

Should collective worship in schools end?

Friday

This week, the House of Lords unusually sat on a Friday. Bishop Steven spoke in a debate on the [Education Bill \(Assemblies\)](#) which would bring about an end to the requirement for state schools without a religious character to hold collective worship in assemblies.

My Lords, I do warmly welcome this debate. As others have said, it is very timely that it is raised. I thank the noble Baroness Burt for her careful introduction and other Lords and Ladies who have spoken, particularly my distinguished predecessor-but-one, Lord Harries with whom I think I am about to disagree.

Worship and spirituality are a vital part of what it means to be human and it is absolutely right for all the reasons that have been said that this is carefully reviewed and possibly some changes introduced.

I think my reason for in conscious finding this bill difficult goes back to my experience of leading assemblies as a local parish priest in Halifax many years ago. and putting a great deal of time and energy into rehearsing the parable of the good Samaritan, the story of Joseph, the story of Moses and only for the otherwise extremely good and gifted headteacher in the school to reinterpret my assembly with the phrase "Of course, what the vicar really means is don't run in the corridors and pick up the litter in the playground."

Without a serious faith tradition, it's a reduction of fantastic values that had been articulated to simple practical motifs which I fear is the danger of the bill like this.

There are many benefits of collective worship in schools: a time to pause and reflect, to gather community, to mourn in times of tragedy as we've seen recently, to foster common values, to celebrate festivals – not just Christian – and to build religious literacy which is vital.

Although there is some evidence to the contrary, there is other evidence that suggests that the present arrangement works well as many schools and children will testify.

The noble Baroness and others have argued that the bill would liberate school to use the valuable time gained to cover themes such as the environment, health, relationships and self-esteem. But all of these are regularly part of good collective worship in the present pattern within the context of the great faith tradition. If the Bill is passed one effect may be to make anything which is more than secular assemblies not legal and contested in our schools.

I fear, one of the risks of the bill, is that it will weaken the protection around this valuable space for reflection from the school day and that the life of our schools will move in an ever more utilitarian direction. And children will grow up being ignorant to the possibilities and depth of the faith traditions which, as the noble Lord Lilley has said, have formed our society and our culture and the societies of the world where faith plays, still, a massive role.

So, is it right in a pluralist society that worship remains wholly or mainly Christian? I believe it is and for this reason: the alternative to rooting collective worship in the Christian tradition is to root it in a largely invented, contemporary gathered syncretic tradition which lacks depth or authority, which is unconnected to any faith community, and which will quickly be abandoned.

I think the effect of the bill may be to replace a tolerant, humane and hospitable Christian faith as the main strand of worship in our schools, combined with other faith traditions, with a largely manufactured cluster of ideas with few roots in stories or culture and varying enormously from school to school.

I don't think the majority of the nation's children and young people should be denied the experience of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development connected to a living tradition which research shows they value. It is right that we are having this debate and I hope many conversations from it, but I urge your Lordships not to progress.

Extract from the Diocese of Oxford:

https://www.oxford.anglican.org/bishop-of-oxford-house-of-lords-september-2021/?fbclid=IwAR0FmVX8A0xOBK6MEeJR-vlv0Qd8BX553m_7kRiQ2HfUKIsLAYT63niirGg