

# PROBLEMS AND CHANGING EMPHASES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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**T**HERE CANNOT be a religious education teacher today who is not aware both of deeply significant changes in the religious education scene over the past quarter of a century, and of the attendant difficulties that these changes have brought in their train. It is no longer a question — if indeed it ever was — of teaching a catechism, a gospel and an apologetic, and thus equipping a child for an adult christian life. The cry of a number of teachers, and of even more parents, is:

It is all very well to say that the catechism is unhelpful, that to study a gospel is to risk treating it like a set book, and that apologetics doesn't cut any ice with youngsters these days; but what are you putting in their place? What real religious education are you giving? What should we be teaching our children? What should our children know when they leave school?

In order to approach these questions, it is necessary to see what changes have taken place, and what difficulties for different people these may have given rise to.

In the first place, because what we are concerned with is — at least tacitly, but not necessarily correctly — to do primarily with schools, we must be aware in general terms of what has been happening in education. There was a time when the job of the teacher was seen principally as the passing on of the received culture. It was assumed that the knowledge, ideals and values of his generation were those which were proper to give to the next. While it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that the phrase, 'But we've always done it this way', summarizes accurately the attitude to education at that time, there is at least an element of truth in such a description. Hillard wrote his books in eighteen hundred and something, and Messrs North and Botting each had a go at perfecting them for generations of schoolboys. Text books were written to last. Education (in so far as this was synonymous with teaching) was largely static. And so were the pupils — they sat in their

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serried ranks, their desks firmly bolted to the floor, while the teacher very properly was on his dais, dispensing knowledge, judgment and discipline with equal impartiality.

Much has happened to upset this straightforward approach to education in the classroom. Curriculum development — what really is appropriate for these pupils to study? — has played its part; as has the enormous advance in knowledge, especially scientific knowledge. A better understanding of child and adolescent psychology has caused educationalists to examine premises which formerly had been accepted as incontrovertible. In particular, primary schools, due partly to the lack of pressure from examinations, and relying considerably on the work of the child-psychologists and the educational philosophers, have been experimenting with great freedom and success. In a nutshell (and obviously the following phrase represents a gross over-simplification of their approach), they suggest that all education should be a process of 'discovery, discussion and doing'. In other words, a child is best helped to an adult maturity by finding things out for himself in so far as this is possible, rather than simply by being told; by examining the evidence critically and assessing it for himself, rather than by having judgments made for him; and by being actively involved in the process, rather than by being regarded as a plastic individual ready to be formed by his teacher.

Such an approach to education is readily accepted by both pupil and teacher; and whatever may be its inherent dangers, it makes for greater freedom, growth, individuality, self-discipline, as well as for easier relationships between children and staff than was usually possible before. This must have its effect on the sort of religious education that is going to be possible; a teacher cannot change his approach to teaching from one period to another. If he encourages critical evaluation and discussion before lunch in his history class, he cannot change to a closed, uncritical and authoritarian approach after lunch in his religious education class: not at least without doing damage both to himself and to his pupils.

What happens in school is not merely dependent on what the theoreticians have to say, but is to a large extent a reflection of what is happening in the world at large. In school and out of school the attitudes of youngsters have changed enormously. They appear to be maturing earlier than formerly. They show a far greater concern for the world-situation than their parents did at their age; many of them have abandoned the happy-go-lucky attitude to life that used to be fairly typical of the teenager, in favour of a greater seriousness and desire for responsibility.

They are no longer prepared to accept rules and regulations more or less without question, but want the whys and wherefores of the situation fully spelt out. Freedom has become a watchword for them, to the extent that law and authority are seen not so much as safeguards for the proper development of society, but as threats to the autonomy of the individual. At the same time they are subject to — and react to — the considerable pressures of the society to which they belong; the 'teenage culture' is a reality which they cannot ignore; they are bombarded from all sides with invitations to buy the best hi-fi set, the latest fashion in jeans, the most tantalizing hair spray or after-shave lotion, the special cut-price electronic gadget — and they have the money to heed these invitations. In spite of, or perhaps because of, these pressures to accept materialistic values, considerable numbers of youngsters are searching for spiritual values; there is in evidence a quite genuine movement towards prayer, especially towards those forms of prayer which are apparently not part of the normal practice of the established religions. There are many, also, who are looking for a way of life which will be for them authentically christian.

Structures, too, have changed, in ways that will have their effect on the kind of education that will be possible and desirable. In particular there appear to be different groupings in society, in which the place of the family is far less clearly seen. Not so long ago the family spread its influence wide: uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents were often within hailing distance for advice, encouragement or consolation. Members of a family are now frequently a long way from each other (in more senses than one); paradoxically one of the main reasons for this is the increased ease of communications (in one sense only). This separation of the family leads to the need for greater independence of thought and action, coupled with less security; it may also lead to the discovery of the need for deep friendships outside the immediate family, though whether in fact it does this is open to question.

There are signs that the nature and influence of the parish is changing. The parish as it has been inherited is a small-town structure transplanted into the city. At one time parishioners felt a close allegiance to their parish, and the parish clergy were the source of everything from the sacraments to social benefits. Much has happened to change the situation: the growth in the size of cities and the consequent decrease in the sense of belonging; the mobility of the population (there are some London parishes where the turnover of population may be 30% or more per annum); the decrease in the number of clergy relative to the number of parishes to be served; the growing feeling among clergy that

specialized ministries within the priesthood have their part to play alongside the traditional parochial ministry; the developments in secondary education since 1944, which have meant the disappearance of the all-age parochial elementary school and the emergence of a system of relatively large secondary schools which may draw their pupils from half a dozen to two dozen or more different parishes. The influence of the parish on young people is on the wane. There are probably few secondary school pupils in the large cities who would regard their parish as a central influence in their lives.

Within the Church herself the changes that have taken place since the mid-fifties have had an inevitable effect on religious education. It is sufficient to mention some of the areas of development: theology, scripture and liturgy; moral teaching (and especially the approach to moral teaching); social teaching (*Pacem in terris* and *Populorum progressio* are every bit as significant as *Humanae vitae*); the progress and understanding of ecumenism; and the understanding and practice of authority. One can appreciate the unsettling impact these developments must have had on those who had grown up with the idea that in all respects the Church was unchanging. *Semper eadem* may be an easy concept to hold on to (superficially at least); *semper reformanda* may be a correspondingly difficult concept to accept, because it demands that one must be prepared to grow, and growth involves pruning.

Another area of change which must be mentioned — indeed in many ways the biggest area of all — is that of the secular society in which we live. In this might be singled out three dependent strands of influence — politics, economics and technology. Without attempting to go into any detail, one can merely note that each of these strands tugs very hard at the educational scene: it is undeniable that educational theory has to some extent depended on political viewpoints, that educational possibilities have been stringently determined by economic conditions, and that educational techniques are continually modified by technological inventiveness. More important, perhaps, than this obvious relationship with education, is the more general influence these strands have on public behaviour and attitudes; it would be interesting to be able to trace the relationship between, for example, current political and economic attitudes and current attitudes towards public morality.

The world in which pupils, teachers and parents live will have a cardinal effect on approaches to education, the content of the curriculum, the methodology of teaching, the structure of the school, college or university, and the authority of the home. What may be said of education in general applies particularly to religious education. Not

all the changes indicated above may be wholly admirable. That is beside the point. What is important is that these and other similar changes have taken place, and that they create new situations and new difficulties in the educational scene. The educational practitioner must, so far as he is able, take account of these in planning his work and how he is going to do it.

So far as the pupil is concerned, there is a host of demanding and very often conflicting problems. He is deeply concerned — even, some would say, obsessed — with the need for relevance in what he does and is taught; hence the importance of re-examining the curriculum, in which there is still so much dead wood. He takes as an absolute requirement in a teacher his complete sincerity, and regards hypocrisy in any form (and especially in questions of religion) as the ultimate sin. He looks for credibility in what he is taught. This is not to say, for example, that he rejects the miraculous out of hand, but that he must be presented with the miraculous in a credible context. He is deeply aware of his own doubt and ignorance, but finds it hard to admit this to anyone but himself. There is a conflict in him between the desire to be an individual and the need to be a conformist. He is looking for community with no strings attached; he wants security and at the same time freedom from constraint. He is aware of the need to pray, but regards many traditional forms of prayer as hypocritical. He comments on the contrast between worship in school and in parish — very often to the latter's disadvantage.

The teacher's principal difficulty is to know to what extent it is proper for him to attempt to express his own faith; or to put this slightly differently, to know to what extent his own faith is the faith of the Church. It is relatively easy for him to teach purely and simply in the language of, for example, the Councils, but in doing this is he doing justice either to the faith of the Church, or to the needs of his pupils, or is he merely playing safe? Whatever he does he takes a risk: either the risk that his pupils will not grasp what is the faith of the Church because the language of academic theology means nothing to them, or the risk of misrepresenting the faith of the Church because the comprehensible language he uses expresses the teaching either inadequately or incorrectly. A teacher is essentially an interpreter, otherwise he is simply a teaching machine; and as an interpreter it is difficult, or perhaps impossible, for him to know precisely the place of speculation in his teaching. His problem is, as for his pupils, his own ignorance and doubt, and the need he has for security. He sees through a glass darkly and wonders if he is seeing correctly.

Moreover the school teacher is sometimes in doubt about his role, especially when he is faced with this particular group of pupils, as many as half of whom may be non-practising and apparently non-believing. Is his task that of the evangelist? Should he be mainly concerned with pre-catechesis? Is he present as a catechist? Does he have a counselling role? In practice it may well be that he does not advert to these different roles in such precise terms; none the less he cannot fail to be aware of the enormously different levels of faith among his pupils, and that this creates great difficulties for him.

To help him in his work, the teacher looks for support. He hopes to find support from within his own school; but may discover that once he has got inside the classroom he is to all intents and purposes on his own, with little guidance from the rest of the department. He expects, too, to obtain help from books; but at the secondary level, at any rate, he finds that there are few books and materials which are more than marginally helpful. If he asks the deceptively simple question, 'What should the pupils know by the time they leave school?', he discovers that no one is prepared to tell him in cut-and-dried terms, and it takes a great act of faith for him to be able to accept that his question may not have a clear answer. The teacher, in other words, can easily feel isolated, insecure and unsure, in a way that a decade or two ago he would not have felt; the changes have hit him hard.

Parents have the same problems as teachers, with the additional worry that 'they don't teach them anything at school these days'. The language and expectations of a religious education programme appear to be so different today to what they used to be that parents may feel cut off from the school and somewhat threatened. A sense of continuity has been lost because their children are unable to express their faith in the brief catechism-type answers that the parents learnt as children. They are finding, too, that many of the questions their own sons and daughters are asking are questions which the parents have never thought — or dared — to put to themselves. Not only are they unable to cope with some of the questioning, but they feel that their authority as parents is in some way being undermined. And if their children stop practising, there is the heart-searching question parents ask of themselves: 'Where have we gone wrong?'

Presumably none of these problems is totally new, but the circumstances of the age seem to have sharpened them and to have brought them into greater prominence. Moreover they seem to suggest certain fresh emphases in our approach to religious education; which will be the subject of the second part of this paper.

## CHANGING EMPHASES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TODAY

*Knowledge*

Traditionally, education has been regarded as having as one of its principal objects the acquisition of knowledge and of the skills of reasoning and judgment which enable the pupil to advance from the known to the unknown. Theology is a science, and religious education (instruction) attempted to follow the same scientific pattern. Facts carry with them, it was said, certain unchanging values and ideals, and the task of the educator was to transmit these facts, along with their attendant values, to his pupils. Such an approach lays great stress on both external and internal authority: the authority of the teacher, and the primacy of reason. The teacher conveyed and explained the facts, and by reason one could then arrive at truth. One implication of this emphasis is that an individual could, at any rate theoretically, educate himself. If he had available the necessary sources of information, and could by practising and testing himself so improve his powers of reasoning, he had potentially to hand all that he needed to know truth.

While one cannot deny and must not minimize the importance of knowledge, one must distinguish between the knowledge that is merely in the mind — that as it were resides in the mind as a lodger; and the knowledge that is possessed so that it has in some way become a part of the whole person who knows — in such a fashion that he is a different person as a result of his knowledge. To take a simple example, a person may know intellectually that it is wrong to lie and yet be unchanged by such knowledge; when, however, he is really possessed of the importance of truth, he knows in a quite different sense that it is wrong to lie, and he is changed as a result of such knowledge. The difficulty is that possession of knowledge does not necessarily follow from the acquisition of the facts at the level of intellect; and, indeed, the possession of knowledge may precede intelligent grasp of the facts. A person may have an instinctive regard for truth that is quite independent of a rational appreciation of facts. Consequently it appears that, however important knowledge of certain facts may be, what is more important is the depth with which this knowledge is grasped. To know truths abstractly, purely in the mind, is not to have a real knowledge of truth, because a man is not a pure intellect but a creature with 'mind, heart and hand', who needs to experience truth at every level of his being — conceptually, emotionally and physically; in other words, as a person.

*Truth and community*

One might, then, describe education (and *par excellence* religious education) as that process by which the individual comes to the possession of truth, or by which he makes truth his own. The substitution of the word 'truth' for 'knowledge' is clearly deliberate — the emphasis is taken away from the purely conceptual and points more towards the activities of the whole person. Moreover, if one accepts that truth is not an abstract quality, but is in some fashion a lived experience, a second emphasis is stressed, namely that education cannot be conceived of as the activity of an isolated individual. No one can be genuinely self-educated. On the contrary, education must necessarily be part of a community experience. While knowledge may be found in the pages of a book or acquired through the services of a teaching machine, truth can only be discovered through a process of personal growth, through the persons whom I know, and within the group to which I belong. For example, a teacher may produce for his pupil a quite admirable description of what love is, and may read him sonnets galore about love, but all this will mean nothing if the pupil has never experienced love in his own life. There is a passage in a book called *I am David*, by Anne Holm, where the twelve year old boy who has lived all his life in the dull, drab, painful surroundings of a concentration camp finds himself on a cliff overlooking the Adriatic: he sees the grass, the wild flowers, the glistening sea, the deep azure of the sky, and he feels the sun warm on his back, and he exclaims: 'So this is what beauty is!' Those of us who have had the experience of celebrating the liturgy with groups of youngsters in informal surroundings must frequently have met the reaction: 'But I never realized what Mass was about before'. These are the sort of lived experiences without which concepts are meaningless.

For the christian teacher today, it seems that there is a great emphasis on the revelatory nature of all truth, and on the community nature of education. For the christian, the world is created by God as an expression of his Word; the world itself is an expression of truth. Moreover the world is created for God, and is redeemed; it is thus purposeful for man's destiny — man cannot grow to fulness without belonging fully to the world. The world, too, has been transformed by God's entry into it, and so along with man the world evolves to a more perfect expression of its creator. The christian believes that his task is to possess the truth according to the possibilities that are open to him, and that this grasp, while a grasp of an objective reality, is at the same time



a personal and individual grasp. He accepts that all truth is an expression of an ultimate truth, however unknowable, inexpressible or incomprehensible this truth may be in essence. And he believes that it is not by unaided reason that he may come to possession of truth, but by living within a community which mediates the truth to him: in other words, by living within a community of faith.

### *Thematic teaching*

If the world in which we and our pupils live were a community of faith, perhaps there would be no problems with religious education. But we know well enough that this is not the situation. The pressures against living as a community at all, let alone as a community of faith, are at times almost insurmountable. An emphasis in religious education today which takes account of this may be summed up in the phrase, 'life situation'. We live in this world, in a certain place and at a certain time, and this space-time condition is one that determines to a very large measure what we can do. J. Audinet defines catechesis as that 'ministry of the Church by which a human group is enabled to interpret, to live and to express its life situation in the light of God's word'. The presumption is that in any human process the individual starts from where he is. The starting point for any growth in faith, knowledge, attitude or experience, is the faith already possessed, the knowledge already grasped, the attitude already practised, the experience already appreciated. In other words the starting point is the present situation.

The importance of religious education being related to the life situation is stressed in the Italian Catechetical Directory, now adopted in England as the official guide for catechists, *Teaching the Faith: the new way*.<sup>1</sup> There we read: 'Any divorce of faith from life represents a grave risk for the christian'; 'Anyone wishing to have an effective discussion about God with the man of today, must have human problems as his starting point, and he must always keep them in mind as he communicates his message'. Education of faith must reach men 'in the context of the place and time of their activities, that is in the concrete situations of their everyday lives'. The stress is made not because the pupils will otherwise fail to listen (though that may well be true), but because of the need for relevance. Religion is to do with daily living; if we live in an incarnational world, everything can speak to us of God. An international group of theologians meeting in Brussels some years ago commented that God's word would have no meaning if it was not also

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<sup>1</sup> London, 1973.

a revelation to us about the meaning of life. One is reminded, too, of Newman's quotation of St Ambrose: 'Not by conceptual analysis did God will to save his people'. Religious education must begin and end with ordinary day-to-day living; only in this way is it possible for youngsters to grasp that almost hackneyed phrase, 'religion is life'.

The process suggested by Audinet's definition is threefold. The catechesis begins with as rich as possible a reflection on, and interpretation of, a human experience — for example the experience in daily life of dying (unselfishness, choosing the harder option, admitting one's failure). There is then an attempt to discover the deeper significance and ultimate fulfilment of this experience in the light of the gospel (if any man would save his life he must first of all lose it). Then with the discovery of the relevance of God's word to life there is the possibility of living this experience at a deeper level in full accord with faith. And, incidentally, this may be the only way in which the real meaning of Christ's resurrection will become significant to the pupils. The word of God and the teaching of the Church are essential for religious education, but on their own cannot provide it; the experience of daily living is the only context in which the word of God can take root. No one could pretend that the process is an easy one to pursue, but it seems to be the right one to attempt to follow.

There are certain fairly obvious pitfalls to avoid in teaching in this way, which a number of the proponents of thematic teaching appear on occasion to fall into. One is to fail to do more than to deepen the pupil's ideas at the level of his own experience: in other words to fail to take account of the theme 'in the light of God's word'. It is possible to spend a great deal of time exploring, for instance, the idea of water, without at any stage coming to a real understanding of the meaning of christian baptism. Another error to avoid is that of presuming, perhaps unconsciously, that the process is a completely logical one, and that if one does the job thoroughly and reasonably one is bound at the end to arrive at a deeper perception of some aspect of God's living. The process is not a logical one, but rests in the end on the illumination of faith. This points again to the fact that religious education can only properly take place within a community of faith.

The object of religious education is to possess truth, to know God. We appreciate that there is a growth in knowledge, and that now we only know dimly and imperfectly; we do not see God face to face, but know him through faith and through the totality of our experience. The purpose of theme-teaching is to show that the daily experience of man is potentially an experience of God, and so to enable the pupil to

raise his life to a higher pitch. There are two tools that the educator must be prepared to use with great freedom if he is to be able to do this. They are well-tried tools which have unfortunately been largely lost sight of by many teachers: analogy and parable.

One of the faults of some approaches to teaching religion has been to imagine that theological definitions are adequate to describe God and his activity, and consequently to make religious education over-dependent on theological formulae. The theologian and the teacher are doing quite different jobs: as different as is the work of the biochemist and the jobbing gardener. Each needs the other, but neither is wholly dependent on the other. They have different objectives, work in different media, and use different tools. The teacher's task is to discover in this or that situation an analogy of some aspect of God's life ('I am the light of the world'); the theologian's task is to try to abstract from the analogy the reality it displays, so as to express the truth methodically in an intellectual framework. Analogy speaks to the whole man in the context of his experience; theological definition speaks to the reason. The teacher says this is what God is like; the theologian says this is what God is (or what God is not).

Most people live at a fairly superficial level. A religious education attempts to look below the surface and, hence, help us to enrich our lives. One of the tools with which this may be done is the parable, through which can be discovered a greater depth to a situation than is immediately apparent, and in which there is usually an element of timeless appositeness. It was certainly no accident that Jesus taught almost exclusively in parables. 'The reason I talk to them in parables is that they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding',<sup>2</sup> and this is precisely how many people look and listen; the vision and words simply rest vaguely on the surface of the mind, and are in no way possessed. Talking in parables enables listeners to reflect on what is said, without their being forced to accept a cut and dried understanding; a parable can appeal to every age group, and the individual may draw from it what he will. The story will be a simple one about everyday things; indeed this is part of the strength of the parable. It is about daily situations with which the listener may identify, and is not a story about a shadowy make-believe land. In each case the listener is invited to draw from his understanding of the story some perception of who God is, how he acts, and what God expects of him: 'This is what the kingdom of heaven is like. . . .' 'So will your Father

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<sup>2</sup> Mt 13, 13.

in heaven. . . . 'Go and do likewise. . . .' Again we can note the recurrence of the word 'like', which is a word that should be part of every teacher's vocabulary. It is a word that can give great confidence to his pupils, because it invites them to search. If there is any doubt expressed in the word, it is only the doubt of the poet who knows that no words can really fathom the depth of the experience he wants to relate, and who therefore arranges his words in such a way that they are free to express themselves to those who have ears to hear with. 'Thy word is all, if we could spell'.<sup>3</sup>

*A summary*

It has been suggested above that the changing pattern of society as evidenced by changes in approaches to education, in the attitudes of youngsters, in social attitudes and structures, and in the Church, give rise to — or accentuate — certain problems in religious education; and that these problems exist for all those involved in religious education — pupils, teachers, parents, priests. As a result of these changes and their attendant problems, it seems that certain attitudes and ideas about religious education are currently emphasized. These may be summarized in the following sentences:

The object of a religious education is the possession of truth.

All truth is a species of revelation.

Truth must be experienced in some way before it can be possessed.

Truth is given and received within a community.

All education is a community process.

Religious education can only take place within a community of faith.

Religious education is concerned with the whole person: with his concepts, emotions and activities.

Religious education begins and ends with daily living.

The burden on the religious educator is by no means lessened by these changing emphases; indeed his task is more demanding than ever. None the less the signs are that, whatever the failures, there is a renaissance of religious education in many of our schools, and that this new birth of interest and vitality is spreading outside schools to that sphere to which all catechesis should be related, adult education. A successful entry into this field would be a great and worthwhile achievement.

<sup>3</sup> George Herbert: *The Flower*.