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THE CHURCH AND EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

This issue of the Journal looks at one aspect of education only, that of children in schools.

The 1944 Education Act laid down certain minimum requirements for religious instruction in schools, in order to comply with which the local authorities, in collaboration with the churches, either drew up or adopted, so-called Agreed Syllabuses. These Agreed Syllabuses were a kind of skeleton text book upon which many teaching manuals have been based. Apart from a cursory nod at the outstanding personages in church history and summary treatment of Christian Ethics, the bulk of the curriculum they prescribed was a systematic and progressive study of the contents of the Bible. They are still largely followed by most teachers of divinity, and will probably go on being followed, partly by reason of sheer inertia, but more because a growing number of scripture specialists are committed to their use.

It is not generally realised in Evangelical circles in general or Brethren assemblies in particular that their circles are cornering a fair percentage of the school posts in the subject. One of the reasons is negative and the other positive. The former is the apathy of most other teachers; religious instruction is shunned even more than mathematics, so that the Christian has only to evince the most diffident interest to be press ganged. The positive cause is the output of such institutions as the London Bible College, which enjoys an enviable reputation in examination successes in the London University Diploma in Theology and Bachelor of Divinity, both of which are more than sufficient for specialist appointments.

Nevertheless there is a strong movement afoot to abolish or modify the Agreed Syllabuses in favour of a less academic, doctrinal and Biblical form of religious instruction, and of greater emphasis on the ethical problems that confront the child in his concrete social situation. The contrast is roughly between preaching from a biblical text or from a topical occasion. There is a lot to be said for this change of emphasis. Religious instruction in school is too academic a subject. This is largely the result of a deliberate attempt in the Agreed Syllabuses to reach a residue of factual information which cannot be turned readily to partisan and controversial ends. The outsider can most easily grasp this nature of the exercise by examining the examination papers set for the O level of the General Certificate of Education. They look like the papers for a miniature Bachelor of Divinity. He might be forgiven for supposing the candidates were destined for the priesthood!

The reformers advocate the scrapping of this sort of nonsense. What, they say, are we trying to do? To produce saints or scholars? Clearly, put like this, we hasten to hope the former. But on second thoughts we wonder whether they are aiming at citizens, as opposed to converts. Evangelicals have always been suspected of unscrupulous proselytizing. We must concede that the enthusiastic Scripture teacher must restrain his desire to win his charges for Christ, if it takes on the colour of poaching. On the other hand the proposals of the reformers are suspiciously like an attempt to tame the evangelistic.

Is it the function of the Church to subserve culture or political order? If the reformers have their way the Church and Christian teaching will be diminished to a mere organ of social control, a means of minimizing juvenile delinquency, and the Gospel will be reduced to mere morality and poetry. Sir Richard Ackland's *We Teach Them Wrong* ought perhaps to be set reading for all teachers of Scripture in schools, in order that they may see whither we go. What is called for is not a recoil of holy horror, but a recognition of the pros and cons of the situation. We should embrace every endeavour to wash cold-blooded erudition out of the Scripture lesson, and to pump in warm-hearted spiritual insight. Even the removal of all doctrinal instruction would not be a bad thing, because it would put back into the pulpits the task of interpreting scripture. What, it seems to me, we should stick out for is an unprejudiced teaching of the contents of the Bible: both because, religion apart, our children are entitled to this heritage; and also because we cannot afford to fear free discussion of the basic historical facts of the Faith.

But it may well be that the Church will be unable to insist on so much. The Church has been in the education business a long time now. In the so-called Dark Ages, according to the text books, only the monastery walls baffled the gust of barbarism which was howling round the guttering candle of learning. The Church bore the torch of civilization and culture from the ancient classical world into Europe. In the succeeding Middle Ages she became the sole repository of learning and set her candle on a golden candlestick. Since the Renaissance, however, rival secular institutions have eroded this exclusive hold on the means and manner of learning. The Brethren as a group have never had a professional interest in educational institutions in the same way as, for example, the Church of England has in her schools. For this reason we do not feel the draught so immediately. But we ought to have a mind on the issue of secularisation and perhaps adopt a policy of action; to resist, acquiesce in, or to advocate it. I suggest there might be a lot to gain from positively encouraging secularisation. Just as we have a vested interest in getting scriptural teaching back into the pulpits where it properly belongs, so we have, or should have, a desire to break the hold that some churches have on the infant mind. We do not allow any particular political party to corrupt the thinking of our young; why should we be afraid to say that we do not want them brain-washed into narrow religious channels? Only the Christian who will not admit the full vigour of the Gospel will seek to impose it

on the child through the machinery of schooling. Secularism will not raise itself as a positive force of atheism and anti-religion, unless opposed by obscurantism. If all schools were secular institutions then all churches might be forced to become much more religious ones. Perhaps readers in lands where education is secularised would write of their experience.

Non-conformists are inclined to regard Anglicans as a bit 'toffee', on the side of the Establishment, and generally too well entrenched in the academic world. Brethren tend to view the rest of Non-conformity in the same way, save that they feel on the whole intellectually superior to the Pentecostals and Salvationists who seem to be predominantly working-class. The Brethren movement sprang up historically in aristocratic and upper-middle class circles in the first half of the nineteenth century and only drained down, through petit-bourgeois traders, into the proletariat, toward the end of the century. To-day we have as wide a range of educational levels and social strata as any of the older communions. No doubt the Salvationists and Pentecostals will change too, though probably more slowly, since they are rather working from the base up than from the apex down. I state this situation as what I think is a sociological fact, and not as a judgment of value. My point is that, just as we regard the Anglican and older Non-conformist churches as over-intellectualistic, so we are disdainful and patronizing towards these more 'left-wing' movements, as being theologically scarcely respectable. The Churchman, we imagine, sermonizes modernistically; whilst the ebullient Pentecostalist raves a species of 'only-believism'. The immense value of the Newsom Report is that it enables us to put this matter in perspective. Half our future locked up in the lower streams of our secondary modern schools, is never going to appreciate the over conceptualised Gospel preached from our platforms Sunday by Sunday. In another context I might urge that we do not put enough thought into the preparation and delivery of our evangel. But, against the Newsom back cloth, we are too posh by half. We need to get to the spiritual equivalent of the pop song and dance. The West Indians who have settled in this country have a lot to teach us on this score, on the worship of God through sheer physical ebullience, and we might do worse than pay their churches a visit one Sunday and get the message.

There are a thousand more things to say about education. This issue is mere appetizer. We hope our readers will be provoked to contribute to further discussion by letters and articles. We should like to see something especially on the problems of the proposed turnover to an exclusively comprehensive system. Are those people right who protest that the question is simply an educational one for the minds of professional educationists, or is the contention sound that we must use the educational system as an instrument for social change, to de-class society? Is it the duty of the church to fight a rearguard action to preserve the public, direct grant and maintained grammar schools against the flood? Frank letters would be welcomed from parents on their decisions regarding fee-paying or non-fee-paying schools. How different are we from our pagan neighbour

when it comes to applying superior income or capital to purchasing privilege for our offspring? Are we doing as the Gentiles do when we buy a public school education for our children, even though we can justify our action—by the appeal to the Christian foundations of our best public schools?

Later issues of the Journal may perhaps be devoted to the problems of education on the overseas mission field, the universities, the theological colleges, and, why not, the Sunday Schools. We might consider whether Brethren ought to emulate the Quakers and found and maintain a school in some under-developed land as indeed has been done at Bangalore and elsewhere or copy other churches and found their own theological college as a school of one of our universities. (I have a 'short list' of quite some length for the first principal!). Should we change the times of our Sunday Schools to leave the afternoon free for visiting friends, Christian or otherwise (as some, indeed, have done)?

ALAN WILLINGALE

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