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'Christian Education': A Contradiction in Terms?

In this paper, the first of four given at the Victoria Institute's Symposium on Education on 6 Feb. 1971 in London, Professor Hirst, then Professor of Education at King's College, London, expresses himself vigorously and provocatively. With no shadow of doubt he lets it be known that in his view a 'Christian Education' is neither a reality nor even a possibility. Even to speak of it is as absurd as to speak of 'Christian farming' or 'Christian mathematics'. Institutions for Christian commitment have their legitimate place, but not in the class room or assembly hall!

The central thesis of this paper is that there has already emerged in our society a view of education, a concept of education, which makes the whole idea of "Christian Education" a kind of nonsense, and the search for a Christian approach to, or philosophy of, education a huge mistake. From this point of view the idea that there is a characteristically or distinctively Christian form of education seems just as much a mistake as the idea that there is a distinctively Christian form of mathematics, of engineering or of farming. In mathematics, engineering and farming we have developed activities in which what is right or wrong, or good or bad, of its kind, is determined by rational principles which make the activity what it is. Mathematical proofs must be judged right or wrong according to the principles of mathematical reasoning. A bridge to stay up in a gale must be designed strictly according to the principles of

engineering. A particular use of land which reduces it to a dust bowl is bad farming judged by the principles of farming. And the principles that govern these matters of mathematics, engineering and farming, are neither Christian nor non-Christian, neither for Christianity nor against Christianity. Nor is anything in these areas decided properly by appeal to Christian tradition, the Christian scriptures or anything else of that kind.

Once of course this was not so. Man's view of the physical world and how to cope with it in practical affairs, was at least in part determined by his religious beliefs. It was not thought possible to attain the relevant knowledge on autonomous, independent, rational grounds. But the pursuits I have mentioned have now been recognised as legitimately autonomous and an exactly similar status is, I suggest, quite properly coming to be accorded to education. Here too, we are progressively coming to understand that the issues must be settled independently of any questions of religious beliefs.

Long before I came to this conclusion, that judging what is good or bad in education has nothing to do with whether one is a Christian, a Humanist or a Buddhist, I suspected that there was something wrong with the whole idea of Christian Education, but could not put my finger on the real cause of my unease. I recognised that what one is offered under this label is often very dubious from both an educational and indeed from a Christian point of view. Much of it is based on very general moral principles, backed by perhaps Scripture or Christian tradition, which, having little or no explicit educational content, are applied to educational problems in a highly debatable way. It is not uncommon to hear it argued that Christians, convinced of the value of personal relationships, must clearly object to any school of above 500 pupils. One is sometimes assured in the name of Christianity, that comprehensivization is a wicked thing, and that specialization in the sixth form is equally deplorable. But clearly the general moral principles that people use to back up these beliefs about education do not alone determine any particular, practically relevant, educational principles. To get these one must consider equally important matters of

psychological and sociological fact, the structure of our social institutions, the availability of money and manpower, and so on. All these and many other considerations must enter into the discussion before one can move from very general principles of a moral kind, to specific educational recommendations, and it is on just these particular considerations that ideas of so-called Christian Education are often quite indefensible. The main point to be noted however, is that none of these considerations has anything to do with Christian beliefs. What is more it seems to me the general principles on which the whole exercise is based are usually not in any sense significantly Christian either, though people might appeal to Christian texts, or Christian tradition in support of them. Working from this end of general moral principles, I suggest that one simply cannot produce anything that is in any significant sense a distinctive Christian view of education.

But if one tries to work from the other end, formulating educational principles from what is specifically said in Scripture about education, one seems to run into an equally impossible situation. If you take what the Bible says about punishment and discipline, and try to compose some general educational principle from this, you will not, I think, get very far. To take ideas of social control out of a Biblical, social context, and transfer them directly to an East End school in our twentieth century industrial society is patently ludicrous. Christians of any intelligence have long since recognised the need to disentangle within Biblical teaching the general principles that can be legitimately applied in our own context from the practices justifiable only in the social and cultural circumstances of Biblical times. The problem then is how to abstract the principles without entering on inconclusive debate about Biblical interpretation. If that hurdle is surmounted is one likely to achieve much that is both educationally significant and distinctively Christian? I think not. And even if one does get so far, how much agreement can there be amongst Christians on particular applications of these principles? Experience suggests very little if any. On these grounds I concluded long ago, that much as one might

like to find a Biblical or Christian view of education, it isn't discoverable. Not because I saw anything wrong with the idea in principle, but because in practice it seems to be the case that one just cannot produce anything of substance that deserves to be labelled a Christian view of education.

Such a conclusion is clearly unpalatable to those Christians who are convinced of the total sufficiency of Biblical revelation for the conduct of all human affairs in all places and at all times. I suggest, however that the conclusion is valid, and that the people who hold the contrary view should rethink what they understand by the sufficiency of Biblical revelation in these matters. It seems to me that as a matter of fact the Bible is insufficient in what it implies for education today and that if crudely interpreted and crudely applied its teaching is positively dangerous.

But if I once thought that the *pursuit* of a distinctively Christian form of education is in principle satisfactory, I have now come to the conclusion that even that is not so. Let me approach this issue by voicing a possible reaction to what I have already argued. It might be said in reply that surely I have wrecked my case by vastly overstating it. If we cannot get an all embracing view of Christian Education that tells us what to do about comprehensivization, the curriculum, how to teach history, or even whether we ought to have compulsory education, surely there are some things in education on which Christians and, say, Humanists would disagree. If so, does it not follow that there is *in part* a distinctively Christian concept of education, one which is distinguishable from other views at least in these particular areas if not in others? If one cannot get everything necessary for educational practise from Christian teaching, surely one can get *something*, and something distinctive. Well, if so, what? The most likely answer a Christian will give is that surely he will want his children brought up in the Christian faith, that the Humanist, say, will certainly not want that, and that in this respect, their ideas of the content of education will be radically different. At this point, however, a very important shift can occur in the whole discussion, for another Christian may well say that the last thing one should do as

part of *education*, is to bring up a child in any faith, even the Christian faith. This second Christian would maintain that communicating our understanding of the Christian faith is a legitimate part of education, and with that many Humanists in our society might well agree, whereas bringing a child up in any particular faith is not what *education* is about. What we have here are two quite different views of education. According to the first, it is concerned with passing on to children what we believe, so that they in their turn come to believe it to be true. According to the second view, education should not be determined by what any group simply believes, but by what on publicly acknowledged rational grounds we can claim to know and understand.

The first of these concepts of education I shall call the primitive concept, for it clearly expresses the view of education a primitive tribe might have, when it seeks to pass on to the next generation its rituals, its ways of farming and so on, according to its own customs and beliefs. Whatever is held by the group to be true or valuable, simply because it is held to be true or valuable, is what is passed on so that it comes to be held as true and valuable by others in their turn. On this view, clearly there can be a Christian concept of education, one based on what Christians hold to be true and valuable in education, according to which Christians seek that the next generation shall think likewise. Similarly there can be a Humanist or a Buddhist concept, indeed there will be as many concepts of education as there are systems of beliefs and values, concepts overlapping in character in so far as the beliefs and values of the different groups overlap.

The second view of education is much more sophisticated, arising from a recognition that not all the things held to be true or valuable by a group are of the same status. Some of their claims and activities will be rationally defensible on objective grounds, whereas others, perhaps held equally tenaciously, may on objective grounds be highly debatable. Some may in fact be matters of nothing but mere custom and tradition. Once it is fully recognised that the belief that something is true, even if that belief is universal, does not of itself make it true, a new principle emerges for carefully

assessing what we pass on to others and how we wish them to regard it. That we hold something to be true or valuable is of itself no reason why anyone else should so regard it. That something can, on the appropriate objective grounds, be shown to be true or reasonable is a very good reason for passing it on to others. But even then what we must surely seek is that they will hold it not because we hold it, but because there are objective grounds. Only then will they be prepared to reconsider, and where necessary revise, their beliefs and practices when new evidence and better arguments arise.

The second, sophisticated view of education is thus concerned with passing on beliefs and practices according to, and together with, their objective status. It is dominated by a concern for knowledge, for truth, for reasons, distinguishing these clearly from mere belief, conjecture and subjective preference. On this view, when science is taught, its methods and procedures are seen to be as important as any contemporary, for these may in significant respects have to be changed. In history, pupils are introduced to examining evidence so that they come to recognise that claims about what happened must satisfy the canons of historical scholarship. Where there is dispute, debate and divergence of opinion this fact is taught. Where in any area there do not seem to be agreed objective principles of judgment, exactly that is what is taught. Of course, mistakes will be made in seeking to follow as closely as possible the ideals of objectivity and reason, but education committed to these ends will be very different from education determined by the particular beliefs and values of a limited group.

On this second view the character of education is not settled by any appeal to Christian, Humanist or Buddhist beliefs. Such an appeal is illegitimate, for the basis is logically more fundamental, being found in the canons of objectivity and reason, canons against which Christian, Humanist and Buddhist beliefs must, in their turn and in the appropriate way be assessed. When the domain of religious beliefs is so manifestly one in which there are at present no clearly recognisable objective grounds for judging claims, to base education on any such claims would be to forsake the

pursuit of objectivity, however firm our commitment might be to any one set of such beliefs. Indeed an education based on a concern for objectivity and reason, far from allying itself with any specific religious claims, must involve teaching the radically controversial character of all such claims. An understanding of religious claims it can perfectly well aim at, but commitment to any one set, in the interests of objectivity it cannot either assume or pursue.

I hope it will not be thought that in the forgoing I have been maintaining something that is necessarily either anti- or un-Christian. I see no reason to think anything I have said is incompatible with any religious position in which truth and objectivity matter, and I am taking it that Christianity at any rate is concerned with asserting truths about what is, in an appropriate sense, objectively the case. If, of course, Christianity is itself held to be in some sense a-rational, irrational or anti-rational then contradictions there certainly are. But then the trouble is, I can see no *reason* why anyone should take such religious claims seriously. Certainly I personally am not prepared to base my life on the glaring contradictions such an approach involves.

It might however be objected by some that my whole argument is based on the thesis that there exist vast areas of knowledge and understanding using concepts and canons of thought, objective in character and in no way connected with religious beliefs. This they would deny, insisting that in all areas of knowledge one is necessarily involved in presuppositions of a religious nature. In history, literature or even science one cannot, it is said, escape these elements and certainly in teaching these matters one's commitment necessarily infects all one does. To argue thus is indeed to deny the whole autonomy thesis on which my case rests, but such a denial seems to me so patently false that I find it hard to understand what is being maintained. In what way is mathematics supposed to depend on Christian principles? Its concepts and forms of argument seem to me to be totally devoid of religious reference. Nor do I understand what is meant by saying that science rests on Christian presuppositions, when the tests for its claims are ultimately matters

of sense observation. Scientific terms have meaning and criteria of application which are not connected with religious concepts of any sort. They are in this sense autonomous and scientific understanding is therefore of its nature autonomous. To maintain that it was only in a context of Christian belief that science did in fact arise, even if true, does not affect the nature of the activity of science at all. The pursuit is perfectly compatible with quite other beliefs, as is obvious in the present day, and nothing by way of historical, sociological or psychological analysis can in any way deny the claim that the concepts and principles of science are in no sense logically connected with Christian beliefs. That there is here an autonomous domain of knowledge and understanding seems to me indisputable. And surely this is why what matters in science, as in any other pursuit, is the mastery of its own logical and methodological principles, not holding any particular religious beliefs.

But it might be objected that if science is autonomous, historical studies are not, for an understanding of say the Reformation must be either Catholic or Protestant. Yet surely even this is an unacceptable claim if it is intended to deny the objectivity of contemporary historical scholarship. What matters is truth based on evidence, irrespective of the particular religious beliefs of the *scholar*: indeed these are nowadays recognised as an irrelevance, it is the justice to the historical data that counts. The idea of coming to a situation to interpret it from a set of beliefs to which one subscribes, is to reject the demand of historical scholarship. What is true of historical studies is, I suggest, also true of literary and even religious studies. I see no reason why there should not be, and indeed there is already being practised, an objective study of religions in which the particular religious beliefs of students are an irrelevant consideration. To understand beliefs or actions does not necessitate that one either accepts or approves of them and to teach for such an understanding demands acceptance or approval of them by neither teacher nor pupil.

But even if the autonomy thesis is accepted, and it is granted that something called education could be planned and

conducted in terms of the second sophisticated concept that I outlined, it might still be argued that this would be undesirable. If education can be understood in two senses, either in the primitive sense of simply passing on beliefs and practices or in the sophisticated sense of passing on knowledge and understanding and reason, why should we not stick to the first which can take on a distinctively Christian form?

In the first place, I suggest the sophisticated concept is important because it provides a clear and to my mind appropriate demarkation for the educational functions of State run institutions. I personally hold that it is quite improper for State institutions to align themselves with any religious group and in particular to take over any of the affairs that properly belong to the Christian Church. The function of the State in religious matters should not, I think, be one of taking any side on issues of so controversial a nature, but the more objective function of preserving freedom and liberty. This is to suggest that there are many areas of life from which the State should keep clear and that in education it should not act outside a domain in which objectivity and reason govern all that is done. This would then leave to the Church, the home and other social agencies those matters which might figure in a concept of education in the first or primitive sense, which could not figure in the sophisticated concept. Bringing up a child in a particular faith is thus seen as the proper concern of the home or Church but not of the State school. It is seen as an element in education in the first of my two senses but not in the second.

Simply to suggest that education in the second sense is appropriate for State schools does however seem to imply that education in the first sense is nevertheless a thoroughly coherent and acceptable concept which can properly be applied in a context wider than or outside the State school. With that conclusion I am however far from happy. For, is bringing up children so that they believe what we believe, *education* in any sense that is nowadays acceptable? Indeed I suggest that this pursuit is in fact now increasingly considered immoral, wherever it is conducted. What I want

for a child, whether he is at home, in Church or at a State school, is that he shall come to believe what there are reasons for believing, accept what there are reasons for accepting and commit himself to nothing simply because I say so. Of course in his early years he may accept things in this way, but what one is trying to develop in education is an autonomous human being who will be responsible for his own judgments as far as he can, certainly on controversial issues of importance to him. It seems incumbent upon me then in home and Church as much as in school, to be as objective as I can about all matters. In so far then as education in the first sense goes beyond concern for objectivity and reason, be it conducted in the home or the Church, I am against it. I am therefore rejecting the moral acceptability of anything which falls under the first concept of education but not under the second. But in that case, the whole idea of Christian education is one I am rejecting, for I wish to resist the suggestion that it should be conducted anywhere.

But, you might say, that is surely to ask too much. What would be the difference between the State school and the Church and the home in their educational functions if none of them went beyond the measured, objective consideration of different religions? In their *educational* function there should I think be no difference. Yet the home and the Church do have other functions that do not run counter to education in the objective sense. Clearly, in areas where there is radical debate on matters which are of enormous importance for peoples' lives, we have by definition issues which cannot be fully settled simply on objective, rational grounds that are recognisable as such by all reasonable men. The whole domain of reasoning in politics, for instance, is one in which rational men disagree, and we accept that they will in all honesty disagree. There are institutions where political matters can be taught from an objective point of view, and I trust this is what we do in school. But we also consider it proper for there to be institutions concerned with promoting and developing particular political beliefs. What they seek is not in any sense anti- or irrational, but commitment, in that people come to a decision however difficult, on highly important issues. In a

similar way, in addition to objective education in religious matters, there is surely a proper area for other religious concerns, that do not run counter to the interest of education. The significance of religious commitment, on matters on which equally reasonable men differ, can be considerable. There is thus a manifold need for institutions in which men can explore to the full and act together according to the beliefs they hold, and through which they can also seek to present and commend to others what they hold to be true. In the Church and the home, children and others are faced with just these aspects of religious belief and commitment. Provided they are introduced to them in a way that does not oppose the development of rational beliefs, there is no need for any conflict with the interests of education in my second sense. But what we should call these quite proper activities, in which religious and political groups seek to commend their beliefs and practices to others, I am not sure. The term education is I suggest inappropriate. My first sense of that term is so broad that it includes not only these quite proper activities, but also others which I have argued are morally indefensible. My second sense of the term is so specific that it excludes these proper activities. To seek to form a third concept of education lying between these two, covering both this category of proper activities and those of education in the second sense, would, I suggest do us all a dis-service.

At present the concept of education in our society is moving clearly towards my second sense, a sense so valuable in its central demarcatory function, that it would seem to me most important to hang on to this notion. In so far as we do that, there can be no such thing as Christian Education. Not that there is any necessary contradiction between Christian beliefs and education in this sense, provided Christian beliefs form a rationally coherent system. It is rather that the term education is being used to pick out activities that can be characterised independently of any religious reference.

I conclude, then, that we have now reached a stage in the development of our grasp of what education might or might not, ought or ought not to, include, that the notion of Christian

Education is properly regarded as an anachronism. If that is so Christians working in education would do well to follow the example of those working in engineering or farming, who simply get on with mastering the non-religious principles of their own professional business. And if that seems to be asking for a divorce between one's Christian beliefs and one's professional practice, I can only suggest that any rationally coherent approach to the Christian faith must see it as perfectly consistent with the knowledge and understanding that man has amassed on autonomous grounds.