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School Worship, John G. Williams, and the Idea of Childhood Piety at the BBC

This paper uses historical methodology to attempt reconstruct the contribution of one leading mid-twentieth century Christian religious educationist, John G. Williams, to the early years of broadcasting at the BBC, and later to religious education in English schools. It seeks to expound Williams' idea of childhood piety based upon his correspondence, his publications and broadcasts, analysing these against the backdrop of the work of the French historian Philippe Aries and others who have sought to trace changing notions of childhood in the Modern period. The legitimacy, nature and purpose of worship in schools – and the character of adult-child relating in spiritual formation – form the critical backdrop to this historical case study.

Background and Outline for the Paper

During the first part of twentieth century the new technology of radio came to be used as a means of religiously educating children and young people at home and in school. In so doing a particular idea of the religiously educated child in the broadcast space, a liturgical framework for this piety within broadcasts, and a pedagogy of religious educational broadcasting, was articulated by broadcasters, and came to be exhibited in broadcast worship for children. Such ideas and practices – informed as they were by pre-existing notions of childhood piety, trends in Sunday school teaching (increasingly shaped by the new psychologies of learning), and developments in religious education – reflected discourse and practices around the, now compulsory, act of school worship in England in the post-war period. The Rev'd John G. Williams, is of note in this context because his career bridges both religious broadcasting and religious education and he was of influence upon both. This paper will outline Williams' understanding of children's piety in his broadcasting and in published work, comparing this with challenges to his approach from the later prominent religious educator, John Hull, in his 1975 book, *School*

Worship: an obituary. Consideration is given to how ideas of childhood piety changed over time (between the 1940s and the 1970s) and across the boundaries of broadcasting and religious education, arguing that these mutual histories maybe informative of the other, in a changing religious context.

The paper will begin by describing the ethos of broadcasting, specifically the emergence of religious broadcasting as part of the the civilising mission of the BBC, which dominated the early decades at the BBC from 1922-. Outlining the shape of early religious broadcasting for children, the relationship of this to adult religious and school broadcasting, the paper will move to focus specifically upon contribution and significance of John Williams (amongst others) to this character and style of religious broadcasting for children. Williams' idea of childhood piety and adult-child relating in the context of broadcast religious formation will be elucidated and critiqued. Moreover, how schools and religious educators responded to the post-Second World War situation, in which school worship became for the first time compulsory, critical questions concerning the legitimacy and purpose of worship across the intervening years to the present will be evidenced and discussed. In particular, the critical climate of the 1960s and 70s, and the publication of John Hull's *School Worship: an obituary* will be reflected upon in light of the contrast between Williams' and Hull's advocated approaches. Additionally, that media and religious educational history may be informative of the other, specifically their respective role in shaping the public knowledge of religion, will be argued for.

I

In 1975 the highly influential religious educationist, John Hull, published his modernizing critique, *School Worship: an obituary*. In this volume Hull fiercely criticised existing and commonplace practices of worship in English maintained schools, which he regarded as: 'aggressively nurturing', 'un-educational', 'un-Christian', 'one of the worst features of religious education, and one of the most prominent reasons for the failure of

Christian nurture in the state school'.¹ He reserved his sharpest criticism of the *status quo* for the sometime religious broadcaster, John G. Williams', work *Worship and the Modern Child*, a book which for Hull epitomised the outmoded approach no longer tenable. Despite this critique, Hull called for a redefinition of corporate, compulsory, school worship, rather than its abandonment. In contrast to the purportedly 'indoctrinatory' approach taken by Williams, Hull held up the ideal that school worship could become a gathering which would: 'widen the pupil's repertoire of appropriate emotional response', 'encourage a reflective approach to living', 'demonstrate the values which are not controversial and upon which democratic society depends', and 'provide some experiences and understandings of what worship is so that the way of worship, along with other life styles, will remain an option for anyone who wishes to follow it'.² Such assemblies would 'not seek to secure commitment, nor to profess faith but to deepen understanding and facilitate choice.'³ Whether Hull's revisionist critique was fair to Williams I shall return to at the end of this paper.

II

Religion was a feature of British broadcasting from the outset, part of the BBC's 'civilising mission', the first religious broadcast being an act of worship from Whitechapel in London, on Christmas Eve, 1922, the year the British Broadcasting Company (as it was then called) began.⁴ Indeed, the BBC had as one of its core purposes the Christianising of the nation, not least due to the influence of its first Managing Director, the Scottish Presbyterian, John Reith, 'a young man to whom religion mattered a great deal'.⁵ Reith hoped that religious broadcasting would succeed where the churches had not in making religion of appeal to the masses, with a resultant revitalising effect on church attendance. Likewise, children's services were broadcast monthly from the 19

¹ Hull, John (1975) *School Worship: an obituary*. London: SCM Press, p.93.

² Hull, John (1975) *School Worship: an obituary*. London: SCM Press, p.118-119.

³ Hull, John (1975) *School Worship: an obituary*. London: SCM Press, p.136.

⁴ Bailey, M. (2007). 'He Who Hath Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear': Christian Pedagogy and Religious Broadcasting During the Inter-war Period. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 4(1): 4-25, p.6.

⁵ Wolfe, K. (1984) *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: the politics of broadcast religion*. London: SCM Press, p.3.

September, 1926. It was believed that these would have a similarly positive effect on the religious temper of the nation, listened to as they were by both children and families not affiliated to Sunday Schools.⁶ Broadcasters decided that the best mode of broadcasting to children was a dramatic presentation of scripture, and a style of service which would involve both a mix of child as well as adult voices. *For the Children*, beginning in 1929, was a combination scripture and drama, co-ordinated by Basil Yeaxlee and members of the Sunday-School Movement.⁷ In 1930, E.R. Appleton's dramatized *Joan and Betty's Bible Story* joined this early diet of Sunday religion for children, each programme timed to ensure it did not clash with the traditional Sunday-School hour.⁸ Religious educational broadcasting to schools was slower to get off the ground for a range of reasons, professional and denominational. Even after establishing a Central Council for Schools Broadcasting (CCSB), qualms that the use of religious broadcasts in schools might infringe teachers' liberty of conscience – because using such broadcasts would be tantamount to an approval of religion – were expressed by the *National Union of Teachers* and the *Association of Assistant Masters*.⁹ As a result, it was decided that religious educational broadcasts would only be for those fifteen or over, who it was understood would have requisite knowledge and maturity to 'appreciate the issues'; and it was affirmed that 'religious debates should be kept away from the classroom, at least in the broadcasts themselves'.¹⁰ It was as early as 1927 that the idea of a broadcast non-denominational act of worship for schools.¹¹ However, it was not until the Second World War that this idea should attain sufficient backing from the public, the churches, and broadcasters themselves to be given serious consideration. This was the background against which John G. Williams came to be appointed a religious broadcaster to children.

⁶ Briggs, A. (1965) *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom (Volume II): The Golden Age of Wireless*. Oxford: OUP, p.247.

⁷ *The British Broadcasting Corporation Fourth Annual Report*, 1930, p11.

⁸ Wolfe, K. (1984) *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: the politics of broadcast religion*. London: SCM Press, pp.101-102.

⁹ Wolfe, K. (1984) *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: the politics of broadcast religion*. London: SCM Press, p.105.

¹⁰ Wolfe, K. (1984) *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: the politics of broadcast religion*. London: SCM Press, p.106-107.

¹¹ Wolfe, K. (1984) *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: the politics of broadcast religion*. London: SCM Press, p.104.

III

John Gordon Williams, briefly a school teacher, then an Anglican cleric, trained for the ministry at the low-church Ridley Hall, Cambridge, serving curacies at S. Luke's Bermondsey (1932-1934), then Holy Trinity, Rotherhithe, where he built a reputation for devising imaginative children's worship, before joining the BBC in May 1940, just at the moment when the Corporation was seeking to respond to the 'new crusade' for religion in schools initiated by a leader in the *Times* of February 1940.¹² Williams went on to prove his indispensability, particularly by his involvement as a script writer and broadcaster of the five-minute *Epilogue* to the, by then established, children's programme, *Children's Hour*; the broadcast *Schools Service*, which began in the autumn of 1941;¹³ and later innovations, such as radio's *People's Service* – which included the singing of popular hymns and a sermon – and *Silver Lining*, a religious broadcast designed for the sick and housebound. For a decade, until 1950, as well being a leading religious broadcaster, Williams became the voice of children's religious broadcasting. Where other broadcasters were regarded as having a 'regrettable tendency towards variety-like vulgarity', Williams' was deemed direct and non-condescending.¹⁴ Some of Williams' broadcasts of the time were later published as *Children's Hour Prayers* (1948), *Listen on Wednesday* (1949) and *Switch on for the News* (1951). In addition, Williams produced a steady flow of books on popular spirituality, from the 1930s through to the 1960s. Taken

¹² Wolfe, K. (1984) *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: the politics of broadcast religion*. London: SCM Press, p.216; Parker, S.G. (2010) 'Teach Them to Pray Auntie': Children's Hour Prayers at the BBC, 1940-1961. *History of Education* Vol. 35 (5), pp.659-676; Parker, S.G. (2012) Reinvigorating Christian Britain: the spiritual issues of the war, national identity, and the hope of religious education. In Parker, S.G. and Lawson, T. *God and War: the Church of England and armed conflict in the twentieth century*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.61-79.

¹³ BBC WAC Central Council for School Broadcasting, Religious Service Suitable for Schools Minute Book, 1940-1945. A note from 25 July 1940 describes the tone which it is hoped the Schools Service will adopt. It should be: 'a model of beauty, dignity, reverence and simplicity, heard every week throughout the country. An act of corporate worship by thousands of children praising, thanking and praying to the Father of All... instruction should be directed not to the personal spiritual improvement of the individual child but to his understanding of the meaning, beauty and purity of the various elements of the corporate act of worship...not to individual action, or to any form of exhortation leading to action, for example, regular prayer or regular attendance at church etc., but to heightening the effect of the service itself, that is let the service speak for itself, don't let anyone intervene between the service and the child. Truth and beauty are great and will prevail, perhaps, unaided by the expositor.'

¹⁴ BBC WAC R11/26/1 File 1 Children's Hour Religious Programmes, 1940-1961 Epilogues and Prayers 1940-46, Geoffrey Dearmer to J.G. Williams, undated 1941.

as a whole these constitute a volume of guidance for adults engaged in fashioning children's spirituality and reflect Williams' idea of childhood piety.¹⁵

Williams' early broadcast *Epilogues* (which were bi-weekly during the war years); some later published verbatim in *Children's Hour Prayers*, ranged across themes in the Church's year. In these, Williams described himself as principally addressing young people between 11 and 15, conscious that younger children might be able to listen without 'feeling too much out of their depth' and that the older ones may 'listen with some profit'.¹⁶ He explained his approach in the broadcasts as one conscious of the 'intellectual doubts and queries' of young people, growing up in a scientific age in which 'the language of religion is rapidly becoming the language of a completely alien world'.¹⁷ In a somewhat counterintuitive way, Williams used radio to evoke 'a simple awareness of God and the claims of religion' and 'to encourage a habit of prayerful reflection' whilst at the same time complaining of the 'incessant noise and pace', which offered to fill 'every leisure moment with distraction' of modern culture.¹⁸ The liturgical shape of Williams' *Epilogues* was typically framed around an attention grabbing opening statement, elaborated upon in a personal story, with a reflection and prayer appended. It would be told in an unfussy conversational style, use direct personal experience, be honest about doubt, but reassuring in tone. The *Epilogues* were neither religiously radical nor contentious, the appeal to the listener perhaps lying more in their reference to real events and experiences.

Williams' principles of adult-child communication on religion were outlined in a series of articles published in the journal *Religion in Education*, later elaborated upon in the volume critiqued by Hull, *Worship and the Modern Child*. Essentially Williams' advice served to style the character of the relationship between adults and children in the context of informal religious education in the domestic setting, as well as the church and school

¹⁵ Williams also published: *God and His World* (1937); *The Life of Our Lord* (1939); *God and the Human Family* (1958); *Hungry World* (1961); *Thinking Aloud: Broadcast Talks* (1963); and *God in the Space Age* (1963).

¹⁶ Williams, J.G. (1948) *Children's Hour Prayers*. London: SCM, p.10

¹⁷ Williams, J.G. (1948) *Children's Hour Prayers*. London: SCM, p.11

¹⁸ Williams, J.G. (1948) *Children's Hour Prayers*. London: SCM, p.11

context. Across these articles, Williams' uses a series of everyday observations about children, which for him determine how children should be addressed on matters religious. His observations are not particularly profound, nor do they state any overt scholarly influences. However, his epigrammatic remarks allude, in summary, to a childhood characterised by a will to maturity; an expectation of authenticity in relating, adult-to-child; and the importance of adult role-models in religion. For Williams, priority is given to (religious) experience over rationality in younger children, the order of which is gradually reversed as children mature. Williams focuses upon the importance of the mother as the principal agent in children's religious formation. To elaborate, Williams observes that 'children possess an all-consuming ambition to be grown up. Peter Pan, he observes, is a monstrous abnormality' and 'in this desire to be grown up they will always imitate the behaviour of the grown up people whom they most admire.'¹⁹ By this, Williams was not arguing that childhood itself does not exist, rather that the child's will-to-mature, and desire for equal standing with adults, be taken seriously. Secondly, for Williams, early childhood is a critical time of religious education, particularly the child's relationship with its mother. It is not 'just a simple question of giving them religious instruction', in their early years (which for Williams is infancy to ten-years-old) what matters is not what they learn about religion, but 'what they come to feel about it'.²⁰ The divine, for Williams, is to be encountered first of all in a child's primary relationship, in ordinary life and exploration, then in the church. The example of parents (especially the mother), as a believer herself, is of greater influence upon the child than anything else. Williams argues: 'a child's very first impression of God will be derived from his relationship with his mother'.²¹ Thirdly, religion must be perceived by the child to be a thing that grown-ups do. For Williams, 'a child is capable of religious *feeling* before he is capable of a religious *thought*,'²² and it is this 'feeling' that lays the foundations of religious experience and religious knowledge: 'our aim from the earliest age onwards must be to surround him with a healthy and happy atmosphere of religion'.²³ Prayer should be a common act, something adults and children do together, not children alone.

¹⁹ John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion I, *Religion in Education*, 18:3, 83.

²⁰ John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion I, *Religion in Education*, 18:3, 83.

²¹ John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion I, *Religion in Education*, 18:3, 84.

²² John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion I, *Religion in Education*, 18:3, 85.

²³ John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion I, *Religion in Education*, 18:3, 84.

When it comes to understanding complex religious ideas, ‘never mind if he (sic) doesn’t understand, who does?’²⁴ Fourthly, as the child grows, Williams observes, ‘he begins to realise that the world is not as comfortable and friendly as he once thought...He is no longer the centre of his own secure little universe. Things are against him and he begins to know fear.’²⁵ Williams offers the following advice: ‘try at every point to meet a child’s fears and problems by giving him a sense of security in the face of an increasingly hostile world. If he gets the impression that God is hostile it will be all up with his religion’.²⁶ Equally, on death, heaven, hell and sex, Williams advises that responses be ‘within the limits of his (sic) understanding...[and such] that will satisfy his need for security and not disturb his trust’, but the answers must be ‘strictly true’: ‘we should never tell him (sic) anything that he (sic) will have to unlearn later’ even if filtering out the more complex ideas for now.²⁷ Moreover, Williams urges honesty with children on difficult questions, else ‘when he (sic) finds you have deceived him...he will not only despise your authority, but may even be inclined to despise all authority.’²⁸ Following the principle that children desire to be treated as equals, Williams contends that children’s deepest emotions should be taken seriously, and responded to with candour and without condescension. The role of adult is to be a spiritual guide to the child, helping the child to construct a realistic view on life, even if one which protects them by filtering out the more complex and postpones the difficult realities for the present. Having focused entirely upon the parent-child relationship as crucial to early religious education, in his final article in the series Williams turns to the question of the child and church attendance. Fifthly then, Williams argues that children cannot know what it means to be a Christian without church attendance being normalised for them, with the ultimate objective of church membership.²⁹ Inducting children into church attendance at a very young age, first as an experiential activity; then, preferably for Williams (as someone heavily influenced by the interwar Anglican Liturgical Movement) a Sung Eucharist, worship should be something done together with adults. Arguing that ‘our most powerful influence over our children is

²⁴ John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion I, *Religion in Education*, 18:3, 86.

²⁵ John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion (II), *Religion in Education*, 19:1, 15.

²⁶ John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion (II), *Religion in Education*, 19:1, 16.

²⁷ John G. Williams (1951): The child's first steps in religion (II), *Religion in Education*, 19:1, 16 and 17.

²⁸ John G. Williams (1952) The child’s first steps in religion (II), *Religion in Education*, 19: 1, 17.

²⁹ John G. Williams (1952) The child’s first steps in religion (III), *Religion in Education*, 19:2, 56.

not what we say, but who we are,' Williams concludes that ultimately 'a child's religion is largely a matter of the will not the emotions'.³⁰ 'It is a psychological error', Williams cautioned elsewhere, 'to lay undue stress on a child's immaturity. He may come to associate religion with the limitations of childhood, which provides a reasonable excuse for abandoning it when he gets older'.³¹

Leaving the BBC in 1950 to become Field Secretary of the Church of England National Society and its Schools' Council, for three years Williams was able to utilise his reputation and experience of broadcasting at a time when – during the post-1944 Education Act period – schools were still adapting to the, now legal, requirement of a daily act of collective worship in English and Welsh schools. It was wisdom drawn from the likes of Williams that became instructive of how to do this, in, for example, his pamphlet *Leading School Worship* (1953) and his more extensive volume *Worship and the Modern Child* (1957 edn) each serving as manuals of advice to adults on how to lead worship with children authentically.

In the post-war period, the BBC responded to the 1944 mandate by continuing to broadcast its Religious Service for Schools, reporting on this and other interim developments to the Church of England's Commission on Religious Education in Schools (chaired by Ian Ramsey, the then Bishop of Durham) much later, in 1967.³² Extending the original provision of a single broadcast (begun in wartime with Williams) to two in 1961 (a 'Religious Service for Primary Schools' and a service for secondary school pupils called 'An Act of Worship'), the liturgical pattern of worship typically consisted of music before and after the service (usually classical), a modern folk song accompanied by guitar (popular with children), hymns (from the published BBC Hymns for Primary Schools), a dramatic 'Interlude', and a prayer (including the Lord's Prayer). This packaged 'BBC religion' for children was put unevenly to use according to data collected for a report on religious education by the Institute for Christian Education, and

³⁰ John G. Williams (1952) The child's first steps in religion (III), *Religion in Education*, 19:2, 59.

³¹ John G. Williams (1956) Religious Education: the Church of England and her children. *The Expository Times*, 67, 358.

³² BBC WAC R103/323/2 The School Broadcasting Council for the United Kingdom: Evidence for the Commission on Religious Education in Schools, 1967.

published in 1954. As a case in point, in the Birmingham area, few grammar schools used it; almost a third of secondary modern; less than one per-cent of Infant schools; but almost 20 per-cent of Junior schools did.³³ Even so, those that did use the service indicated its value, one school reported children's voluntary attendance at broadcast services, another that children enjoyed listening to it at home when away.³⁴

Even today, much of the tone and content of broadcast school worship has a profoundly Christian flavour, especially in the choice of music and songs. This fits with the character of current legislation, but belies the generally liberal and inclusive character of religious broadcasting overall. Why school worship has shown remarkable resilience to liberalising trends requires more detailed investigation. Moreover, as the modern era has progressed, and schooling increasingly governmentalized, so to an increasing degree the state – and public service broadcasting – have supplemented (perhaps even in some respects supplanted) the churches in educating (and religiously educating) the masses. This shift in the locus of religious education, the intersection between the churches, media and religious education, require further investigation in order to fully appreciate their mutual histories.

IV

Returning to John Hull's critique of Williams, these were three-fold. First, Hull critiques Williams' assertion that worship is not 'possible outside the provision which God has made within the sacramental life of his Church' and that therefore 'in school worship the claims of the Church must always be kept clearly in sight'.³⁵ Secondly, Hull critiques Williams' view that 'worship is the most powerful medium of all for communicating dogmatic truth...more powerful than the direct instruction of the classroom...teaching, that sink[s] most deeply into the subconscious mind and become the foundations of 'faith''.³⁶ For Hull this is nothing short of the indoctrination Williams' himself opposes.

³³ *Religious Education in Schools: the report of an inquiry made by the research committee for the Institute of Christian Education into the working of the 1944 Education Act* (1954). London: SPCK, pp.106-108.

³⁴ *Religious Education in Schools: the report of an inquiry made by the research committee for the Institute of Christian Education into the working of the 1944 Education Act* (1954). London: SPCK, p.107.

³⁵ Williams quoted in Hull, John (1975) *School Worship: an obituary*. London: SCM Press, p.92-93.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Finally, Hull rails against the compulsory nature of collective worship which forces ‘the uncommitted young person, who has no choice but to be there’.³⁷ Space does not permit a fuller discussion of the differences of opinion between Williams and Hull on school worship. Needless to say their principled positions – not least in an increasingly plural religious context – touch on persistently contentious issues. Notwithstanding the differences about what is appropriate in the school context, there are however many similarities between Williams’ and Hull’s ideas on religious education, particularly in the domestic sphere. Both Williams and Hull (after Rousseau) idealise the child as naturally innocent, ‘not yet contaminated by the false values and standards that prevail in our western civilization’, only corruptible by the poor counsel of the grown-ups around them who ‘create the future for the child’ rather than enable the child to devise its own.³⁸ Likewise each imagines that the emergent individual is motivated to an authenticity of adulthood that can only materialize within a context of free-inquiry: as John Hull expresses it, it is by: ‘enriching children’s vocabulary and, through conversation [that]...children [learn] to grapple...with the issues and experiences involved in God-talk’.³⁹ In religious education and worship, both Williams and Hull espouse the view that the child’s interests and questions arising from their growing experience be given pre-eminence. For Williams, the listening child and the worshipping child is a child active in its own spiritual meaning-making.

The line in the sand Hull drew in *an obituary* needs to be seen in the context of the broader revisionist discourse about the nature and purpose of religious education which he was at the centre of, and which are characteristic of the long 1970s.⁴⁰ In *an obituary*, Hull extends the discussion around the educational legitimacy of religious education to

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ J.G. Williams (1957 edn), *Worship and the Modern Child*. London: SPCK, p.5; John M. Hull (1975) *School Worship: an obituary*. London: SCM Press, p. 107.

³⁹ Hull, J. (1991). *God-talk with Young Children: notes for parents and teachers*. Birmingham: CEM, p.4.

⁴⁰ Parker, S.G. and Freathy, R.J.K. (2011) ‘Context, Complexity and Contestation: Birmingham’s Agreed Syllabuses since the 1960s’, *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 32: 2, 247– 263; Parker, S.G. and Freathy, R.J.K. (2012) ‘Ethnic diversity, Christian hegemony and the emergence of multi-faith religious education in the 1970s’, *History of Education*, 41: 3, 381–404; Freathy, R.J.K and Parker, S.G. (2013). ‘Secularists, Humanists and Religious Education: religious crisis and curriculum change in England, 1963-1975’, *History of Education*, 42: 2, 222-257.

include school worship. However, in doing so one wonders if he was differentiating too strongly between religious education in the home and religious community and the school, especially as the characteristics of religious education he espouses elsewhere, most notably in *God Talk With Young Children* starkly contrast with the more critical tones of *an obituary*.

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