

Welsh parliamentarian wants multi-faith assemblies in schools

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Welsh Liberal Democrat Assembly Member Peter Black has called for the Welsh Assembly to reconsider the requirement for schools in the country to hold an act of Christian worship and to make assemblies “multi-faith.”

Writing on his website in response to a humanist group, Mr Black says: “The present requirement for schools to provide a daily act of what is interpreted as Christian worship for all pupils as enshrined in the 1944 Education Act is not a practical possibility for most schools and does not fit with the cultural, religious and ethnic make-up of modern 21st Century Britain. We have to recognise that pupils live and work side by side with others of all religions and cultures and we should amend the duty on schools to use morning assemblies and lessons to help youngsters understand, appreciate and benefit from the diverse society they live in.

“In many schools there is no suitable hall or room capable of accommodating the whole school with the result that most headteachers stagger assemblies and interpret the requirement as providing an act of Christian worship at least once a week. Because of the diverse nature of their pupils many are able to opt out of these assemblies and do so, thus defeating the purpose of them. A multi-faith assembly staggered over the week or one focussed on educating children about the differences between all faiths and none would benefit everybody and lead to better tolerance and understanding within our society. If at all possible the Welsh Assembly should review the present legal requirement and seek to amend it to accommodate these views.”

Responding to this in the *Western Mail*, Saleem Kidwai, Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, welcomed the suggestion that different faiths could contribute to assemblies, and was adamant that religion should not be banished from the educational system. He said, “I’m a product myself of a Catholic school.”

Brian Cainen, secretary of the West Glamorgan Humanist Group, which approached Mr Black, believes a distinctively Christian assembly is divisive. He said, “You’ve got Christians, Muslims and Jews being divided up. I do think education is about enthusing people and giving them space for philosophical thought and discussion is very important.”

The Rev Aled Edwards, chief executive of Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales), said, “The balance struck with the legislation is the right one where [schools are] required to broadly reflect the Christian tradition.” However, he stressed it was the responsibility of faith communities and schools to pass on their beliefs. Schools, he said, should “create an ambience where young people think through their own values and faith background.”

Colin Hart, director of the right-wing Christian Institute, also defended the status quo. “The biggest danger is the curriculum squeeze on religious education. That’s why it’s important it’s still legally required.”

Stephen Green, founder of the extremist group Christian Voice – notorious for its opposition to Jerry Springer: The Opera – does not want Islamic teachings in schools. He said, “Much as it must irritate the secularists, Wales is still part of a Christian United Kingdom.”

A Welsh Assembly Government spokesman said, “The legal requirement for schools to have daily collective worship is contained in primary legislation. There are no regulation-making powers available to the Assembly Government to change or amend this legislation. Collective worship and religious education in maintained schools without a religious character must be broadly Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of other principle religions represented in Great Britain.”

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: “These exchanges illustrate perfectly why religious practices and RE should be taken out of school life. They encourage division and have no purpose other than to try to indoctrinate children into one particular religion. This is not a legitimate function of the state. As minority religions become more vocal and assertive, this will become an increasing bone of contention. We need to make schools into neutral secular spaces where religious proselytisers play no part.”
