

RELIGION AS A CLASSROOM SUBJECT

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TO PUT IT that way, 'Religion as a classroom subject', sounds a bit odd; not only unusual, but logically odd as well. For we are apt to think of religion in universal and absolute terms, as a reality 'caught not taught' which cannot be confined in a strait-jacket of chalk and talk, lesson-notes, time-tables, syllabuses and curriculum-planning. Harold Loukes¹ wrote of the content of religious education as 'the depth, the realization of everything, the experience of the whole, the living and the human'. And, lest we should imagine that only liberal protestants think this way, let us set beside his words those from the *General Catechetical Directory*:

For every man whose mind is open to the message of the gospel, catechesis is a particularly apt means for him to understand God's plan in his own life and to examine the highest meaning of existence and history, so that the life of individual men and of society may be illumined by the light of the kingdom of God and be conformed to its demands, and the mystery of the Church as the community of those who believe in the gospel may be able to be recognized.²

These olympian ideas are difficult to wing and bring to earth. Yet, if religion is to be taught in the classroom, it has to submit to those limitations and structures which make class-teaching possible. The phrase 'religion as an occupation' is a similar case. It strikes an odd and jarring note. Yet if some people are to spend all their time on religious matters, then professional considerations, job-satisfaction, salaries and pensions must count for something as well as liturgy and Divine Providence.

A century ago, this logical oddness did not exist. Religion appeared then as an established body of knowledge which stood alongside other established disciplines and formed the basis of the curriculum. So Newman could discuss theology in relation to other subjects as the basis of a unified educational programme. But now religion is a rather shadowy presence in the intellectual market-place. Moreover,

¹ Loukes, H.: *New Ground in Christian Education* (London, 1965), p 148.

² Sacred Congregation for the Clergy: *The General Catechetical Directory* (Catholic Truth Society trans., London, 1973).

many would argue that the basis of its place in the curriculum is not religious knowledge or even understanding. They would say that it is 'appreciating religious experience' or 'making a free and informed commitment' or 'developing a mature faith'. A different model of the curriculum is being used. It is not based on an established house of intellect with different areas of knowledge related to each other in a single framework. It looks rather to individual and social needs. It does not assume that educational purposes will follow the pattern of organized academic knowledge. A secure lodging for religion in this curriculum structure is much more difficult to find.

It is my contention that, in recent developments in religious education, too many large abstract words, too many high-level vague ideas have been used without their meaning being clearly defined or their implications worked out. Examples are the word *kerygma*, the word 'relationship' and the word 'experience'. I do not doubt that these words represent valid and important ideas. But I think that they have not been pursued systematically into the content, methods and structures of the religious curriculum. There has been an absence of lower-range questions, like: Is it possible or desirable to preach the Lord's *kerygma* in the classroom?: What kinds of teaching are likely to promote relationships?: Are all experiences of equal worth or do they come in different kinds? Consequently there is a poor logical connection between these large, rather vague ideas and the reality of the text-book and the classroom. Where there is a lack of connection between aims and actualities, there develops the lack of a sense of purpose: as a faulty connection brings electric current to the bulb only in fitful bursts.

I hope in this paper to make a little progress with the questions: what is the status of religious education in the school curriculum?, and given that this can be answered with some clarity, with the logically consequent question: what are its aims?, I hope to avoid the subtleties and the jargon of the recently and rapidly developed body of curriculum theory. That theory none the less is the framework within which I am working. It requires that the aims of the curriculum be thought out in a broadly philosophical way, yet in a form definite enough for the aims to be teased out into more specific objectives. These need not be strictly behavioural but they must be concrete enough to guide the construction of curricular material. The first question then, is that of justification: what is the case for the evaluation of religion in school education? The second question is one of taxonomy: can its place be systematically worked out in terms of curriculum-design?

I turn then to the first question: is religious education possible? I do not mean of course, is it possible as a matter of empirical fact. There is a story of an American revivalist preacher who leaned over a fence and asked an old negro hoeing the cotton: 'Brother, do you believe in baptism?' 'Why sure I believe in baptism', came the reply, 'I've seen it done'. We have all seen religious education done. Or at least we have seen something which we would describe as religious education going on. My question rather is the logical one: can we show that religious education is not a contradiction in terms? Can we give an account of religion and of education to show that the two are not logically incompatible? For some would argue that while religion can rightly be connected with training or even with socialization, education is a process with which it is not compatible unless it is treated objectively — as in comparative religion or the history of the Church.

Let us examine the two concepts and try to see whether this is so. I am content for the moment, to accept the established view of education proposed by R. S. Peters, Paul Hirst and others in a number of books.³ According to this view, an activity, if it is to count as education, must meet three criteria. First it must be an initiation into some worthwhile area of knowledge or experience. Worthwhileness is the most difficult factor to account for. Maybe it must depend upon a common and perhaps a temporary view of life. At present we would say that it would allow science and music, but exclude necromancy and shove-halfpenny. Secondly the activity must be set in a rational tradition. It must include reason and reasonableness in some way, even though it is not essentially an intellectual activity. So we would have to exclude behavioural therapy and track-training, on the grounds that they are mechanical or unconscious. Thirdly it must promote independence of mind. Conditioning or indoctrination would not meet this criteria because they both try, in different ways, to set up patterns of behaviour which will be proof against critical thought. Which account of religion, if any, will meet these three criteria?

Before I discuss two or three recent accounts, I note the striking fact that accounts given from *within* religion are especially difficult to reconcile with them. The words of the *General Catechetical Directory*, 'a form of the ministry of the word intended to make men's faith alive and active through the light of instruction',⁴ offer one example. For the ideas of ministry and faith seem at odds both with the criteria of

³ Cf, for example, Hirst, P. and Peters, R. S.: *The Logic of Education* (London, 1970).

⁴ *General Catechetical Directory*, 17.

reasonableness and with that of independence of mind. So we have the odd situation of having to rely on accounts which treat religion as an objective phenomenon; those of unbelievers or those of believers prepared to discount, for the time, the inner logic of their faith. It is easy enough to see why this is so. Those who wish to justify the place of religion in the curriculum will tend to set it on all fours with physics or social studies. They will tend to present it as a discipline, an area of experience or a realm of meaning open to investigation like any other. They will be reluctant to draw on private understandings which might be thought subjective or partisan or outside the forum of public check and control. This tendency is understandable and reasonable. Nevertheless, I do not think we should be too ready to abandon accounts of religion which come from inside the world of faith. I shall return to this point later.

I wish now to discuss three accounts of religion and its place in education. Each of them gives it a place in the curriculum which has a different rationale. Consequently each proposes different aims. The first of the three is that offered by John Wilson in *Education in Religion and the Emotions*.⁵ According to this view, the defining characteristic of religion is its connection with the emotion of awe. We are in awe of large, powerful and mysterious things, like thunderstorms, volcanoes or the sea; and of the superhuman powers which rightly or wrongly we believe to underlie them. Awe leads characteristically to worship. Religion, according to this definition, can be identified wherever awe and worship exist, from the greek worship of Poseidon and the animism of primitive tribes, to the much more refined and rational objects of orthodox christianity.

Most christians, and especially catholics, will find this account inadequate and unsatisfactory for several reasons. It does, however, set in high relief a weakness very typical of traditional catholic life. The weakness is the tendency to set up an entirely rational scheme, as though the essence of religion were a systematic corpus of doctrines. Wilson's thesis rightly recalls us to the recognition of the important link between religious education and the education of the emotions. We have sometimes treated the emotions as though they were superficial feelings which floated on the surface of life. They are really a much deeper and more important part of our human endowment. When Pascal spoke of 'the hearthaving its reasons', he was not referring to anything sentimental or irrational. He meant a way of apprehending and responding to

⁵ Wilson, J.: *Education in Religion and the Emotions* (London, 1971).

reality: a way certainly subjective and highly personal, but not necessarily out of touch with rational and objective facts. Wilson also sees emotion as related to cognition. Awe involves not just raw feeling but also certain facts and beliefs about its object. One of the chief aims of emotional education will be to develop an appropriateness between the feeling and its object; so that we are not irrationally afraid or unreasonably guilty, but are afraid only of what is really fearful, guilty about what is really wrong and in awe only of what is in the old sense of the word, 'awful' — *mysterium tremendum, numinosum et fascinans*.

For the moment, I will offer only one criticism of Wilson's account, and that a purely logical one. It is that the definition attempts to be too comprehensive in trying to include every possible instance of 'religion', including Poseidon and nature-worship. An adequate complex concept does not need to include every possible example. For there is loose usage. There are aberrations. There is also a mainstream of meaning. If this can be identified, other uses of the term can be left outside. If religion (or anything else for that matter) is too broadly defined, it ceases to mean very much; and it becomes impossible to go about living it or teaching it clearly. This is the case (a logical not an ideological one) to be brought against the inclusion in the religious curriculum of what humanists call 'non-religious stances', or of Marxism. It is not primarily that these things are subversive or are not worthwhile. It is rather that if we expand the frontiers of 'religion' indefinitely, shortly we shall not know where we are.

This consideration brings me neatly to my second account of religion, for here the word is defined more precisely and more narrowly. I take as a 'case' of this view, a popular book by Michael Grimmitt, called *What can I do in R.E.*⁶ It is true that what Grimmitt says about the essence of religion is rather thin. Rather than define it like Wilson in terms of the emotion of awe, he seems to take Tillich's concept of 'ultimacy' as the root one. But he achieves precision by adopting the six dimensions of religion proposed by Professor Ninian Smart, as the ways in which the ultimate mystery is expressed. These dimensions are the mythological, the doctrinal, the ethical, the ritual, the experiential and the social. They constitute a much more adequate account of religion than the earlier one, though it has to be said that not every religion manifests all these dimensions, and that, in some religions, one dimension seems to dominate. Still they do provide already a basis and aims for the religious curriculum.

⁶ Grimmitt, M.: *What can I do in R.E.?* (London, 1973).

It will set out to initiate children into all the dimensions of religion in a rational way which promotes independence of mind. Thus it will meet all the criteria of education, provided that, to safeguard the third one, no one religion is favoured but material is drawn impartially from a number of them. It is important to notice the difference between this idea and the teaching of comparative religion. The latter is an objective study of religion. This approach sets out to be an education *in* religion. It tries to help the children to feel their way into different aspects of religious life, teacher and pupils joining for the moment in a willing suspension of disbelief. It is an important idea, already carefully formulated through the massive research and development of the Lancaster project made popular and influential through the *Schools' Council Working Paper*, 36,⁷ and rapidly becoming the new orthodoxy for religious education in county schools. In religious education in a Church context, we have nothing that even comes near to matching it. Indeed very many of our difficulties in religious education stem precisely from the lack of a comprehensive and systematic theory such as this. I should like none the less, with respect and with some trepidation, to offer three reasons why I cannot accept the thesis which Michael Grimmitt sets out.

My first quarrel with him concerns his distinction between the confessional, neo-confessional and phenomenological approaches. The first teaches one particular religious faith as true. The second favours one particular faith while acknowledging the value of others. The third shakes free entirely of commitment to any specific belief or content. It initiates generally into the world of religious life, drawing on whatever material is most appropriate. It is, Grimmitt argues, 'unbiased' or 'non-partisan', and it alone can count as education within the meaning of the Act. There are two points about this thesis which seem to me questionable. The first is the use of the category of the 'neo-confessional' within which most of the religious education which goes on at present would probably fall. Grimmitt includes in it what might be called broad-minded christian education — the gospel and the Church made relevant to the modern world. But he also includes the implicit religious approach; the view taken by Harold Loukes⁸ and also, I think, from very different premisses, by Gabriel Moran:⁹ the view that religion is co-extensive with experience when that is appreciated in some depth.

⁷ *Schools' Council Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (London, 1971).

⁸ Loukes, *op. cit.*

⁹ Cf Moran, G.: *Vision and Tactics*, ch 1 and 2 (London/New York, 1968).

Now these are two very different things, and the way in which they are bundled together suggests to me that the three categories themselves are rather imprecise, and that the aims which they adopt need a more careful analysis.

The second point I wish to raise concerns the logical reason why it is maintained that only the non-partisan, phenomenological approach can be accurately called education. The reason seems to be that the other two — confessional and neo-confessional — infringe the second and third criteria. They are not set in a rational tradition, nor do they promote independence of mind. I do not see why this is logically necessary. Christianity, at least, with its long and strong tradition of theology and apologetics, can hardly be denied the title of rational. Moreover, although much christian education may not, as a matter of empirical fact, have shown much respect for autonomy or independence of mind, this again does not seem to be a matter of logical necessity. For it is perfectly possible to conceive a style of christian education which would allow room for the development of critical thought within a community and a tradition of faith. Moreover, it is arguable that a decision against faith is only properly rational and responsible when it is made from the experience of a community of faith, from having known it from the inside; and this is a point I shall return to in my next section. My point here in brief is that the logical connection between the demands of education and non-confessionality is a weak one. It would be perfectly possible logically to initiate children into the several dimensions of religious life in an educational way, while presupposing commitment to and choosing material from a particular religious tradition: Christianity, Judaism or Islam. The real reason, I think, for insisting on non-confessionality is a rather vague desire to avoid indoctrination, plus the particular difficulties of religious education in a society whose religious outlook is pluralist and secular. To clarify and to meet those reasons would take me outside the scope of this argument.

My second objection to the Smart-Grimmitt thesis concerns the idea of a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Both Wilson and Grimmitt are at pains to argue that they are not recommending comparative religion, and they are anxious to forestall the many objections to the introduction of that study in schools. They maintain that it is perfectly possible for a teacher who does not hold a particular faith to enter into the experience of it and to help his pupils to do the same. So they would deny the principle that only the insider can properly understand the game. Wilson puts the point piquantly. He says that you might as well argue

that only a teacher who has lived in stuart England could effectively teach the history of the period. However, I do not think the analogy holds. The reason is that there is in religion a quality of ultimacy which is not present in history or the arts. Religion entails a moral commitment which is not merely a consequence but is a part of the act of faith itself. St Paul's phrase, 'doing truth', catches this point. So does Newman's remark in the *Grammar of Assent*¹⁰ that 'the real safeguard of faith is a right state of heart'. There is in religious understanding a complex interweaving of reason, emotion and moral commitment. It is for this reason that the insider, perhaps only the insider, sees most of the game. It is this fact which justifies, even educationally, religious education within a community of faith.

My third objection is that the religious dimensions in this thesis are placed on all fours with each other. Yet they are in any religious system closely interrelated. Each has a different function, some have a predominance. In christianity, I should like to underline the importance of the doctrinal dimension. It has no absolute primacy. But it does have a controlling function. Doctrine ensures the unity of the Church. It enables it to survive the variety of culture and of language. It ensures continuity and identity. Again in the field of emotion, as observed earlier, emotion has a 'cognitive core'. This is not to reduce emotion to cognition. It is to insist that emotion must have an appropriate 'target'. In dealing with the religious emotions, this again emphasizes the controlling function of reason and of doctrinal formulations. It seems to me that after ten years of eclipse it is time to look again at the question of the teaching of doctrine. It is a difficult problem, but it seems to me very necessary to tackle it. There is some parallel here with the teaching and learning of language. For some years, the more systematic cognitive aspects of this — learning to spell for instance or learning grammar — have been submerged in a flood-tide of creative writing. The theory is that these abilities are learned incidentally. In practice this does not always happen. So, a new concern has grown up with finding new ways of teaching these abilities. No doubt what will emerge will be very different from old-style spelling and grammar lessons. But the function is the same. The necessity of learning these abilities explicitly is once more recognized. In a similar way, good doctrinal teaching will be very different from old-style parrot learning of doctrinal formulas. As the grammar lesson is based on a grammar of function, so doctrinal teaching will be based on the function of doctrine in the life of the Church and

¹⁰ Newman, J. H.: *University Sermons* (London, 1971), p 239.

of the individual christian. It will be enlightened by what we know now about the effective teaching and learning of cognitive material. Perhaps a properly systematic approach to it might provide a new impetus and a new interest in what will certainly be a difficult task. For, as Baron von Hügel observed, 'Reasoning would appear to be the transferable part of the process but not to move us; and experience alone to have the moving power but not to be transmissible'. Doctrinal teaching will always be difficult from the point of view of interest and motivation. A new attempt at it would have to be carefully worked out and properly based on its relationship with other aspects of religious life. In suggesting that this should be done, I am not returning to the view that the substance of religious education is a body of doctrinal knowledge. I am arguing that doctrine is one indispensable and neglected part of religious education and religious life. Moreover the learning of it is particularly appropriate to the school, a place concerned centrally though not exclusively with promoting knowledge.

Let me summarize at this point the phenomenological theory of religious education. It is a massive and impressive case: philosophized by Ninian Smart, made concrete and practical by Michael Grimmitt, given an official benediction by the *Schools' Council Working Paper*. We who are concerned with religious education in a Church context would be foolish to ignore it. We have nothing which even remotely matches it. Yet, as David took his slingshot to Goliath, even the isolated individual may find a weak spot in its forehead. I find three logical weak spots in it. First, the identification of 'educational' with 'non-confessional' is at least not proven. Secondly, the 'empathetic' method which envisages the learning of religion by a temporary suspension of disbelief, may, in religious matters, not be possible. Thirdly, there is a case for saying that the 'religious dimensions' central to this approach, are not on level-pegging with each other, but have different functions within a total scheme. If this is so, then the conclusions for the religious curriculum will be very different from those which Michael Grimmitt draws in his book.

Finally I wish to consider briefly an alternative and very different thesis put forward by W. D. Hudson, in *New Essays in the Philosophy of Education*.¹¹ Hudson also addresses himself first to the same question, what is religion?, and consequently, what is the basis of its place in the

¹¹ Hudson, W. D.: 'Is Religious Education Possible?', in *New Essays in Philosophy of Education* (ed. Longford and O'Connor, London, 1973).

school curriculum? His reply is that the concept of religion, and consequently the universe of discourse which we can accurately describe as religions, has two defining characteristics. The first is that it accepts the concept of God which he defines as 'transcendent consciousness and agency with which the believer, as such, has to do'. The second is that it uses a particular style of language. To characterize this, Hudson adopts from his namesake, J. L. Hudson, the category of 'performative' language; he means the kind of language which in some way brings about what it expresses. Examples are: the phrase 'I will' in the marriage ceremony, or the phrase 'I name this ship' in a launching ceremony. So religion has a conceptual content, all of which is logically related to the idea of God. It also uses a style of language which expresses an active relationship with God, which, like a sacrament, enacts what it signifies. These two aspects of religion Hudson describes as 'theology' and 'devotion'. Taken in the sense in which he means them, they circumscribe religious discourse and religious life. Religious education must work within these limits, given that the criteria of rationality and of autonomy are observed. Therefore if you abandon the concept of God, or if you abandon this style of language, you are no longer engaging in religious education, though of course you may be engaging in education of some other kind.

This is plainly a narrower and more precise definition of religion, as well as a more traditional one. It would not leave much place for the study of marxism or for comparative education or even for the phenomenological approach which does leave room for non-religious stances. These matters might well be taken up in social or liberal or environmental studies, and then might be related to the religious curriculum itself in various ways. It is a definition which has the virtue of not bending over backwards to include every possible case. It also throws light on some of the problems which I have raised earlier, especially on the questions concerned with 'confessionality'. For if this definition is right, then religious education not only can but must be in some sense confessional. It must confess God — its theological element; and it must confess him in an involved or committed way — its devotional element. Confessionality, it suggests, is not a black and white affair; it is a matter of degree. Any dealing with religion involves some limits. The dimensions of Smart and Grimmitt set the limits very wide, they would allow most organized ideologies in the concept. Wilson, with his defining concept of awe, sets the bounds wider still and wider; Hudson argues that the limits should be more narrowly prescribed. All are agreed that religious education must allow for the criteria of rationality and

independence of mind. But where you draw the logical limits of religious discourse itself remains an open question.

I can now state, though very briefly and rather tentatively, my own position. There are elements in all the three theories which I think to be valid. From John Wilson I adopt the importance of the emotions in religious education and the idea of promoting an appropriateness between our feelings and their 'targets'. From Smart and Grimmitt, I accept the six dimensions of religious life and readily adopt them as the basis of the religious curriculum. From Hudson, I draw the lesson that the logic of religion demands that its limits are not drawn too broadly, lest in trying to include everything it ends up by meaning nothing.

I go on now, although extremely briefly and inadequately, to the second question, the question of taxonomy: how to formulate, from this body of theory, aims for religious education precise enough to be teased out into specific objectives and eventually into teaching material. I propose five principles from which these aims can be deduced. First, religious education should initiate children into all the dimensions of religious life. So, learning doctrine, studying scripture, experiencing liturgy and belonging to a religious community are all valid parts of the substance of religious education. Secondly, there is no logical requirement that these dimensions should be treated as though they were of equal value. So a religious curriculum could, for instance, reasonably allow a controlling interest to the doctrinal dimension. Thirdly, educational criteria do not rule out that teaching and learning might go on in a climate of commitment. Education can occur within a community of faith. But fourthly, the criteria of education do require that religion be rationally presented. Especially it is important that the curriculum distinguish between belief and fact, and not confuse religious and scientific certainties. And, finally, the teaching must be done in such a way that children's minds are not closed. It is this effort to shore up religious belief by irrational means against subsequent criticism: it is this rather than the nature of the material itself that really constitutes indoctrination.

There are two final points. The first is to forestall an obvious objection to the case which I have been making out: that what I have said is logically tidy but runs counter to practical experience. To confine the religious curriculum rather more narrowly, to urge the teaching of explicitly religious material in however enlightened a way, will, it might be argued, put the children off. In a secular world, they do not take kindly to religious ideas or religious language. Better to attempt to deepen their grasp of secular experience and hope that

religious understanding based on that will grow. I admit readily that I have been concerned mainly with logical considerations rather than with empirical facts, interest or motivation. It may be that these are so at odds with the logic of the case as to change the principles of the curriculum completely. On the other hand, logic has its own value in education. It may also be true that motivational difficulties stem not only from the pressures of a secularized world, but also from the vagueness and lack of inner coherence of the religious curriculum itself. A well-constructed curriculum generates its own dynamism. Its purposefulness is an inbuilt motivation. If we could offer that, perhaps it would be a very different story.

Finally it may be said that to define narrowly the limits of the religious curriculum is to narrow down the scope of the Church school. This, I agree, is true. Schools cannot work miracles. There are some things in religious education which they can do well. Others lie beyond their scope. It is important at present to define as clearly as possible what, religiously speaking, the school can reasonably be expected to achieve. Beyond that, we must mobilize the other educational potential of our Church, which is very considerable. We must try to involve the whole of our church community in the task of religious education. It is as a contribution to this larger strategy that I hope that this consideration of the limits and possibilities of religion as a classroom subject may be of some value.