

Digging trenches in playgrounds: When state schools inspire spiritual Apartheid.

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Abstract: *A concerned parent shares the experiences of his children at a primary school that delayed implementation of the Policy on Religion Education, promulgated in 2003. A simple evaluation of the objectives of child education is proposed. The article highlights pertinent sections of the national policy and argues for its support within a context of democratic values and inclusive, comprehensive education.*

At the age of five, well before they could differentiate adequately between fact and metaphor, my five-year old children were taught that there was a man living in their hearts. They were told that everything in the world belonged to someone called Jesus, and wouldn't believe that their mother and I had made them because their teacher had taught them that this Jesus person did. My natural explanations competed with a magical worldview where some unseen guy in the sky simply made everything at his whim. And to top it all, our children were told that they were the children of Jesus, implying that we are foster parents of some sort. Our children were frightened by these revelations.

The real-world knowledge they had gained before going to school was eroded by the superstitious convictions of a teacher trusted to prepare children to live in reality. Our children were taught that the impossible is possible and that superstition is a perfectly acceptable world-view. Isn't it ironic that so many South Africans denigrate an imaginary Harry Potter who waves an imaginary wand to fight imaginary ghosts in an imaginative story but praise a real potato preacher who sells imaginary salvation to insecure fathers?

I found that:

- School boards are supposed to embrace pupils of all convictions, but give preferential treatment to Protestant teachers and pupils. Instead of creating a climate that would make all their pupils feel welcome and appreciated, some schools impose a constricting Calvinist ethos that immediately brands minority classmates as hell-bound pupils.
- Instead of setting up their own religious schools, as they are allowed to do and should be encouraged to do, conservatives are hi-jacking state schools and using taxpayer money to fund religious agendas.
- Instead of celebrating liberty on Freedom Day one primary school proposed celebrating an evangelical Jesus week with children wearing yellow armbands. This isn't just unfair discrimination but harks back to the Holocaust.

- Instead of teaching children about the rich diversities in cultures and religions a school reads Bible stories and prays to Jesus before lunch-boxes are opened.
- Education Departments are supposed to enforce our education policies, but seem to turn a blind eye to a new form of separatism.
- Teachers exercise a self-claimed and school board sanctioned entitlement to inculcate superstitious beliefs in children, suggesting that it's perfectly acceptable to believe in 10 impossible things before breakfast.

While wrestling with this issue of arrogant teachers indoctrinating our children I happened on a short piece written by Penn Jillette. Reading his words of wisdom helped me to order my thoughts. In the book titled "Parenting Beyond Belief", edited by Dale McGowan, he has an entry aptly named "Passing down the joy of not collecting stamps". I will quote from it at some length, hoping that this audience will appreciate his position as much as I did. I quote:

"Little kids have to trust adults or they die. Trust has to be built in. So while you teach them to eat, stay out of traffic, and not drink too much of what's under the kitchen sink, you can abuse that trust and burn in the evil idea that faith is good. It'll often stick with them longer than not drinking bleach. It seems if someone snuck the idea of faith into you at an early age, you're more likely to do it to your own kids.

"If your childhood trust was not abused with faith or if somehow you kicked it on your travels down the road, your work is done. You don't have to teach an absence of guilt for something they didn't do. [Y]ou just have one more reason to keep your kids away from priests. Tell your kids the truth as you see it and allow the marketplace of ideas to work as they grow up. You have to work hard to get kids to believe nonsense. If you're not desperately selling lies, the work is a lot easier.

"[T]ruth just needs to be stated, it doesn't need to be hyped. If every trace of every single religion were wiped out and nothing was passed on, it would never be created exactly that way again. There might be some other nonsense in its place, but not that exact same nonsense. If all of science were wiped out, it will still be true and someone will find a way to figure it out again. Without hype, Lot's salt-heap ho would never be thought of again. Without science the Earth still goes around the sun and someday someone will find a way to prove that again. Science is so important because it's a way to truth,

but the truth doesn't depend on it. Reality exists outside of humans, religion does not.

"The bad guys always have to fight for their ideas to be taught. They must cheat. Government force, propaganda, and hype are the tools you desperately need when you're wrong. Truth abides." (End of quote.)

Jillette's ideas made me realise that we have to do only three things to raise knowledgeable and world-savvy children:

1. Do not lie to children. If you remain honest, they will remain trusting and respectful.
2. Do not teach children fear. Without fear they will feel secure and free to explore, and by exploring they will find the truth even where you failed to provide it. And without doubt in some way you will fail in that task, for our children have to learn more than we could. It's a fact of social progress.
3. Teach children everything. You may need to keep things simple to start off, but don't set a principle that there are facts that should best remain hidden. In time all knowledge must be made available to all. We must learn from our past.

In short: Teach our children everything we know, but none of our fears.

Teachers play a major role in the education of children, being an extension of our responsibility to prepare our children for the world in which they will have to live and work in. Teachers and parents share the responsibility of helping children prosper in a civilised and modern society. Therefore teachers must help develop our children and their careers by imparting humanity's collective knowledge but without infusing any of our fears, especially not the superstitious fears of strangers.

Children need not be concerned about original sin or suffer for those of their fathers. They need not fear capricious gods living in their hearts and scrutinising their every move. And they certainly need no schizophrenic priest threatening them with everlasting pits of hellfire and brimstone. And teachers may not teach such fears.

Lawmakers in Australia and the United States of America prohibited the teaching of religion in schools. The consequences of such an approach are threefold:

1. It diminishes the issue into a simplified dichotomy – you are either for or against. All the nuances within religion, from charismatic evangelism to mysticism, are lost. Everyone outside the in-group is painted as evil.
2. It polarises society into those for and those against religion. Battle lines are drawn and wars break out in the public square, often with disastrous results for the careers of the innocent.
3. Children grow up ignorant about the major differences between cultures. They never learn to understand their classmates and terrorists, Iranian politicians and European activists. They never learn why it is wrong to suggest that “we all pray to the same god”.

A better approach will be one that does not polarise and alienate people yet allow children to learn about religion, its history and its influence in cultures. That is exactly what South African intellectuals and lawmakers set out to accomplish.

South Africa entered the real world in 1994 after 50 years of nationalistic religious propaganda through Christian National Education. A task team of intellectual and religious leaders was appointed to develop a policy for teaching religion in schools, which was drafted and ratified in September 2003. I've studied under some of the intellectuals involved in the making of that policy, and can vouch for their integrity and worthy intentions.

The Policy is a long document with preliminaries, rules, guidelines and objectives. It is available on the Internet and I urge all parents to read it. Those who do will come away with a sense of fairness and respect for democracy and freedom of conscience. Unlike the North-American and Australian policies it acknowledges and respects religion yet demands fairness and equal respect. It is an excellent compromise between the demands of the religious and the expectations of the informed. It is clear that a lot of thought, compromise and effort has gone into developing this policy, and whoever persisted and produced the final document has to be applauded for its depth, clarity and, above all, fairness towards all our citizens.

Please share my hope with me as I read important sections.

“As institutions with a mandate to serve the entire society, public schools must avoid adopting a particular religion, or a limited set of religions, that advances sectarian or particular interests. Schools should be explaining what religions are about, ... in ways that increase understanding, build respect for diversity, value

spirituality, and clarify the religious and non-religious sources of moral values. We owe this to our pupils, as well as to parents, citizens, and taxpayers.”

Herewith the playing field has been levelled for all convictions, religious and secular.

“As they develop creative and critical abilities for thinking about religion and religions, pupils will also develop the capacities for mutual recognition, respect for diversity, reduced prejudice, and increased civil toleration that are necessary for citizens to live together in a democratic society.”

We are all in life together, and competing for god’s love is not acceptable anymore. We are obliged to teach our children the value of cooperation and to develop their critical faculties. No more room for divisive doctrines and discriminating propaganda.

“[Schools] have a responsibility to teach about religion and religions in ways that reflect a profound appreciation of the spiritual, non-material aspects of life, but which are different from the religious education, religious instruction, or religious nurture provided by the home, family, and religious community”

Schools must teach about religion in ways different from Church and Sunday school. They are not to impart the fears needed to sustain faith, which is left to parents and churches.

The policy repeatedly stipulates, in various sections, that schools have to be accommodating and embracing to all convictions. Here’s just one such reference:

“Schools must create an overall environment - a social, intellectual, emotional, behavioural, organisational, and structural environment – that engenders a sense of acceptance, security, and respect for pupils with differing values, cultural backgrounds, and religious traditions.”

Public schools now have to make all pupils feel welcome and accepted, regardless of their convictions. They may not use the pretext of freedom of association to exclude minority pupils and promote religious separatism, or make children feel insecure and their convictions frowned upon. It is also in our society’s interest that children be educated about the cultures of their classmates and future fellow citizens. Schools aren’t doing minorities a favour by allowing their children to attend – they are obliged to be accommodating and make room for everyone’s convictions.

“Schools should also show an awareness and acceptance of the fact that values do not necessarily stem from religion, and that not all religious values are consistent with our Constitution. Religion Education is education not only about valuing traditions but also about the traditions and histories of values. Religions are an important, although not an exclusive source of moral values. ... Moral values are not the monopoly of religions, much less the exclusive property of any one religion.”

Contrary to popular opinion, religion has no monopoly on morality, and some religious values, such as condemnation of those of different conviction, are no longer acceptable. We are forced to admit that religion isn't the be all and end all of moral values – Confucius proved this centuries ago. The Bible can no longer be used to justify any form of state-sanctioned supremacy, neither based on skin colour nor spiritual conviction. Those who did so in the past, including our illustrious *Susterkerke*, have been branded as immoral and must serve as reminders to school boards. A free and equitable political democracy implies a free and equitable spiritual democracy.

Here's my favourite part:

“Religion Education, with educational outcomes, **is the responsibility of the school**. Religion Education shall include teaching and learning about the religions of the world, with particular attention to the religions of South Africa, **as well as worldviews**.... In this, we re-assert the policy of the Revised National Curriculum Statement to offer education **about** religions for the purposes of achieving "religious literacy". Religion Education is therefore an educational programme with **clearly defined and transferable skills, values and attitudes as the outcomes**.... An open, plural, **historically informed**, intercultural and interdisciplinary study of religion in public schools is consistent with international developments, and it is also a model gaining popularity and relevance throughout Africa.”

It is no longer sufficient to disseminate dogma and inculcate religious belief. Schools have to teach pupils, **MUST** teach pupils, about religions and secular worldviews and about their histories. Pupils need to develop religious literacy and a deeper understanding of the broad phenomenon called religion. Teaching pupils about the exodus and of fig trees withering on command is indoctrination; teaching them about the nature of myths is religion education.

“In the process of exploring a field of knowledge, a programme in Religion Education develops ways of knowing that are consistent with constitutional guarantees of human and civil rights to freedom of religion, thought, and conscience.... It does not seek to impose a unified, syncretistic or state religion, and does not proceed from or advance any of these positions. It is about a civic understanding of religion, which is compatible with all major religious traditions. The policy is about the equality of all religions before the law; whether all religions are equal and true in a religious or philosophical sense falls outside of the scope of this policy.”

Schools may not suggest that one religion is superior to others, or that pupils of differing convictions are inferior. Neither can mob rule and coercion by numbers be allowed to discriminate in our democratic society where all citizens are to be respected equally by state institutions, regardless of their numbers. Religions are to compete equally in the public space.

“A programme of Religious Studies should introduce pupils to the kinds of critical thinking about significant issues of personal morality and social ethics that are often associated with religion.”

The value of critical thinking about morals is recognized. Knowledge is power, which is why churches have traditionally favoured ignorant followers. An uninformed child will never be free.

“The state must maintain parity of esteem with respect to religion, religious or secular beliefs in all of its public institutions, including its public schools.”

At last the reality of secularism is acknowledged. It is not a religion, an alternative to religion or a threat to religion but simply the fairest approach to accommodating citizenry of all stripes. Schools may no longer elevate religion above reason.

“Our public schools cannot establish the uniformity of religious education in a single faith or the divisiveness of religious education through separate programmes for a prescribed set of faiths.”

No more separation. No more elitism. No more Bible Studies. Let the conservatives shield **their** children from knowledge if they so wish but don't expect informed parents to remove their children from class when the school wants to “play church-church”.

Finally:

“Our schools are not in the business of privileging, prescribing, or promoting any [particular] religion. Schools have a different responsibility in providing opportunities for teaching and learning about our religious diversity and our common humanity. This policy for Religion and Education upholds the principles of a cooperative model for relations between religion and the state, by maintaining a constitutional impartiality in the formal activities of the school, but encouraging voluntary interaction outside of this.”

Many schools have, if not in deed at least in principle, implemented the national policy. But some do little more than pay lip service to the Constitution, impose a Calvinist ethos and limit the teaching of religion to their preferred dogma. “Let the children come to me, and force them if they resist.” Where Apartheid claimed racial superiority, such schools shrewdly claim spiritual superiority and find authorization in article 15 of our Constitution to impose faith-based policies:

15 Freedom of religion, belief and opinion

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion.
- (2) Religious observances may be conducted at state or state-aided institutions, provided that-
 - (a) those observances follow rules made by the appropriate public authorities;
 - (b) they are conducted on an equitable basis; and
 - (c) attendance at them is free and voluntary.

Although religious observances may be conducted at state schools within bounds set by the appropriate public authorities, some schools ignore the rules referred to by article 15(2)(a). In the case of schools this clause references the National Policy on Religion in Education that, in addition to providing guidance on the holding of religious observances, also addresses various other aspects related to religion in schools.

Here’s one example of a “holier than thou” ethos expressed in a letter from Louw Geldenhuys Primary (my translation): “The school’s religion curriculum may, in terms of the school’s character, be offered from a Christian perspective (on request from the parent community). Prospective parents who do not agree with the religion policy must exercise their right to free association.” In other words, if you don’t like the school’s ethos, take your child elsewhere. And the Education Department is implicated: “The

school is acting within its Constitutional right and has received the approval from the Department to offer religious education from a Christian perspective.”

A prospective parent who attended a school function and questioned the activities being opened by prayer and Bible reading was told in writing: “All school activities at Louw Geldenhuys Primary are opened by prayers from teachers, ministers and even pupils, as approved by the parents and Control Board.”

The goals of Elarduspark Primary (“Lardies”) in Centurion include “The assertion, protection and promotion of Christian education and to ensure that the Word of God serves as beacon to inculcate Christian values in our children.” Their mission is to strive towards:

- A pupil who knows his Heavenly Father above all and maintain high Christian-National values,
- Personnel who bow before their Saviour, and
- A parent who values Christian values highly

The old “Whites only” sign has become “Calvinists only”.

Has fundamentalism reared its ugly head in South African schools, aided by a beleaguered and a wavering Education Department? Has the Christian National Education of our past been replaced by regional versions? The signs are there if you dig deep enough:

- Faith in faith and the mistrust of logic, reason and research,
- the suppression of knowledge of “others”,
- stressing the contrast between the religious and their perceived moral enemies,
- making absolute, non-negotiable demands about cultural and traditional rules and regulations, and
- the constant and incessant endeavour to proselytise¹; ostensibly approved by Education Departments.

Stellenbosch Primary has adopted a less fundamentalist but still disquieting approach. The school’s Code of Conduct stipulates: “The school shall have a Christian character and this will be expressed in all activities”. One of its goals says: “Stellenbosch Primary sets itself the objective of fostering a life orientation by modulating Christian values to pupils through word and deed.” They claim parity of religions and following the rules yet

¹<http://www.amazon.com/gp/aw/d.html/181-1835425-7120904?rn=0&cr=1&co=&qid=1251257634&a=0062505092&sr=8-1>

reserve the right to inculcate, impose and proselytise, contravening up to 23 of the National Policy's articles². "I can accomplish anything through God" is plastered across their classroom walls, as are a myriad of maudlin Bible verses.

Their policy on religion in education states: "Religious observances can take place during normal school hours, in school assemblies or in class. Religious observance is completely voluntary. The voluntary nature of the attendance of religious observances must be mentioned regularly and alternatives have to be created for pupils who do not partake in the religious exercises or who prefer alternative religious observances." (School policy). Now imagine a 5-year old Muslim pupil in a vastly outnumbered Protestant class excusing herself every morning the teacher starts praying to Jesus and not feeling unwelcome and different. Exorcism has acquired a new meaning.

When religion is used by the fearful to control the ignorant, it is bad for democracy and civilisation. Progressive parents who wish for their children to be educated appropriately must insist and endure, for we owe it to the next generations. What remains to be done is to have the divisive holier-than-thou backward-looking mission statements replaced with responsible, inclusive, future-looking ones. Reliable knowledge, including that about cultures, religions and morals, must be made available to children. Pupils need to learn about the dangers of blind belief and the abuse of dogmatic authority without desensitising them to the rich heritage of constructive religion. But that won't happen in schools controlled by elitists and supported by false-hearted Education Departments.

There is no doubt that the National Policy on Religion and Education is the fairest possible approach to teaching religion in a diverse and democratic society like ours, and I thank old minister Kader Asmal for it. Implementing this policy will teach our children all about religions and their adherents, and none of their fears. But it is not going to happen without the persistence of informed and enlightened parents. Where school boards use religion as an excuse to promote prejudice and keep our children uninformed they must be brought to task. Eradicating medieval principles and dragging school boards into the present will be a challenging exercise, but it is not a futile one. It is time for us to act.

I owe it to my children; to teach them everything I know, but none of my fears.

² 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 12, 14, 16, 22, 25, 29, 30, 35, 36, 54, 55, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 64 and 70.

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