

TEACHING THE NEW TESTAMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ONE VERY simple answer to the question, 'How do we teach the New Testament in Secondary Schools' is 'Don't'. If the New Testament, as I shall suggest shortly, is a highly sophisticated composition, and if, by virtue of the experience it expresses and demands, it is essentially an adult book, why try to teach it at all in school? Would it not suffice to mediate christian values, or rather those human values which will open our pupils to a concern for truth and for the spiritual dimension of man, and prepare them to be 'hearers of the word' in whatever form that word will later come to them? Before trying to bring into focus the question we are considering, before discussing the 'how', I ought perhaps to say why I cannot make my own the simple answer 'Don't'.

I would emphasize the importance to religious education of the total education of the personality of the child, and, therefore, of much which does not seem to have any overt or explicit reference to *religious* education. I would grant that with some groups of adolescents, and with all at some moments of their secondary school career, one can do no more than foster human values in this way; and that what one can thus do is not negligible, nor need one feel guilty or apologetic about it. But at the same time I should feel that I had betrayed them in some way if I had not done all in my power at least to open the gospels (and they need opening) to them.

If I try to analyse and express my reasons for this I find it is something to do with my faith in Jesus the Christ. We hear much these days about the enduring presence of Christ by his Spirit in the believing community. Now I, as an educator (quite apart from explicit preoccupation with religious education), am concerned with what I call the 'affirmation of individual experience in communion'. We all grant the primary importance to the individual of his or her personal inner experience. We also know, if we reflect upon it at all, how incomplete and fragmentary is our awareness of that inner experience, and how very limited our ability to express it to ourselves or communicate it to others.

How seldom are we really able to say what we mean, or express who we are. How uncertain we are of *what* we mean, of *who* we are. But how our grasp of ourselves is made more sure, how our experience is affirmed, when we find ourselves 'understood': that is, when someone has recognized our experience as echoed in some way by his own, and a communion is established in that recognition. I am teaching a third form (thirteen year olds), among others, at the moment, and three times recently it has happened that a girl has made a really original, though tentatively expressed, contribution to a class-discussion and I have found myself answering: 'I had never thought of it that way — but how right you are!' And each time I have seen the girl in question grow, as her insight was taken up and affirmed either by me, or (as markedly happened once) by the whole class. And I thought, 'Yes, this is what community is made of and is for — this cherishing of insights recognized in experience. This is communion of a kind, and it is mutual creation'. And surely this is supremely true of the community of faith. Surely there is and always has been a 'conversation in faith', a mutual affirmation in recognition of a common insight into reality through faith. True, this recognition does not always come through words, through attempts at verbalization; sometimes these seem only to divide, and it is a community of life and charity which affirms a common faith. We all need this community of faith, so that our tentative understanding and our lived relationship with Christ may be affirmed.

Nor is this communion only with the contemporary community. The New Testament is so precious to us because it is one of the means (not the only one, but a very important one) through which we enter into communion with the faith-experience of those who were better placed, historically, than we are to feel the identity of this experience of the Spirit of Christ with the knowledge of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This is so faith-affirming that even if it becomes operative, so to speak, only at rare moments of our life, it is worth a great deal of spade-work to make it possible.

'With the knowledge of the person of Jesus of Nazareth . . .'. This is the second reason why I want to open the gospels to them if I can. Essential to christianity is the belief that the creative Spirit of God found full expression in the life of a man, a first-century jew, Jesus of Nazareth. 'God has made both Lord and Christ this same Jesus whom you have crucified'. This is the fundamental assertion of the christian faith, and it is important that its historical roots be not lost. The gospels, as we know, are not simple history in the accepted sense of the word; by the very nature of their literary form they assert the identity of Jesus Christ.

So when the question is asked: 'How do we teach the New Testament in Secondary Schools?', this is why I cannot just answer: 'Don't'.

Behind the question, of course, there is a problem. New Testament scholarship in the last hundred years has radically altered our understanding of the nature of the New Testament writings. The foundations of this scholarship, indeed, lie much further back than we often think. Kummel, in his *New Testament: the history of the investigation of its problems*, is able to show how all the principles on which contemporary scholarship is based were established in essence by 1750. But things moved slowly for a long time — for historical reasons which we need not go into here. Since the beginning of this century, however, a quiet revolution has been effected among scholars in this field. In the period after World War I, form-criticism distinguished in the gospels, not consecutive and chronologically-based narratives, but collections of independent items (*pericopes*) taken from the earlier tradition, both oral and written, of the Church. These *pericopes* were apparently strung together by the evangelist with what seemed at first sight to be little or no principle of sequence, and remained as distinct and discernible as beads on a string. But the beads were not all of the same colour and material: the *pericopes* were perceived to be of different literary forms. Some were identifiable as stories from popular folk-lore; some as meditations upon scripture; some as paradigms or preaching-stories designed to illustrate and lead up to a maxim. To the dismay of many, the gospel narratives, so confidently described to this day in General Certificate of Education syllabuses as describing the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, seemed to disintegrate into fragments very much more marked by the circumstances of their transmission than we had suspected. Attempts to discern through them the *arrière-plan* of the actual life of Jesus seemed hopeless; and for a while the 'quest of the historical Jesus' was virtually abandoned. The gospels came to be perceived less as biography than as theology — the echo through the ages, the communication from age to age, of the christological faith of the early Church.

Little by little attention focused on the work of the men who had finally codified and assembled this material. Their task was seen now not as a work of reporting (which demands detachment), but as a work of editing, of redaction and of composition (which implies a principle of redaction, a point of view, an insight, a vision to be communicated). It was possible to discern, through close study, the principles which had guided this work of redaction. The evangelists no longer appeared to be mere collectors, stringing their beads together in a more or less

haphazard or vaguely chronological order on the thread of their narrative. Rather, they are perceived as men writing in a particular situation, for a particular group of people, each evangelist conveying his own particular understanding, within the Church, of the christian message, with its own particular emphasis. The fundamental insight of form-criticism into the nature of the gospels is confirmed by redaction critics: the gospels are not simple reporting, but developed reflections on the significance of Jesus for the believer in the early Church.

To what extent has this quiet revolution penetrated our schools? My experience of meeting and talking with catholic teachers in general (and indeed with non-catholic teachers too) suggests that it has penetrated them little or not at all. Many catholic teachers do not themselves possess the scholarship that would enable them to tackle this problem; others are deterred by the obvious difficulties or unconvinced of the necessity or wisdom of so doing. Is not this understanding of the New Testament, they ask, far too sophisticated and revolutionary for the average schoolboy or girl to cope with?

Do we have to try? Cannot we go on teaching the gospels as we have traditionally done, leaving modern scholarship out of it as being too speculative and sophisticated? Frankly, I don't think we can; it is much too dangerous. Fr Hubert Richards, in his latest book *The first Christmas Day*, speaks of the danger of allowing the gulf between the scholar's understanding of scripture and that of the 'simple faithful' to grow wider and wider. If there is danger in this for the adult catholic, there is greater danger for the adolescent. For the adolescent is tomorrow's catholic; and by the time he is an adult, ideas which are still regarded among us as belonging to the scholar's province will be part of the general outlook, except perhaps in the obscurantist circles of those who have been educated in catholic schools! May I draw a parallel? Ten years ago we were still sending youngsters out of our catholic schools with two mutually irreconcilable mental pictures of the first man existing side by side in their minds. One was of a fair-skinned, fair-haired, western european type who would hardly have survived without central heating the first night after the fall; the other was of a long-armed, hairy, low-browed ape-like creature, barely erect. The one image was derived from the pages of their 'Bible Histories', the other from their science and history books. By an extraordinary feat of mental departmentalization, they kept the two side by side in their minds for a while. Eventually, of course, they had to throw out one; and in a scientific age, it is not difficult to see which they were likely to throw out and what they would throw out with it. That this situation, by and large, no longer exists is

due to the courage of teachers of religious education, who, in advance of the general body of adult catholics (and of many clergy), accepted the insights of scripture scholars into the literary form of the first three chapters of Genesis, and recognized the validity for our world-outlook of a new model of the concepts of creation and original sin. Similar courage, it seems to me, must be found to transmit in our secondary schools the basic findings of up-to-date New Testament scholarship. It does not matter over-much, I suppose, if your model of atomic physics is out-of-date when you give it to your fourth form, and anachronistic by the time they are twenty; but it does matter very much if their understanding of the gospel form is so out-of-date.

How to achieve this in practice? In a paper of this kind one can but give general indications; details have to be worked out by each teacher in the context of his own school and his own natural approach to teaching. The two most sensitive moments, it seems to me, are in the first or second form (according to the maturity and ability of the class) and in the fifth (fifteen to sixteen year olds).

It has long been recognized that children in the first form of a secondary school (eleven year olds) are well disposed to receive the kind of information which will provide a background to scripture study and understanding. Studies of the life and times of Old Testament people — the life and times of the Palestine of Jesus's day — answer their interest in the way other people live or have lived, and their delight in factual information, and correlate easily with parallel studies in history and geography. This retains its importance, and its aptness for this age group. But if nothing but this is done, it may prove in the end a positive obstacle to true understanding, as by itself it tends to strengthen the impression that the gospels are the literal reporting of events in a particular historical and geographical context.

To be helped to read the gospels aright, we have to be educated to an appreciation of the reality and importance of the inner experience of men. I have myself worked, and seen worked by others, a whole series of 'lessons' with eleven to twelve year olds which aimed explicitly at this, and which I consider very much more relevant to gospel study than might at first sight appear. The course, which was spread over a term, went in outline as follows:

1. (a) We (class and teacher) look at a large evocative photograph picture, perhaps with musical accompaniment. We shall *feel* things and *think* things as we look at this picture. Feeling and thinking . . . this is called *experiencing*. Can we write down what we have experienced? We try
(Point: Experience is something that happens inside you.)

(b) We remove the picture: we close our eyes: we see it in our mind's eye: we have thoughts, and feelings. . . . We are living it all over again

(Point: We can re-live an experience in our memory.)

2. (a) The next week: the picture is no longer here. Perhaps we cannot remember it very well. We read to ourselves what we wrote last week. Now can we have those thoughts and feelings again? . . . Perhaps . . . perhaps we feel differently now or have new thoughts. . . . But we can recapture some of it

(Point: A written record can help to re-create an experience.)

(b) We read to each other what we wrote last week. In this way we share our experiences with each other.

(Point: Experience can be shared. A written record can make this possible even if conversation is not possible.)

3. We read together a written record of an earlier experience: for example the first paragraphs of *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee:

I was set down from the carrier's cart at the age of three: and there with a sense of bewilderment and terror my life in the village began.

The June grass, amongst which I stood, was taller than I was, and I wept. I had never been so close to grass before. It towered above me and all round me, each blade tattooed with tiger-skins of sunlight. It was knife-edged, dark and wicked green, thick as a forest and alive with grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like monkeys. I was lost and didn't know where to move. A tropic heat oozed up from the ground, rank with sharp odours of roots and nettles. Snow-clouds of elder-blossom banked in the sky, showering upon me the fumes and flakes of their giddy suffocation. High overhead ran frenzied larks, screaming, as though the sky were tearing apart.

For the first time in my life I was out of the sight of humans. For the first time in my life I was alone in a world whose behaviour I could neither predict nor fathom: a world of birds that squealed, of plants that stank, of insects that sprang without warning. I was lost and I did not expect to be found again. I put back my head and howled, and sun hit me smartly on the face, like a bully.

This is an experience remembered. We note such expressions as 'tiger-skins of sunlight', a 'wicked green', 'grasshoppers . . . that leapt through the air like monkeys', 'larks . . . screaming as though the sky were tearing apart' Is sunlight really made of tiger-skins? . . . Is grass wicked? . . . Are grasshoppers like monkeys? . . . Do larks scream? . . . Is all this *untrue*? No: *it is true to the experience.*

(Point: When we are writing about our experience, because it is so difficult to explain to other people how we feel, we use language differently. We use comparisons, and sometimes even stories, to convey what we mean.)

4. More sharing of experience — Write about: the most exciting . . . the most dreadful . . . the happiest . . . the scariest . . . the queerest experience you have ever had. In poetry if you like.
5. We go on a school outing. We write about it afterwards — not just about what time the bus left, etc., but about what we felt and thought. We compare accounts. They will vary — though certain things will probably occur in all the accounts.

Presume that one member of the class was away. We want to share our experience with her. Which accounts shall we send her? The neatest? The most exact account of what happened? Or the truest to our experience? And who can judge which accounts are truest? Only we whose experience it was

(*Point*: Selection according to authenticity recognized by the community.)

6. All this time we have been collecting things written or painted by members of the form (in any lesson) into THE BOOK OF FORM ONE. Enlisting the co-operation of the English teacher and the art teacher will have ensured that the book contains all kinds of 'literary forms': stories, poems, chronicles of events (that is, history), plays

We now analyse the contents of this book, which altogether give a picture of Form One. We distinguish the various literary forms, and find other examples of each in the library.

(*Point*: When a group or a people puts its experiences, record in writing, it can use different literary forms.)

7. Study of: the first heart transplant or the first space flight.

(*Point*: An experience participated in by few can be of significance to many. Events like these give rise to written reflections and expressions of experience, greatly treasured by those who could not share directly in the experience itself.)

All this constitutes a remote preparation for an understanding of the gospel *genre*. It can be made an immediate preparation if the class and the teacher are ready for its direct application. One pattern this might take is through the story of two men and an experience. (See Alan Dale: *The New World* [London, 1967], p 156: story of the two disciples going to Emmaus.)

These two men had had an experience. . . . What had they felt and thought? Why was it so shattering? Was the loss only to themselves? ('He made God real — and everybody knew it. He'd made us feel that he was the one . . .')

They meet a stranger, and share their experience with him. They have a new experience as they talk with him. Suddenly they know who he is. Why is this so shattering? Does it matter only to them?

They share this experience with others. In fact, all those who had known Jesus and believed in him shared this experience. What did they feel?

Alleluia! What did they think? Jesus is risen! Jesus is Lord! There had never been such an experience in the world before.

When the early christians shared this experience, they knew that Jesus is risen, that Jesus is Lord. And now they remembered. . . . They understood so much which they had not understood before. Jesus is Lord; this means that he has great power . . . and they remembered the day when they were with him on the sea of Galilee, and the storm had suddenly died down, and they had felt power in him. And they told the story to express their faith in his power, and their experience of the peace that he could now bring to their hearts when they were stormy with anger or fear. Jesus is Lord. This means that he has great power over the hearts of men . . . and they told the stories about this too. Jesus is Lord. This means that he understands and loves everyone

They understood now what it was he had been trying to tell them when he made them notice the care that shepherds have for their sheep

Jesus had said to the two men going to Emmaus: How slow you are to see what the bible is all about. What they had experienced was really the most important part of a long experience, in which a whole people had taken part. Like the 'Book of Form One', this people wrote all kinds of things — stories, poems . . . to express their experience. All these things together form what we call the bible.

The christian way of life is an experience. The early christians, because of their faith in Jesus, lived in a certain way; they recognized that the Spirit which moved them was the Spirit they had seen in him: they knew he was alive among them, even though he had died. They wrote his life in the light of what they now understood about him. A number of stories were current about what he had done and said, and they took these stories and used them to try to express what he had come to mean to them. Stories of his healing blind people would express how they saw life with new eyes because of him; stories of his raising the dead would express how they had come alive and were full of hope through their faith in him; stories of his walking on the waters would express how their faith in him gave them courage to walk over the uncertainties of life. . . . And so there was produced a very special kind of 'life' of Jesus, in which the account of what Jesus said and did was lit through by what they understood about the christian way of life. A number of such 'Good News proclamations' were written. Four were recognized by the christian community as true to its experience. We call them the four gospels.

This is material for the first or second year (eleven year olds plus) of the secondary school. The other moment when a direct effort is necessary to teach the literary form of the gospels is with classes (fourth or fifth forms) preparing for 'Ordinary Level' scripture examinations. All too often this examination is taken only by less intelligent children, and

is regarded as a soft option without any intellectual challenge or academic responsibility. I have found that an approach which takes form-criticism and redaction criticism into account (without necessarily using those terms) and endeavours at least to clarify the purpose and the redaction procedures of the evangelists, awakens new interest and new conviction. Yet another advantage can be found. All too often christian teachers feel that the study of the gospels for Ordinary Level examinations is nothing more than an academic exercise, with no relation to christian faith and commitment. But if the gospels appear, through a more scholarly approach, not mere biography but the faith-communication of the early Church, their study is transposed to a different depth, where some degree of personal challenge is inescapable. Of course, Ordinary Level papers, as they stand at present, do not demand such an approach. Though some questions of late allow for more sophistication, in general it still remains an examination which can be scraped through by the candidate with a good memory who merely learns the gospel text by heart! To teach as I have suggested is certainly to over-teach where the demands of the examination are concerned; but this will not do any harm. There is no need, either, to drown our pupils in meticulously-detached scholarship. Our purpose is to produce not scripture scholars, able, for example, to list all the theories that have ever been put forward on the meaning of the 'Son of Man' expressions: but christians aware that such speculation is possible because they understand the specific character and the genesis in history of the basic documents of their community of faith. Between the first/second year and the fourth/fifth, the 'gospel education' of pupils will be more indirect, depending on the choice and the treatment of whatever gospel passages are incorporated into one's teaching. Within these years, there will probably be a 'fallow period', where the development of the pupils will demand a more apparently secular approach. There will be room too, at other times, for a 'prayed' approach, in which teacher and pupils share their personal reactions to a gospel passage, the word which it speaks to each. This indirect teaching is admittedly more difficult than the more direct approach of the first or fifth years. The teacher will have to be sensitive to the capacity of each group, and make judgements on what is appropriate to the capacity of the group at any particular time. He will need also — and this is perhaps *the* factor which will contribute to his success — to have assimilated at least the main lines of contemporary scholarship and integrated its insights into his own personal understanding of the New Testament.