

Christianity and some Issues of the Day: Education

Trinity College Cambridge

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The Very Revd Dr John Hall, Dean of Westminster

Some years ago, soon after I had become the Church of England's chief education officer, I attended a conference where I knew very few people. I introduced myself to a neighbour: "I'm John Hall, general secretary of the Church of England Board of Education". He immediately replied: "Surely that's a contradiction in terms". Church Education, Christian education: a contradiction in terms? The conversation that we might have had was prevented by my surprise at his confident condemnation and my unwillingness to engage an unknown assailant in those circumstances. Perhaps I should have been better prepared. In later years I became familiar with the charge, though it was never expressed again so pungently.

The Church has had hosts of critics within and without for its role in education in England as elsewhere. One such critic, Paul Hirst, at one time professor of education in this University, addressing a Roman Catholic audience over thirty years ago, in honour of Cardinal Wiseman the first Archbishop of Westminster, suggested that the traditional understanding of Christian education held by the Church was primitive and should give way to a more sophisticated understanding, 'a concept of education as the development of the young person within the limits of reason'. Education should only concern what could be objectively known and demonstrated to the natural reason. Christian catechesis, which seeks to complement education in matters of faith, inhabits, he claimed a separate realm and should be kept distinct. A Christian school would then be a contradiction in terms. Education, objective and rational, would be the purpose of the school; Christian formation and nurture, by implication subjective and irrational, the purpose of the home and Church. Paul Hirst's view that education occupies the realm of the transmission of objective knowledge and that religious education is different in character and should not be attempted in school has proved influential and persistent. I think it is a doctrine that reigns supreme in most school common rooms. And yet, it remains unsatisfactory.

Pope Benedict XVI, who worshipped at Westminster Abbey during his state visit in September last year, has often spoken against the widely accepted thesis in western society that faith and reason occupy such different grounds that the intellectual gulf is unbridgeable. In his address at Westminster Hall he asked where the ethical foundation for political choices was to be found. He suggested that the role of religion in political debate was to 'help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.' He recognised that 'distortions of religion arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion.' Reason though, without religion, he said, could suffer distortions. The 'misuse of reason, after all, was what gave rise to the slave trade ... and the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century.' 'The world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief', he said 'need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.'

John Henry Newman put it more directly in the *Idea of the University*: 'all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself as being the acts and the work of the Creator.' William Temple, archbishop of York for many years, then of Canterbury all too briefly in the Second World War, applied the thought to education. 'Education is only adequate and worthy when it is itself religious. There is no possibility of neutrality. To be neutral concerning God is the same thing as to ignore him. If the children are brought up to have an understanding of life in which there is no reference to God, you cannot correct the effect of that by speaking about God for a certain period of the day. Therefore the ideal for the children of our country is the ideal of truly religious education.' He was influential in shaping the Butler Education Act of 1944, which did much to embed religious education in the curriculum for all schools, through regular religious instruction and a daily act of collective worship, and also to advance the cause of church schools.

Must Christian education be a contradiction in terms? Does the heavy hand of the Church close down the argument and impose its own point of view? Is it not rather that Christ is the light of the world, the true light, which enlightens everyone, the revelation of God, the Truth that makes sense of everything? The choir sang a little ago the words of the old man Simeon in the *Nunc dimittis*: 'Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in

peace... for mine eyes have seen... a light to lighten the Gentiles.' From that point of view, any education that is not underpinned by the person of Christ is to some degree flawed and falls short.

Our society has of course generally moved far from the Church and from the fullness of the practice of the Christian religion as most of us would recognise it. For many English people the fundamental beliefs of Christianity are unknown or alien, the tradition of worship and prayer, which is so characteristic of the Church of England and recognised as such in very many parts of the world and which nourishes us here this evening, is strange and unfamiliar and scarcely if ever encountered. And yet, Christian values, which are the outward expression of Christian belief in deed, are still generally honoured and recognised, if only in the breach. And as a government agency responsible for the school curriculum has stated: 'Education influences and reflects the values of society, and the kind of society we want ourselves to be. It is important, therefore, to recognise a broad set of common values and purposes which underpin the school curriculum and the work of schools.' There is a real task to be undertaken, no easy task, reconnecting the values with the belief that gave rise to them and reconnecting the world with that pattern of belief. But I believe there is more knowledge and understanding out there than we often allow.

Confirmation of that sometimes comes in strange ways. I remember a train journey one Friday evening on a suburban railway. There were six people in the last carriage, in their late teens or early twenties. One man was smoking and there were beer cans around. Recklessly confident within my dog collar, I stared hard at the man who was smoking and sat down. He came and sat near me, somewhat to my dismay. But then he put out his cigarette, and told me without any other introduction that his name was Billy and that he had just come out of prison. Within the short journey I discovered that he had been in and out of young offender institutions ever since he was sixteen but that this was his first time in prison. The experience of Brixton, Wandsworth and Belmarsh meant that now at 22 he planned to go straight. He had a job to go to. He was soon to marry his girl friend Lucy, who had stood by him, on St Valentine's Day. At the next stop other people got on. At Billy's invitation they joined the conversation. He had earlier asked me whether I was Church of England or Roman Catholic and volunteered that in prison he went to chapel

to both sorts of service. Now he asked the couple in their later twenties to name their religion. The man was a lapsed Quaker who said he still liked the silence. The woman, with red hair and white make-up, proclaimed herself a pagan witch. Billy asked her to sing. After a little prevarication, she sang John Bunyan's To be a pilgrim, all three verses, word perfect. The memory has stayed with me a long time.

Perhaps she went to a church school. The Church's commitment to Christian education has meant that there have been church schools from the earliest time of the Christian mission in England. One of St Augustine's first acts in England was the establishment of a 'school' within his monastery - the first church school in England. This school taught geometry, grammar, music and art and also Latin, of which the Anglo-Saxons were entirely ignorant. Augustine had begun to introduce the English to a Christian education. His aim was to Christianise England not only through conversions to Christianity but also through Christian culture. Monks, such as Columba, Paulinus, Aidan, Chad and Cuthbert inspired by the same mission also founded monastic schools around England. These monastic schools were essential elements in the conversion of England to Christianity. Westminster School, so closely linked to Westminster Abbey, with the Dean as chairman of governors, and incidentally strongly linked to this College whose Master is ex officio one of two College governors of the School, owes its origin to the monastic school of the pre-Reformation Benedictine community. The School continues regularly to worship in the Abbey.

More recently, two hundred years ago this year, the National Society was founded with the purpose of educating the poor in the principles of the established Church. Teaching them to read would also give them access to the King James Bible whose quatercentenary we celebrate this year. Between 1811 and 1851, 17,000 schools were founded by or in union with the National Society, which means that almost every parish in the land had its church school. The education act that rendered elementary education compulsory and established school boards to build non-church schools came much later, in 1870. Local education authorities were not established until 1902.

The Church of England still provides one in four primary schools, almost five thousand altogether, and more than two hundred secondary schools, within the government-funded

maintained system. The numbers of such schools have increased significantly and look set to continue to do so. These schools, with the Roman Catholic schools that make up 10% of national provision and the small handful of Jewish, Muslim and Sikh schools, altogether one in three maintained schools in England, are popular and often oversubscribed. There may be many parents who are unsure of the relevance of regular worship but who know that for their children they want Christian education. Others may just recognise the value of a good education. A Christian education with coherent values based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ that sets high store by the individual will have 'positive outcomes'. Every pupil whose parents wish it should have access to such an education.

The lessons this evening take us beyond Easter and the celebrations of our Lord's resurrection from the dead. They foretell the triumph of God's kingdom, his rule on earth. The Church has always understood the vital role of education in working towards the building of that kingdom of love, justice and peace. If our children and young people are to become adults who embrace the values that have underpinned our civilization, of which the President of the United States of America spoke so powerfully last week, their education must embrace not only our country's traditional values but also the system of belief and religious practice that underpin them.