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Christianity and the Boarding School

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THE aim of this article is to approach the subject of education and Christianity from as practical a point of view as possible. Its scope is limited to boarding schools, first because the writer thinks that the boarding schools are one of the most potent forces for Christianity in the country to-day, even though no more than two per cent of the population can attend them, and secondly because the writer's own experience is confined to boarding schools for boys of the ages thirteen to eighteen. The day school has its own part to play, and much that is said here will apply equally to it.

The school is the third stage in the widening life of the human being. His horizon is first bounded by his mother, secondly by the family into which he is born, thirdly by the school he attends, and finally by the adult community of which he becomes a full member (the second and third stages of course overlap). It is impertinent of those who address boys at school to confine the word "life" to the fourth stage and to speak of the other three merely as preparation for it. The adult stage is perhaps only the most important because it is the longest. To the human being each stage is "life", and the basic human needs of each stage are the same, namely, a framework of security, outlets for adventure, and the exercise of some responsibility.¹ The boarding school is particularly suited to satisfy these needs. It is a community with a closed life of its own coming midway in size between the family and adult life and serving as the best bridge between the two. Its size is such that none is lost in it, and this combined with its routine and discipline provides the sense of security. Its activities can be far more varied than in the home and can explore ground that would be inaccessible there. It offers the experience of personal relationships with a larger number of contemporaries than the home can, as well as opportunities of exercising social responsibility and of learning to lead through learning to be led. The boy learns to lose his self-centredness now that he is one of many and no longer the child in the centre of his family's attention. He is introduced to the manifold experiences of life in a community of his own level and not in a world where the adult sets the pace and reigns supreme.

To those who think that a Christian home is one of the most valuable influences in life the importance of the school being Christian need hardly be argued, and it may further be said that, unless these two early environments of the growing person are Christian, there is no hope of the adult world being Christian. Here, too, the Christian school is the vital bridge. The Christian influences of the home can be continued and their implications seen in a wider framework. At the same time the framework is narrower than that of the adult world,

¹ C. M. Fleming, *The Social Psychology of Education*, p. 16.

and the Christian life can be demonstrated in a context where everyone can know everyone else ; so that relationships do not become so impersonalised as in the modern world with its supra-national relationships, where what is done by a group of people in one country may harm people in another country of whom they have never heard ; and so that the Christian institutions and worship do not become confined to a separate department of life but are central and relevant to all that is going on. Throughout history, since Christ called out His band of apostles to live a common life with each other, it is religious communities which have shown the Christian life in its fullest flower, from which men have gone out with inspiration and power to serve and influence the larger world. Christian schools can be such communities to-day.

I.

The question will at once be asked whether the schools of this country are, in fact, having such an influence by demonstrating the Christian life in practice and sending out missionaries of the faith. It is true that most of the boarding schools have specifically Christian foundations and proclaim Christian intentions. One of the chief arguments which is stated in favour of their continued independent existence is their claim that they are fitted best to provide a truly religious education,² and we find the demand for such an education echoed in passages from government reports such as the following : " People in general . . . are very conscious that there is something missing, and that their lives lack purpose and meaning. There is a general acceptance of the Christian ethical standard as the highest teaching known to men. There is a vague but widespread desire that the young people shall not miss that which somehow their elders have missed, and which does give value to life. And there is evidence from the higher schools, the Universities, and various student and youth associations that among the young there is a movement of minds impatient of bare formalities yet eager for the truth, a feeling after God if haply they may find Him."³

Religious education may, however, be something very different from Christian education. Donald Hughes has emphasised that all education rightly viewed is religious, just as all religion is a form of education : " Education is concerned with nothing less than the whole man : of all activities it is the most truly religious . . . Education that is less than religion is less than education."⁴ The questions to be decided are, first, what religion is to inform our education and, secondly, if it is to be Christianity, what meaning of that widely-used word is meant.

From looking at the boarding schools of this country to-day it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, so far from showing the Christian life in its essence as a pattern to the world outside, they have taken

² Board of Education, *Report on the Public Schools*, 1942, p. 49.

³ Board of Education, *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools*, p. 84.

⁴ Donald Hughes, *Some Educational Foundations*, p. 11.

from the world outside the debased version which goes by the name of Christianity but which, when stripped of its nomenclature, is seen to be that secular humanism which is the Christian faith's most potent rival in the modern world. For many years the popular appreciation of the Christian faith has been confined to its ethic, and, in the vain hope of achieving its standards without giving any attention to, for instance, the reality of sin and the necessity of personal commitment to Jesus Christ, people have been trying to live on the spiritual capital and example of their ancestors and a few of their contemporaries. The schools, with their emphasis on character-training and service, have tended, also, to miss the essentials and the phrase "public school religion" has, in fact, been coined to describe the "good-chap-who-plays-the-game" type of sermon which is so common in school chapels.

Professor M. V. C. Jeffreys writes : "There is a general belief that our culture and civilisation cannot be properly understood without some knowledge of Christianity, and also that religious teaching is of practical value because it has 'a powerful effect on life and character'". It is, in short, a view of religion which is pragmatist and humanistic, conceived in terms of man's spiritual aspiration and moral progress, and with little or no discernment of the central truth of Christianity that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"; a view that finds explicit reference to Christ and Christianity embarrassing, and prefers a broad-minded and well-educated eclecticism that leaves everyone free to make things mean what he likes. What is lacking is the distinctive note of personal salvation which is at the heart of the Christian experience and is expressed, for example, in the Collect for Ash Wednesday : "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of Thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord." The truth is that, in spite of the European adoption of the Christian religion, the prevailing cultural tradition of the west has been Hellenic rather than Biblical. To our Hellenic heritage we owe our belief in the self-sufficiency of human reason and virtue, and therefore our 'ethical' view of religion and personal character."⁵ He shows how frequently this view of religious education is expressed in government reports. For instance, from the 1943 White Paper : "There has been a very general wish, not confined to representatives of the Churches, that religious education should be given a more definite place in the life and work of the schools, springing from the desire to revive the spiritual and personal values in our society and in our national tradition."⁶ The viewpoint of almost all books on education is man-centred and not God-centred, and much religious education, even when it calls itself Christian, would be better described as humanist, for it is concerned with man's self-betterment and ignores his need of salvation.

What sort of school, then, has the right to the name Christian?

⁵ M. V. C. Jeffreys, *Education, Christian or Pagan*, p. 23.

⁶ Board of Education, White Paper, 1943, para. 36.

The rest of this article will attempt to give some indication of the answer. But at once it must be said that all schools differ from one another, because they are communities of living persons which grow and change from moment to moment, and that any type of school may claim the name Christian, because, to quote Professor Jeffreys again, "There is no such thing as Christian education, just as there is no such thing as Christian agriculture. There is good farming and bad farming, good education and bad education . . . Christian education is simply good education carried on by Christians . . . If we start from the claims of Christianity we find ourselves committed to enlightened principles of education and, if we follow out faithfully the implications of our acknowledged educational principles, we find ourselves committed to nothing less than Christianity."⁷

II.

The teacher who has himself experienced the futility of self-effort and has received the forgiveness of Christ and the new life of personal faith in Him knows that he is called to be a fellow-worker with God. Persons whom God has created with a purpose for eternal life and has endowed with individual gifts are growing up in ignorance of Him and His purpose and in misuse of His gifts. God's will is that they should find life and find it in abundance. But how shall they hear without a preacher and how shall they learn without a teacher? The Christian teacher knows that God needs him first to proclaim the Gospel message to those who are growing up with self in the centre of their picture, so that God may give them forgiveness and new life, and secondly to help them develop the gifts with which God has endowed them, the gifts of character, mind and physical strength, so that God may give them the life abundant, which consists in the enjoyment of those gifts when they are brought to full fruition by God's use of them for His own purposes. Life and the life abundant are not reached by natural growth but are the result of conversion, which need not be sudden but must be definite, in that it involves the turning from the self-centred life which is natural to the human being's growth and the enthronement of Christ at the centre. Conversion is the work of God, but God uses human agency.

Next to a Christian home there can be no agency better suited to be used in this work of God than the Christian boarding school, which has its boys for the four or five years of adolescence. Experience has proved that these are the years when conversion comes most easily. William James has written : "Conversion is in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity."⁸ Professor Olive Wheeler, in a recent book, describes an investigation in which, out of 186 young people who were questioned about their experiences at this age, 164 spoke of a religious experience of some sort, and she writes : "The generalisation that an awakening to the

⁷ M. V. C. Jeffreys, *Education, Christian or Pagan*, pp. 37, 40.

⁸ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 51.

spiritual universe is natural to the period of adolescence can therefore be safely drawn. . . . In general there is in the adolescent an interest in spiritual values, an attraction to Christian ideals, a use of prayer, and above all a determination to find the meaning of the universe and his or her own place in the scheme of things."⁹ The fact that the Christian school has its boys not only through the most impressionable years but also through the most formative years, when the building up of Christian ways can be of most lasting effect, is the measure of its opportunity. Its task is so to present Christ that the Spirit can do His work of conversion ; so to supply the best Christian influences that young believers may be built up in their faith ; and so to offer the best educational standards that all the faculties which God has created may reach their full maturity for His glory.

The three chief influences in early life are the home, the school and the church. The boarding school assumes the functions of all three at the same time, and, although it will be convenient here to treat the Chapel, the classroom and the social life of the school separately, they are, of course, merged together in its general life.

It would, in fact, be a great mistake for the Chapel to be in a department of its own. When the boys go into it at the beginning and end of each day and on Sundays, what they hear and say and sing in it can be so relevant to their every day activities that the services become merely one "central and interpretative activity" of many.¹⁰ It is in the Chapel that the school meets together as a whole and feels its corporate unity, that it worships God and owns His pre-eminence, that it hears His word read and His Good News preached, and that it commits all its activities to Him. The maintenance of this corporate unity is the reason why the regular prayers and services should be attended by all. It is true that Wordsworth has written of compulsory College chapel :

Was ever known
The witless shepherd who persists to drive
A flock that thirsts not to a pool disliked ?

but that last word may be altered to its opposite by experience which is helped by a little compulsion in its early stages and by continued care to suit the prayers and services to the needs of those who come to them. As a school is a many-sided community, the services will, of course, be open to all who serve in it. It is good that the main school service should preserve a traditional framework, such as that of the Church of England, within which there can be plenty of variety. The link with one or other of the denominations is useful as showing that the school Chapel is not a growth of its own but part of a wider Church in which a boy can have continuity of worship when he leaves school. But boys of all denominations will be made to feel at home in the services, including that of Holy Communion, and if the services are really suited to the needs of their age, no denominational differences need be felt. The evening service on Sundays may be purposely

⁹ Olive Wheeler, *The Adventure of Youth*, p. 184.

¹⁰ M. L. Jacks, *Total Education*, p. 84.

varied to take different forms and to illustrate the best in other methods of worship. No service will normally last more than fifty minutes. A mid-week evening service, with perhaps series of short talks, may be of great practical help to young Christians and may have a particular significance from being entirely voluntary. Just as there should be a link with the Church at home, so there should be a live interest in and contact with the work of foreign missions. The Chapel will be open at all times for boys to drop in and be quiet, and if it can assume a natural place in the centre of a boy's school activities, the school is demonstrating an experience which is needed greatly in the life of the modern world.

Three essentials are a fine Chapel building, a good chaplain and a good director of music. That the Chapel should be of the best architecture goes without saying. There is no need for extravagance in its interior, which can be simple, light and airy. The good school chaplain calls for a multitude of qualities which one could hardly expect to find combined in one man. He must be a man of deep spiritual experience and consistent practice. His Christian faith must have a firm intellectual basis so as to commend itself to the most intelligent of the older boys and yet be able to be put before the youngest with crystal-clear simplicity. He must be capable of mixing on the best of terms in every day life not only with the boys but with the masters and the rest of the adult staff, and be accessible to all of them so that they turn naturally to him for help. He must have a good presence and a good voice. Above all he must be a man of maturity and balance, which includes a sense of humour, who sees life whole and can look at it through the eyes of any of his flock. He must, in fact, have all the qualities of a good schoolmaster with more added. It will be his task to prepare boys for Confirmation, a task which offers the greatest evangelistic opportunity of school life. Boys will come to the school from all types of home, many of them pagan, but Confirmation offers the chance to all to come forward of their own free will to study the facts of the Christian faith of which they have been hearing at school, to face Christ's demand and to respond to His call. If the chaplain presents only those who are sincerely prepared to make a decision on their own responsibility, Confirmation will be a time of conversion to some and of strengthening to all. It will be the chaplain's duty to plan the Chapel services so that they are conducted by himself, choir and congregation in the most finished and dignified form possible. For that reason a good director of music is essential. Whether the choir is presenting an anthem or the whole school is singing a hymn, music of high standard is within the capabilities of a school and the Chapel must have nothing less than the best.

In its teaching the Christian school will offer the highest standards in all subjects of the curriculum. Many educationists have sought for some unifying element to bring the many subjects together so that they may have more meaning for the learner. The Christian finds it in the revelation of God and His purpose. William Temple wrote : " We are not training children according to their own true nature or in

relation to their true environment unless we are training them to trust in God. In their own nature they are God's children, destined for eternal fellowship with Him ; and their environment exists at three levels—the sub-human, studied in the Natural Sciences ; the human, studied in the Humanities ; and the super-human, studied in Divinity. The school must provide for all three."¹¹ Every subject when taught by a Christian becomes a religious subject, and Divinity is but the central and interpretative subject among the rest. The Divinity teaching, using the Bible as the text book, will take the boy progressively through the events of the Christian revelation, the Old Testament stories, the life of Christ, and the history of the early Church ; through the ideas thus given to men, the messages of the prophets, the teaching of Christ and the writings of St. Paul; through the beliefs which have become doctrine because they have rung true in men's experience through the ages, the beliefs about God, about Christ and about the Holy Spirit, about men and about the Church ; to an introduction to the Christian philosophy. A boy, before he leaves school, will have obtained an intellectual basis to his faith and will, through free discussion, have met many of the ideas of other ways of thinking, so that he can stand firmly on his own feet when he meets these ideas in later life and know that the Christian philosophy can hold its own with any other system of thought. The Christian teacher will not fear to be dogmatic ; he knows that the boys have freedom to accept or reject. He will not fear to show bias by exhibiting his own beliefs. "The teacher's duty here must surely be to offer his beliefs as well as his knowledge, and to let it be known that it is by these beliefs that he lives. The alternative is to leave behind the damaging impression that all the most vital matters are matters of opinion, and that one opinion is as good as another or as no opinion at all. This is not good teaching and is not a good preparation for life."¹²

III.

It is impossible to describe fully the Christian school without discussing every one of its institutions, because Christianity in a community must pervade all its life or be nothing. It is only possible to touch here upon one or two sides of school life to which Christian educationists will give thought. The school will open its doors, so far as it is able, to boys of all classes, nations and colour who will profit by coming to it. Its rule will be democratic ; personality will be respected and individual differences honoured, but notice will be taken of intrinsic not of extrinsic distinctions such as birth and wealth. The Headmaster will associate masters and boys with himself in making rules, and it will be clearly shown that these are framed for the good of all. Masters and prefects will follow the example of Christ Who washed His disciples' feet ; power will only go with service, privilege only with responsibility. The aim will be the greatest possible freedom for those who have learnt the secret of discipline.

¹¹ William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, p. 69.

¹² M. L. Jacks, *Total Education*, p. 90.

summed up in the words of the Collect "Whose service is perfect freedom", discipline of course being a quality that must grow from within and cannot be imposed from without. Any punishment will be made constructive, to fit and to reform the criminal, using love rather than fear; for that and other reasons corporal punishment will have no place. The boy's extremely strong sense of justice will always be respected. No boy will be expelled, because expulsion is final; the Christian knows that redemption is possible. If a boy is doing no good to others or himself, he will leave until such time as a cure is found and he is fit to return. Competition will be kept within healthy bounds and co-operation will take its place in many school activities. Manual and practical work for the school will give dignity to labour. The importance of leisure time in the modern world and the high principles with which Christians should approach its use will be recognised by a wide range of activities, which can take place in the evenings and in free time and be largely organised by the boys themselves: religious activities such as Bible study or discussion groups; intellectual activities such as a Literary Society; artistic and musical activities such as painting, pottery, sculpture, choral society and orchestra; handicraft and engineering activities such as woodwork and model-making. Just as goodness is pursued in all school relationships and truth is pursued in all school studies, so beauty will be pursued in the architecture and surroundings of the school and created in leisure time activities.

It is hardly necessary to stress that a Christian school depends for its success on its teaching and domestic staff being Christians of definite convictions and consistent life. Adolescence is the age when youth naturally looks to an adventurous leader. The Christian adult has then his greatest responsibility for influencing by his example, and for leading those who are unconsciously looking to him all the time to look beyond him to Christ as their leader for life. Each boy will be intimately connected with the master who is likely to be of most help to him as his Tutor or Housemaster, and the Headmaster will be accessible always. The experienced adult will have many opportunities, when boys come to him with their problems and difficulties, of helping them. Dean Inge has said in an often quoted passage, "The best teacher is he who can say: 'For their sakes I consecrate or sanctify myself.' Religion is caught rather than taught; it is the religious teacher, not the religious lesson, that helps the pupils to believe."¹³ A famous Headmaster once said that the rules for a schoolmaster were as simple to state as they were hard to fulfil: they were only that he should know what he wanted his boys to know, that he should be what he wanted his boys to be, and that he should add enthusiasm. And, he might have added, the original meaning of the word enthusiasm is "having God within."

It was said above that the three chief influences in early life are the home, the school and the church. From the standpoint of Christian teaching and help the influence of the home is, in many cases, negligible, and

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¹³ W. R. Inge, *Speculum Animae*, p. 38.

For all these opportunities Christians should be on the look out, and in the creation of them they should be prepared to take the initiative. In all the planning of Community Centres, Colleges of Further Education, and the like, they should play their part. Vigilance in this field over the next few years, and a readiness to give without counting the cost, may open many new doors for the Gospel.

In the Church of England the National Society has an Adult Committee, presided over by Sir Richard Livingstone. In the new arrangements which will follow from the recommendations of the Selborne Commission, an Adult Council will be one of the four departmental councils of the Church of England Council for Education. We are assured, therefore, that the Church will give thought to this matter, and that there will be a staff to help us, in parish and diocese, as we seek to further the task of educational evangelism.

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge,"¹ said the prophet long ago. It is a fair diagnosis of the situation in modern England. But at the same time there is a desire for knowledge, an appetite for knowledge. It is for the Church to use all the methods which the times provide to bring to men, in terms which they can understand, the knowledge of the one true God.

* Hosea iv. 6.

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the church is not given an opportunity of influence because it is never entered. It is left to the schoolmasters who feel their vocation to Christian ministry and service to be the new clergy, and their responsibility in the modern world is very great. The school depends also upon the influence of its older boys. Their witness is usually better given in their life than in their words. Boys are reticent about the things that mean most to them and can see through any form of words that is not lived out in practice. The general atmosphere of the school depends on the relationships of all within it—of masters with masters, of boys with boys, of both with the domestic staff, of all with people outside the school—being those of Christians who love one another in the fullest meaning of that word. The school must remember its duty to all the types of boys which come to it, and it need not hurry unduly in view of the four or five years for which it has the boy. The Christian boy must be built up in his faith and leave with firm and lasting foundations to it ; he must not find the atmosphere so protected from outside ideas and experiences that, when he meets them later, he is unable to stand on his own feet ; the boy with no Christian experience must be shown the faith in all the strength and attractiveness of its claims, but, if he does not accept it then and there, every care must be taken that he is surrounded by understanding love and not choked off into antagonism. Just as a child is led most easily to faith in Christ in a Christian home, so it should be easy to find Him in the life of the Christian school.