

Catholic social teaching and education policy

Philip Booth

**Talk to Catholic Union Conference at the Institute of Economic Affairs
(June 2011)**

Introduction

The Catholic Church's view about the role of the state in education has been articulated in many documents and is brought into sharp focus in the *Catechism* and in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* and, where appropriate, is reflected in Canon Law. What is striking is the importance the Church gives to parental autonomy and how the state should merely *assist* other structures in society in achieving their legitimate aims.

In the old Soviet Union, it took ten years to buy a car. You paid in advance and then go on a waiting list and receive your car a decade later. One time, this fellow went into the office to pay for his car. He handed over the money and the person behind the desk said: "Thank you very much, please come back in ten years time and collect the car." The fellow said: "morning...or afternoon?" The comrade behind the desk said, "Does you really need to know now?" The fellow who bought the car replied: "Well...the plumber's coming in the morning."

For those trying to find their children a place in a good state secondary school, this is not especially funny. For many the process begins nearly ten years before their child enters secondary school when they move house into the catchment area of a Catholic feeder school, put their child's name down and become known to the parish priest. Manipulation, voice, ensuring you are in the right place at the right time, and so on, can be very important.

More generally, we have built a system that is very institution focused. I fear that this institution focus is reflected in the way in which the Catholic Education Service and the Bishops' Conference think about policy. I want to stress that this is not necessarily their fault – I would like a constructive discussion here and not a defensive one. To a large degree, our particular model of state education has led them down this path.

What do I mean by institution focused? I can give several examples. The Bishops' Conference often talk about the state and the Church providing education for families in partnership as if education is something that is "done to" families. Admissions policies for secondaries are often skewed towards helping Catholic primaries by favouring children attending such primaries, ignoring the needs of parents who have moved into the area, whose children are converts, whose children had to leave the primary because they were bullied, or because it was too far to travel to and so on. And Catholic heads talk about the Catholic comprehensive principle of providing the same education to all as if this is some extension of the Catholic principle of social justice – putting equality before the value of the person.

This focus on institutions is, I think, reflected in the Catholic Education Service's comments on free schools that talked about the value of the "family of schools principle". It is also reflected in comments which, to some extent, welcomed free schools but expressed fears of competition and a "free for all".

Competition

Let me deal with this issue of competition first. The new free schools agenda provides the opportunity to develop schools with a Catholic character – whether designated Catholic by the local Bishop or otherwise – that provide alternatives for Catholic parents. Competition, as properly understood, is not a "free for all". It is a process by which those who provide goods and services discover the needs of those who wish to obtain those goods and services and discover new ways of providing for those needs. The normal result of a competitive process is that those who are most successful have their ideas copied by those who are less successful. Only rarely does competition lead to the dramatic exit of an established supplier which is why events such as the demise of Southern Cross do make the headlines. Competition in education is to be welcomed because, though it may be uncomfortable for institutions at times, it provides an environment that encourages innovation, success and – crucially – ensures that institutions serve human persons and not the other way round.

The opposite approach is the one we have now. At its worst, it involves dreaming up alternative administrative mechanisms to allocate a fixed number of places at institutions between a huge number of *competing* parents. Parents compete for schools. The difficulties that we are all feeling with regard to the Cardinal Vaughan situation in London has arisen because parents are competing for a fixed number of places at a static number of institutions rather than institutions responding dynamically to serve the goal of parental autonomy.

The mechanism by which the Church was given autonomy in education in the post war period – through the operation of voluntary aided schools, has served a certain purpose; it is arguably better than the situation in those countries where the government requires all schools to be secular; and it might have worked tolerably well in an era of limited geographical mobility and when cheap private education was available as it was before the abolition of direct grant schools. However, in my view, we need to be welcoming moves to open up the education sector and pushing the government to go further.

The "common good", solidarity and subsidiarity

Let me now explore how Catholic social teaching can inform the question of whether we should be free to establish schools funded by the state on the same basis that the state funds its own schools – in other words "free schools".

The root of Christian social thinking applied to public policy is the pursuit of the common good. This is often defined as "the sum total of social conditions

which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.” Sometimes, “ensuring human flourishing” is used as a short-hand.

This is not some utilitarian calculus that involves pulling public policy levers to design society to make it a better place in somebody’s subjective judgement. The concept has its modern roots in Thomas Aquinas. The individual exists for society *and* the society for the individual. However, every *institution* of society – *and the government is an institution of society and not society itself as some think* – should be oriented towards serving the human person who is subordinate to God.

This is not an individualistic ethic, though it does point in the direct of human freedom. We cannot have human flourishing unless there is solidarity – a deep-seated concern for the welfare of others. However, solidarity is not primarily reflected in duties pertaining to the state. Solidarity is an attitude and virtue which is translated into good works. There is a role for the state in the economic sector but we should not confuse the duties of the political community – which is necessarily coercive, and distant from the needs it wishes to meet - with the duty of us all to act freely (individually and collectively) in a spirit of solidarity. As Pope Benedict said in *Caritas in veritate*, quoting from *Sollicitudo rei socialis* “Solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone, and it cannot therefore be merely delegated to the State.”

Catholic social teaching has suggested that there may be a role for government in financing education – especially for the poor – because without a basic level of education human flourishing is not possible. But, beyond this, the responsibility for education is firmly placed on parents, the family, the Church and the community.

There is a suspicion of such freedom in our Catholic education institutions and a widely-held belief that a uniform, state-funded comprehensive system is necessary to prevent social inequality. We should be careful not to trade fundamental parental rights for other values but, in any case, the evidence suggests that education systems with strong state control – for example, in Britain and America – produce less equal outcomes and worse outcomes for the poor than systems where more parental autonomy is allowed (for instance, in much of continental Europe). There is a good reason for this. In our education system the better off can improve their children’s education by moving house, by paying privately, by using private tutors or by articulating their needs to the relevant authorities. These options are not generally open for the poor. Evidence from educational choice programmes demonstrates that it is the poor, those from minorities and those with special educational needs that benefit most. Parental autonomy is a pro-poor policy.

Moving on to the principle of subsidiarity, this demands that, where the government does intervene, it does so in such a way that it *helps* the voluntary community and families achieve *their* legitimate objectives never supplanting their initiative, only facilitating it. In some senses this is an

interpretation of the big society. Subsidiarity is not a question of delegation, it is about *facilitating initiative*.

The dangers and dehumanisation that come about as a result of the welfare state supplanting the initiative of families was described in *Centesimus annus*. The full quote is instructive, but perhaps this part of the quote is most relevant. "Malfunctions and defects in the Social Assistance State are the result of an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the State...the Social Assistance State leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase in public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking...and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending." (CA 48).

I think we can recognise this within our education systems. There is an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the state, an inordinate increase in public agencies involved, there is a bureaucratic way of thinking and there has certainly been an enormous increase in spending.

Catholic social teaching has been explicit in stating that finance for education should be provided in such a way that parents' wishes are never supplanted and that private – including Church-provided - education is not discriminated against. This way, the state would be supporting families in the pursuit of their legitimate objectives and not displacing their initiative. For example, it is stated: "The right and duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable" (Catechism: 2221). These are very strong words. The Catechism continues (2229): "As those responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right *to choose a school for them* which corresponds to their own convictions." Indeed, the Church goes as far as suggesting that it is an *injustice* for the state not to support attendance at non-state schools (which sounds like a call for a voucher system), that a state monopoly of education offends *justice* and that the state cannot *merely tolerate* private schools (Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching, paragraph 241). This is all reinforced by Canon Law which states: "Catholic parents have also the duty and the right to choose those means and institutes which, in their local circumstances, can best promote the catholic education of their children...Parents must have a real freedom in their choice of schools."

The Catholic Education Service has recently pointed out that Bishops can choose whether to give a school the title "Catholic". But the spirit of subsidiarity is not just applied in the political domain. There is no reason why dioceses should be the sole or even main provider of education that is designated Catholic. Canon Law says: "If there are no schools in which an education is provided that is imbued with a Christian spirit, the diocesan bishop has the responsibility of ensuring that such schools are established." In other words, bishops may establish schools if necessary, but this responsibility is not a reason for putting impediments in the way of parents, lay movements and other groups who wish to develop a school with a distinctly Catholic character. Bishops have every right to be prudent before allowing new schools to be formally described as "Catholic" but they should not be obstructive.

The 1944 settlement is a long way from the principles described in Canon law and Catholic social teaching where parents have “true freedom”, are “prime educators” and the dioceses offer the designation “Catholic” where appropriate whilst providing schools only *if necessary*. The time has now come when the Bishops can encourage the faithful to bring Catholic social teaching in the field of education to a more fruitful situation.

Free schools

It follows from the above reasoning that there are strong reasons for Catholics to support, in principle, the free schools agenda. But, there are problems in the policy which Catholics involved in public life may wish to think about – basically, free schools are not free enough. There can be a role for the state in the regulation of education. For example, *Gravissimum educationis* suggests that it is important that the government ensures that schools prepare children to exercise their civic duties and rights. *Divini illius magistri* talks, quite reasonably, about the role of the state where parents refuse to look after their children properly. However these are roles which require minimal intervention probably, through primary law, rather than detailed regulation and prescription.

In the last two decades, there has been increasing state control of curriculum, admissions policies, the examining system and sex education – without any conspicuous success. The free schools programme does not reverse this – though it changes the situation somewhat

The Catholic Church believes that all schools should be free to deliver a truly Christian education that puts the development of the human person and his or her intellect and spirituality at its centre. Under the free schools programme, faith schools are restricted in their admissions policies and the curriculum has to be approved by the Secretary of State for Education. Whether Christian approaches to, for example, sex education will be allowed will be determined by the executive power of one individual in the executive of government – this is hardly the principle of subsidiarity at work. There are also restrictions on the employment of individuals of particular faiths arising from other primary legislation. Furthermore, there are few checks and balances against a hostile secretary of state closing down free schools – especially if they are operating in state-owned buildings.

We should make representations about these issues. But, nevertheless, the free schools initiative provides possibilities for developing schools with distinctive characteristics suitable for particular children and their families (small schools, schools with lots of facilities, schools with fewer facilities and more teachers, more academic schools, less academic schools, and so on). The initiative also provides exciting possibilities for the new movements and for co-operation between different Catholic seats of learning – we could have a Maryvale sixth form specialising in theology and humanities or a Liverpool Hope University sixth form, specialising in humanities, theology and business, and so on.

The bottom line is always that parents have an inalienable right to determine the appropriate form of education for their children within the law. Within that framework we should let a thousand flowers bloom. This approach would lead to the institutions supporting family and community initiative and not displacing it.

The free schools programme does not take us all the way there – still less the academies programme. Turning voluntary aided schools into free schools may or may not be wise, given the axe that the secretary of state can wield over free schools. The main benefits from the initiative will come from the creation of new schools and I think the Catholic Bishops in England and Wales should positively encourage those Catholic organisations, institutions and groups of parents that wish to start a free school to do so. There should be no state monopoly in schooling, *and Catholic teaching strongly implies that there should not be a monopoly of diocesan Catholic schools either.* Encouragement, administrative support and, possibly, help with premises will be needed for those wanting to establish free schools. If the Catholic Education Service is going to help with such things, it may well require something of a culture change.

All institutions in society serve the common good by serving the human person. In the field of education, the administrative institutions – whether within the Catholic hierarchy or within the state – should serve the goal of parental autonomy. Interference with that autonomy is an occasionally necessary exception but, unfortunately, it has become the rule in British education policy. Free schools provide an imperfect opportunity to increase the role that parents and free communities – or the “Big Society” as the government likes to call it – play in education. I think they should be welcomed and supported by our Catholic agencies.