

## COMMENT

J. D. C. HARTE

Professor Hull's informative account of the educational background to the 1988 Act stresses the difference between content and method in religious education. Nevertheless he begs questions about the way the one effects the other. For example, when Kenneth Baker as Secretary of State for Education stressed the importance of Shakespeare's writing and other specific texts in teaching English, or the importance of historical facts, even dates, in teaching History, there seemed to be a risk that too specific requirements of content could hamper modern teaching methods designed to widen pupils' understanding of what they were studying. In the field of academic law, which some might consider largely untouched by contemporary educational theory, disputes over what ought to be included in undergraduate syllabuses may represent an underlying conflict between content and method. Traditionalists may emphasise the importance of mastering a coherent corpus of rules, especially the cases in which these have been developed by the judges. Others advocate a variety of more modern approaches which draw out the function of Law in Society but may fail to give an adequate grounding for future legal practice. Rightly or wrongly certain methods of teaching may come to be associated with particular interpretations of the content of what is studied. On the other hand it may be that specific content may hamper certain approaches to study. Professor Hull asserts that content can be taught by any method, but it is revealing that those who drafted section 8 of the 1988 Act and limited it to the rather tortured reference to Christianity were at pains to reject more specific references to content, particularly to the Bible. Was this because insisting that the actual text of the Bible be studied would to some extent have dictated *the manner* of study?

Although Professor Hull assures us that in practice local agreed syllabuses always provide for Christianity to be studied, the 1988 Act does require that it should be a principal focus of study. Therefore the Act seems to reassure those who were concerned at the form of some existing syllabuses and feared for future developments. These may find little comfort in Professor Hull's analysis in this Journal. He implies that provided it is given substantial recognition in county agreed syllabuses, Christianity could still easily be marginalised in the teaching of particular schools despite the Act. The Act certainly does not provide any clear rule which parents, especially, could use to challenge the form of teaching in a school. Nevertheless the explicit reference to Christianity in the Act sets a norm which may influence the framing of future syllabuses and may be referred to in any case where a syllabus or specific teaching is challenged in the courts. Professor Hull fairly identifies our difference of belief over whether it is "desirable" or "appropriate" for religious education to exhibit a Christian character in this country, let alone for it to be expressed by Law. However it is perhaps surprising that he should be puzzled by the idea of Christianity as the national religion, when the Church of England even today remains established by Law.

Of course the collective worship required in county schools is not to take the form of Anglican liturgy any more than that of any other denomination but Professor Hull disputes whether the 1988 Act presents Christian worship as a

norm at all. He correctly implies that a majority of schools could opt out of it, and certainly, if that were to happen, the legislation might be changed. However I would not agree that to be a legal norm a standard must necessarily be “compulsory and ubiquitous”. Some rules are broken to a limited extent by virtually everyone, like those setting road speeds. Others may be broken by a large proportion of the population, like the law forbidding theft. Some norms, such as a number of British Standards or legislative standards for pollution levels, are intended to make clear what is acceptable in certain circumstances but are not actually compulsory or ubiquitous. Indeed, from a Christian point of view, Watchman Nee’s classic “The Normal Christian Life” underlines the truth that the norm for the Christian life has only ever actually been lived by Christ himself.

Professor Hull charges me with showing little sympathy for teachers facing “the administrative complexity and the religious evaluation which this extraordinary legislation requires of them”. However, he seems initially to accept that there is now no problem for a Christian headteacher of a county school who wishes to keep the school assembly entirely Christian, although in Professor Hull’s view this could involve the head teacher unacceptably imposing (his or her) religious views upon school life. Later, on the other hand, we are told that, “in view of the many restrictions and qualifications placed upon Christian worship it would be just as true to say that Christian worship is circumscribed as to claim that it is unambiguously enjoined”. Where Professor Hull and I mainly appear to differ is over our theological assumptions and our understanding of the nature of worship. He seems to equate full worship with sacrament and assumes that there is an antithesis between a community of faith and a school but what I would most question is his assertion that “school worship can never be full Christian worship”. In one sense this must be true, just as it is true that if any of us found a perfect church we ought not to join it as it would then cease to be perfect! However such an attitude seems to me to miss the purpose of worship or of joining a church.

Perhaps the real difference between Professor Hull and myself on the practical implications of the 1988 Act, is over the question of how far schools should all aim to provide for maximum diversity rather than each seeking a distinctive and sometimes quite narrow ethos. The 1988 Act provides a legal framework which seems to me to encourage schools to create their own ethos. It identifies Christianity as a model whilst acknowledging the position of other faiths and it leaves open the possibility of very different views of Christianity. These would doubtless include both Professor Hull’s and my own. The Act certainly does not guarantee a new approach. Like many pieces of legislation it may turn out a dead letter. If it leads to changes these will only become apparent over time. However if Christianity does reclaim greater prominence and vitality in our nation’s schools and in the nation itself I suggest that the Act is bound to be a significant symbol even though it will doubtless be impossible to prove the extent of its contribution.