

1. Title of paper (or other)

(Workshop) **Religion, Intelligence and Curriculum: some critical reflections.**

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ABSTRACT

Workshop on Religion, Intelligence and Curriculum: some critical reflections.

This workshop wants to stimulate discussion about John White's book on *Intelligence, Destiny and Education* (2006) by making the provocative suggestion that his arguments could be used by proponents of faith schools to argue for the need to develop their own distinct curriculum. Although White intended to provoke debate and reassessment about the place of both intelligence testing in schooling and the way the curriculum is packaged into a hierarchy of subjects, this paper argues that this debate has the potential to also stimulate some fresh thinking on the question of whether or not there could or should be a distinct Catholic or Islamic curriculum that ought operate in these faith schools.

This paper will briefly recap on the arguments developed by White's 2006 book before going on to consider how and why faith schools, in particular Catholic and Islamic ones, might be able to use his basic thesis to justify why there needs to be a distinct or different curriculum on offer in these kinds of schools. This paper takes White's thesis in positive terms and seeks to suggest that if he is right about the Puritan influence on the contemporary curriculum there is a need faith schools to reconsider the nature and shape of the curriculum that they offer to the pupils who attend these places of learning.

Workshop: Religion, Intelligence and Curriculum: some critical reflections

Introduction

This paper makes a playful but ultimately radical move to use the arguments presented in John White's book on *Intelligence, Destiny and Education* (2006) to explore the question of whether in faith schools, such as Catholic or Islamic ones, ought to now develop their own distinct curriculum. White attempted to identify how and why the ideological roots of intelligence testing raises fundamental questions and concerns about the way the school curriculum ought to be organised. Clearly White intended to provoke debate and reassessment about the place of both intelligence testing in schooling and the way the curriculum is packaged into a hierarchy of subjects. This paper argues that this debate has the potential to also stimulate some fresh thinking on the question of whether or not there could be a distinct 'catholic' or Islamic curriculum that ought operate in these faith schools. It will be maintained that despite criticisms of White's thesis (about the heavy and significant Puritan influence on the design of the current curriculum) enough of his basic argument remains to be able to support the development of a separate and distinct curriculum in faith schools, in particular Catholic and Islamic ones. At the very least, in the light of White's analysis this concept will have become much more plausible.

It is important to note the paradoxical nature of this discussion. John White is an atheist, and he is critical of the impact of Christianity on education. In '*Intelligence, Destiny, and Education*' nothing praise worthy is said about the influence of 'puritan' Christianity. Implicit in his thesis is the claim that just as the Puritans were misguided in their commitment to predestination, so too are the advocates of Galtonian inspired intelligence testing. White wants to move away from these ideological roots. Yet this critical assessment will seek to use White's thesis in support of finding an argument in favour of faith schools developing an alternative account of the curriculum grounded on principles other than Puritan ones. In effect this paper seeks to show how issues in the philosophy of Catholic or Islamic education can usefully build on the insights of liberal (and atheistic) philosophers of education.

Section 1: A brief reminder of White's thesis in *Intelligence, Destiny and Education*

In *Intelligence, Destiny and Education* John White presents a skilfully crafted historical analysis that shows the influence of puritan Christian influences on the contemporary curriculum. Through his carefully argued historical analysis White is able to show that key features of the 1988 National Curriculum and its commitment to a rigorous testing and assessment regime is grounded in Puritanism and the curriculum of the dissenting colleges. Moreover, he also explains that whilst the overt links with learning about God's universe might have been slowly dropped in the nineteenth century the widely held assumption that learning topics or subjects for their own sake has remained an influential idea. In all this White is showing that many of contemporary educational problems stem from assumptions and beliefs grounded in a very different world-view. The almost passive acceptance of these assumptions has resulted in subject based curriculum, that is hierarchically ordered, and shot through with assessment structures. In fact White explains that it was the acceptance of these assumptions that meant there did not need to be any serious attention to what the aims of the 1988 National Curriculum should be. Against this historical analysis White returns to his familiar themes: the focus on aims in education, and working from these rather than assumptions about subjects in themselves.

Section 2: Faith schools and the curriculum

Even before White published his book in 2006 there had been many who had begun to ask if there ought to be a different curriculum in faith schools. For example in R. Davis' discussion of '*Can there be a Catholic Curriculum*' (in Conroy 1999) there was a presentation of the history of curriculum development from a catholic perspective. What Davis' account draws out is the element of suspicion that Catholics have had about the contemporary school curriculum. There is the tacit suggestion that had catholic Christianity remained dominant – rather than puritan (protestant Christianity) – the school curriculum would have been very different. It would be interesting, if space allowed, to speculate whether or not the same subject based curriculum and the philosophical controversies with 1988 National Curriculum would ever have developed had Catholic Christianity remained dominant

Davis wants to explain why no distinct catholic curriculum has emerged, and he is in effect agreeing with White' thesis about the 'protestant' roots to the contemporary

school curriculum. He describes this curriculum as the ‘liberal democratic model’ and there is, he proposes, at least a tacit element of anti-catholic bias at work in this curriculum.

Just as Catholic faith schools would have reservations about the puritan influenced curriculum those who belong to Islamic faith schools would also have concerns. If White’s analysis is basically correct both the Islamic and Catholic faith schools would want to liberate the design of the curriculum from these puritan Christian influences.

Section 3: White’s thesis and the possible development of a separate or distinct curriculum in faith schools

In essence the argument is straight forward. It is that White’s historical analysis of the puritan influence on the curriculum should be accepted as a broadly accurate one. As such the current curriculum has been deeply skewed as a result of these puritan influences. The puritan tradition is grounded, as White explains, in the reformed theological tradition of Calvin. It has a soteriology that places central importance of the concepts of predestination, and rejects large swathes of catholic ecclesiology and sacramental theology and practice. Even in a time of ecumenical openness and dialogue there are huge differences between this puritan theology and that of contemporary Catholicism. Given this, White’s analysis triggers some serious questions about whether it is appropriate for faith schools to continue using the subject based curriculum, and to promote the related testing regime and use of programmes such as the ones for Gifted and Talented pupils. If White is right then the question of developing an Islamic or Catholic curriculum cannot be ignored, or treated as a minor concern. White has raised general questions about intelligence testing and the subject based school curriculum that are relevant and important for every school. However, for faith schools the issues he raises become even more serious because he reveals a deeply ‘protestant’ character to many standard parts of schooling in the UK and the US. It would be essential for those in Islamic or Catholic education to recognise this and develop a curriculum that was genuinely ‘Islamic’ or ‘Catholic’ in character.

If White's thesis is accepted then it becomes harder to justify not giving control of the entire curriculum over to those who run faith schools. For such schools it cannot simply be a matter 'of doing what other schools do but only better'. White's thesis explains that there is something wrong with what other schools are doing, and it is related to the ideological roots. A case could be made for developing an Islamic or Catholic curriculum that is not based on privileging theoretical and abstract knowledge. It is not necessary for faith schools to simply adopt the epistemological assumptions in the puritan inspired curriculum.

The issue come down to working out what is or ought to be distinctive about the curriculum in a faith school.

Section 5: Concluding comments

This paper has sought to use White's thesis in support of finding an argument in favour of developing an alternative account of the curriculum grounded on catholic Christianity. In effect it has taken seriously White's thesis about the ideological roots of intelligence testing and the subject based curriculum. He has at the very least shown that his ideas about these Puritan influences do deserve to be taken seriously. Crucially in terms of this assignment, what White does provide is a fresh perspective from which to engage in the discussing the plausibility of there needing to be a separate curriculum in faith schools.

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