

Church Schools : Rebirth or Sticking Plaster?

by Revd Dr Howard Worsley

Howard Worsley is Director of Education for Southwell Diocese, having previously taught theology at St John's College in Nottingham.

(Abstract: The article fits into four parts. The first concerns the present context of education, the second the background theological issues, the third the educational issues arising out of theology and the fourth is a theological reflection).

Context

Since 1870 when public funding for education was introduced by Parliament, there have been many changes in education but one thing remaining constant has been that change has always been there.

Writing in the year 2005, the year of election, I notice that we have had a major change in the position of the Secretary of State for Education, and that new proposals for education are being offered by the different Parliamentary parties.

We are now at a stage where the public is debating the value of the faith school. A recent survey by the Guardian/ICM poll suggests that a 2/3 majority are against government plans to increase the number of state aided faith schools. Of course this debate is not focussed on the difference between various faith schools, and offers no clarification between whether the faith school is an exclusive Brethren ghetto, an Islamic foundation, a Roman Catholic, a Jewish or a Church of England school, let alone whether the school is voluntary aided or controlled. Conversely, even as we speak, BBC radio is running a series that is reflecting upon the value of the comprehensive schools that replaced the old secondary modern and grammar schools. The public is offering mixed messages. In other words, late modernity is calling for both comprehensive and for selectively chosen education. Into this context, we must consider the Church school, specifically the Anglican Church Schools. Are they part of the solution for a new society or are they part of the problem? Will Church Schools offer rebirth or the short term effects of sticking plaster to an emerging educational context?

In 2001 the Dearing report was published, calling for 100 new voluntary aided secondary schools to be built for the Church of England, tapping into the emerging funding streams becoming available for the rebuilding and refurbishment of all secondary schools. This report called for a new confidence in Church Schools to stand up and see themselves as standing at the centre of the Church's mission to the nation. It understood itself to be responding to parental demands that called for more Anglican Church education at the secondary stage.

Indeed, the dominant driver for change has been the emphasis on parental choice, parents wanting better education for their children in their area, a choice that has caused some schools to become overly popular and other schools to become extinct.

Many are asking if the move for all schools to be foundation schools, operating an individual admission criteria, is a move to a red tooth market of competition destined to drive more schools into becoming super schools and more schools into becoming sink schools that will fail.

Many are asking if the current move to give choice to parents in the present is only a brief dawn of imagined freedom before schools will in turn make the choices for them as market choice creates schools of different academic strata.

Many are asking whether Church schools will offer a religious nurture that releases a form of education that militates against the emergence of global citizenship? In other words, the public are questioning whether religious education will always be tribal in its impact rather than global?

From an educational point of view (that view purportedly espoused by the local education authorities) education is in actuality about becoming a learner, becoming a world citizen who continues to learn across the life cycle. This view is to be praised but it is often swamped by the popular demand expressed by parental choice calling for education to be more about cognitive development rather than about affective or spiritual development. It often expresses itself as a form of judging one school against another, generally seen in the league tables which value examination results (a narrow form of cognitive appraisal) as short-term goals of expediency, rather than valuing and awarding the results of making someone into an effective world citizen.

Therefore education is becoming commodified, in that it is being bought and sold by the highest bidder.

In all this, what does the church school do? Does it strive for excellence in the market place of choice, selecting the academically better pupil and de-selecting those who carry emotional baggage? Does it draw comfort from the evidence published in The Times in July that church primary schools are a year or more ahead of their contemporaries in state schools by age 11? ⁽¹⁾ Or does it bemoan the fact that in the competition for primary school places some parents feign belief in Christianity or even jump through religious hoops to gain a place for their child? Does it grieve that church primary schools have fewer children from single parent families and attracts long-term teaching staff who yearn for a more steady environment? Alternatively, is the Church school a place where there is cause for greater celebration that there is a higher percentage increase in the numbers taking RE at 'A' level than in any other subject for the 2nd year running?

Conversely, should church schools endeavour to buck the trend and opt for the more challenging pupil, ensuring that at least a percentage of places are reserved for such children?

To do it justice, OFSTED does attempt to value systems of improvements and standards, endeavouring to give equal value to inclusive policies, the handling of value added dimension and special education needs.

Debate currently exists as to whether or not our standards of education are developing. Are the GCSE and A-level results getting better? Is the higher demand for university places benefiting our young people or are we debasing our degree system?

Let us affirm though that schooling is about learning. As Archbishop Rowan Williams himself said at this august body meeting in Exeter two years ago, "Learning isn't just a matter of having to function within a society successfully enough to survive. It opens doors to the sort of experience that changes what is possible in society for the individual and for the whole group."

(1) Article by Ruth Gledhill "Church schools reward faithful" The Times (July 28th 2005 p.30)

Theology

As I continue these thoughts, I will now turn to theology to reflect on what Christian thinking has to offer to the current educational context and to the notion of change. I will develop the discussion by looking at educational issues arising from theology before offering a concluding theological reflection. After that I hope we will have time for questions and an open exchange.

So let us reflect on where God is in the context of change. There is a view that says God does not change, that God lives outside of change because he is beyond and above the pressures that affect mortal people. There is also the view that says that God dwells within change, that the affairs of the human race deeply affect him. Christianity offers both perspectives.

The first perspective considers God as being unchangeable, that concentrates on God existing before time. This viewpoint says that God is the great 'I am', that God is impassive and immutable, that God is the God of the 'omnes', in other words that God who is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. This God is transcendent. This notion of God is seen par excellence in Islam and in ancient religions that use the Old Testament to speak about a God who is beyond the human understanding. Obviously to speak of the God of the 'omnes' is to remove God from the vagaries of the process of change and makes theology seem less relevant to the debates of education.

The second perspective considers God to be known in time, to be seen in Jesus Christ. This view of God sees God living with his people as a human, to be known as Emmanuel, God with us. This God is a God who weeps, who suffers, who questions, who knows anger and tiredness and who dies. This God is imminent. He is known more in liberation theology and in the theologies of identification that speak about God as drawing alongside his people to lead them out. This understanding of God fits more readily into the process of learning and change and therefore seems more relevant to the concerns of education.

Educational reflection

If we are to combine our theology with our context in education, we will note that the transcendent God is a more traditional notion that enters education in terms of God as our teacher. God is seen to have existed before time and needs no education. Such a God has no need to learn because he already knows everything. However, such a view of God is not an accurate Biblical viewpoint, either from the Old or the New Testament of the Christian Bible.

In the Old Testament, evidence is offered of God changing after the Flood when he repents of wiping out humans. Genesis chapter nine reports God saying that he would never again act like he had done.

In the New Testament, Jesus demonstrates the learning character of God, not only by his appearance as a human but by his self confessed ignorance of some things. For example Christ is stated to have been unaware of the future but is recorded to have said that only his heavenly Father knows such things. In Jesus Christ, God appears as a learning God, as a child who learns Aramaic at his mother's knee, who

learns to honour his parents when he is absent for too long at the age of 12. This God is seen to be learning to be breaking out of his cultural norm, to be learning to reject the accepted rudeness to women, mothers and strangers.

To speak of God as learning is not heretical, although it may sound so, because learning does not imply that the learner is inadequate or sinful. Rather it implies a development, and an improvement on a previous way of being. When a five-year old learns how to ride a bicycle, this does not imply a previous state of sin when the child could not ride a bicycle. Similarly, the movement from the 12-year-old at key stage three, as Jesus was in the Temple in Luke two, onto his development to an adult at key stage five and over, as Jesus is often recorded in the Gospels, shows an educational developmental notion of Christ.

The incarnation of God in Jesus allows Christians to see God as one of us, God as a learner. This does not take away from God's perfection but rather enhances it. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of God in Christ becoming perfect through his sufferings. Because God is known as love, he is in constant dynamic flow with the object of his love. Love is always flowing, it is dynamic, it is changing and it is learning how to relate. As God flows into the future in his creation, it is right and proper to say that he learns with us.

Maybe we are also right to draw back from being too definite at this point, as to some extent, God is beyond language and thought. He is too high for our humble ideas and to an extent it is foolish to attempt theology because God exists beyond our language and we cannot call God adequately in words.

To quote T S Eliot,

*"we shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring will be
To arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time."*

This is the paradox of learning.

However, the language of education has established that in the Christian tradition God can be discussed as one who is learning as well as one who teaches. In other words he can be seen as the teacher and as the learner. Another line of thought might equally say that God is revealed as the father but also as the son who is a child.

Theological reflection

If this reflection is applied to education and to the Church in the 21st-century, it is interesting to notice the new areas that become open for theological reflection. God can be seen with the teacher as the Creator and as the sustainer. God can also be seen with the learner as the poet and as the experimenter.

I believe that God as the traditional teacher speaks into education through our values.

Such theological reflection affirms that good education is about loving. This is well expressed in the words of Martin Buber who described the teacher entering the classroom to find the students, "crouching at their desks, indiscriminately flung together, the misshapen and the well proportioned and in one glance the teacher accepts and receives them all." This shows the true teacher to be working with values, to be offering an unconditional love and not a selective favouritism. Such love is not 'eros' (the Greek word that denotes an earthly love, existing only in response to the loveliness of the object, in other words a conditional love). The love shown by the true teacher is 'agape' (the Greek word that denotes no condition, a love that can be showered on the unlovely and the unlovely).

Seen in terms of love, education must be inclusive of the poor and the rich, of the able and the less able. It will defy the attempts of society to buy education and to submit it to the standards of success, of elitism or of finance. Love says that education cannot be commodified. Although learning is frequently portrayed as something that can be bought or sold in the marketplace where teachers are providers and pupils or parents are consumers, we need to remember that learning cannot be bought.

This is a rebuke to such educational institutions where teachers are only interested in teaching bright pupils like themselves. It teaches us to have an openness, without inappropriate distinctions of race or sex or class. It teaches schools not to seek approval from the league tables. It teaches Church schools not to cherry-pick the better pupils but rather to have a means of admitting the least able whilst still being attractive to the most able.

If Church schools (VA and VC) are to maintain the core value of love, they will identify their distinctiveness to be about preserving an atmosphere in which love will thrive, where the Christ is known, where the ethos of the school will nurture those who wish to explore their faith in a God of love. Such schools will be a reminder that education is not the preserve of the consumerist marketplace that simply demands more of certain commodities.

Moving on to a notion of God as the radical learner, we see God speaking into education through our experimentation.

It is true to say that the world has never been the way it is now and it will never be the same again in the future. Into this emerging scenario, the schools of the future are emerging alongside fresh expressions of future Church. Here we see our learning God coming to us as a child, vulnerable and easily missed, but enquiring and exploring, adventurous and wondrous.

God the child teaches us to look for new ways of being. The Dearing report of 2001 called for 100 new Church of England secondary schools to come into being but it offered no identifiable pot of money. It is those who are childlike who responded to create the new schools, or the schools that did not exist, or which were failing, or which were anxious to change category, or where LEAs wanted to invest in faith education.

The same report called for the Church aided school to regain confidence, to learn how to be distinctively Christian. It called for Christians to wake up and come into education, to be open to a future that is different, to believe again. It is the childlike and the learner who are responding to this vulnerable call to change, to be reinvented, to get involved.

Personally I hope to move beyond rhetoric in my lifetime. The ideals of religious schooling, based on Gospel values have often set out to work with the poor initially and preferentially but have ended up realising that the disadvantaged are rarely a good investment. In his provocative essay, "Religious schooling and the challenge of the poor" (2005), Jeff Astley wrote, "one reason why the poor are always with us is that the successes of the poor and their friends simply do not count. Hence, in England, there are many educational institutions and charities that were founded for the poor that have been quietly hijacked for the education of comfort of the rich."

The childlike and the learning God calls Christians into education to work in hard places in the belief that "the humble will be exalted."

Church aided educational establishments are places where not only can Christ be known and loved, but where inclusive values can be set in place, where schools can be centres of excellence for special needs and for the gifted and talented. In the Church we must learn to support our Church aided schools, not as elitist places but as places of spiritual and educational value. Let us join with Dearing in responding to his timely sense that, "Church schools stand at the centre of the mission of the Church." If Church schools succumb to short-term solutions and the whims of an uncertain public, they will be merely sticking plaster. But, if they work with God the educator and the learner, working in an emerging context for both Church and society, they will indeed be part of God's rebirth in the nation.

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