

Background and Commentary

Background

Influenced by a local authority SACRE initiative an all-day RE Debate was arranged in a primary school by a headteacher. Sixteen schools, twelve primary and four secondary participated and eight separate issues were discussed these included: 'Are human beings superior to animals?' 'Is honesty always the best policy?' 'Is there a place in school for RE?' and 'Should charity begin at home?' Sophie was one of four pupils that formed her schools debating team. Sophie's team agreed to speak for the motion 'Everyone deserves to go to heaven' while a team from another school agreed to speak against it. Sophie and her other team members were given time in school to research and write their speeches. A teaching assistant supported Sophie discussing together some ideas. The speech went through three drafts before Sophie was happy.

Commentary

Sophie's main argument is clear and well presented. It is not primarily based on the authority of scripture but rather on her understanding of the nature of God. In other words Sophie's argument is essentially a theological argument rather than a scriptural or a moral one. The essence of it is as follows - all humans are created by God and so are children of God. God is a loving father. No loving father would permit their child to be sent to hell. So it follows no human goes to hell as God would not permit it. Hence, everybody must go to heaven. She sustains her argument well linking statements together so that there is an underpinning logic. If one is willing to accept the main premises of her argument that there is a God who created us and that this God is a loving God her argument works quite well. In her speech she does claim that scripture supports her argument that 'we are all God's children'. Also, she claims that in the Bible there are lots of stories 'about Jesus and God forgiving people and giving them a second chance' backing up her claim that God is fundamentally kindly towards us. However, she doesn't offer any examples of stories from scripture to support her claim.

Her idea of heaven is also not very sophisticated. She tends to see it as a 'great place' and particularly as a place of reward. It is a place where everybody would be happy. Although interestingly she suggests it could also be a place where souls are not necessarily perfect but may continue to reform or improve – a place where they could 'turn over a new leaf and do something good'. Finally she offers the argument if everyone goes to heaven this would be very nice because then friends and family wouldn't then have to worry if their dead loved ones are happy in the afterlife. This part of her argument is a little cosy, endearing and perhaps sweet, perhaps all too sweet and comfortable.

On the day of the debate Sophie delivered her speech well. She spoke up in a strong and clear voice and given that she was addressing an audience of over 70 mainly strangers she held her nerve well. She didn't fluff any words but showed in one so young an impressive self-control and confidence. Although in time Sophie might be encouraged and given practise in being less dependent and focused on the written text, but use prompt cards or memory as when done well this can substantially increase the rapport a speaker has with their audience.

How might the work be improved?

Sophie's argument that all people are saved has a long pedigree within the Christian tradition. Although it has to be said it is a view that in the main has been rejected by organised Christian institutions. Sophie might have been helped by being shown some basic research skills, for example, how to find relevant scriptural passages using ICT, and how as a characteristic of good scholarship

she might check scriptural passages personally herself in order to authenticate their accuracy both in terms of what they say and how they might be interpreted. Had she known of and used better research skills it is quite likely Sophie would have discovered 1 Timothy 4 v 10, "We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of **all people**, especially of those who believe". Or she may have found Lamentations 3 v 31, "For **no one is cast off by the Lord forever**, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion". Both quotes may have been used to further strengthen Sophie's argument. However, they may also challenge and question Sophie's comfortable faith that everyone will enjoy a state of happiness in the afterlife and that there is no penance at all, of any sort, that must be faced.