

THE ATTITUDES OF PARENTS AND PUPILS TO RELIGION IN SCHOOL *

J. E. GREER

New University of Ulster

The attitudes of pupils in upper sixth forms at county and Protestant voluntary schools in Northern Ireland and of their parents to religious instruction and religious worship in schools were investigated by means of questionnaire. Over 90 per cent of the parents who responded agreed with present practice. In the case of religious instruction, 50 per cent of boys and 34 per cent of girls did not agree; the percentages not in agreement with religious worship were for boys, 56 per cent and for girls 34 per cent.

One of the most controversial educational questions today is the place of religion in the life of a school. If a school is a Church foundation, to which parents choose to send their children, religious teaching and worship may naturally form part of the time-table which is acceptable to pupils and teachers. If on the other hand a school is not a Church foundation or if it accepts pupils of different religious beliefs, the teaching of religion and the organization of worship may raise difficult problems.

In a discussion of the place of religion in schools, one important factor is the attitudes of parents and of their children to the religious provisions of the English Education Act of 1944; the Act provides for Religious Instruction (or Religious Education as it is sometimes called in the Act) in schools and the beginning of each school day with a collective act of worship. A number of studies in recent years suggest that parents are generally in favour of maintaining the status quo. In one such study, 90 per cent agreed that the present arrangements for religion in schools should continue (2); in other studies (3, 4) while the figure agreeing with the

*The survey reported in this paper was undertaken with the permission and encouragement of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Church of Ireland Board of Education while the author was serving as Church of Ireland Education Organiser. Thanks are also due to Mr K. G. Dalton of the Department of Education, Queen's University, Belfast, Professor A. Milton and Mr G. A. Brown of the Education Centre in the New University of Ulster for their guidance, and to Mr R. W. Ewart and Mr B. Woods of the Data Processing Department, Queen's University for their invaluable assistance. The author is grateful to Mr Edwin Cox and the Christian Education Movement for permission to make use of questionnaires.

provisions for instruction and worship was again around 90 per cent, the number agreeing that schools should be required by law to make such provisions was lower (77 per cent). In general, pupils appear somewhat less favourably disposed than their parents to the teaching of religion in school (1).

These studies were carried out in Britain; no comparable investigations of parental attitudes to school religion have been conducted in Ireland though the provisions of the 1947 Education Act in Northern Ireland are similar to those of the 1944 English Act. The present paper reports an investigation into the attitudes to religious teaching and school worship of parents and their sixth form children attending county or Protestant voluntary schools in Northern Ireland.

METHOD

The investigation was part of a wider study of the religious beliefs and attitudes of sixth form pupils in Northern Ireland. The study made use of a questionnaire designed by Cox (1) with certain modifications. In this report we are concerned only with the answers to part of the questionnaire.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered by teachers and completed anonymously by pupils in class. (In two schools these instructions were not followed and pupils were allowed to take the questionnaires home.) Each pupil was also asked to take home an envelope to his parents containing a questionnaire, a letter of explanation and a stamped envelope addressed to the writer.

Instruments

Information for the study was collected by questionnaire. Parents, in their questionnaire, were asked 'Do you think that the Christian religion should be taught in school?' and 'Do you agree with schools beginning each day with religious worship?' In reply they were requested to indicate 'Yes' or 'No', and in addition they were asked to indicate the reason for their choice from a number of alternatives that were presented. Pupils in their questionnaire were also asked two questions: 'Do you agree with the legal provision that all children should have religious instruction in school?' and 'Do you agree with the legal provision that every school day shall begin with an act of worship?' They also were provided with the simple alternatives 'Yes' or 'No.' They were also asked to give reasons for their

choice in an open-ended question. They were further requested to indicate on five point scales their attitudes to the importance, interest, relevance and usefulness of Religious Education in school.

Sample

A request to co-operate in the study was sent to the principals of all county and Protestant voluntary schools in Northern Ireland (n: 67) which were thought to have a second-year sixth form. Forty seven were grammar schools and twenty secondary intermediate. Of these, 45 agreed to co-operate and eventually 42 schools (35 grammar and seven secondary intermediate) actually took part. The schools which did not take part were varied in type and location. It will be noted that the sample was restricted to schools attended mainly by Protestant pupils. It will also be noted however that the study was not restricted to grammar schools as Cox's (1) had been and that an attempt was made to reach all second-year sixth form pupils in the province (approximately 2,500). From a total of 1,882 second-year sixth form pupils in the 42 schools which participated, 1,631 (86.6 per cent) completed and returned usable questionnaires. Half of the parents of pupils (n: 832) completed and returned questionnaires. Previous coding of questionnaires made it possible to match all but twenty-nine of the parents' questionnaires with the appropriate pupils' questionnaires.

RESULTS

The teaching of religion

Over 90 per cent of parents who completed and returned the questionnaire agreed with the provision of religious teaching in school (Table 1). This strong parental support for Religious Education was not however shared by a substantial proportion of the pupils; only two-thirds of the girls and less than half of the boys agreed with the teaching of religion.

Teaching the Christian religion in school was most commonly justified by parents (78 per cent of respondents) on the religious grounds that 'Christianity is true.' Justification on the grounds that 'it helps people to be good' was second in order of frequency (51 per cent); four per cent added the comment that religious teaching provides a source of moral values. Justification on cultural grounds that 'it is part of our history' (39 per cent) and on the grounds that 'it is an interesting study' (38 per cent) came third. The reasons that 'most people seem to want it' (15 per cent) and that 'the schools seem to want it' (10 per cent) were least frequently

given. Two other reasons for the teaching of religion in schools were given by appreciable numbers of parents in the form of written comment; three per cent expressed the belief that children should be taught religion in

TABLE 1
ATTITUDES TO RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION
(Figures in percentages)

	Pupils whose parents replied		Pupils whose parents did not reply		All pupils		Parents
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
N	460	343	531	297	991	640	832
Yes	52.2	64.4	42.7	61.3	47.1	63.0	92.8
No	44.6	33.8	53.9	33.7	49.5	33.7	6.0
No reply	3.3	1.7	3.4	5.0	3.3	3.3	1.2

school because they may not learn about it elsewhere, while two per cent stated that the subject should be taught so that children would be led to salvation.

Most of the 50 parents who disagreed with the teaching of religion in schools gave their reasons, and only eight of these reasons were anti-religious or anti-Christian. Most of these parents were in fact sympathetic to religion but were opposed to religious teaching in schools because it was taught by unqualified teachers, or by non-believers, or because religious education was really the task of the Church and/or the home. A number were of the opinion that schools should be integrated non-denominational communities from which religious divisions were excluded.

The most common justification for religious teaching given by pupils was that it helps children to make up their own minds about religion (15 per cent boys; 18 per cent girls). The argument that the school is the only place in which many children receive religious teaching was also commonly used (5 per cent boys; 21 per cent girls). Less frequent were the arguments that religious teaching provides a sense of values, that children should be taught about all religions, or that children should have a chance to hear the gospel. The commonest argument used by pupils against religious teaching was that it is wrong to indoctrinate children or to force religion on people

who do not want it (19 per cent boys; 10 per cent girls). It was also stated that religious education was boring and badly taught (4 per cent boys; 6 per cent girls) and that it was the responsibility of the Church or the parents, not of the school (6 per cent boys; 6 per cent girls).

Worship

Again, over 90 per cent of the parents who responded agreed that the school day should begin with an act of worship and again their opinion

TABLE 2
ATTITUDES TO RELIGIOUS WORSHIP
(Figures in percentages)

	Pupils whose parents replied		Pupils whose parents did not reply		All pupils		Parents
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
N	460	343	531	297	991	640	832
Yes	42.4	64.1	38.2	60.3	40.2	62.3	93.0
No	53.3	34.1	57.6	33.7	55.6	33.9	5.9
No reply	4.3	1.7	4.1	6.1	4.2	3.7	1.1

was not shared by a substantial proportion of sixth form pupils (Table 2).

The most common parental justifications for school worship were that 'it gives the children a sense of God' (76 per cent), 'it helps the children's religious education' (58 per cent) and 'it helps the community spirit of the school' (45 per cent). The reason that 'it brings all the children and the head teacher together regularly' was less commonly given (36 per cent). Almost all of the 49 parents who disagreed with school worship gave their reasons and the commonest, mentioned by 18 parents, was that the worship was boring and meaningless. Twelve parents opposed the compulsory imposition of worship on people who did not want it, while a few felt that worship created a division in the school community and was a barrier to the integration of schools in Northern Ireland.

The commonest reason in favour of school worship given by pupils was that it provided the right way to start the day, or that it was right to begin with God's presence (10 per cent boys; 20 per cent girls). Some pupils felt

that assembly brought the whole school together (3 per cent boys; 8 per cent girls) and that school worship was enjoyable or helpful (4 per cent boys; 9 per cent girls). The commonest reason against school worship (25 per cent of pupils) related to the quality of the worship, and pupils often described it as boring, useless, insincere, a meaningless routine in which most took no interest and played no part. A considerable number of pupils put forward the argument that it was wrong to force worship on people (15 per cent boys; 11 per cent girls).

DISCUSSION

It is possible that the differences between the attitudes of parents and pupils which have been outlined may be partly explained by the different forms of wording which were used in the parents' and pupils' questionnaires, and that pupils were reacting against the idea of legal provision. The results obtained in May and Johnston's (4) survey indicate that respondents may be less favourably disposed towards the idea of legal obligation. But it is unlikely that the large differences between parents and their children can be completely explained in this way. It may be that the differences are related to the lower response rate of parents. A comparison of the answers of pupils whose parents replied with the answers of pupils whose parents did not reply revealed that there were some significant differences between the groups. Boys whose parents replied were significantly more inclined to belief in God (χ^2 : 15.2; df : 4; $p < .01$) and in the divinity of Jesus (χ^2 : 11.7; df : 4; $p < .02$), and were also more inclined to agree with the teaching of religion in school (χ^2 : 9.0; df : 1; $p < .01$) than boys whose parents did not reply. This was not true of girls, though there were significant differences for girls on answers to other questions. Thus the pupils whose parents replied were in some respects more inclined to orthodox religious attitudes than the pupils whose parents did not reply.

The differences between parents and their children were not only apparent in the figures relating to attitudes to religious teaching and worship in school but also in the reasons which respondents gave for these attitudes. A direct comparison between the frequency of parents' and pupils' reasons cannot be made because parents were given a number of options from which to choose whereas pupils were not given these options but were asked to write out their reasons. However it seems clear that the kinds of justification for school religion which parents provided were generally different from those provided by pupils. While parents most commonly justified religious teaching on the grounds that Christianity was true, pupils most commonly justified it on the grounds that it provided

young people with a chance to make up their own minds. A few parents seemed to be aware that religious teaching and worship were sometimes badly performed, while a large number of pupils at the receiving end commented vigorously on the poor quality of much school religion, which they claimed turned them against the religious provisions of the Education Act. Pupils were also much more articulate than parents about the wrongness of enforcing religion on those who did not want it.

The numbers of Northern Ireland pupils who disagreed with the teaching of religion in school were significantly higher than the numbers of English pupils in Cox's survey, and on the five point scale Northern Ireland boys and girls consistently rated Religious Education as less important, less interesting, less relevant and less useful than did English boys and girls. (Chi squared tests for all comparisons yielded p values beyond .001). In contrast, the investigation also showed that Northern Ireland pupils were significantly more inclined to belief in God, belief in the divinity of Jesus, and to be much more regular in church attendance and private prayer than English pupils.

One can only speculate about the reasons why such large numbers of sixth form pupils in this study expressed disagreement with their parents about the place of religion in school and why religious education was regarded more negatively by pupils from Northern Ireland than by pupils from England. Regarding the first point, similar findings have been reported for England (1). Apart from the possible reasons already considered it may be that young people today react against the 'forced' religion of school and, in the case of Northern Ireland, against the more general influence of religion in society. If the point of view of pupils is to be taken seriously, then a number of questions must be given serious consideration. For one thing, one must ask at what age should young people be considered mature enough to make decisions concerning their involvement in religious education and worship in school? Following the acceptance of the recommendation in the Latey report, the age of majority has been lowered from 21 to 18, and it would seem that a situation has developed in which a young person of 18 is able to vote, inherit property and marry without parental consent, but will not be judged mature enough to decide whether he should attend school worship and receive religious teaching in school.* Secondly, one must ask can a com-

*The Age of Majority Act does not amend the Education Act as it does a number of other Acts (Marriages Act, Trustee Act); Section 21 (3) of the Education Act, relating to the responsibility of parents for the excusal of their children from Religious Education and worship, still stands.

pulsory subject be taught in such a way as to avoid resentment? And thirdly, can religion be taught in such a way that it leads to a deeper understanding of religion and does not attempt to impose rigid standards and beliefs? A discussion of these questions is beyond the scope of the present paper, but they raise issues which deserve the attention of all concerned with religious teaching and worship in schools.

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