

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

FA3

THE TEACHING OF RIGHT AND WRONG

On July 31, 2006, *BBC Online, The Times, The Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail* and others reported a proposal by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to remove the concept of right and wrong from the national curriculum at Key Stage 3 (years 11-14). Readers were asked to make their views known on various associated web sites and the comments flowed in. A feature of these press reports was the similarity of quotes and references – a fact tending to indicate a single, common source.

Apparently, several changes to the curriculum were proposed in March to the then Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly, by Ken Boston, head of the QCA. Among the most controversial of these was replacing ‘the school curriculum should... develop principles for distinguishing between right and wrong.’ with ‘11-14 year olds should learn “secure values and beliefs”.’ This change of approach would primarily cover the teaching of religious education, citizenship and personal, social and health education.

A comment on the QCA website dated 4 August quotes Ken Boston as saying: ‘Of course children should learn what is right and wrong. They should learn it at home, at school, in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. The question for those of us who are reviewing the aims of the national curriculum is how this should be expressed in a practical way which helps teachers to do their jobs. We want to have a national debate about what those aims should be, and indeed whether “right and wrong” should be one of them, or if there is a better wording.’

What Should We Make of the Proposals?

From contact with the QCA offices, it appears that the national debate finished in early September, as many returned from summer holidays, its existence having previously gone unnoticed. There is mention, however, of a consultation planned for next year. Interestingly, details of the draft proposals don’t feature on the QCA website, the only reference to ‘secure values and beliefs’ being in an obscure add-on to proposals for changes to the geography curriculum. Spiritual and moral teaching is still mentioned in a bright, attractive document setting out in general terms the proposed direction of the review, although the wording is a touch vague.

Is this another milestone on the road of decline in spiritual and moral teaching? Well, there are indications that it could be. Since the principle of direct state school provision was established in 1870 there have been moves away from teaching the distinctive biblical absolutes of right and wrong. These downgrades are linked with the increasing plurality of societal values, decline in the belief and worship of God and, more recently, with post-modern attitudes to knowledge and knowing. Since this downward trend is steady and continuous, the new proposal is hardly unexpected. It reflects the prevailing spirit of the age, which takes offence at anything which implies that something can be absolutely right or wrong.

Many in and around the educational establishment appear strongly to dislike the notion of absolute standards because, ultimately, such standards can only be credibly received or derived from an infinite, perfect and knowable being. For some, the removal of the words right and wrong would be a step further to the erasure of the notion of God. For this reason, if for no other, any moves of this sort should be resisted.

Will there be any Practical Difference in the Classroom?

In practice the proposals, even if adopted, may not make much difference to classroom teaching. A *Daily Telegraph* leader on 31 July, the day the proposals were reported, pointed out:

‘Homicidal Islamism, dedicated to the destruction of the Dar al-Harb – the non-Islamic world – is a “secure value”; so is world communism; so is nihilism and the cult of hedonistic despair. None of these values is compatible with the survival of British society, yet all fit the requirements of the new curriculum.’

This is true, but a similar argument can be made under the requirements of the existing curriculum. Whether one is ‘developing principles for distinguishing between right and wrong’ or learning ‘secure values and beliefs’ the intellectual destination largely depends on the primary frame of reference, core beliefs and values. What a child learns at home, at church, from friends and other areas of school life is likely to count for more than is taught under the current or proposed curriculum.

Teaching in these subject areas at this stage of education is focused on gathering information, organising it and reasoning with it, not on the rightness or wrongness of a particular argument or view. Children are taught to process information, using it to construct ‘sound’ arguments. This ‘processing’ will include both reviewing their own and other people’s values, and seeking to understand the consequences of actions. Marking systems are set up to award marks for the argument’s construction and content, not the rightness or otherwise of the conclusion. A pupil might, for example, be able to construct a reasoned argument for the use of hard drugs. A teacher has the scope to criticise elements of the argument and undermine it, but is not able to say the conclusion is wrong. A teacher may, however, give his or her view, if asked.

Consequently, in this context there are two ways for a teacher to influence a child's values. One is to criticise an argument and by a superior argument influence the conclusion; the other is simply to articulate a personally-held view on request. In a pluralistic society these classroom limitations deliver a safeguard of sorts, since they ensure that a teacher cannot overtly peddle views which we might believe to be wrong, damaging or offensive.

Is there Anything We Can Do?

In contrast to the blurred messages of pluralism, the Christian can remind himself or herself of the clear benefits and beauty of biblical truth, which:

- has been given by an infinite, personal, knowable, creator God;
- has been designed specifically to meet every human need in navigating this life and preparing for the next;
- is reliable and true, and makes sense, a small child having the capacity to understand its essential message and the greatest intellect being unable to plumb its depths;
- speaks clearly of what is right and what is wrong on the core issues of life;
- confers blessings on those who seek and follow its precepts, not just to God's people but also to society at large;
- has its key tenets inscribed on the consciences of all mankind.

There is nothing else, in the arena of knowledge and knowing, like it, or which can be compared to it. In view of this, we should resist, reasonably, attempts to remove or water down the terms 'right and wrong'. Right and wrong are from God and speak of him. We should be ready to show that it is impossible for values derived from human thought and experience alone to be secure, since they will always be relative, never absolute.

If we seek opportunities to express our views, even our delight and wonder in the biblical economy and wisdom, to the educational establishment's decision-makers, MPs, and those at the local school, we can be confident that no matter how firmly our views, arguments and enthusiasm may be resisted, they will resonate in and stir the consciences of some of our hearers.

Occasionally, we will find a listening ear.

Peter Fearnley

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Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.