



Subsidiarity and education policy

How far does and should sovereignty reach into the lives of communities and individuals? With reference to the issue of education, the author argues that of the two principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, it is the latter which should have the stronger influence in education.



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Introduction

This article examines the importance of the principle of subsidiarity in education policy. It is timely for Christians to consider this matter because, after a long period of increasing central control of education by a secular government hostile to Christianity, the possibility of liberalising the education system has arisen. However, we should be careful not to welcome this intended liberalisation without examination of the detail. Sometimes education reform that has apparently created greater autonomy for parents and schools has, in the detail, led to more centralisation. In the case of the proposed 'free schools' reform proposed by the coalition government, there are particular questions regarding the religious status of schools that need to be considered.

In considering this question, this article is based on Catholic social teaching. As such, it relies on the Catholic Church's interpretation of Scripture and natural law through its social teaching documents and is not directly grounded in passages from Scripture.

Solidarity and subsidiarity

Christians, and especially Catholics, frequently use the phrases 'solidarity' and 'subsidiarity' to describe the extent to which a free-market economic policy should be balanced by government intervention.

One way of thinking about solidarity is to consider it to be the duty of the political authorities to pursue what is sometimes called a 'preferential option for

the poor'¹ through government intervention, income redistribution and so on. The argument would continue that such intervention should be limited by the application of subsidiarity. This, it is suggested, requires that intervention should take place at the lowest level of government and, preferably, that autonomy should remain with voluntary groups and the family.

This way of thinking tends to lead to a moderate left or a moderate conservative view of politics. According to this view, the state should redistribute income and wealth but otherwise protect private property; the state should also devolve responsibility to lower levels of government where possible, thus giving local bodies or even families autonomy in fields such as healthcare, education and so on. This would often seem to produce an outturn rather like some of the Christian Democratic states of the European Union in the mid-to-late twentieth century.

A more authentic interpretation of solidarity, however, sees it as an attitude and virtue. It relates, firstly, to how we view our neighbours. It is an attitude that is then translated into good works through our actions as employers, within our families and extended families, through professional associations, community groups, schools, parishes and so on. Only finally is there action through the political sphere where the state has a role, though not the primary role, of overseeing the exercise of human rights in the economic sector.²

This leaves unanswered the question of where government intervention in the economic sphere might begin and end. In answering this question, we need to

consider the root of all Christian social thinking – the pursuit of the common good. This is defined in Catholic social teaching 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’.³ The common good cannot be promoted if all people do not have the basic necessities for living and, in the event that charity does not provide for those who have insufficient, the state may step in to respond to such sins of omission.⁴ This may, in turn, imply a role for the state in financing education – at least for the poor.

As has been noted, the principle of subsidiarity demands that such intervention in the economic sphere is a last resort. As the Catechism puts it, ‘The principle of subsidiarity is opposed to all forms of collectivism. It sets limits to state intervention.’⁵ However, the principle

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also demands that government *helps* or *assists* lower levels of community – and especially families – in achieving *their* legitimate objectives.⁶ In the words of the Rio Declaration on the Family: ‘Subsidiarity means that the family, not the State, not large organizations, must be given responsibility in managing and developing its own economy.’ The government’s interventions must enable lower-order communities (including individuals and families) to pursue *their* legitimate objectives and not displace their objectives by the state’s objectives.

The principle of subsidiarity enshrined in the EU Treaty of Maastricht works differently, even though it is often said that it derives from Catholic social teaching. In EU governance, subsidiarity means that lower levels of government are responsible before higher levels of government for implementing EU policy. However, in its proper context, subsidiarity is the process by which the state *helps* private and intermediate groups attain *their* legitimate ends, never supplanting their initiative, only facilitating it.

Of course, debates between Christians on the appropriate scope of the market and the domain of the state in economic life are still legitimate. There are occasions where we are asked to balance the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity⁷ (see Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005, para 351, hereafter referred to as the *Compendium*). But neither the Catholic Church nor Scripture exhibit a bias in favour of the general use of socialised, political mechanisms to achieve the sorts of objectives (protection of the poor, sheltering the homeless, provision of health and education, etc.) that Christian communities and others hold dear.

Subsidiarity and the welfare state

In 1991, to celebrate the centenary of *Rerum novarum*, Pope John Paul II published *Centesimus annus*. In this, he explicitly critiqued welfare states, of which the provision of education is part. He wrote: ‘In recent years the range of such intervention has vastly expanded, to the point of creating a new type of State, the so-called “Welfare State”. This has happened in some countries in order to respond better to many needs and demands, by remedying forms of poverty and deprivation unworthy of the human person. However, excesses and abuses, especially in recent years, have provoked very harsh criticisms of the Welfare State, dubbed the “Social Assistance State”. Malfunctions and defects in the Social Assistance State are the result of an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the State ... By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, 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.’ (*Centesimus annus*, 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.

At the same time, the Catholic Church regards it as important that the state guarantees the provision of at least some level of education to all children in order that the common good can be achieved (see, for example, *Gravissimum educationis*). It is difficult to envisage human flourishing for all if substantial portions of society are completely uneducated. This does not mean that the state should finance education for all; and the state might not have to be involved in the *provision* of education in any way. But the state should ensure that the conditions exist so that some kind of education is available to all children, according to Catholic social teaching.

Catholic social teaching has at times suggested that finance might only need to be provided for those who cannot afford education and for whom charities or the Church also did not provide. *Familiaris consortio*,⁸ for example, suggests that the state should provide families with aid to meet their educational needs and that aid should be in proportion to the needs of the family: this might suggest some form of means-tested assistance to help with the finance of education. But, in this article, I shall leave that issue aside and not discuss further whether finance should only be provided on a means-tested basis by the state: I will assume that the state will finance education for all.

It could be argued that it would be a reasonable application of the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, with the aim of promoting the common good, if the

NOTES

1. This term has been used frequently in Catholic Social Teaching, especially in the last 40 years.

2. *Centesimus annus*, 48.

3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), para 1906.

4. There is an interesting discussion of this in Nicholas Townsend’s chapter, ‘Government and social infrastructure’, in N Spencer and J Chaplin (eds), *God and Government* (London: SPCK, 2009).

5. *Catechism*, para 1885.

6. See, for example, *Centesimus annus* and *Quadragesimo anno* written by Pope John Paul II and Pope Pius XI, respectively.

7. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), para 351.

8. Written by John Paul II, published in 1981.

9. *Catechism*, para 2221.

10. This is all reinforced in Canon Law. The 1983

state were to have a role in financing education, but that finance were always to 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.

Indeed, this does seem compatible with Catholic social teaching in this field. The duty to provide education is clearly laid upon the family: 'The right and duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable'.⁹ These are very strong words. The Catechism continues (para 2229, emphasis in original): '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, that a state monopoly of education offends *justice* and that the state cannot merely tolerate private schools (Compendium, paragraph 241). *Gravissimum educationis* puts it like this: 'Parents who have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools' (20).¹⁰

The principle of subsidiarity *demands* that the state is limited to providing help for families. There is no need for the state to provide education – except possibly to fill in gaps in very particular circumstances – or to dictate how that education should be delivered. This is a long way from the form of education provision in the UK at present although Catholics, Anglicans and Jews are able to set up 'voluntary aided' schools which have a degree of independence.

The Catholic Church also has a particular view of the nature of education. As is stated in *Caritas in veritate* (Pope Benedict's first social encyclical): 'The term 'education' refers not only to classroom teaching and vocational training – both of which are important factors in development – but to the complete formation of the person' (61).¹¹ Merely allowing parents to choose between different schools that essentially teach the same state-determined syllabus and which are driven by the same secular ethos can degenerate into an imposition of the culture of moral relativism by the state; it prevents families and schools from being genuinely free. This is not to say that Catholic social teaching argues that there is no role for the state in the provision of education. *Gravissimum educationis* (21) suggests that it is important that the government ensures that schools prepare children to exercise their civic duties and rights. However this is a role which surely requires a minimal degree of intervention, through primary law, rather than detailed regulation and prescription with regard to admissions policy, curriculum, employment and governance.

Subsidiarity and education policy in the UK

In the last few years, there has been increasing state control of all aspects of education – right down to

nursery level. This includes control of admissions policies, curriculum, exams that can be taken, sex and personal health education, and so on. Organisations sponsored by the government enter schools to provide abortion and contraception advice. There was a public argument between church figures and government ministers before the general election about the extent to which it should be possible for Christian voluntary aided schools to teach Christian values in relation to sex education: such arguments may not be necessary if the principle of subsidiarity is applied.

On the face of it, we may be entering a new era of 'free schools'. There is little question that, as an expansion of existing options for parents, this new policy helps meet some of the concerns of recent years that education policy is increasingly ignoring the principle

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

of subsidiarity. It could be argued, however, that the process is dominated by the government imposing its own desires on parents rather than facilitating parents in achieving their legitimate objectives. Faith schools, for example, are restricted. They cannot have admissions policies that lead to more than half of the number admitted being of a relevant faith. Some religious denominations may feel that this policy prevents them from developing the ethos of the school effectively. There is very little freedom with regard to admissions policy in any other respect. Furthermore, the curriculum of free schools 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 particular individual in the executive of government.

Code (article 797) says: 'Parents must have a real freedom in their choice of schools. For this reason Christ's faithful must be watchful that the civil society acknowledges this freedom of parents and, in accordance with the requirements of distributive justice, even provides them with assistance.' It is interesting that the faithful are asked to use schools that best provide for children's Catholic education but that this should not necessarily be a school which is officially designated as Catholic by the local Bishop (or other competent authority). Parents could, for example, set up their own school. It is worth noting that, sadly, these teachings are not reflected in the official policies of the Catholic Education Service [of England and Wales] or the Scottish Catholic Education Service. These bodies are intended to represent the respective Bishops' Conferences.

11. It should be noted that the same paragraph called, in solidarity, for the promotion of greater access to education internationally.