

Trevor Cooling

Living as a Christian in the World of Religious Education¹

Religious Education can be a traumatic career choice for the religiously committed but humanly sensitive teacher. I find this to be an inescapable conclusion after six years' experience of working alongside Christian teachers, most of whom would see themselves as belonging to the evangelical wing of the Church.

The stresses involved can be illustrated by a story — fictional, but one which reflects the experience of many teachers. Helen worked with children who had behavioural problems. She had come particularly close to one Hindu child in her school, who had caused great difficulties at home. The parents were so delighted with, and grateful for, the progress that was being made by their daughter that they invited Helen to come and share in a meal and religious celebration at their home. This immediately posed a dilemma for her as to how far as a Christian she felt she should go in participating in the practices of another religion, although she felt very close to the family and the child in particular. When she tried to discuss this with her colleagues at school she found nothing but incomprehension over her anxieties. How could she be so rude as to even consider not accepting? The parents had issued the invitation in good faith and it would be nothing more than bad manners and Christian arrogance to decline.

So Helen sought guidance from her church, but here the reaction was again less than sympathetic. She found herself rebuked for even thinking of involving herself in the worship of false gods. How could she possibly consider compromising the name of Christ in this way? To engage in celebration with this family would communicate the false message that worship outside of Christ was acceptable and would be a denial of the uniqueness of God's revelation in Christ.

In inservice work with teachers I use an OHP cartoon to illustrate this type of situation. It is a picture of a man standing in the jaws of a large, open gin-trap, primed to go off at the slightest movement. The point that this illustrates is that, for many Christian teachers, whatever they do in RE they seemingly cannot fail to set the trap off. On the one hand, if they seek to take on board the human realities of the situation in which they work and to respond to the fact of religious pluralism in the world at large (and often in their pupil population), they are made to feel disloyal to their deepest religious commitments and are criticised by those they worship with. On the other hand, if they seek to remain loyal to the uniqueness of Christ and the claims that he makes in their lives, they experience a battery of charges from educational colleagues, most commonly of arrogance and intolerance. Their Christian commitment leads to their professional credibility being questioned.

¹ This paper first appeared in *Discernment: A Christian Journal of Inter-Religious Encounter*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1992, pp. 29-35 and is reproduced here by kind permission of Dr. Cooling and Rev. Dr. Clinton Bennett, the Editor.

Neither the professional nor the confessional communities to which teachers like Helen belong seem prepared, or able, to offer the support, advice and encouragement necessary for them to achieve a creative affiance between their personal commitments and their professional responsibilities. Stewart Sutherland has commented on the gladiatorial struggle that goes on between education and theology.² Teachers are the victims of this, finding themselves presented with a choice between the two which they neither want to make, nor can make with any sense of personal integrity. The psychological and spiritual stress that this causes can only do damage in a teacher's life. Both Christian theology and educational theory must answer for their failures in creating this unnecessary and unacceptable situation. What is needed is some way for teachers to live at peace with themselves whilst doing justice to both their faith commitment and their professional responsibilities.

The Failure of Educational Theory

Perhaps the one idea that attracts almost universal support amongst writers on religious education is what I shall call the diversity principle. By this is meant that it is illegitimate for schools to prescribe what pupils or teachers should believe in matters of religion, where people of integrity may reasonably differ. Sometimes the word used to describe this approach is secular, which highlights the fact that there is no one overarching religious framework that acts as the umbrella under which society in England at the end of the twentieth century can operate. In the words of Brian Hill:

'this has created a kind of middle ground where people from various faiths can transact their business and engage in dialogue, protected by the freedoms associated with democratic government'.³

Education is part of this middle ground where children and parents of a variety of faith commitments can interact and seek to understand each other under the patronage of a state of which they are all citizens.

The failure of educational theory is that having asserted this important principle it then turns it back on it. The starkest manifestation of this is when writers argue that only one form of Christian theology can support the educational enterprise — what is called a liberal radical or, more recently, a pluralist theology. The features of this can be broadly described as relativist, a non-realist understanding of religious language, an emphasis on individual choice rather than community nurture and a sceptical approach to religious truth-claims which are regarded as inherently fallible. Such a theology is antagonistic to the notions of exclusive truth-claims and evangelism, entails the rejection of an absolute

² Stewart Sutherland 'Concluding Remarks' in *Religious Education in a Pluralistic Society*, p. 141, ed. M. C. Felderhof (Hodder & Stoughton 1985).

³ Brian Hill 'Values Education in a Secular Democracy' in *Journal of Indian Council for Philosophical Research*, Vol. 3, Autumn 1985, p. 68.

revelation of God in Scripture and has even been used to justify schools helping to 'release' children from the 'confining' experience of nurture within a particular faith community. It is not unusual to find that teachers are encouraged to adopt such a theology as a way of underpinning their educational work.⁴

The failure of this strategy is that it does not recognise its own controversial nature. It is a fact that in the philosophy of religion there is genuine difference of opinion concerning the validity of this epistemology. To insist that teachers adopt it if they are to be professionally credible is actually a denial of the diversity principle. Resistance to multifaith religious education from faith communities is not usually an objection to teaching other religions. Rather the concern is with this underlying philosophy. So Muslims attack what they call 'integrational pluralism'⁵ and Christians object to an approach which they see as 'secular humanist' or a 'multifaith mish mash' (a phrase much used in debates about the 1988 Education Act).⁶ In an important book Edward Hulmes describes it as a 'monocultural response' to the multifaith challenge, which has 'an ideological confessional character of its own'.⁷

The Failure of Christian Theology

As I stated at the start of this article, the teachers I am particularly concerned about are those who hold to an evangelical Christian theology. This is both absolutist and exclusivist in its adherence to belief in the uniqueness of Christ and its stand on the inerrancy (to use a difficult word which needs a lot of unpacking) of the Bible. For some it is these features that make it inherently inadequate. I dispute this, but cannot enter that debate in this article. For my purposes now it is enough to establish that evangelicalism is part of the pluralism that can be found within the spectrum of mainstream Christian belief and that it can be held by people of integrity. To deny that is to deny the facts — after all the Church of England now has a self-confessed evangelical as its Archbishop of Canterbury. This established, it is enough to point out that evangelicalism is thereby covered by the diversity principle.

The failure that I am concerned about can be illustrated by a device I use when leading INSET with evangelicals. I give each member of the group a question on a piece of paper. They are not allowed to look at each other's questions and are required to give a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer. The implication is that everyone has that same question. In fact there are two, which are:

⁴ I have argued this in more detail in my paper 'Evangelicals and Modern Religious Education' in *Spectrum*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Summer 1986.

⁵ Islamic Academy *Swan Committee Report: An Evaluation from the Muslim Point of View*, p. 5 (1985).

⁶ John Burn & Colin Hart *The Crisis in Religious Education* (Educational Research Trust 1988).

⁷ Edward Hulmes *Education and Cultural Diversity*, p. 18 (Longman 1989).

1. As a Christian parent would you object if a teacher influenced your child away from faith in Christ?
2. As a Christian teacher would you seek to influence children in your class towards faith in Christ?

Half the group have question 1 and half question 2, but almost invariably 100% answer 'yes' to their question. Usually there is a pregnant silence as the penny drops and participants begin to appreciate the import of this result, namely, that as evangelical Christians they are prepared to do unto the children of others what they are not prepared for others to do unto their children. The Golden Rule is contravened.

What has to be appreciated is that this is not so much a personal failing on the part of individuals, as a problem with evangelical theology generally. Not enough attention has been given to considering the proper relationship of the State to religion.⁸ Most Christians believe that the democratic State has no business to interfere with the religious faith of their children through its schools. To this degree they support the diversity principle. However, in their concern to share the Gospel, they too easily forget that as teachers they are also representatives of the State and that to seek to proselytise in the classroom is to condone a form of totalitarianism. The challenge is to develop an approach which allows the believer to hold his exclusive faith as public truth,⁹ in the sense of having universal application and relevance, without violating the secular nature of schools.

A Way Forward

Is it possible then to find a way forward for religious education which honours the diversity principle and yet allows teachers of any persuasion to teach the subject whilst remaining true to their own faith commitments? An analogy from another profession may help.

Doctors operate in a climate of often great controversy. The efficacy of a particular treatment for an illness can arouse considerable passion. After all the stakes are high when an individual's health is on the line. What then does the professional doctor do when faced with a patient with a condition where the treatment is the subject of considerable disagreement within the profession. I suggest two things, both of which are based on her concern and respect for the patient.

Firstly, she will recommend, after careful reflection on the evidence available, what she considers to be the best treatment. Only a callous person would hold back from this if she genuinely felt that this was in the patient's best interests.

⁸ See James Skillen *The Scattered Voice* (Zondervan 1990) for a discussion of this issue.

⁹ See Lesslie Newbigin *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK 1989) for a discussion of the Gospel as public truth.

However, a good doctor will also respect the fact that doctors of integrity differ on the issue and will ensure that the patient knows this. In the end it is an act of gross disrespect towards another individual not to allow them to be aware of the difference of opinion over a treatment that may radically effect their future. It is also a denial of the pluralism that, as a fact, exists within the medical profession. To behave otherwise is to play God.

Religion too is an issue of great import. It is only the apathetic who do not care at all what the children in their charge come to believe or about the manner in which they hold those beliefs. Like the good doctor, the professional teacher will take seriously his inevitable influence on those he works with, but will seek to exercise it in a responsible fashion.

Conclusion

I have already argued that to set education and theology in opposition to each other is unhelpful. So is the attempt to impose a particular theology as the norm for education. Rather, if teachers are to develop a creative alliance between their theology and the profession I suggest three strategies are essential:

1. It must be recognised that even though we all hold our theology passionately, and this is as true of the pluralist as of the evangelical, we must accept some restraint on our desire to share our beliefs with others if we are to apply our theology in education in a way that is ethically acceptable. To ask this of someone is not to ask them to compromise, or even change, their theology. It is rather to ask them to recognise that state-funded education is a particular context, which legitimately demands restraint from believers if their theology is to be successfully contextualised within it and the diversity principle upheld.

Some may doubt that an evangelical approach to theology has the resources to do this. I dispute this, although I do not have the space here to support my case. Suffice it for me to point to the literature which distinguishes evangelicalism from a fundamentalist approach.¹⁰

2. Instead of expending energy seeking to prove that any particular theology is superior as a support for education, our energies should be devoted to developing a code of conduct which will apply to everyone teaching religious education, irrespective of their personal commitments. Then the emphasis will be on responsible behaviour in the way teachers influence their pupils, rather than on trying to decide which is the most rational theology for schools to propagate.

¹⁰ An interesting case study in George Marsden's history of Fuller Theological Seminary *Reforming Fundamentalism* (Eerdmans 1987).

Elements of such codes are beginning to emerge. One example is the removal of inclusive language from the classroom in favour of what is called owning and grounding language. By this is meant that all religious beliefs are either owned by a particular individual, this is what I believe, or grounded in a particular religion, this is what evangelical Christians believe. Such phrases as 'in Britain today we believe . . .' or 'no intelligent person believes that anymore . . .' are treated as inappropriate.¹¹ Another example is the use of distancing devices in the classroom, such as pictures of children of a particular faith at worship. This encourages children to recognise the difference between their religion and that of someone else.¹²

3. Finally, all teachers will have to accept that religious education in state funded schools can only have limited objectives if it is not to become totalitarian. Seeking to persuade children of 'the truth', or encouraging them to hold 'beliefs more appropriate to the modern world', is the province of the voluntary faith community and not of government schools. Evangelisation by government employees in the name of education is a form of political abuse. Rather, schools should concentrate on promoting the legitimate concerns of government, of which I should think one of the most important is encouraging people of different religious persuasions to cooperate with each other as fellow citizens.

St. Paul exhorts Christians to be in the world but not of the world. Teachers such as Helen will continue to experience unacceptable pressures unless the Christian church can offer her ways of applying her theology so that she can 'be in the world' of secular education. To do this she will have to be prepared to meet the needs of children from a variety of faith backgrounds. Education too, however, has its part to play in allowing her the freedom to be true to her own exclusive beliefs and thereby remain 'not of the world'. It will be a sad day indeed for religious education if we force our teachers to choose between these two options rather than to retain the creative tension between them. It will be the day when religious education has ceased to grapple with the realities of its subject matter.

¹¹ Garth Read et al. *How Do I Teach RE?* pp. 60-61 (Mary Glasgow 1986).

¹² Michael Grimmit et al. *A Gift to the Child — Teachers' Source Book* pp. 10-11 (Simon & Schuster 1991).