

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Religious Education – The Present and the Future

i) The present and the recent past

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION HAS changed dramatically in most schools over the last fifteen years. The old pattern was fairly clear cut – religious education in Britain tended to be entirely Christian based and to concentrate on the New Testament with references to some selected parts of the Old. In Catholic schools there tended to be heavier emphasis on catechesis and on teachings about the sacraments as well as, possibly, the lives of certain saints. GCE R.S. ‘O’ levels, to the extent that these were relevant, tended to demand that religious education should be seen as primarily a matter of the transmission of factual material – knowledge of which could readily be examined.

Recent years have seen development in four main directions within this broad area:

1) There has been increased emphasis on biblical interpretation where pupils are expected to interpret texts and to show a knowledge of source criticism as well as the Old and New Testament allusions and connections that commentators consider are important. This has often been accompanied by an increase in course work by students where they are expected to enter into the biblical stories and possibly to re-tell them from a distinctive perspective. There has been increased attention to academic detachment in religious studies and to this extent religion has been seen as broadly similar in approach to any other academic subject.

2) Much greater attention has been paid in many schools (although in Catholic schools this has tended to be less prevalent than in Anglican, non-denominational or State schools that are not religiously affiliated) to tuition about the beliefs and practices of world religions. Many schools would regard it as unacceptable to educate children about only one of the world’s major religions and would instead expect to give pupils some insight into several major religions. This might be done by studying the beliefs of these religions but also by visiting places of worship and trying to understand the festivals that are important in different cultures.

3) Religious education has begun to be seen necessarily to involve covering central areas of ethical concern such as abortion, euthanasia, just war theory, sex and similar issues. These are being treated as of equal importance to biblical studies in many schools and students are encouraged to think issues through for themselves as well as to understand the arguments on different sides.

4) More recently, philosophy of religion has begun to be an important part of religious education in a number of schools – particularly at ‘A’ level. Students are taught philosophic skills and are helped to analyse issues such as arguments

for the existence of God, the meaning and understanding of miracles or the problems of evil. An increasing number of schools are now choosing examination boards which permit philosophy of religion to be included as one component in examinations.

In addition, of course, specific religious education courses have been designed for those students who are either not academically inclined or who choose not to take R.E. as an examination subject and much effort has been invested in making textbooks accessible and interesting.

The frontier between R.E. and P.S.E. (Personal and Social Education) in the state sector has sometimes become blurred, particularly prior to the recent legislation requiring all schools to offer religious education as part of the normal school curriculum. This legislation has led to a resurgence in religious education with questions being raised about its aims and purposes.

The most significant development, however, may have been largely unnoticed and is not yet widely accepted. It entails an entirely new way of approaching religious education and responding to the needs of students.

Traditional R.E. has concentrated on the transmission of factual information – in other words it has involved objective knowledge. This has been regarded as academically necessary as only such knowledge can be tested and students' performance evaluated. If R.E. were to be regarded as an academic subject on a par with others, then it would have to show that it adhered to the same academic standards. A GCSE in R.E. is every bit as demanding intellectually as a GCSE in geography, history or biology and it is because of this that R.E. teachers are, generally, valued members of the staff room. However, an increasing number of R.E. teachers have been asking whether this way of teaching R.E. fails to address the real issue of what religion is all about. A child may learn what Catholics believe about abortion, about the Trinity and Easter, or about the meaning of Muslim practices during Ramadan, but this largely fails to communicate what it means to be a Catholic or a Muslim.

The objective approach encourages students to stand outside the believing community and to observe. Due to the multi-cultural way that R.E. is increasingly taught, all religions tend to be regarded as something of a curiosity, which undoubtedly have meaning and purpose for those living within the faith cultures concerned but which are not directly relevant to those who 'stand outside' and who can find no neutral ground to evaluate the conflicting truth claims of the different groups. This has led to an entirely new way of approaching religious education which is called 'Affective R.E.'.

ii) Affective R.E.

The techniques used in Affective R.E. have been pioneered in the state sector and this is not a matter of chance as state sector teachers have to work hard to make R.E. relevant in the face of student apathy and, sometimes, the antipathy of other teachers to their subject.

The Affective approach concentrates on the subjective or 'feeling' side of R.E. and is pupil-centred. It might be described as taking the spiritual side of

human development seriously in the classroom. The approach arose out of the work of the Alastair Hardy Research Centre at Oxford into spiritual and religious experience and, more particularly, out of David Hay's research set out in his book *Exploring inner space*,¹ where the very wide existence of spiritual experiences (defined as an awareness of a presence or power beyond themselves) by people from all walks of life, from all religious and non-religious groupings and from all age groups was chronicled.

One of the central aims of Affective R.E. is to provide young people with space to be silent; space to look into the inner world; space to recognize their own feelings and emotions as well as space to be open to the Other – however this may be defined. Not surprisingly, this is an approach that is often greeted with suspicion. For six years I have looked at these methods which I initially approached with great scepticism and have been increasingly impressed – although the skills and dedication required by teachers using these procedures are considerable. Many techniques can be used, but two practical examples may help illustrate the approach:

1) Imagine a classroom with a group of pupils aged anywhere between eleven and sixteen. The children learn to be quiet (not an easy thing to achieve but it can be done and pupils learn to welcome this brief 'stillness period' once they overcome their initial scepticism and hilarity at the idea) and after a few minutes of silence they are asked to look at a poster at the end of the room. This shows a desert scene with rolling sand dunes and a scorching sun burning down – in the distance is a small figure. The teacher says:

'Imagine that is you in the desert you see before you. The heat is seering, there is no shade, no one else can be seen, the sand burns your feet and you are thirsty . . . You have come a long way to be here . . . How have you come? By train? . . . By car? . . . By plane? . . . Why have you come to this place? . . . You have come because you have been told that if you come to this particular spot you will be given the answer to any three questions you wish to ask . . . Think quietly to yourself and then write down the questions you would like to ask.'

After a few minutes the children are then asked to share, if they wish to do so, with their neighbour some or all of the questions. Then the teacher puts them up on the blackboard, possibly grouping some questions together – some children, of course, wish to keep their questions to themselves and this is always carefully respected.

When I first saw this exercise done I was expecting questions such as 'Who is going to win the football on Saturday?', 'What will I get for my birthday?' 'Will I get to drive a Porsche when I grow up?' However the results – based on the use of similar techniques in many schools with a wide spread of age and ability groups – were very different. Almost all the questions were serious. They raised issues with which the boys and girls were obviously greatly concerned but which

they had never had the space to articulate. Specimen questions included: 'How come there is so much suffering in the world if there's a God?'; 'What happened to my Aunt Sophie who died last week?'; 'Why has my Mum run off and left us?'; 'Is there a heaven?'; 'Why do people treat each other so badly?'; 'Why are there so many lonely people?'; 'Does my dog have a soul?' and so on. Such questions, of course, provide the trained teacher with an opportunity to address areas which the children themselves have shown are of central concern – not by 'giving the answers' but by initiating and guiding discussion so that the children can think for themselves. Obviously great care and sensitivity is required but in almost every case when I have seen the new methods used, such care has been exercised.

2) Children are invited to go on a 'still hunt'. The North American Indians sometimes do this – they go off by themselves often for several days to find a place that can speak to them in silence and they stay there so they can listen. The children are asked to go and find some place in the school grounds where they can remain silent for ten minutes and to bring something back from that place – it may be a leaf, a stone or a twig. Then they are asked to draw this and to comment on the reactions it produces. Again children who are unused to this type of exercise may find it threatening and intrusive – the older they are when they are first introduced to it, the more embarrassing they find it, but few do not get a great deal from it by skilful direction.

In both these exercises and many, many others children are allowed to be quiet and to begin to look at the world and at themselves in a different way. Normally all of us are bombarded with noise, with activity, with 'busyness' and the opportunity to slow down and to think – or to stop thinking – can be an enormous gift. W. H. Davies expressed it well when he said:

What is this life if full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?

To be quiet, to be aware of one's own inner self may be an important part of religious education yet traditionally it has not been acknowledged. Sometimes overtly religious images are used during Affective R.E. sessions such as the Buddhist wheel of life which may first be explained and then the children asked to produce their own pictures of the cosmos, or perhaps a candle surrounded by wire (although this is by now such a well-known image that it can be considered too coercive).

The problem, of course, is that such methods do not appear to fit in easily with the rest of the curriculum. Pupils are not being taught things on which they can be examined. Their activity appears to be 'useless', they are not learning factual knowledge or mastering academic skills and, indeed, some critics can see Affective R.E. as a cloak for some kind of religious indoctrination. This latter charge should never apply provided the methods are used properly, as one of the central features of Affective R.E. is that it is non-coercive. The other

challenges may be valid *if* education is regarded as solely a matter of transmitting factual information. Supporters of Affective R.E. maintain that if the 'solely factual' approach is taken a central part of religious education and, indeed, of human wholeness is being omitted.

A new handbook showing how the new methods can be applied in the classroom has recently been published, *New methods in R.E. teaching*.² This summarized the traditional approach in Catholic schools as follows:

The daily R.E. lesson in many Catholic primary schools traditionally comprised the learning of rote questions and answers from the Catechism of Christian Doctrine, reading and recalling stories from the Old and New Testament, and the learning of responses, prayers and hymns so that children could participate in an adult-orientated liturgy. (Ch 16)

The new methods do not want to reject the old but rather to supplement them. It is not a choice between the old and the new but a matter of greater attention to a holistic concept of religious education which takes the individual seriously as more than a receptor of factual information and instead sees him or her as an individual with a capacity to be open to the possibility of the Other, who needs to be brought to see the value of silence and of having space to relate to the world in a different way.

Affective R.E. is an exciting and important development. It opens up new horizons for the R.E. teacher and new challenges to develop skills which will make the new techniques possible. Nevertheless there are some genuine questions and concerns about the new methods and it is right to address these.

iii) *Affective R.E. – a critique*

The introduction to *The handbook of Affective R.E.* says:

The true intentions of the kind of religious education we are proposing are:

- 1) To show that the implicit (and in our culture usually heavily secularised) 'model of the person' that we have in our heads radically affects the way we experience and relate to the world.
- 2) To help pupils increase their awareness and appreciation of the variety of religious responses of human beings to reality.
- 3) To show that these alternative ways of being human are also personal possibilities for ourselves. (p 18)

The handbook later continues:

Words and symbols are inadequate and cannot reveal directly the reality which religions attempt to describe and lead their followers towards. All the major religious traditions are clear about the limitations of human reason and logical thought. They concentrate on the

necessity of action, of doing and of being. The learning model presented in this book follows this view, stressing practical experience, the value of intuition as well as logical thought, and direct engagement with our own learning. This applies to teachers as well as pupils. (p 21)

This is only partly right. The search for truth *is* a rational business. Catholic natural theology, for instance, has traditionally maintained that certain basic information can be found out about God by the exercise of human reason alone. In its early days Christianity formulated creeds to preserve against heresy – indeed much time and effort, perhaps too much, has been devoted to this. Intuition has value, but it can also suffer from real defects. Whose intuitions do we listen to – Charles Manson's? Peter Sutcliffe's? If we say their intuitions are as valid as anyone else's, then we are into a sea of relativism. If we say that they are not valid, then we need criteria to be able to determine which intuitions are valid.

There is a highlighted quotation in the *Affective R.E. handbook* which needs a great deal of careful thought before it is accepted: 'Experience and intuition are higher than all human reason . . . We do not understand the world when we are pondering over its problems, but when we are doing the world's work' (p 22). I am not at all sure that intuition *is* higher than human reason. Intuition has to be brought to the bar of reason and evaluated, and reason is needed in order to decide how to do the world's work. Our world today is highly complex and reason is essential if we are to solve its problems. Intuitions may lead many people to diverse and impractical solutions – reason has to be used to decide between the various possibilities.

Lying behind the new methods of Affective Religious Education are some western, liberal assumptions which need to be challenged. It is certainly right to recognize that traditional methods of R.E. have often failed seriously to address individual spiritual development or to take account of the fact that human beings have a spiritual nature. We are not merely rational animals. Kant was, in some senses at least, mistaken – religion should not be within the limits of reason alone and numinous experiences, as William James and others have chronicled, are a possibility. David Hay's pioneering work (see page 325) provides confirmation of this even though some modern writers such as Nicholas Lash in *Easter in ordinary*³ reject the view that there can be religious experiences other than experiences mediated through other human beings. Lash rejects the Cartesian dualism (of God and the world being distinct) which he maintains exists in traditional Christianity and, for instance, in Rahner's thought, and instead sees experience of God as the experience of mystery found solely within this world. Lash may well, however, not be right – certainly the great Christian mystics such as John of the Cross, Francis of Assisi, Thérèse of Lisieux, Ignatius of Loyola and many others affirm that God can be experienced by the individual directly as well as through those around us.

However it is one thing to say that religious education may have a responsibility to open children's minds to a spiritual dimension of reality, and it is quite another to affirm that all individual intuitions are equally valid.

Today we live in a multi-cultural society and it is right that religious education should recognize the complexities that this brings. We live in a world with a number of major religions, all of which have many sincere and devoted followers. This leads to a natural temptation to claim that there is no one right way to approach the transcendent or the Other – that all religions are equally valid and that claims to truth must be seen to prevail within each religious tradition rather than to judge between them. To take this view is to adopt a non-realist approach to truth (see my article in *The Way*, October 1987).

However apparently enlightened and open-minded this approach may seem to be, I believe it to be seriously flawed. In science, a realist approach to truth is widely (although admittedly not universally) seen to prevail – it is either true or false that space is curved and the $E=MC^2$. The truth or falsity of scientific statements depends on their correspondence to states of affairs that exist independently of these statements. The same may well be true in the religious field. Either Jesus was crucified under Pilate or he was not; either the statement 'God exists' – where 'God' refers to the creator and sustainer of the universe – is true or it is not; either Jesus rose from the dead as an individual on Easter Sunday or he did not. It seems to me that Paul's intuition was right – if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is essentially false. It may have interesting insights into the human condition, but at its heart it rests on a mistake. Questions of absolute truth and falsity in religion are live issues for every individual and cannot be lightly disregarded. Of course, the interpretation of many religious doctrines is complex and the above examples are simplistic; nevertheless they convey important insights about the nature of the traditional Christian truth claims.

To teach children respect for other religious traditions is undoubtedly right and it must also be right to help them challenge the assumptions of their own culture. Perhaps Christianity is false and older children should be willing to address this possibility as a live option. The issue of truth is a vital one. Coleridge put it this way: 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity and end by loving himself best of all'. To regard Christianity as simply a cultural matter which should be inculcated into children so that they can live by the rules of a cultural convention is to deny their value as human beings and is a debasement of the educational process. *Truth matters* and children must be helped to seek religious truth for themselves and to be aware of the possibility that it may lie outside their own community. In many countries this notion is rejected – in Turkey, for example, books by materialist philosophers such as Marx and Russell are banned and inculturation into Islam is the only accepted option in schools. To take this approach is to deny human worth and human responsibility and to deny individuals the possibility of coming to their own decisions. Sadly it is still an approach implicitly taken by some denominational schools in Britain.

The Affective approach to R.E., whilst immensely valuable, can when taken by itself lead to a relativism which rests on unjustified and unproven assump-

tions. The fact that many now deny that there are any ultimate truths and consider that personal intuition and religious cultural relativism rule the day does not mean these are right. Affective methods of R.E. need, therefore, to be balanced by a passionate commitment to a search for truth and this requires philosophy of religion to be taken seriously in schools.

iv) Summary

Successful religious education needs to be four-dimensional, with the balance between these dimensions varying at different stages.

a) Specific facts: the teaching of detailed factual content about the children's own religious tradition. In the case of Christianity this will include knowledge of significant parts of the Old and New Testaments and Christian or denominational rituals and beliefs.

b) General facts: the teaching of factual beliefs held by other world religions including an understanding of their major festivals, rituals and beliefs.

c) Affective R.E.: helping children to be aware of their own spiritual nature; of the place that silence can have in their lives; of the importance of a religious dimension on reality and of the possibility of an awareness of the Other. Such methods should be non-coercive and should seek to foster an awareness of a child's own 'inner space'.

d) Philosophy of religion and ethics: helping children to seek truth and to challenge their own preconceptions. This will involve providing them with the techniques and also the open-mindedness to question their own and their community's preconceptions and to think through diverse truth claims as well as to consider topical ethical issues.

One of the biggest problems in a restricted school timetable is to find space for these diverse areas. Although the Affective dimension is likely to be the one placed under the most pressure (as it does not fit easily into the academic agenda of a school) it does have an important and significant place – but it must not be allowed to dominate. Intuition must not displace truth.

One point is clear – highly skilled and motivated R.E. teachers will be needed although sadly even this is often not recognized. One large Catholic comprehensive school advertised recently for an additional R.E. teacher – no teaching qualifications were required provided the candidate could provide evidence of regular attendance at mass. Such attitudes do not begin to take seriously the excitement and challenge which Religious Education is capable of providing in the years ahead and it is likely to lead to future generations of children finding religion as boring and irrelevant a subject as many still do today.

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NOTES

¹ David Hay, *Exploring inner space* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1987).

² John Hammond, *New methods in R.E. teaching: an experiential approach* (Oliver and Boyd, 1987).

³ Nicholas Lash, *Easter in ordinary* (SCM Press, 1988).