had no knowledge or understanding of the language of faith. Words such as 'spiritual', 'mystery', 'repentance', 'conscience', and even 'beliefs', depend for their meanings on the background of each child. They had been taught, after a fashion, about many cultural/religious beliefs, but with none of their own to measure them by. A class of Jewish or Sikh children actually recognises the point one is making, because there is a modicum of shared language and their home background is often one of religious practice. In showing a group of Year 9s round our Nottingham church, the English pupils just filled in their questionnaires. The Asian children asked continually for answers and explanations. They were not strangers to highly-coloured visual symbols of religious significance.

Perhaps at this stage it would not be out of place to explain very briefly my county's SACRE experience, because we too are going to be involved in producing and formulating ideas on our Religious education. When the excellent 1944 Education Act was implemented, it envisaged almost a pre-war, but improved, world. That up to 1988 it was at least in part, still working for religious education, highlighted two points: first, that it had been framed very well, and second that, with regard to Christianity, the criteria for teaching and examining had ossified into Bible study, backed up by project work, usually on the New Testament. Meanwhile, other subjects had moved on from School Certificate to GCE, then to CSE, and to the present GCSE. When we started work in the sub-committee, the last syllabus we had before us was dated August 1948.

On the SACRE committees we had Sikhs, Hindus and Jains and six Christian groups; we had the teachers' union representatives, who were fired up with equal opportunities; and we had the councillors of the main political parties, appointed to attend by the Chief Education Officer, and keen to be utterly impartial. With this background, it was a miracle that anything positive occurred at all. But it did - the result of two years' hard work, and every word weighed against another for political correctness and equal respect. It is a masterpiece, covering all the key stages of the National Curriculum. For the non-confessional, non-specialist RE teacher, it is a godsend - scores of ideas, masses of excellent information, resources, multi-media aids. There is no excuse for not achieving results - but it all has the effect of trivialising and levelling to a sameness the study of religion. One very eminent Free Church person asked why the Olympic Pantheon wasn't there, or Valhalla? Yet we had all been involved, all contributed information, and agreed it within the narrow confines of our brief. The government realised what was happening across the country and attempted to make it a point of rejection of the many permitted syllabi if Christianity had not been given pride of place - but by this time it was too late, and for many children, unless they are taught by an enthusiastic and

brilliant teacher, RE has become the 'turn-off' of the week, somewhere behind 'Personal and Social Education' which at nearly all points parallels RE, but without mentioning God.

Where does the Orthodox child fit into this confusing scene? Some parents, aware of the problems of the state system, send their children to a Church School where the emphasis has more of a specifically Christian content. This must be an improvement, but who is going to tell the Orthodox child that Western Christianity has become a splintered mirror and that the Anglican/RC Church School cannot be expected to do other than teach about the various Christian bodies - the Anglican working towards the paradoxical principle of 'unity-in-diversity', the Roman Catholic teaching about our 'separated Eastern brothers and sisters'? Or, as stated by a woman minister, 'Surely if your Church has the Holy Spirit you would have been more up to date by now...!'

On questioning some of the young people in my parish in Nottingham as to the main thrust of their school RE, they replied that it consisted mostly of lengthy projects on multi-cultural themes. This being the case, then where did they learn about their Orthodox faith? Some said that they had been lucky as they knew a priest as a friend of the family who had talked with them. Others said that their parents had told them about it, or that they had had a few talks at their youth group. Of course the priest would preach sermons, but this was rarely geared for the younger members of the congregation. The picture here looks even bleaker for the majority without these channels, but I am sure that there are parishes working with their youth to excellent effect.

No child wishes to be seen as different, and in the classroom context will try to be indistinguishable from his peers. So everything depends on the faith and practice of the family. Many Cypriot children who were members of our community twenty or thirty years ago are now in church with their young families. Often there are three generations of a family present at the Liturgy. They run their businesses but rarely miss a Sunday. They have a quiet understanding of all they are about, and their young people value the community. It is true that the traditions of the community and the practice of their Orthodoxy are a little too closely intertwined. However, their children deserve much more. They are facing pressures very different from those of their parents, and are bombarded with secularism and cynicism as exhibited by my Year 7, who will carry their disbelief with them into their own families. Our children could well turn away and join the world of change for its own sake.

We cannot rely on family alone in this situation - the family practice needs careful reinforcement from people who recognise the fight for the faith. Our task is to show the parents that there is help to reinforce their good work, that there are competent teachers working on their behalf to our agreed syllabus. We have to avoid falling into the trap set for the SACREs: i.e. teaching the pupil what the horse looks like rather than teaching them to ride it. We need to organise a multi-approach syllabus, properly structured for appropriate abilities, extendible to help parents and priests, schools and youth-group leaders. It needs to have attainable goals and, most importantly, it will need to involve the young and to be their programme.

Our purpose is to set in motion the beginnings of just such a programme that will give heart to all those in the parishes searching for help and materials in educating their youngsters in the foundations of their faith, giving our children St Basil's 'feet of mountain deer', to scale the heights and depths of Orthodox Christianity.

Joseph Fitzpatrick Williams

Winter 1997