
Brian McClinton

Religion, Philosophy and Ethics in Schools

Former British education secretary Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University produced a report in June recommending that RE in English schools should be replaced by Religious and Moral Education. This has already happened in Scotland, where RME includes learning about Christianity and other world religions as well as values.

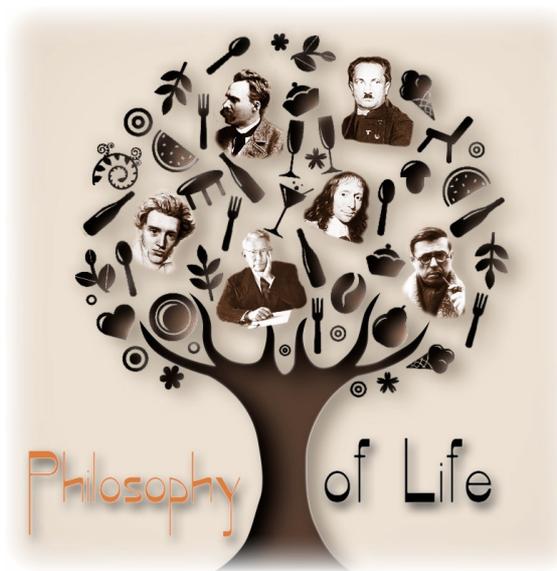
Hugh Lewis, the education minister in Wales, stated in August that RE should be renamed Religion, Philosophy and Ethics, in order to broaden the subject and allow children to ponder ideas around morality and citizenship. In the Irish Republic, philosophy is set to become a subject on the school curriculum for the first time under a plan formulated by Minister for Education Jan O'Sullivan.

NORTHERN IRELAND SYLLABUS

Northern Ireland, however, continues with the same narrow RE curriculum that has existed for 70 years. In all Key Stages, children study the 'Revelation of God', 'The Life of Jesus', 'The Christian Church', and a bit of morality from a biblical perspective. The only concession to modernity is that two religions other than Christianity are considered at Key Stage 3. This obsolete system prevails because the government allows the four main Christians churches control over this part of the curriculum.

The RE Core Syllabus is simply not inclusive of the increasing diversity of a pluralist society. Moreover, as children here are largely segregated along sectarian lines, it effectively brainwashes them into one particular brand of Christianity.

It must all be very confusing to young people. Most are born into our age-old quarrel in one tribe or the other. A Catholic child is likely to be reared as Catholic, nationalist, republican and left-liberal, whereas a Protestant child



will probably be brought up as Protestant, unionist, monarchist and right-conservative. Children are thus labelled with a whole baggage of ideas and allegiances even before they have had time to think about them.

NO PHILOSOPHY HERE

The school curriculum ignores philosophy, yet a recent large-scale study funded by the Education Endowment Foundation concluded that having a philosophy session once a week resulted in 9 and 10 year old children making more rapid progress in reading and maths. This effect was particularly marked among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report confirms that by encouraging clarity, rigour and logical analysis, philosophy raises IQ and assists greatly in transferring skills.

Kids are naturally inquisitive and eager to understand the world around them. Philosophy inspires wonder and provides the thinking tools to explore answers to the fundamental questions of the human condition.

Philosophy also promotes tolerance and open-mindedness by increasing awareness of different perspectives. The French philosopher Descartes ar-

gued that childhood is where prejudices are born, which only philosophy can overcome. It continually encourages the questioning of assumptions behind important decisions and powerful institutions, a skill which is not only vital in work but also helps young people to resist indoctrination and group-think and instead to seek their own truths.

NO HUMANISM HERE

Any student of philosophy knows that a religious belief is not the only possible worldview that humans can adopt. There are also secular philosophies and ideologies which have had enormous influence on human

affairs, yet there is no attempt to explore these alternatives to religion in an exclusive religious RE syllabus.

Humanism is just such a major alternative life stance, which maintains that humans can be good without belief in Gods or the supernatural. But the RE syllabus also ignores it altogether, even though 17% of the Ulster people declare that they have no religious belief. This is surely a violation of fundamental human rights, including the right of the child not to be indoctrinated.

A society noted throughout the world for its sectarianism continues to display it to this day at the very heart of its Religious 'Education'. Churches should stop using schools to control and manipulate their communities and instead contribute to greater tolerance and understanding by supporting the introduction of Religion, Philosophy and Ethics (RPE), which would include the study of world religions, Humanism and other secular ideologies. Our greatest natural resource is the minds of our children, and they need widening horizons instead of being confined to the narrow shores of our failed sectarian certainties.