

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Catholicism: ideological and institutional constraints on system change in English and French primary schooling

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ABSTRACT Research studies have shown clear and persistent differences between the French and English systems of education. Given that England and France are in many ways very similar societies, sharing a European heritage, of approximately the same population profile, with comparable levels of socioeconomic and technological development and facing the same financial imperatives in a global market, the question arises as to why their educational arrangements should be so different. In this paper it is argued that the differences arise out of deeply embedded cultural traditions through which contrasting fundamental value orientations are mediated and that these fundamental value orientations can be traced back to and now represent secularised educational versions of French Catholicism and English Protestantism. Evidence is put forward to suggest that structures of consciousness and forms of social organisation which originally developed in an ecclesiastical context for religious purposes have been transformed over time into secular equivalents for educational and economic purposes and that it is in the continuing societal commitments to the two dissimilar sets of underpinning moral values that an explanation for the observable contrasts between French and English primary education needs to be sought.

Introduction

The basic thesis advanced by Weber (1992) in his classic text *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is that cultural phenomena in general and the Protestant ethic in particular are capable of acting as autonomous causal factors in social and economic development. As Anthony Giddens recently pointed out (in the preface to Weber, 1992) this thesis has largely been sustained, despite the serious criticisms levelled at it over the decades since it was first published. Weber (1992) showed how a cultural phenomenon, the religious ideology of Protestantism, shaped the social and economic institutions associated with the rise of capitalism. Weber's limited interest in education *per se* has often been lamented (Archer, 1979; King, 1980) as a Weberian approach to the study of comparative education potentially has much to offer researchers interested in explaining how differences in education systems arise and persist (Archer, 1989). In this paper it will be suggested that Weber's methodology in the comparative study of religion provides a useful model for the comparative study of

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education. Specifically, it will be contended that no real understanding of the differences between contemporary primary education in England and France is possible without an appreciation of the independent role played by cultural values in shaping all institutional structures and social processes in the education systems of the two countries. It will be argued that in both societies there are deeply embedded cultural traditions that are rooted in a collective societal heritage deriving in the one case from what may be described as an ideal-typically Protestant ethic and in the other from an ideal-typically Catholic ethic. These ethics can be seen to be underpinned by fundamental value orientations which set parameters within which policies for educational reform are or are not conceivable and which may in this way indicate limitations on the possibilities of system change.

It is, however, important to highlight the speculative nature of this paper at an early stage. It proposes a twofold typology of educational value systems which may help to illuminate key differences in the education systems of England and France although these may well be of relevance to education systems in other societies. The typologies are essentially defined by contrasting forms of social organisation in key domains of educational practice and, in this sense, the paper is intentionally redolent of the kind of conceptualisation of contrasting social formations in educational contexts found in Bernstein's (1971) seminal work on classification and framing. Because it is in a similar fashion propositional this paper does not aim to present a watertight thesis grounded in a solid evidential base, although it necessarily draws on some empirical references. Weber (1992) drew an important distinction between adequacy 'at the level of meaning' and adequacy 'at the level of causality'. The discussion here is intended to make a contribution at the level of meaning to the fundamental question of why two advanced industrial societies, objectively comparable in so many respects, such as England and France, should differ so markedly and obdurately in the nature, composition and operation of their respective systems of primary education. Adequacy at the level of causality would require a historical analysis which it is beyond the scope of the present paper to attempt.

The empirical references principally drawn on will be the large-scale 'Bristaix' studies (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1987, 1988, 1993, 1995; and the small-scale ethnographic research undertaken by the present writer in a Northern French town anonymised as 'Coeurville' (Sharpe, 1992a,b, 1993a,b).

The paper is organised in four sections. The first three sections present an analysis of three key domains, in which it is suggested the two ethics display characteristic differences and the final section considers what implications these differences might have for the possibilities of system change. The sections are as follows.

- (1) The structure of authority and the nature of accountability: the Catholic nature of authority in French primary schooling and the Protestant character of authority within English primary schooling.
- (2) The educational environment: the congruence between French primary classes and Catholic churches and the Protestant ambience of English primary schools.
- (3) Social roles and social action: the 'Catholicity' of behaviour in French primary classrooms and 'Protestant' attitudes among pupils and teachers in English primary classrooms.
- (4) Social and educational implications.

The Structure of Authority and the Nature of Accountability

The fundamental distinction between Catholic and Protestant traditions in the matter of

authority centres on the role the church is seen to play in providing for the salvation of the believer. In Catholicism the church is historically the vehicle of salvation, a view encapsulated in the famous *extra ecclesia nulla salus* principle and delivered through the ages down to the Second Vatican Council which, reiterating centuries of tradition, declared that

... they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or to remain in it. (Vatican II, *Laumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in Flannery, 1981, p. 66)

In the various Protestant churches believers receive guidance, help and support towards finding their own individual salvation through faith. The Catholic Church thus has a single, universal, monolithic structure of authority with clearly defined levels of superiority and inferiority defined in bureaucratic terms of accountability through a distinct hierarchical line, contrasting sharply with the multifarious organisational forms displayed by the Protestant churches in which the nature of authority is more likely to have localised, democratic, particular, personalised features. Accountability within Catholicism is clearly defined: the believer's responsibility is fundamentally to assent to the Universal Church's doctrinal teaching on faith and morals and to fulfil the obligations of the Church imposed on all who would be saved. For Protestants accountability is a much less clearly defined issue with the ultimate accountability being a purely individual matter between the believer and God. Weber (1992) noted that 'The puritan continually supervised his own state of grace' (p. 124) and that 'The Calvinist's intercourse with his god was carried on in deep spiritual isolation' (p. 107).

Marty (1972) observed that

It (Protestantism) has been split into churches, sects, denominations, parties, factions, emphasis groups, and national entities; and at times such premium was placed on 'the right of private judgement' that the meaning of Protestantism was reduced to autonomous and private forms of individualism. (p. 51)

In these circumstances the nature of authority becomes diffuse and more emphasis is placed on the personal and charismatic qualities of particular leaders.

The Catholic Nature of Authority in French Primary Schooling

The organisational structure of French education parallels in significant respects the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The minister with his cabinet and the myriad of attached ministerial committees and commissions corresponds to a notable extent in form, function and style of operation to the Pope, the College of Cardinals and the various Vatican committees, commissions and congregations. Decrees and pronouncements are drawn up, made and applied to 'everybody' in comparable ways in the two authority systems. The 1985 programmes of study, the introduction of national evaluations and the various reforms of the 1989 *Loi d'Orientation* were all conceived within the bureaucratic centre with little or no 'democratic' consultation outside it and then announced by the minister and henceforth incumbent on all. If not exactly infallible the minister's decision is certainly officially definitive. By the same token, as the Bristaix study conclusively showed and the Coeurville teachers confirmed, the dictates of such centralised authority may not be implemented at ground level even though there is nevertheless a strong sense of continued allegiance. The

TABLE I. Parallels between the hierarchies of the Catholic Church and L'Education Nationale

Nationale			
Catholic Church		L'Education Nationale	
Archbishop	Archdiocese	Recteur	Académie
Bishop	Diocese	Inspecteur de d'académie (IA)	Département
Auxiliary bishop	Subdiocese	Inspector de l'education nationale (IEN)	Circumscription
Priest	Church	Teacher	Class

parallels with the gulf between Catholic teaching and the behaviour of individual Catholic believers scarcely need drawing out.

The Catholic Church and the Ministère de L'Education National both attempt to enforce their authority through two principal mechanisms: a hierarchy of officials with territorial responsibility and the monopoly control of legitimate textual instructions. In the case of the former the parallels can be easily detected, as is shown in Table I.

At the highest level of the hierarchy the parallel extends even to the manner of appointment with the system of *sur dossier* allowing a degree of self-recruitment from the top not dissimilar to what happens in the Vatican. Lower down, at the level of the inspector (IEN) the recruitment through competitive civil service examination rules out any subjectivity in preferment. Once in a post, however, all officials in the two systems function in similar ways constituting a *voie hiérarchique* with each level responsible for those below it and subordinate to those above it. In both there is a direct monolithically hierarchical line management responsibility from the lowest to the highest levels. Teachers are not accountable to head teachers but to an (IEN) with responsibility for up to 450 teachers spread over a number of schools in a given area. Inspections take place on average every 3 years, focus on the individual teacher's compliance with textual prescriptions and result in the awarding of a mark out of 20 which exerts a determining effect on both progress through the salary scale and on freedom to change post. Teachers are also recruited by competitive examination and can only move schools through the annual allocation of posts, now undertaken by computer, in which those with the highest *barèmes*, a mark arrived at by combining years of service with the last inspection mark, are automatically appointed.

The defining characteristic of Catholicism is its self-perception as the unique repository of religious truth. In this perspective there is essentially only one church offering salvation, Catholic and Universal, constant through the ages. The unity of the organisation is guaranteed through the single hierarchy and the proclamation of dogmas enunciated in official texts to which all believers are required to give assent. Such assent to established and new textual instructions is demanded less on the basis that the individual believer might scrutinise the wording, consider the implications and then decide to agree than on pre-existing membership and implicit commitment to submit to the dictates of an authority already regarded as legitimate. Committed Catholics acknowledge the Church's right to define what is right in the matter of faith and morals and the legitimacy of the texts is respected because of the source from which they emanate not because they seem sensible or reasonable. Once issued, the texts hang like tablets of stone as the fundamental reference against which all actions and events have to be justified. Departure from them is heresy without express prior permission from an accredited official.

There is in France, in a real sense, only one school, national and universal, with a

directly comparable mission to offer secular salvation to all. Its unity is maintained in the same way. During the fieldwork in Coeurville teachers repeatedly referred to *les textes qui sont sortis, les textes qui viennent de sortir* (the texts issued, the texts which have just appeared) and like expressions. It was found in both the Bristaix and Coeurville studies that official instructions were sometimes not implemented and sometimes not agreed with. What was clear though was that there was no real challenge to the ministerial right to issue them. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that acknowledging the legitimacy of the ministerial hierarchy is not so much a facet of teachers' professional ideology as a fundamental feature of the individual teacher's national identity, a part of being French.

The Protestant Character of Authority within English Primary Schooling

In English primary education there is a multiplicity of sources of authority. Some powers are vested in central government departments and agencies, some in quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations and some in local authorities. From the point of view of teachers and pupils, however, immediate and palpable authority is not so much located in external structures as in the internal organisation of the school itself. In particular, the authority role of the head teacher marks a striking contrast with the situation in French primary schools where head teachers have virtually no line management function whatsoever. It is largely through the figurehead authority role of the English head teacher that the distinctive culture and ethos of particular schools is created, sustained and promoted. As Pollard (1985) commented, 'It is undoubtedly the fact of the significance of the headteacher's dominant formal position which has led some researchers almost to equate the perspectives of head-teachers with the school ethos itself' (p. 122).

If anything this has been reinforced by the extensive powers now held by governing bodies. Primary schools have always been local micro-communities and are now increasingly able to govern themselves as a result of recent reforms, with the result that a parallel may be drawn between the 'market' situation of Protestant churches competing for religious converts and English primary schools competing for pupils. Even prior to the reforms, however, English primary education was characterised by its diversity, the so-called 'rich tapestry of variation'. Teachers have traditionally been recruited through an open job market with head teachers playing a major role in the selection of their own staff and, although teachers are accountable to head teachers, English primary education is characterised by a variety of managerial and teaching styles. In this sense teachers unhappy with the predominant managerial or teaching style of one school can, in theory at least, choose to move to another school regime more to their liking. For French teachers there is no other choice of authority structure available. Inspections systems, even up to the present day Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) apparatus, have respected this diversity and crucially have and continue to have a whole school focus. What is being assessed is the quality of an educational community made up of diverse individuals. Choices about all manner of school policies, practices and issues have been made by those individuals and by school community leaders, the senior management team and the governing body. It is on the basis of their individual and collective responsibility for the wisdom, knowledge or skill inherent in these choices that they are judged. It is in this sense that English inspection is essentially Protestant in character: it places great stress on individual personal responsibility within a distinctive 'team' framework, a far cry from the Catholic approach of the French system which focuses on individual compliance with impersonal, universal behavioural norms.

The Educational Environment

The environment and ambience of churches communicate much about their doctrines. Catholic churches everywhere in the world have certain common, universal features: an altar, tabernacle, pews, stations of the cross, confessional, etc. These are physical manifestations of the various aspects of the Catholic faith which are held to be of central importance in the life of the believer who, in encountering them, is expected to experience the reality of what the Universal Church claims to embody. The high point of this 'embodiment' is of course the point in the mass where the bread and wine are said to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. This was another key point of dispute with Protestants for whom the act is fundamentally symbolic. Once departed from this universal understanding, however, a plethora of Protestant traditions have emerged with a diverse array of views on the manner in which physical objects arranged in an ecclesiastical environment can represent numinous realities. Protestant churches thus vary enormously in what they look like, what they contain and how they are arranged. The key difference, though, for the purposes of the present analysis is that Catholic churches are essentially all the same wherever they are located in the world and they are not designed to reflect, in essentials, the particular circumstances of the enviroing local community, whereas Protestant churches are very different from one another and do reflect the particularities of their community of worshipping believers.

The Congruence between French Primary Classes and Catholic Churches

The basic organisational unit in French education is not the school but *la classe*, controlled and directed by a teacher under the authority of an inspector. It is *la classe*, not the school, which parallels the individual Catholic church, controlled and directed by a priest under the authority of a bishop. The environmental form of both has several correspondences. Catholic churches always contain a large number of pictures, objects and statues which are put on display to remind the faithful of important matters to be remembered and constantly borne in mind. These are not simply to be looked at in the manner of an art gallery, still less to be taken as background decoration like an attractive wallpaper, but rather to be experienced, felt profoundly at the core of being, responded to with both understanding and emotion. When a Catholic 'does' the stations of the cross much more is being undertaken than the appreciation of a series of pictures. Basic structures of consciousness are being revitalised, emotional commitments deepened, moral feelings reinforced. The teacher-organised displays in French primary classrooms have comparable purposes and arouse comparable responses. They are there as a public statement of what must be known and respected. Conjugations and adjectival agreement are not simply to be learnt and remembered, they are also to be experienced as 'right'. Dates in French history and the map of France are not simply to be known, they are to be identified with. When children enter the classroom and survey the wall they are intended to feel the significance of the messages conveyed by the displays, to be personally involved with them, to care about them.

Many of the displays are first introduced to children on the blackboard which in some senses parallels the altar in a church. Both are the focal point of their respective environments, the principal reason why attendance in them is required. In a Catholic church the altar is the location of the 'salvic action' of the priest who during mass there transforms bread and wine into the body and blood of the Saviour, with which the faithful are to be nourished, sustained and granted eternal salvation, i.e. being joined with the Church Universal and obtaining a place in heaven. In class the blackboard is a similar fountain of vital intellectual nourishment for pupils. The teacher's action at the blackboard

creates important educational realities which pupils are required cognitively to digest for their own benefit and ultimate secular salvation. It is at the blackboard that teachers 'conjure up' these crucial phenomena impregnated with social significance and meaning and they expect pupils to attend to it with a similar degree of awe and reverence. Whether pupils experience the this-worldly salvation in adult life, which in French is described as *insertion sociale et professionnelle*, i.e. joining the workforce and getting a place in society, is assumed to be very much a function of whether they pay attention to the blackboard. For this reason just as during mass the altar is where the only action that matters occurs, so during *leçons en classe* the blackboard is where what is important takes place and teachers feel legitimately entitled to be outraged by pupils who appear not to be involved in this focused collective action.

The importance of the blackboard, as with the altar, is reflected in the organisation of seating accommodation. Pews in church and the layout of classrooms have much in common. Attention is focused on what is significant, the universality of the experience is emphasised in having everybody in the same position and the undifferentiated imposition of common expectations encourages the suppression of self and of all that is personal, particularistic and idiosyncratic. Churches tend to have high walls and windows that cannot be seen out of so that believers concentrate on the religious action in which they are engaged. All the schools observed in Coeurville had high or obscured windows to prevent seated pupils from seeing outside.

The architecture and setting of French schools similarly reflects basic educational values. None of the schools in the Coeurville study is set in its own grounds. None of the schools has a field. The lack of a field is not only a question of the relative unimportance of sports and physical education in French primary schooling, it arises more fundamentally from the basic conception of what a school is. Schools in France are national institutions and like other establishments connected with institutional apparatuses of the French State these school buildings do not stand back from but stand directly on the streets of the town they serve. These buildings are not intended to articulate any sense of the individual corporate identity of the school as a community in itself but rather to emphasise the school's role as a public institution located on the public highway. Indeed the word, *publique*, often appears on the school sign at the entrance. The stress is on belonging to and being a part of 'the public'.

The Protestant Style of English Primary Schools

English primary schools have their own collective identities. Teacher, pupil and parental identification with the distinctive corporate character of the school is systematically encouraged and fostered through the wearing of uniforms, badges and insignia, ritual practices such as assemblies and prize days and the building up of sports and cultural teams which 'represent' the school and interact with other communities on its behalf. In the corridors, classrooms and open spaces of the school there are trophies, memorials and pictures, all of which contribute to the collective sense of identity which members of the particular school community are intended to feel and to exude. All of this is virtually unknown in French education where it is seen as more important that children and their parents should identify with the national structure of schooling and know that they are, for example, in the *cours préparatoire* and will aspire next year to be in the *cours élémentaire, première année*. And of course they also know that a *cours préparatoire* in Bordeaux is the same as a *cours préparatoire* in Boulogne or Besançon or indeed anywhere else on French territory.

A key feature of the environment of English primary classrooms is that they reflect the particular pupils in them. Teachers mount extensive displays on the walls which celebrate and give value to the efforts of individual pupils and which stimulate curiosity and

motivation to promote learning. These displays transmit two essentially Protestant values. Firstly, they affirm the importance of individualised identity, the identity of particular children whose work is displayed and the social identity of the particular class. Secondly, they reveal the importance attached to engaging the commitment and involvement of the learner in the learning process. The teacher-made display charts about the agreement of the past participle or how to multiply decimals, visible in countless French classrooms, say nothing about the particular learners trying to get to grips with these intricacies and make little or no appeal to pupil motivation. They communicate a sense of this being something it is important to know. Displays in English classrooms tend to communicate more a sense of 'here is a something it would be exciting for us to find out about'.

Whereas French classrooms tend to have serried ranks of pupils facing the blackboard English classrooms are more likely to have a variety of seating arrangements and more likely also to alter seating arrangements according to different purposes at different times. Such arrangements reflect the different perceived purposes of primary education in the two countries. French education focuses on a more narrowly defined curriculum in which mathematics and French play a predominant role while English primary education continues to operate with at least a residual concept of 'educating the whole child' and a curriculum which covers whole areas of experience that play no part in French schooling whatsoever. Catholicism posits a theological system in which external salvation is gained by fulfilment of specified defined obligations. It is arguable that French education and French society offer secular salvation in terms of 'professional insertion' through satisfactory performance against similarly narrowly defined criteria. Protestantism proposes that only those can be saved who have had a full and personal knowledge of Christ as their saviour. It is arguable that English education and English society make secular salvation similarly dependent upon very broad personal achievements. English school architecture typically emphasises the school as a community. Schools are often set in their own grounds with an entrance board giving the name of the head teacher. There are rooms other than classrooms such as a staffroom and a hall where the whole school can be gathered for social activities and experiences which promote a strong sense of communal identity.

Social Roles and Social Actions

In inducting individuals into the Catholic faith the emphasis is on teaching what it is the Universal Church believes. The believer needs to know, understand and accept that which has been defined by ecclesiastical authority must be assented to in order to gain salvation. In essence this process is a purely formal business taking place between an officially accredited catechist and one or more inscribed catechumens. In the exchange between the two there is no inherent need for their individual personalities to play any part. The catechist has a clear programme of defined knowledge to be transmitted to the catechumen and the role of the catechumen is to receive that knowledge. In principle, therefore, it does not matter who the catechist is or who the catechumen is; the process is universal and role bounded. There are clear and mutually understood definitions of appropriate role behaviour which do not vary according to who the role players are.

In the Protestant tradition, by contrast, it matters very much who the persons concerned are because salvation is a very personal business. There is no 'one' way to salvation and every believer has to develop a personal relationship with his/her saviour. As the Protestant theologian Whale (1954) put it 'God confronts me, in person, as it were; in the person of the Son, our Saviour. And I no longer speak of Him but to Him' (p. 18).

The main role of the inductor is not so much to pass on a body of doctrinal rules and

formulations as to facilitate the process whereby the converts or seekers can strive towards belief for themselves. Success in this endeavour depends very much on establishing personal relationships in which the particularities and potentialities of the convert can be developed through a variety of growth-promoting experiences.

In this sense, while Catholicism emphasises teaching and sees the knowledge to be transmitted as the starting point of the process of induction, in Protestantism the stress is on learning and the starting point is the nature and perceived needs of the learner. The spirit of Catholicism recoils from the idea of leaving learners to find things out for themselves, such that the Catholic faithful are not supposed even to read and understand the Bible on their own but rather to accept the official interpretation of it promulgated by the Church Magisterium:

... the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office (Magisterium) of the Church alone. (Vatican II *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, in Flannery, 1981, p. 750)

In contrast, the Protestant ethic proposes precisely that this is how real, lasting and personal knowledge of the truth is gained. Educational reflections of these different approaches in English and French primary schooling have been clearly documented by the Bristaix studies. Broadfoot *et al.* (1993) noted that

A much greater tendency to relate teaching to perceived pupil and group need was apparent in English classrooms than in French ones because, for the most part, French pupils were typically engaged in the same task for most of the time.... In England the whole approach was typically found to be much more active and emphasised discovery-based learning. The teacher often appeared to be encouraging creative thinking, whereas in France the effort was more likely to be directed towards leading children to the correct answer ... On balance, English teachers appeared to be concerned to encourage creativity and inventiveness, giving clear priority to the understanding of principles and concepts. French teachers in contrast placed a strong emphasis on acquiring knowledge through rote learning and were more concerned to achieve pupils' conformity to a common goal. (pp. 70–71)

The Catholicity of Behaviour in French Primary Classrooms

Teacher action in French primary schools is largely guided by a bounded role conception which provides for homogeneity and interchangeability. An Inspecteur d'Académie, speaking at an Anglo-French conference on primary education in 1994 observed that just as it is a matter of indifference who the driver is when a train journey is taken so it should not matter who the teacher is: the essential point is that the child should arrive on time at the educational destination. The parallel with the professional priesthood of the Catholic Church is obvious. For priests role prescriptions are strongly bounded, even to the extent of what vestments must be worn, actions taken and words uttered. Their individual private thoughts, hopes, aspirations, anxieties, fears, joys, enthusiasms and the like have nothing to do with the validity and the efficacy of their priestly actions. While acting as priests their personal characteristics are more or less irrelevant. There is a real sense in which French primary teachers are recruited to a comparable educational priesthood, a distinct 'corps' with a defined mission to be carried out whoever they are and whatever they think. Researchers wishing to investigate French primary teachers' attitudes and feelings about their professional responsibilities have sometimes encountered difficulties in obtaining permission from inspectors who have taken

the view that what teachers think and feel is a matter of no concern to the proper performance of their professional role, a purely private matter and of no interest to anybody else including educational researchers. It is not hard to imagine Catholic bishops taking a similar view in equivalent circumstances.

It is possible to see French primary teachers in their classroom role performing a number of social actions which are somewhat analogous to those of Catholic priests: representation, catechistic instruction, interpretation and mediation, surveillance, leading collective ritual, benediction, inquisition, criticism and the imposition of penance, the pursuit of goodness and the protection of the sacred.

In a way similar to a priest at the altar teachers represent the class in posing questions on their behalf, not to an invisible god, but to an impersonal rationality presumed to be objective and external. The questions posed tend often not to be the spontaneous wonderings of lively young minds expressing a personal curiosity but rather to be predetermined adult questions with which pupils are expected eventually to identify themselves. Teachers like priests are thus engaged in catechistic instruction through which an institution, school or church in this case, defines the questions to which it exists to provide the answers. A key characteristic of catechistic teaching style (Sharpe, 1992a) is that the admissible questions as well as the acceptable answers are prescribed by the teacher.

Pedagogic material is interpreted by and mediated through the teacher or the priest to ensure that a 'correct' interpretation is given to it. As noted earlier a central tenet of Catholicism and one of the key controversies with Protestant reformers is the idea that only the Church can define the true interpretation of sacred writings. Just as individual believers are not encouraged to engage with texts for themselves and find their own personal meaning, individual pupils are rarely left to make their own sense of textbooks, worksheets or exercises. Written material placed in the hands of the pupils is scrupulously explained in minute detail. In the Coeurville study, a tendency on the part of teachers to want to undertake more or less continual surveillance was observed. The stress is on outward conformity to generalised universalistic expectations, embodied notably in the omnipresent *on* which litters French pedagogic dialogue, *on fait ceci, on ne fait pas ça*. This translates superficially as 'one does this, one does not do that', but the English word 'one', especially with its rather stilted and upper class connotations, hardly begins to give an idea of the universal imperative which impregnates so much French discourse and which is referenced most directly in the ubiquitous *on*.

Teachers spend the majority of their time involved in interaction with the class as a whole, conducting them through tried and tested pedagogic procedures and leading collective ritual such as the recital of known answers, the use of the *procédé La Martinière* and the collecting in of marks. In all the Coeurville study schools visited the use of little slates called *ardoises* on which children wrote immediate answers to questions asked by the teacher was frequent and extensive. This famous *procédé La Martinière* enables teachers to see at a glance any children who are in error. It was often administered in a quasi-military fashion with each stage in the procedure being marked by loud taps on the desk or the floor with the teacher's big ruler. The teacher asks a question and then taps before giving the command: *vous réfléchissez!* (think!). During the next few seconds the children are to sit silently thinking, not writing anything until the next tap tap with the command *vous écrivez!* (write the answer!). Having then written their answer the children are expected to hold their slate against the chest so that it cannot be seen by others until the next tap tap and the instruction *vous levez* (hold your slate up!). At this point the teacher tours the classroom inspecting each raised *ardoise* in turn to check that what should be on it is indeed on it. The writers of wrong answers are singled out and their failure made public. The inspection over, there is a final tap

tap and the command *vous effacez* (clean your slates). Children wipe their slates clean with a cloth or sponge and wait expectantly for the next questions to begin the cycle once more.

It would be difficult to find a clearer demonstration of the high value placed on conformity to orthodoxy than the sight of whole classes of children moving as a single body to hold up physical signs of their ability to comply with intellectual rules dictated through the teacher. In virtually every case the process was uncontextualised and tended to be undemanding, because the teacher's purpose was to be reassured that particular points that had been thoroughly taught had been retained. It was this idea of 'justifiable expectation' in the teacher's mind that lay behind some of the harsh verbal treatment meted out to those whose slates displayed erroneous responses. These wrong answers were doubly offensive. They offended the teacher because they implied that the teaching had not been effective. Secondly, there was a moral offence that attaches to anything which deviates from socially sanctioned norms: it is wrong, abnormal and unacceptable. Gender definitions are not only known to be right or wrong they are felt to be right or wrong. And so errors always incite a degree of negative emotion and the desire to condemn. The *procédé La Martinière* was used extensively in both French and mathematics teaching but it was particularly in the area of written language, grammar, conjugations, vocabulary and spelling that teachers seemed to become most indignant about mistakes. On occasions it was as if an offending slate stood out against the surrounding expanse of righteousness as a shocking outrage, almost an offence against purity, rather like a single child with dirty finger nails in a line of pink, well scrubbed clean hands extended forward for examination. The severity of the teacher's reaction was fed also by the underlying conviction that because the child should have understood there was a degree of moral responsibility to be borne for the failure to conform. In a process resembling the attribution of deviance children themselves would be blamed. The teacher had done everything necessary to ensure that error did not occur, the expectation that it should not occur was entirely reasonable, the majority of children did not err and therefore the minority who did were responsible in some way: laziness, inattention, sheer perversity. The harsh reactions shown by teachers were functional in two important ways. They marked boundaries for the moral majority, promoting a warm sense of belonging to all that is right and good through witnessing the fate of those who are, in this instance, neither right nor good, and through fear of repeated sanction they encourage greater effort from the latter in the future.

The same stress on the importance of the reproduction of cultural norms is evident in the ubiquity and frequency of dictation in French classrooms. Dictation is ordained in the national curricular prescriptions and was observed to be practised intensively and extensively in every classroom visited in the Coeurville study. It is an abiding feature of French education from the nursery stages through to adult levels; it is part of the French national psyche, a scholastic experience which all have undergone and by which all have been profoundly marked. French national television even gives over 2 hours of prime time weekend viewing to an international dictation championship, something quite unimaginable in England. Nothing could be a more archetypal test of ability to reproduce cultural forms according to learnt generative norms. It is in some senses the purest form of catechistic teaching: it teaches both the rules and the rules for applying the rules, rewarding those whose acquired knowledge enables them to reproduce rule-governed texts faultlessly. It is in many ways the cornerstone of French education.

Pupils are motivated to gain teacher approval and when this takes public form in overt praise for correct answers it is tantamount to a kind of benediction in which blessings are bestowed by authority. Teachers practise a ceaseless inquisition of their pupils and subject all deviation from pedagogic norms to greater or lesser degrees of open criticism, imposing

penances of various kinds including loss of marks, additional work and ritual humiliation. In fieldnotes taken during the Coeurville study the following extracts from lessons are recorded.

Extract 1. In the CM2 class in the Ecole Albert Camus children were resolving 'top heavy' fractions. The method Monsieur Hochart had shown the children was exemplified on the board as follows:

$$16/5 = 15/5 + 1/5 = 3 + 1/5$$

The next to be resolved is $13/2$. One child tries to argue the case for

$$13/2 = 12/6 + 1/2 = 2 + 1/2$$

which is smartly rejected as *complètement faux*, (completely wrong) and *c'est évidemment du n'importe quoi* (it is obviously any old thing). In other words the teacher is implying in this case that the child has written anything just to give an answer and has not made an effort to think about the problem. This is confirmed by his subsequent remark in which this child's perceived failings are generalised in an intended rebuke to the whole class: *vous faites trop de bêtises par manque d'attention* (you make too many silly mistakes by not paying proper attention).

In saying this he is attributing to the child not just mathematical inadequacy but moral laxity. He does not listen to the child's explanation for his thinking yet since it was a volunteered contribution it was likely that there had been a thought process behind it. The numbers given are in point of fact not arbitrary, not *n'importe quoi*; the child had clearly perceived some sort of relationship between 12, 6 and 2 leaving a remainder of 1 from 13. Monsieur Hochart does not pursue what line of thinking was going on in the child's head, he does, however, restate the rule that if you multiply the bottom figure by a certain number you must do the same to the top, announces that there will be two more practice examples and expresses the hope that there will be fewer errors this time.

Extract 2. In a lesson with special needs children in the *classe de perfectionnement grands* (a special needs class for children aged 9–13 years who have not been able to progress at the normal rate through the nationally defined curriculum levels) on writing the date Monsieur Chatillon had explained how the months with 31 days could always be remembered by reciting the 12 months in order and counting them on the knuckles on the principle that those which coincide with knuckle bones always have 31 whereas those coinciding with the hollows between knuckle bones have 30 days apart from February. His manner was, as always, very firm and the children were silent as the explanation was given. He asked one child *Juillet, combien de jours?* (July, how many days?). The girl had evidently not grasped the point, had a poor command of spoken language anyway and was obviously apprehensive. After a long silent pause, pregnant with collective anticipation as all waited to see what would happen, she nervously uttered the single word *cinq*, (five). Monsieur Chatillon laughed mockingly and repeated with great deliberation *Cinq jours au mois de juillet, hein?* (Five days in July, eh?) in a fashion that invited the class to join in with his artificial mirth. Lest they had not taken this hint he then asked the class: *Vous connaissez beaucoup de mois à cinq jours, vous?* (Do you people know many months that have 5 days in them?).

These two ironic questions about a 5 day month indicate the teacher's preoccupation with eliciting preordained answers according to his own framework of understanding and an apparent lack of concern with the very real efforts of the child to make some sense of the situation for herself. For this incident occurred on 5 July. At the start of the day a lot of time and attention had been paid to writing the date on the blackboard and in exercise books, to

the fact that the day before it had been 4 July when the Americans celebrate Independence Day, just as the French celebrate 14 July which would now be in 9 days time and to the fact that tomorrow would be 6 July. At a loss to think of anything else this girl with learning difficulties had presumably thought the question could be understood as asking 'how many days into July are we?'

In discussing the importance attached by teachers to discipline in the teaching of reading in French primary education Baudelot & Establet (1980) commented

This choice of a certain cultivated discourse as the basic support material for the teaching of reading necessarily implies, as the condition for it being possible, the reduction to silence of spoken expression which is immediately identified with noise and with being in the wrong. The choice is never made without this exclusion and this is, in the primary school, especially the case. It can even be said that it is around this repression that all the pedagogic practices of the primary school are organised; here discipline and learning constitute a single unity. You can only learn to read and write well in silence, keeping quiet. (p. 231, in French)

As they themselves point out, such disciplinary rigour is not confined to reading but pervades French primary teaching in general. Broadfoot *et al.* (1993) noted in the classes they observed that

... teachers in England were more likely to use questions in a way that built upon children's responses until the desired result was achieved, whilst French teachers would typically reject a child's response if it was not exactly what they wanted. (p. 70)

This has continued to be apparent in the most recent study: 'The French primary teachers employed more negative sanctions than their English counterparts and were less likely to use encouragement to motivate pupils' (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1995, p. 9, in French).

The whole system of assessment and reward, based on the accumulation of marks for recognised good works, resembles nothing so much as the traditional Catholic view of judgement and merit. Given the arduousness of French schooling it is also perhaps not stretching the analogy too far to see in it the purification promised in the Catholic vision of purgatory. The meritorious can advance more quickly through it and reach the promised land of successful professional 'insertion' early while the less deserving must repeat years and endure longer. The role of the teacher as pastor is to get as many of the pupils as possible through the process so the overriding pedagogic aim is always to prevent pupils from falling into error. Detailed explanations are given before pupils are allowed to do anything to ensure that everything they produce accords with the relevant norms. The demand that everything the child does be exact, correct and proper, even from the very beginning, in short, the pursuit of goodness, thus characterises lessons in all subjects and teachers display an anxious concern always to protect the sacred values implicit in the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess and are charged with transmitting. In some incidents witnessed during the Coeurville study teachers appeared to react to children's mistakes with the same sense of horrified moral outrage, of something sacred being threatened with pollution, which is, according to Durkheim (1968), the defining characteristic of religion. The notions of emergent and developmental learning, so central to English primary pedagogy, are largely alien to French teachers. The order, certainty, predictability and rationality inherent in *on* (one), the word which conjures up that omnipresent yet invisible community of the good with whom all are expected to conform themselves are venerated, while the disorder, anarchy and chaos of *n'importe quoi* ('any old thing') are strongly anathematised.

'Protestant' Attitudes among Pupils and Teachers in English Primary Classrooms

The stress on 'the individual believer' in Protestant theology and the role of ministers as guides rather than priests representing authority is strikingly consonant with the relationship between teacher and pupil envisaged in the child-centred philosophies of education which have tended to dominate discussion of primary education in England. Just as Protestants work out their own salvation through direct engagement with scripture and divine texts taken to be the Word of God, so pupils in child-centred schooling are often expected to find things out for themselves, to make their own sense of written texts and experiments and to work independently. All that the teacher can do is to create the conditions in which such learning can take place and then be available as a facilitator to assist, guide and encourage.

The archetypal theoretician of such child-centred learning was of course Jean Piaget and in the light of the thesis proposed here it is unsurprising that he should have originated from a strongly Protestant background. As Cohen (1983) noted '... his mother came from a staunchly Protestant family, and it could be argued that she left her son with a nagging need for absolute truths in the best Calvinist tradition' (p. 8).

It has always been something of a paradox that Piaget, who wrote in French, should have exerted such a huge influence on English primary education and so little influence on French primary education. The explanation revealed by the analysis being advanced in this paper is that his attack on the traditional didactic role of the teacher and his vision of the child as isolated individual constructing his/her own knowledge through direct personal experience were utterly at odds with the Catholic ethic of France, albeit now secularised and entirely resonated with the Protestant spirit at large in England.

In Piaget's scheme of things,

... (the teacher) should not lecture; rather a good teacher will offer the child the chance to act out his, or her, own development. For Piaget that means giving liberal opportunities for handling things. His vision suggests severe limitations on what can actually be taught. (Cohen, 1983, p. 22)

With characteristic moderation and reserve the Her Majesty's Inspectors (1991) team which undertook a study of French primary education commented that 'Practical work was not a strong feature of the lessons seen' (p. 2) and as recently as 1995 the Bristaix team found that still 50% of the lessons observed in French primary classes took the form of whole class formal instruction, whereas in England '... with the English pedagogy which is more orientated towards the activity of the pupil the authoritative role of the teacher seemed more attenuated' (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1995, p. 9 in French).

In Protestantism real faith is not intellectual assent to authoritative teaching, it is what Karl Barth called *Entscheidung*, the commitment of one's whole being and existence. 'It is the risk, the self-abandonment, the leap—the agonised, despairing, joyous leap' (Whale, 1954, p. 22).

These Protestant attitudes and sentiments are remarkably consonant with what is expected of pupils in English primary schools. There is the multisensory involvement of '**the whole child**', a concept unknown in French education and one which includes the child's inner commitment since teachers are perceived to have a legitimate interest in the individual child's inner self. As Weber (1992) noted, Catholic social control was formalised, but Protestantism introduced '... a regulation of the whole of conduct, which penetrating to all departments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced' (p. 36).

This kind of social control goes beyond the verification of outward conformity and intrudes into the personal thoughts, feelings and intentions of the individual. In Bernstein's

(1971) terminology Protestantism can be seen as having weakened the strong boundary maintenance systems of Catholicism. In considering the relaxation of formal boundaries in the educational context he commented that ‘... weak boundary-maintaining procedures ... increase the penetration of socialisation as more of the self of the taught is made public through the relaxed frames’ (Bernstein, 1971, p. 68).

And yet in the discourse of child-centred progressive English primary education the Piagetian ‘child’ is desperately alone; his/her task is to construct schemata through which an individual and personal understanding of the world can be gained and this can only be done through direct interaction with a world of objects. Just as the Protestant builds up a personal relationship with his/her God through prayer, the Piagetian child comes to ‘know’ her/his environment through first-hand experience. The teacher cannot give the child this knowledge, rather the teacher must encourage the child to make the creative leaps necessary to the processes of ‘assimilation’ and ‘accommodation’ through which individual knowledge is gradually assembled. There is no one way: what is right for Sarah may not be right for Simon and so an important feature of the professional skill of English primary teachers is to ‘know’ their pupils as individual personalities. Teachers must be ever alive to the individual responses of children; the notion of ‘error’, so unproblematic in the Catholic ethic, becomes in the Protestant vision a ‘miscue’, a valuable source of pedagogic evidence for the teacher, an indication of how the child is thinking and an evidential base on which future learning experiences, tailored to meet the needs of the particular individual, can be planned.

As Weber (1992) noted, there is an intrinsic connection between Protestantism and anxiety:

... this doctrine (the Protestant ethic) must above all have had one consequence for the life of a generation which surrendered to its magnificent consistency. That was a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual ... it forms one of the roots of that disillusioned and pessimistically inclined individualism which can even today be identified in the national characters and the institutions of the peoples with a Puritan past ... (Weber, 1992, p. 106)

Unlike Catholicism, the Protestant ethic offers no certainties; the believer can never know for sure that she/he is saved. The individual is alone and must work out his/her own salvation without ever arriving at a point of complete knowledge. The only solution to the angst such a position engenders is the famous Protestant work ethic, something which Piaget himself keenly felt: ‘Fundamentally, I am an anxious person and can only find relief in work’ (quoted in Dolle, 1974, p. 14).

In the individualised schooling characteristic of English primary education the teacher conscripts children into this personal struggle to make their own knowledge, fosters a sense of guilt about not making effort and monitors ongoing development. Whereas the cardinal sin in French primary classrooms is being wrong, in England it is not trying. The English pupil is expected to engage with the learning project and to be committed to it so that learning may ‘emerge’. In order to promote this process English primary teachers have to adopt a wide variety of approaches, styles and strategies. In the Bristaix studies English teachers used many terms to describe the different activities they undertake in carrying out their professional responsibilities but for many French teachers the question ‘how would you define your teaching style?’ was all but incomprehensible. Commenting on this the researchers conclude that the French sample worked with ‘an unproblematic, traditional pedagogy in which the notion of “teaching style” is virtually meaningless for most teachers. Teaching is teaching’ (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1987, p. 298).

If the Protestant believer can never know definitely and certainly that she/he has attained

salvation and must therefore be committed to a ceaseless struggle towards it, it may be said that in the same way the English primary teacher is involved in an equally limitless pursuit of an unattainable ideal in striving to meet all the individual educational needs of all pupils. Despite reforms of both systems in the late 1980s the most recent Bristaix study found:

The findings suggest that individualised teaching still dominates in England ... It seems that French teachers gave support to individuals in order to enable them to follow the level of the group, but they did not centre their teaching on the needs of the child. (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1995, p. 7)

It is important to stress that both in the presentation of research evidence and in the analysis of implications the concern here is to describe how things actually are and offer some explanation for why they are like that. If the above statement seems to imply a criticism of French teachers because of their collective approach it is easy to provide counterbalancing observations of the effects in practice of individualised teaching styles in England; for example, the Bristaix studies revealed '... far more instances in England of lapses of concentration and lack of pupil effort being unchallenged by the teacher' (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1993, p. 72).

Social and Educational Implications and the Possibilities of System Change

Research evidence clearly and consistently reveals definite and systematic differences between the English and French systems of primary education, evident in precept and action at every level. The key question is why do these differences exist and persist? What is the nature and form of the social factors which underpin them? It is axiomatic in the social sciences that the characteristic behaviours prevalent in different societies are not the outcomes of arbitrary choices made by individuals but are socially conditioned. An immediate answer is that it is the 'national context' (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1988) which shapes institutional forms and practices and socialises individuals into particular styles of thought and action. Then by breaking down the concept of 'national context' into its principal components and examining their mutual interrelationships (Sharpe, 1992b) it is perhaps possible to shed some light on the processes of social conditioning which lie behind the reported research findings. The question still remains, though, as to why the 'national context' in one society takes this form and in another that form. Historically both England and France were part of the Roman empire and its legacies, yet the 'national contexts' of each differ substantially.

In an authoritative text Colley (1992) demonstrated to what a significant extent the English national identity has been shaped by Protestantism. In this paper it is contended that an answer to the question of why the national contextual influences on education are so different may be sought in the religious traditions of English and French society. *At the most basic level it surely cannot be mere coincidence that these parallels exist between religious ethics and forms of schooling. What is suggested here is that structures of consciousness and social organisation historically established within a religious context have continued to provide the fundamental organising principles of value orientation, thought and action within a secular educational context.* It is, however, important to signal the limitations of this thesis. It is clearly not being argued that all societies with Roman Catholic religious traditions will necessarily have generated educational systems like France or that all societies with Protestant religious traditions will have educational systems like England, although there may well be grounds for expecting similarities. What is being asserted, however, is the powerful nature of the underlying social values that these religious traditions established in the different national contexts of England and France. This has meant that long after the religious narratives associated with each have

lost their potency and ceased to grip the minds and imaginations of most people in the two societies, the social sentiments and ideas they inspired continue to affect educational actions and institutions. The exact path taken in the value-guided development of primary systems of schooling in England and France, though, is necessarily something which must be left to historical analysis of cause and effect.

At the level of meaning, however, it is contended that there are clear indications that a spirit of Catholicism is evident in the national educational homogeneity apparent in France and that some version of the Protestant ethic underlies the persistent educational heterogeneity in England. The phraseology used by Osborn & Broadfoot (1992) to summarise the principal contrast between the characteristic national attitudes of primary school teachers itself neatly encapsulates differing orientations to existence which, although directed towards the educational sphere, correspond congruently with the typical religious orientations to salvation: '... a French teacher's perception of her role is centred on "meeting one's contractual responsibility" and an English teacher's on "striving after perfection"' (p. 3).

For Protestants there is typically a constant need to 'strive after perfection', to commit the entirety of being to the pursuit of individual salvation. For Catholics, on the other hand, salvation comes principally through obedience to the doctrines of the Church, and through fulfilling the requirements, duties and holy obligations the Church Universal lays indiscriminately on all believers, something which clearly approximates in practice to 'meeting one's contractual duties'.

If the broad thesis put forward here is valid it appears that the Protestant ethic in English education and the spirit of Catholicism in French education may be regarded as two distinct value clusters each with its own intrinsic unity and coherence. Each represents fundamental value orientations, generative principles which lie behind surface structures such as institutional arrangements and systems of interaction and which may remain more or less constant over time while admitting of change and development at surface level. New elements in harmony with the respective overarching value commitments may be accepted and integrated whilst others which do not fit may be refused, repelled, resisted.

'We've been trying to get more flexibility into the system for 10 years, but no-one will let us', says M. Delaquis, the French deputy chief inspector. 'Everyone believes that you must have the same programmes, the same number of hours devoted to subjects, the same kinds of textbooks, the same training for teachers ... a common programme is integral to the concept of equality of opportunity. It's entrenched by history. It's natural.' (*Times Educational Supplement*, 6 March 1987, p. 19, quoted in Broadfoot *et al.*, 1993, p. 13)

Ten years ago, at the outset of the Bristaix studies Broadfoot (1985) noted that '... it is difficult to escape the conclusion that in each country the systematic differences that exist in political, institutional and ideological terms interact in quite different ways to inhibit change,' (p. 269).

The key features of the basic composition of these two value clusters are summarised in Table II.

If the main thesis of this paper is valid then the limitations on the possibilities of system change may be quite significant. As Giddens (Weber, 1992) points out, Weber does not say that the puritans knew what they were doing to promote capitalism by responding to 'the calling' towards 'this worldly asceticism' but rather shows how their involvement in a particular form of socially organised consciousness led unintentionally to capitalist institutional forms and practices. The general point for present purposes is that involvement in a

TABLE II. Value orientations shared by religious and educational systems

Catholicism/French education		Protestantism/English education
Central value orientations		
Universalism		Particularism
Uniformity		Diversity
Equality		Differentiation
Specificity		Diffuseness
Domains of socio-educational practice		
Authority	Monolithic	Diffuse
	Hierarchical	Democratic
	Universal/national	Localised
	Impersonal	Personal/charismatic
Accountability	Bureaucratic	Personal
Environment	Formalised	Flexible
	Transmission	Reflection/expression
	Teaching focus	Learning focus
Action	Role impermeability	Role permeability
	Didactic	Negotiated

'national context' underpinned by 'the Protestant ethic' or 'the spirit of Catholicism' is likely to 'open up' some visions of possible change and 'close off' others. Put simply it can be said that individuals will to a greater or lesser extent be socialised into the prevailing dominant ideology and will feel the weight of established institutional forms and procedures. Policy makers who will themselves be subject to these influences are therefore likely to construct policies that can be seen to be, to some degree, virtually always in conformity with national ideology and institutions, however radical they appear to be on the surface. In this sense policies for reform are likely to produce change of a gradual and developmental character. If a 'rogue policy' not in conformity does break through into policy makers' consciousness it is likely to be defeated or at least severely constrained by institutional inertia and ideological conservatism.

The fate of the reforms of primary education in England and France since 1988 provides clear illustrative evidence of these processes. The British Government introduced a prescriptive National Curriculum in 1988 which from the outset could not be assimilated into the system and was immediately subjected to a succession of ongoing revisions until the Dearing reforms restored the position a mere 5 years later to something not so far removed from the general unwritten consensus which preceded it. In France the 1989 Loi d'Orientation represented another attempt to introduce flexibility into the system and to put the child at the heart of the educational process by making more widespread the use of individualised and group differentiation techniques and having teachers work together in a pedagogic team. These notions are largely alien to French primary teachers and have not been implemented to any significant extent. Broadfoot *et al.* (1995) commented that

... fundamental teacher values and practices remain substantially unchanged, English teachers' perceptions of education still emphasising individual development and the whole child, French teachers' perceptions of education still focusing on the acquisition of skills to standardised national levels. (p. 6)

Another way in which consistency with value commitments is maintained is through the interpretation of educational terms, almost à la Alice, to make them mean what they need to mean. There is much talk in both countries of 'learner autonomy' but the phrase means quite

different things in each. The English autonomous learner takes the initiative in his/her own learning, undertakes investigations, engages in problem solving and works with others in team building towards a solution. The French autonomous learner does work set and explained by the teacher on his/her own without needing help.

... they were autonomous in the sense that once a procedure had been explained they did not need any more help. By contrast the English conception of autonomy allowed pupils to help each other work out a solution. (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1995, p. 7)

Similarly discrepant understandings surround a wide range of terms, of which perhaps the most controversial currently are 'accountability', 'inspection' and 'assessment'.

Final Remarks

The purpose of this paper has been to contend that in the same way that Weber (1992) demonstrated the crucial significance of religious values in the explanation of how and why particular economic institutions developed, it may be possible to explain the forms taken by educational institutions in similar terms. The paper has pointed to some evidence at the level of meaning that French primary schools enshrine secularised Catholic values while English primary schools are characterised more by a secularised Protestant ethic. It is suggested that the influence exerted by these value systems may set limits on the possibilities of change. Such influence is powerful partly because it is long established, entrenched and manifestly durable, but also because it is profoundly moral. These are values built not only into the fabric of society but also into the very being of individual members, of teachers, of parents and of pupils.

It has been stressed above that the analysis proposed is intended to be neutral, value free in Weberian terms. In the context of an increasingly interdependent European Union and indeed a wider world beyond, it would, however, be useful to find out more about the impact of the particular pedagogical approaches characteristic of the two systems on pupil learning and progress in order to establish more clearly what the costs and benefits of each are. A project of this kind has in fact been recently funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It may well be that the results of such a policy-driven enquiry might turn out to be unacceptable to policy makers and/or professional educationists in one or other country, but such an eventuality might then be taken in itself to provide further evidence of the extent to which value commitments deriving from the Protestant ethic or the spirit of Catholicism do indeed exert constraints on system change in English and French primary schooling.

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