

as a single volume and is a valuable acquisition for the serious church administrator.

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Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools

Edited by PETER CUMPER AND ALISON MAWHINNEY

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Scarcely ever can there have been times when it was more important for children to grow up with some understanding of world religions, including the historic religion of the land where they are living. Yet school ‘collective worship’ and ‘religious observance’ (the Scottish term) are distinct from religious education, and are more controversial for today’s children, often with no family faith, who are growing up in a multi-religious society. This collection of essays derives from a two-year research project, and relates mainly to schools without a religious character (that is, non-faith schools). Robert Jackson outlines in his Foreword how schools’ responses to the legal requirement have been various and often creative, if not always legally compliant. This reviewer could do worse, in summarising this valuable collection, than to start with a précis of Jackson’s own summary:

- Part I: analysis of law and policy across the UK, with policy options;
- Part II: legal perspectives in relation to the interests of children, parents, teachers and the state;
- Part III: contributions that ‘assemblies’ can make to children’s development, the need to take into account children’s and teachers’ backgrounds, and positive ways forward; and
- Part IV: comparative views from several other nations.

The chapters of Part I describe the position in each of the four countries of the UK. First, there is a useful description of: the parameters, exceptions and limitations of the legal provision for ‘mainly . . . Christian’ collective worship in English schools; the failure by Government and Ofsted to tackle persistent non-compliance by many schools; and the difficulties that arise within a multi-faith and partially secular environment. The Welsh position, as described, is similar to that in England, with a shared historical legislative base; the

authors of this chapter record that devolution of Welsh education legislation in 2006 has not produced any changes over collective worship. The Northern Irish collective worship position, while constituted differently from England's and despite the more pronounced denominational Christian divisions, is in many respects similar. It is the current Scottish policy that significantly differs, distinguishing between 'religious observance', with a mainly reflective content for spiritual development, and occasional acts of worship.

The first chapter of Part II contains a summary and critique of the English, Northern Irish and Welsh legal frameworks and their philosophy within a changing historical context. And the following chapters argue that the frameworks require revision to ensure that collective worship makes a valid contribution compatible with a child's right to autonomous self-determination, and extends this to the wider field of the human rights of children and parents. Part III has a more educational bent, examining: the contributions of collective worship to spiritual development; the scope for 'philosophy with children' as an alternative to religious observance in Scotland; the breadth of understanding, for better or worse, of 'collective worship'; and issues of pluralism and inclusivity. Part IV includes perspectives on UK collective worship and religious observance from outside the UK: from the US, the positive benefits of collective worship; a Netherlands valuing of 'embracing otherness in supporting community' – although 'otherness' turns out not to reflect the transcendent, but otherness in human diversity; and lingering traces from Scandinavia of Lutheran church links to be seen in occasional school church services.

This valuable volume is a compendium of essays, rather than a truly edited work. While, for instance, there is immense value in the four descriptive chapters in Part I, it would have been helpful if there had been more consistency of content to make comparison easier: indeed, the chapters relating to Northern Ireland, Wales and England could have been combined as one, with the differences being noted. Indeed, throughout the compendium, although most of the underlying issues will certainly be found relevant to Scotland, the main detailed application is to the rest of the UK. It would have been helpful, and in the interests of overall brevity, if the chapter writers had worked to more specific briefs, to avoid unnecessary duplication and overlap.

Chapter 10 in Part III, by Julia Ipgrave and Farid Panjwani, should take the prize as the most helpful chapter, examining collective worship and religious observance in diverse cultural contexts and specifically in terms of some main religious perspectives. As a collaborator with the remarkable, but sadly deceased, John Hull, this reviewer cannot but endorse the worthy dependency on his work in this chapter and in those of several other contributors.

For many, it is a curious anomaly that collective worship and religious observance should still be mandatory elements in the life of most UK schools. The case for religious education is obvious to most. But worship, however it is

defined – and, even more so, religious observance – seems an extraordinary concept for compulsory retention beyond faith schools. Yet, for most children, school observance will be their only childhood opportunity to experience worship and come anywhere near conceiving of, or even glimpsing, transcendence or the divine, and so be better placed for making personal religious decisions. This book certainly explores thoroughly the underlying legal and philosophical issues from a variety of standpoints. In this respect, it will stand as a major and valuable contribution, particularly in academic circles and as background for advisers and legislators in the field. As such, it is heartily recommended.

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