

THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

HILDA NEATBY

IT is a platitude to say that we none of us practise what we preach. The assumption is always that we fail to do so from human frailty and that we must patiently strive to come nearer to our theory. No doubt this is sound in general, but it may be an over-simplification. Truth is, after all, not a simple goal that we struggle to reach, but a many-sided thing that we struggle to grasp. The quality of achievement often seems to exist in a kind of splendid inconsistency, in a state of fruitful tension between theory and practice, in the paradox which reveals its truth through contradiction.

There is no need to enlarge on the meaning of the paradox to those who know anything of the glorious paradoxes of the Christian doctrine and way of life. The Englishman Charles Williams, novelist, lay theologian and friend of T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis, makes use in one of his writings of the ancient conception of the two ways: the affirmation of images and the negation of images. By the first way every created thing is an image of God and is to be received as such from God "who has given us all things richly to enjoy". All things are of God in Christ and all may lead to God through Christ. This is the affirmation of images. But the Church also follows with St. Paul, for example, the way of rejection of images. "What things were gain for me those I counted loss for Christ." Created things, images, may be idols, and he who accepts the idol denies Christ. Williams insists that both ways must (in some degree) be followed by everyone. In all matters of this world the Christian must say to Christ, "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou". One man may be led to rejection as were many great ascetics who were saints; another to acceptance; but each way must in some sort be practised by all. Of St. John of the Cross whose life was a miracle of rejection Williams says, "Even he, toward the end, was encouraged to remember that he liked asparagus; our Lord the Spirit is reluctant to allow either of the two great Ways to flourish without some courtesy to the other".¹

The ways of acceptance and rejection have appeared in all the Church's dealings with temporal matters and surely nowhere more startlingly than in education. On the one hand there is the emphasis on the necessity and sublimity of pure faith, of revelation, and of acceptance through an act of grace. And these alone matter; they are life, eternal life. Where, then, is there any place for education? Where is the need for any but purely utilitarian or vocational training? Moreover, the Scriptures are full of

warnings against intellectual arrogance, of reminders of the distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Education, like wealth, may be a snare: "Not many wise men after the flesh are called." One might even suppose that in education the Church had found an image that must be pretty consistently rejected.

We know, however, that this has not been so; that the very reverse has been true. If the Scriptures emphasize that salvation is by the miracles of grace and of faith, so do they also stress the efficacy of preaching and the necessity of instruction in all matters concerning the faith. We are to prove all things. Williams suggests even that we must argue out all things, remarking that God rebuked not the impatience of Job who was sure something was wrong, but the complacency of his comforters who insisted, in the face of the evidence, that all was well.

But the Church has not only approved and insisted on a rational examination of dogmatic truth. It has in addition sanctioned, encouraged and patronized profane learning, and the arts. In the western world, as we all know, the Church was until modern times the centre of all cultural development. The search for truth in every form was the way of acceptance. If all truth comes from God, he may be worshipped by affirmation as well as by negation.

There is, then, in the educational tradition of the Christian Church, before the Reformation and since, this lively and fruitful tension, this essential paradox: education, irrelevant to salvation, may yet be a powerful means of grace; the arts, letters and sciences, vain pretensions of man's contriving, are yet witnesses to the glory of God. Education is at once affirmed and rejected. It is nothing; yet it may be everything.

This paradox, however, became a dilemma in the modern age which has seen an increasingly clear-cut division between Church and State. The division, however inevitable, was unnatural and in a sense immoral and had serious implications for education. No man can serve two masters.

The problem did not grow simpler. As the State became more highly centralized and secularized, State authorities took an increasing interest in the education of the citizen for service. The spread of secular rationalism, the increasing popularity of ideas of liberty and equality, the extension of the franchise, the need for trained soldiers, administrators, and scientists to serve the State, all contributed gradually to bring about the system with which we are all familiar: universal, free and compulsory education provided and enforced by the State. The nineteenth century saw this principle accepted for elementary education in the advanced countries of the western world; the twentieth century has seen the principle extended to secondary education.

These natural and inevitable developments presented Protestant churches with a dilemma that they have not, as yet, faced fairly. In the leading Protestant countries, Britain, Germany and the United States, it may be said that Church and State joined in approval of compulsory elementary

State education: the State, because along with its other advantages, it seemed to be a necessary rational foundation for the exercise of the franchise; the Church (and I am now specifically thinking not of the whole Christian Church but of Protestant churches as a group), because reading would open to the children the Bible containing the revelation of the will of God. One can say that the State and the Church found common ground in a process which seemed to serve what Matthew Arnold called reason and the will of God.

But this education which both Church and State approved was primarily the responsibility of the State and under its authority. In the interests of national unity and efficiency it could not well be parcelled out among the dozens of churches and sects that flourished in England, the United States, and, as settlement extended, in Canada. In England and the United States the Church in some branches asserted itself, declared that education could not be secularized, and retained a measure of authority over the education of its members. Other branches, refusing both positive affirmation and outright rejection of secular education, accepted it as a neutral thing. In the United States the trend has generally been in this direction, toward complete secularization. In Canada, officially a Christian country, there has remained in most elementary schools some official recognition of the Christian religion.

By and large, however, in all these countries public education became separated from religion as the State was, if not in theory, increasingly in practice, separated from the Church. The kind of education offered by the State was in general the rational-humanist or "liberal" type developed in line with the Renaissance emphasis upon the separation of learning from the dogma of the Church. It was intended to dispel ignorance, to form and train the mind, and to provide intellectually those norms and ideals of conduct necessary for the guidance of the good citizen. In theory (in the light of past experience) this was a good education for the individual in a free and secure society.

In practice, however, two things happened. First, liberal education was cheapened and weakened. It was assumed too readily that people could be educated in the mass as bolts of cotton and pigs of iron could be produced in the mass. We have not yet solved the problem of how to perform cheaply and for the masses the process which, at its best, can be compared only with a delicate hand operation. Second, the social assumptions which had formed this system of education were, from similar causes, proving increasingly unreliable. State education which was religiously and even to some extent morally neutral could be received with profit only against the background of a home where Christianity was practised or at least where an enlightened system of ethics prevailed; and it required also, if its deficiencies were not to be revealed, the environment of a community with clearly defined moral traditions.

As the nineteenth century moved into the twentieth changing conditions

and the opening of new areas of knowledge showed how false were the assumptions of a "natural" ethical or moral background for State education. The stable community life where so many essential educational processes had been carried on outside of school was breaking up. The clan-like family which had been a community in itself was disappearing. Many of the values even of the intimate family group were weakened as the family unit became very small. And broken families and slum homes seemed to make a mockery of formal intellectual education. Moreover, just as natural groups with their traditions, their common affairs, their emotional satisfactions were breaking up, psychological investigations were stressing their immense importance in the development of the child and the life of the individual.

The result, if not inevitable, was not surprising. Rational-humanistic education was indicted as at best calculated to produce sharp, aggressive, competitive individuals, and at worst lonely, rejected, frustrated atoms. It was argued that, after all, the teacher should be more interested in the kind of person who leaves his hands than in the kind of knowledge that person has mastered. The statement if not new, is true, even though it does carry a subtle implication of what is not true. On this principle changes gradually crept into the schools, changes of matter and of method, and of aim, changes dictated and sanctioned by the increasingly secular and materialistic character of society.

Most people are familiar with the general character of these changes. The prime motive for work was to be interest, not obedience; its end was to be the fulfilment of the conscious aims of the child, not his sense of any general external law; instead of individuals working separately, responsibly and more or less competitively, understanding and responsibility were to be achieved through the joint activities of a closely integrated group; the product of the group activity would be the child's sense of self-realization through a shared experience, and also through individual success—but success achieved without the spirit of competition. The ideal outcome of this mode of education is the development of such desirable attitudes in the child as will assure his "socialization"—that is, his ability to take his place happily and usefully in society.

There is nothing in all this bad in itself, and yet to those who accept the dogmas of the Christian Church, and to many others it is dismaying. For there is here a neglect at once of reason and of the will of God. The Church had affirmed State education because it both furthered rational enlightenment and opened the way to a better understanding of the will of God which the Church preached. But if education, ignoring moral imperatives and rational decisions, should make "desirable" attitudes and "socialization" in terms of this world its chief aims, must not the Church decide that such education is not an image to be accepted, but an idol to be rejected? Education had been narrow and neutral, but in seeking an apparently broader base, it was becoming too obviously anti-Christian.

This may seem at first to be an extreme and uncharitable statement. Setting aside differences of detail between schools of thought, it is important to consider what is the essence of the new tendencies. Essentially, it seems to me, what is being attempted is to preserve Christian values without Christian dogma. Christians, because they approve Christian values, have been slow to offer even obvious criticisms. All the new procedures which I have mentioned have a curiously familiar ring. First, children are to work from interest, not from blind obedience—of course; just as Christians are to do the will of God from the heart. Again, children are to follow their self-conscious aims, rather than any external law; just as Christians also are under no law, but know a “service which is perfect freedom”. Children are to achieve their objects through the integrated group; and Christians, all members one of another, are to look, not to their own things but to the things of others. Finally, the sharing, the self-realization, the sense of success without competition, are the values claimed by members of the body of Christ who together “grow up to the measure of the fullness of His stature”.

Why, then, it may be asked, should Christians, and the Church, be concerned at a philosophy of education which apparently after the manner of the Christian Church sets aside a rigid legalism in order to build children into groups for the purpose of developing socialized attitudes? The Church must be concerned for the obvious reason that the secular group is a body without a head; and it is a body whose members make no use of the means of grace, no claims on the power and goodness of God, who show no recognition of the truth of God and no obedience to His will. From the Christian viewpoint there can be no corporate group claiming (as the school group does) a *total* moral absorption of the individual except by Christian revelation and grace. Failing these we fall back, as individuals, on the law and by the law we are convicted.

The tendency of the new philosophy is to set aside on the one hand absolute law, or reason; and on the other to set aside Christian revelation and grace. Those who accept the philosophy know what they need; and they are following methods which are very old, and which in the Church have achieved admirable results. But these methods are not the sole and necessary cause of these admirable results. Groups are powerful things; and group dynamics are not to be scorned. They are even to be feared. They will not, however, of themselves lead to virtue any more than to knowledge.

Modern education is seeking the fruits of virtue and of Christian love without any concern for the roots. Many, including modern scientific inquirers, are offering evidence of their want of success. A recent writer quotes a psychiatrist as saying that “the chief problem of people in the middle decade of the twentieth century is emptiness”, and that “there is a god, or rather a demon they are trying to appease; it is the spectre of loneliness which hovers outside like a fog drifting in from the sea”. The

conclusion is that man's only resource is "to cultivate freedom and inner strength".² But members of the Church know that freedom and inner strength, with the love that can alone make these qualities safe for society, cannot be achieved merely by contriving group integration and seeking desirable attitudes.

For Christians the essential question is to determine the challenge to the Church in the face of this inescapable problem. Perhaps the answer may best be found by drawing up a list of further questions which look less like a challenge than an indictment: questions on the current relations of Church and State, on relations between the Church on the one hand and the school and society on the other, on the relations of the Church to members of its own flock. These questions apply to the whole Church but with special force to members of Protestant communions.

The Protestant churches accepted and supported State sponsorship and control of a system of largely secular education. Few people would question the rightness of a decision which, as I have suggested, was based on the assumption that the rational-humanist education contemplated would not only cultivate the reason but would make possible a fresh understanding of the will of God. But one must ask whether these churches reminded themselves that from the Christian viewpoint this is only a conditional good, an image which the Church must reject as well as affirm? Moreover, did they sufficiently bear in mind their responsibility to follow the State schools with prayer, and with study, support and advice, and to seek to use education as a means of grace? Have they fulfilled the citizen's duty of supporting and promoting all desirable changes, and of examining all proposals of change and improvement in relation to their implications for morality and religion? In particular, have they concerned themselves with the principles and materials of instruction in schools and in teachers' training schools?

The answer will be that Protestant churches and their members did not do these things and, as a rule, for what seemed like very good reasons. Sensible people realized the danger of silly meddling, they were satisfied that the position of the schools was at worst neutral and at best benevolent, and, finally, they admitted that denominational differences made joint action difficult.

The reasons were excellent. Therein lies the dilemma. The fact remains that tens of thousands of young teachers *knowing no philosophy of any kind* have been introduced to an educational philosophy based on the assumption that belief in God is not only irrelevant but harmful to the educational process. In one large Canadian training school, at least, students used, or were using very recently, a text which professes to be "unique" in presenting all schools of thought, a text in which "idealism" (a philosophy of education which allows belief in God) is given relatively little attention as "it is of interest chiefly to parochial schools". The Church as a whole—and that means every Christian who is a citizen—has a duty

to consider whether such tendentious instruction, if it cannot be checked, should not lead him even to consider sending his child to "a parochial school".

There are also good grounds for questioning whether Protestant churches have sufficiently considered their collective obligations to the school and to society. Have they realized the growing difficulty of the schools, faced with children morally and emotionally unready for the enrichment and the discipline of their minds? Have they separately and collectively done all in their power to maintain homes and communities which, by making their proper contribution, leave the schools free to devote time and energy to their special task of training the mind? Have they not rather acquiesced in the general permission and even injunction to the schools to do and to be everything for the child?

If answers must be given in general terms, I think they would have to be "no" to the first two questions and "yes" to the third. Just as the schools were increasing their bias against traditional morality and religion, they were tacitly encouraged by the Protestant churches to take an increasingly totalitarian view of their functions.

Finally, the Protestant churches have apparently assumed that while the school would attend to things of the mind, specific instruction in religion was the responsibility of the home and the Church. Such an assumption should have inspired vigilance and constant concern for religious instruction. Have our churches seen to it that (so far as lay in their power) *all* children and all parents had such a firm and complete grounding in the Scriptures and in the essentials of Christian dogma, that no matter what happened in the schools there would still be a solid core of instruction based on the will of God, and on reason as well?

The answer here is obviously No. All teachers of literature know that today Scriptural allusions, like classical ones, are a stumbling-block to their so-called Christian students. I, myself, when I taught a beginners' class in French literature had as a rule to depend on my Jewish students to tell the class something of the character and exploits of the man whose name is the title of De Vigny's *Moïse*.

The Protestant churches, I believe, must plead guilty to having betrayed the cause of the Church. I do not mean that they have wilfully injured the State or society, but rather that they have failed in the individual and collective witness which all Christians owe to society. The challenge remains. Christians as individual citizens have a direct responsibility in this matter, and so has every branch of the Church. Appropriate action is needed in three areas where all Christians have or may have information, interest and influence.

It is needed first in the school. I have written in general terms of the philosophy and methods which seem to be approved for the modern Canadian school. As we all know, however, there is much variety of practice and I am now more certain than ever that there is much confusion

of philosophy. I think that it is desirable and that it should be possible to demand from Canada's educational leaders a clear statement of educational philosophy. Now that the aims of the school are so much more ambitious and far-reaching than they were when universal State education was being sketched a century ago, is the philosophy of education as taught still consistent with the claims of reason and the will of God? And I do not think that the almost inevitable statement about an eclectic philosophy should be accepted without further investigation.

If a clear statement on Canadian philosophies of education can be secured, one might well ask whether they are really in accordance with the convictions of the majority. A contemporary American writer has stated quite bluntly that many American schools profess a philosophy which, in his view, is contrary to the beliefs and wishes of the parents concerned; that is, he charges that the operations of American schools are not only unchristian but essentially undemocratic. It may be that such a situation exists in our own country.

It may be, however, that most Canadians approve a philosophy which the Christian Church could not accept. If so, the Church might still inquire whether in such matters as the emphasis on sports and extra-curricular activities, and on guidance in all its forms, and in many other matters, minority rights receive sufficient consideration. And, if it is ascertained that they do, the Church must still consider, on the one hand what measures it must take to protect its young people from an education of which it cannot entirely approve, and on the other how it may best give sympathy, support and encouragement to the many things that are good in the work of the schools.

Action is also needed to influence Canadian education within the organization of the Church itself. I have already raised the question: What are we doing with our children and our young people? I will not use an over-worked and a misused term and ask whether the Church is child-centred. It is, however, appropriate to ask whether of all the auxiliary rooms in a church the Sunday school rooms are the most attractive and convenient and the best-equipped. It is also proper to ask whether every member of the congregation and particularly those charged with the government of the Church make it their business to know the children and to encourage the teachers. In short, is the Church showing itself in the care and training of its children to be a group which is not merely integrated but which has and owns a Head?

And finally, the same questions must be asked about Christian families. Are they truly Christian in their group life, and are they helped in their supremely important educational task by the Church? Should it be left to psychologists, good and skilful as they may be, to tell parents how to treat their children with love and sympathy? Also, should not some one tell them how to use the findings of psychology in Christian teaching and training? This is done frequently by the clergy in at least one Christian communion

which is not Protestant. Why do Protestants trail behind? Is it because Protestant parents will not listen, or because the leaders of Protestant churches are less concerned with parents' responsibilities?

The Church, and particularly its Protestant section, is faced today with an educational process which seems to employ Christian modes, too often forgotten or neglected by us, but without any recognition of Christian revelation or Christian grace. These modes may well meet superficial needs, but by so doing they cover over the true needs which they do not recognize and cannot satisfy. It is for the Church in all loyalty to a free and democratic society to work honestly, consistently and humbly to make reason and the will of God prevail. The true challenge here is the same as on all other fronts: to show not only a form of godliness, but a power.

NOTES

1. *The Descent of the Dove*, p. 281, quoted in *Theology Today*, July, 1953, "Charles Williams: Lay Theologian."
2. *Times Literary Supplement*, February 19, 1954, p. 125.