



Whitefield BRIEFING

March 1998 (Vol.3 No.1)

The Spiritual in Modern Education

Trevor Cooling

THE SPIRITUAL IN MODERN EDUCATION

When I was a student teacher in the mid 1970s, we were often *reminded* that our Christian faith was a personal matter. To bring it into the classroom was to indoctrinate. An influential article of that period was titled "Christian Education: a Contradiction in Terms". In this the author, a leading professor of education, argued that education was about developing rationality, a matter on which all people could (or at least should) agree. In contrast, religious faith was controversial, where agreement on the basis of rational deliberation was impossible. Such ideas made Christian teachers feel apologetic about their faith, even to view it as like an infectious disease. Measures were required to make sure that their pupils were not contaminated. As is now the case in America and France, there was a real sense in which religion was not welcome in the classroom. This understanding of education was inspired by what Trevor Hart describes as the Enlightenment vision for creating *faith-free zones*.¹

In contrast, since 1988, there has been an air of optimism amongst Christians involved in education. The importance of Christianity in the life of the school has been championed by a string of Government ministers and influential civil servants. The 1988 Education Reform Act made explicit reference to the importance of Christianity in Religious Education and daily worship. More and more opportunities for Christians to share their faith in schools presented themselves. School inspectors are required to ensure that school worship is of a "broadly Christian character". What is more, the law requires that spiritual and moral development be an integral part of every subject, not *just* Religious Education. Education seems a more *gospel-friendly* environment (to use a phrase of Bishop Hugh Montefiore²) than it has been for some time.

However, recent developments suggest that this change of climate since 1988 may only have been a freak change in "weather patterns" rather than a substantive shift in attitude to the role of Christianity in education. Two current initiatives will serve to illustrate this concern.

First, as I write, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (formerly called the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority) is undertaking a pilot study with schools on spiritual and moral development. The results of this study will be incorporated into guidance which will be issued to all schools and will be a required part of the new curriculum to be implemented from the year 2000. In the pilot study materials it is stated that "spiritual development is not dependent on religious belief". Secondly, early in February 1998, it was reported that the teaching unions were calling on the Government to

change the law on school worship. Instead of daily worship of a broadly Christian character, they wanted the requirement changed to "assemblies of a spiritual or moral character". In both initiatives, specific reference to Christianity is seen as problematic. The proposed alternative is to look for a seemingly inclusive category like *spiritual*, which is seen to be a universal human characteristic and therefore non-problematic. It is, like the rational, viewed as a characteristic which transcends the petty squabbles that result from religious differences.

THE BACKGROUND TO THESE CHANGES

One of the great challenges facing modern western societies is the impact of religious pluralism. How do we accommodate the fact that people of different beliefs have seemingly irreconcilable differences of opinion on what is true? This is a particularly acute question for those schools whose purpose is to educate children from a wide variety of faith backgrounds.

The classic (Enlightenment-inspired) response to this challenge is to make a clear distinction between facts (or knowledge) and beliefs (and the values derived from them). So it is thought that schools can legitimately pass on universal facts which are established according to universal rational standards. In contrast, religious beliefs and values are seen as matters of personal preference which are potentially unreliable and should not be imposed on other people. Hence the 1970s' response to the educational dilemma was that schools should only transmit rationally established knowledge. It is assumed that there is a "neutral" or "objective" domain of the rational, which is the subject matter of what has come to be called *secular* education. This is the legitimate concern of schools. The concept of *Christian* education was deemed a nonsense because it mixed knowledge with beliefs, facts with values.

In philosophical circles, confidence in this seemingly neat solution has collapsed. The impact of what is loosely called "post modernism" means that it is now widely recognised that knowledge and belief are inextricably related. As Alister McGrath puts it - "The belief that the language and values of a secular culture are universally valid is no longer taken seriously".³ Lesslie Newbigin has mounted a very powerful assault on the fact/value distinction and the consequent privatisation of Christian belief⁴ by drawing on recent developments in the philosophy of science. The attempt to discover one universal, rational position usually amounts to the imposition of one person's views on everyone else. To quote McGrath again, "the illusion of universal norms can become profoundly oppressive".⁵ In educational discussions, there is a strong case for the argument that a radical form of liberal Christianity has been allowed to act as judge and jury over all other forms of religious belief.⁶

The philosophical "respectability" of post modern thinking has, despite its weaknesses, made an extremely important contribution to debates about education. It has made it plain that the different religions have specific and distinctive insights to offer to the curriculum. In 1994 the Government published model syllabuses for Religious Education which required explicit study of the distinct world religions. Under the pressure of Enlightenment models of thought, previous syllabuses had tended to emphasise the idea of one universal (even rational) essence for religion which was to be studied. Even outside Religious Education, resources have been published for other subjects which develop a specifically Christian perspective.⁷ Previously this would have been regarded as the height of irrationality.

However this recognition of the importance of religious belief in education raises one important question, "Whose beliefs should provide the framework for the school?" In the case of state-funded, faith-based schools (mainly Church of England and Roman Catholic) the answer is fairly clear. Despite initial signals from the Labour Government in 1997, it appears that these are here to stay for the foreseeable future. Indeed, in January 1998, the highly significant decision was made, for the first time ever, to extend state funding to two private, Muslim schools. Post modern insights are therefore being embraced in this sector of state education.

The problem is with those state schools which are not under the governance of a particular religion. Some people argue that Britain is a Christian country and therefore these schools should be based on Christian beliefs. However this creates memories of Victorian Christian colonialism for too many people and is fiercely resisted by the minority faith communities. Politically it is not really a practicable option. Above all, the education profession is very concerned about indoctrination once religious faith enters these schools.

So educationalists face an impasse. On the one hand, post modernism and the rhetoric of respecting pluralism has convinced them that religious faith is educationally significant. On the other hand, their liberal instincts shy away from what they perceive as the divisive effects of educating children according to faith-based principles. They feel they are left with no alternative but to search for a new unifying principle which enables people of all religious persuasions to be educated together as citizens of one society. Their aspirations are similar to those of the influential philosopher of religion John Hick, who has journeyed out of an evangelical Christian faith to one which sees all religions as complementary responses to the one reality. The educational answer for many seems to be return to the approach which seeks to identify an essence that is common to all religions and to focus the attention of the school on that. Hence the interest in the "spiritual".

The problem with this can be illustrated from an argument put to me in a recent discussion about school worship. I was proposing that the law ought to retain the requirement that school worship should reflect the beliefs of a specific religious tradition. In Britain it makes sense that this should be Christian in the majority of cases. I was immediately challenged on the grounds that this was divisive. In contrast, it was argued that the assembly should be "spiritual" in order that everyone could participate. The interesting thing about this response is that in order to be unifying, it appears that the language of specific religious traditions has to be replaced by a language which is supposed to reflect the essence of all traditions. I will not be surprised to find an article with the title "Christian Spirituality: a Contradiction in Terms" being published. The problem with all this is that there is no way of talking about general categories, like the spiritual, without fleshing them out in terms of a specific tradition. There are certainly Christian, Islamic and Humanist understandings of what it is to be spiritual, but there is no *neutral* understanding which will be unifying because it is uncontroversial.

Most educational definitions of the spiritual make response to God an *optional* element. This runs counter to Christian and many other religions' understandings. The Qualifications and Curriculum Agency's discussion of the spiritual read like something from a therapist's textbook with their emphasis on the difference between feeling high and low in spirit. The response to religious pluralism which looks for an uncontroversial essence is simply a variation on Enlightenment patterns of thought and ends up eradicating the very pluralism it claims to respect. It does this by refusing to allow the different languages of the different traditions space in the public domain.

HOW CAN CHRISTIANS RESPOND?

Currently, the greatest threat to Christian presence in education is not competition from other religions, but a return to Enlightenment models of thinking. Probably the most important thing we can be doing is to argue that, in all aspects of school life, it must be recognised that truth is not some free-floating category which is independent of religious belief. Rather truth is discovered through beliefs. The major assault on Christianity in education is the suggestion that it is irrelevant to education. Compared to that, finding that Christian understandings of education are in conflict with other understandings is but a minor skirmish. In practical terms this translates into a specific question. Whenever educationalists talk about spiritual education, we should ask *which spirituality* we are talking about. Schools should be helping their pupils to understand that Christianity and the other faiths have very specific understandings.

REFERENCES

- 1 Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking*, SPCK, 1995
- 2 Hugh Montefiore (ed), *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, Mowbray, 1992
- 3 Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, Apollos, 1996, p131
- 4 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, 1989
- 5 op cit. p133
- 6 See Trevor Cooling, *A Christian Vision for State Education*, SPCK, 1994
- 7 E.g. The Charis Project. Details from The Stapleford Centre, Wesley Place, Stapleford, Nottingham. NG9 8DP

Further Reading

Trevor Cooling *A Christian Vision for State Education* (SPCK, 1994)

George Marsden *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford University Press, 1997)

Alister McGrath *A Passion for Truth* (Apollos, 1996)

John Shortt & Trevor Cooling (eds.) *Agenda for Educational Change* (Apollos, 1997)

Trevor Cooling is Head of The Stapleford Centre, a Christian charity which exists to promote Christian development in education. Before this he directed the Stapleford Project, a curriculum development initiative supporting the teaching of Christianity in schools. Trevor is a Special Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham and course leader for the range of distance learning courses for RE teachers offered jointly by St. John's College Nottingham and The Stapleford Centre.

