

Religion and education in England and France, A sharp contrast, in theory



FOR the average Brit who knows something about education, the French government's newly proclaimed charter for secularism in schools would come as quite a shock...and a reminder of how different practices (and above all, attitudes) are on the other side of the Channel.

The French regime of separating church and state, known as *laïcité*, has been well entrenched since at least 1905, and its application in schools was reinforced in 2004 by a law that banned pupils from wearing ostentatious religious signs, from Muslim headscarves to large crosses. But Vincent Peillon, the education minister, still deemed it necessary to reaffirm the principle with a 15-point charter, to be displayed in every school. Pupils must be "protected from all forms of religious proselytising" that would impede their free choice; teachers must not reveal their religious or political convictions when going about their work; teachers and pupils alike had a duty not simply to respect the ideal of secularism but to promote it actively.

Reactions to the charter reveal a lot about why it was felt to be required in the first place. Prominent French Muslims said they felt "targeted" by the document which unfairly implied that they were challenging secularism. Elsewhere in the political and educational world, there were grumbles that the text did not go far enough in stamping out a perceived threat of *communautarisme*—promoting the interests of one community at the expense of the general interest. In many contexts, this has become a code-word for assertive Islam.

In England (other parts of the United Kingdom have slightly different regimes) the whole attitude to religion and education has more to do with adapting to reality (including local reality) in a pragmatic way, and there is much less desire to impose a particular ethos on the entire nation. There is still a law which requires schools to have a daily act of worship that is "wholly or mainly" of a "broadly Christian" character; but it also lets head teachers take into account "circumstances relating to the family background" of pupils. In many places (for example, heavily Muslim areas of some northern cities) the "broadly Christian" rule would be unenforceable, and that is quietly accepted.

As for religious education, state schools are required to offer the subject, but parents may keep their children away; and significantly, the content (ie, which faiths are explained) is determined by agreements with local authorities in which faith groups are consulted. In Leicester, for example, pupils are more likely to learn about the Jain faith, which abounds locally, than they would be in other places. England's 7,000 or so faith schools (mostly Christian, but some emphatically Jewish or Muslim) are free to prioritise their own creeds in collective worship and teaching. The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education says the subject remains popular, especially when the focus is on tangible things like how people eat, dress and pray, and why.

As one might expect, secularists in England are keen to see their country take some French lessons. "With the government perfectly content for religious evangelisation and education to go hand in hand, we're a million miles from France on this," says Keith Porteous Wood, director of the National Secular Society, which argues for a reformed, uniform system of moral and philosophical education with a stress on citizenship.

Still, whether the distance is a million miles or just 22, the Anglo-French gap is perhaps greater in theory than it is in practice. No law or regulation will make a bolshy English 15-year-old any more "broadly Christian" than he/she chooses to be; and in all probability, no charter will make a French child raised by pious Algerian or Turkish parents anything other than a God-fearing, fast-observing Muslim. In both countries, teachers have to deal with pupils as they are, not as they should be.

Erasmus