CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Ros Stuart-Buttle and John Shortt

Overview

This is a book about Christian faith, formation and education, written by theologians and educators who are friends and esteemed colleagues. The idea for this volume originated early in 2015 at Liverpool Hope University when a number of staff members working in the field of Christian education met to discuss the theological context and to attempt to identify important issues relating to a Christian engagement in education in terms of teacher formation, school impact and education as a potential force for good in society. The thinking behind the initial meeting was further developed at a colloquium held in October 2015. This was later followed by an international conference held in June 2016 at Liverpool Hope University, at which a number of chapter contributors presented papers. So the process behind this book, which has been some time in the making, is a story of partnership, collaboration and coming together in dialogue, debate and discussion in the interests of better understanding and of serving Christian education in its broadest sense. Here the role of Liverpool Hope University Centre for Christian Education and Pastoral Theology together with Canterbury Christ Church National Institute for Christian Educational Research is acknowledged, along with the contribution of our many friends and supporters.

R. Stuart-Buttle (✉) • J. Shortt
Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

R. Stuart-Buttle, J. Shortt (eds.), *Christian Faith, Formation and Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62803-5_1

How can we approach the relationship between faith, formation and education, assuming, of course, that a relationship can be shown to exist in the first place? This edited volume explores this question within a context of much current thinking and changing policies and practices affecting the educational sector. The importance of shared values and character education has risen to the fore across all schools, colleges and universities, promoted by governments and educational bodies and seen as urgent in light of ideologies and actions that threaten the common good. But the idea of nurturing or developing a particular religious faith is viewed as far more questionable. Indeed, many today view the separation of faith from the educational context as desirable or even essential, on both philosophical and educational grounds, and given the pluralist twenty-first-century society we inhabit. However, the aim of this book is to provide an accessible, practice-related yet scholarly resource that demonstrates how Christian faith can contribute to a rich vision of education that encompasses the formation of the whole person in their intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual and moral dimensions across all stages of life and work.

Christian educators invite individuals and communities to be formed and transformed as they are inspired and challenged to better come to know themselves and the world and experience something of the realm of God. This suggests a view of education that goes beyond the instrumental to the formative, in other words towards the growing and shaping of the human person with their attitudes, beliefs, values, motivations, experiences and worldviews. This needs to be done in fidelity to the deep roots of the Christian tradition yet, at the same time, with commitment to and engagement in the contemporary plural and secularist context where religious faith can no longer be assumed to be supported by civil society. As such, it invites debate and reflection about the role and relevance of faith and theology within approaches to, and practices in, education today.

What makes this book distinctive and worth reading? This is a question that might well be asked. Our response is that the chapter contributors, who are recognised exponents and leading international and ecumenical practitioners in the field of Christian education, each demonstrate that faith really matters, both to the agency of the individual learner and to the identity formation of educational communities where specific teachings, ethos, values and relationships are encountered. This holds significance not only for personal conviction and worldview but also for how professional work and educational activity are interpreted and performed. The book argues against any supposedly 'neutral' form of education, which is

where much thinking about contemporary secular education lies. It also advocates strongly against an indoctrinatory or uncritical sense of education that promotes any form of religious exclusivism or confessionalism. Instead, the chapters bring to bear the fruits of fresh thinking about how Christian faith can play an important part in the meaningful formation of the human person and an education for the common good of society. This is a timely and important witness, given the fast-changing political, educational and socio-cultural forces of today.

Framing the Discourse

Part I opens with Jeff Astley's chapter which explores the foundational concepts of faith, formation, development and education. These concepts are employed across a wide variety of contexts but have often been used without much clarification or consensus. Astley's chapter considers these component elements and their differing applications, recognises the importance of a critical dimension within Christian education and makes a significant distinction between faith formation and faith development. In Chap. 3, John Shortt discusses the question of whether talk of Christian education is even meaningful. He reminds us of arguments that suggest that Christian or indeed any other faith-based education is necessarily indoctrinatory and therefore fundamentally anti-educational. In contrast, he proposes a holistic form of Christian education that seeks the promotion of shalom and is relational in pedagogical approach and appropriate for plural contexts, not just those of Christian schools or churches.

Mario D'Souza, writing in Chap. 4 from an international (Canadian) context, considers how universities in recent decades have seen the humanities and liberal arts being pushed to the side-lines in a mounting pressure for early specialisation. He argues that the Christian university can respond by showing how and why education is more than a preparation for a profession. His chapter suggests an opportunity to broaden religious literacy and prepare students to become reflective adults. Relying on a Christian anthropology, the Christian university can witness to knowledge and understanding that lies beyond the immediacy of the material, the sensory and the experiential.

Clare Watkins in Chap. 5 also discusses the modern questioning of faith in the academic context. She resituates this within the current trends of a late modern reading of culture and through reflection on qualitative data gained in research with Catholic school leaders in England and Wales. In

turning to Aquinas' account of Christian pedagogy, which demonstrates a deeply theological and anthropological reading of faith and intellect from which late modern educators can learn, Watkins articulates a theology of the 'faith-full intellect' as a fundamental quality of personhood and one that holds deep significance for teaching and learning today.

In focusing on the situation in the United Kingdom, David Ford in Chap. 6 advocates an approach to education that is deeply Christian yet at the same time healthily plural. Drawing on the Church of England's recent *Vision for Education* he demonstrates that to be healthily plural, education should foster all-round education that serves the flourishing of children and the common good of society, encouraging a pluralism of multiple depths that has means of negotiating and adjudicating disputes. This is contrasted with less healthy forms of pluralism and with less plural systems. Ford exemplifies this from the Church of England's new vision of an education that is 'deeply Christian, serving the common good' and built around wisdom, hope, community and dignity.

John Sullivan in Chap. 7 presents the dialectic between doing justice to the score of the living tradition of Catholic education and empowering personal rendition of it among learners whose agency is brought into play. He explains what he means by promoting agency in learners before drawing upon two philosophers of education, Graham McDonough and Pádraig Hogan, to comment insightfully on different aspects of the need to develop agency in students. The principal risks and benefits incurred by giving salience to learning agency are outlined before the chapter underlines the importance, for both educational and religious development, of eliciting an original response from those we teach. In Chap. 8 Trevor Cooling considers three starting points to faith education, namely instruction, formation and education, as discussed in an influential report on English schools. He notes that the idea of religious formation has been a problematic idea since the 1970s and traces the current discomfort through intensive case study research with teachers in church secondary schools. His chapter develops the notions of formation and instruction, arguing that the concept of instruction is based on a positivist understanding of Christian learning whereas the concept of formation is better understood through a hermeneutical model of learning.

In the closing chapter of Part I, Ros Stuart-Buttle outlines the challenge of defining theological education and enquires about the interrelationship between adult theological education and professional practice. Her chapter considers the professional teacher as theological learner and

draws upon on social work research to present the concept of the 'faith closet' but linked to theological and faith formation approaches for professional practice in church schools. The chapter concludes by advocating a hermeneutical-dialogical-participatory encounter with Christian theology as one way to hold relevance and enable today's teachers to connect and apply theological thinking to professional practice and personal faith identity.

Reflections on Practice

The chapters in Part II take on a more concrete focus and practice-based emphasis. In Chap. 10, Andy Wolfe discusses a growing momentum of challenge to James Fowler's theories and related linear approaches to faith development and he calls for something of a paradigm shift for our contemporary social context. Through an examination of the impact of social media, his chapter unpacks the nature of identity formation in teenagers through the framing of 'journeys of faith' and a *multi-logue* of 24-7 interaction, narrative shaping and identity formation. Wolfe suggests that through a deepening understanding of this social context, schools can become better equipped to provide the support, guidance, experience and celebration of narrative to allow faith to develop. In Chap. 11, Ann Casson considers how a sense of belonging to a Christian community contributes to the spiritual development of pupils. Drawing on data generated by the Ten Leading Schools research project, her chapter explores the ways in which pupils and staff identified a sense of belonging to a Christian community and reflects on the potential implications and significance of these findings.

The following two chapters offer further insight from international perspectives, this time from the Australian context. Graham Rossiter reflects on the trajectory of Australian Catholic school religious education between 1965 and 2017. He portrays the creative tension of the 1970s between ecclesiastical interests in the outcomes of Australian Catholic school religious education and the concerns of religious educators to promote the personal development of their students, whether or not they were churchgoing. Since then, the discourse has come to be dominated by ecclesiastical terminology, with Catholic identity, faith formation and new evangelisation as the current most prominent constructs. In critiquing this development, Rossiter proposes that the discourse of religious education needs to become more outward looking, and more overtly concerned with

what it means to educate young Australians spiritually, morally and religiously for life in an increasingly challenging culture. Richard Rymarz in Chap. 13 brings the focus of his chapter to rest on offering a framework for the formation of younger teachers in Catholic schools. Recognising that young teachers have a key role in maintaining the religious identity of the school at a time of significant cultural change, he reports on an empirical study which examined school principals' perceptions of the religious experience and background of younger teachers in their schools. Key findings emerge that younger teachers are reflective of the wider cultural shifts in religious practice and belief but are open to greater engagement with the religious tradition.

The final two chapters take on areas of particular focus and pressing contemporary concern. Robert Bowie in Chap. 14 reviews research that identifies weaknesses in teaching the Bible in English schools and reflects on a new project that is trying to develop a better reading of the Bible in the classroom. Religious education in England has recently changed to focus more sharply on the study of religion at examination level, creating an opportunity for the better use of religious texts as sources but with a risk of replicating existing problems in what is sometimes viewed as an examination factory system. Bowie explores the hermeneutical challenge to develop a capacity for wiser explorations of the Bible that build on common ground between important and influential theological and educational writers in faith and education contexts. The final chapter of the book, from David Cracknell, considers the much-debated and often thorny topic of Christian leadership in education. His chapter aims to show how Christian faith can engage effectively with the personal and professional challenges that Christian leaders experience in schools, colleges and other educational organisations. From an exploration of what is meant by Christian leadership in education, its relationship to the wider study of educational leadership and how leaders might be challenged and transformed, Cracknell proposes that Christian leadership needs to be God-centred, God-led and God-empowered. This means a concern with relationships and interdependence. It is about knowledge but even more about wisdom and a search for truth. It develops as discipleship and service, not status and self-importance, in community, not autonomously, with empowerment, not exploitation, and with a vision for learning that leads to life and hope.

Resonant Themes

It is not surprising that, in a book like this, there are themes that recur in some or even all of the chapters. Identifying these resonances throws light upon the underlying approach being taken by the authors as they reflect upon faith, formation and education.

Formation is a key theme throughout the book. Several of the contributors present formation as being of the whole person. For example, Stuart-Buttle talks of an educational vision for the formation of the whole person in body, mind and spirit. Wolfe commends a holistic vision that values not only students' academic achievements but also their all-round development socially, morally, culturally and spiritually. Astley argues that teaching and learning have dimensions of not only the formation of beliefs, attitudes, skills and other aspects of the whole person but also critical evaluation of what is being taught and learnt. He says that something important is lost if both dimensions are not present. Christian education is both formative and critical. Cooling argues that all education is formative and that Christian education affirms pupil agency. Agency is also a central theme in Sullivan's chapter as he calls for a Christian education that fosters a learning space supportive of the development of the student's agency.

Another recurring theme is an emphasis on community rather than on the lonely individual. In his chapter, Ford calls for a Christian education wherein students are shaped in learning communities. It is 'an education for community and living well together' because our humanity is 'utterly relational co-humanity in a shared life on a finite planet'. Watkins places teaching and learning in 'that mysterious place of human relationship, friendship and affection' because people learn and grow when they are bound together in relationships of love. Casson's research found that a sense of belonging to a school community contributed to spiritual development through relationships of trust and openness that encouraged and supported it.

D'Souza writes of an education which seeks the common good, a common good which is 'not a collection of individual goods lumped together' but rather the good human life of people living together in communion. Shortt says that Christian education is education for *shalom* and this calls for a relational pedagogy which promotes an *ubuntu* relationship with our fellow human beings as well as with the physical creation and with God.

Watkins says that relational education is characterised by a practice of 'humility before the mystery of the learner', a *kenosis* of the teacher before

the student as made in the image of God. Cracknell says that *kenosis* should characterise the Christian leader in educational and other contexts. Cooling and Bowie both call for humility on the part of teachers and learners before that which is being studied, an epistemic humility before the text. Shortt writes that relational pedagogy calls for humility before the learner as Other as well as humility before that which is being taught and learnt. This humility before the Otherness of the world we are studying is contrasted by D'Souza with a reductionist attitude that treats it strictly as something to be mastered.

Casson, Rymarz and Stuart-Buttle all make use of the idea of the narthex, the exterior porch of a church, as a metaphor for the Christian school in that it should be a safe space in which there is opportunity to explore the spiritual dimension of life and to reflect upon it. Rymarz says that such a narthical learning space provides opportunity for people from different backgrounds and outlooks on life to meet and converse. He links the idea of the narthex with that of the Court of the Gentiles near the Temple in Jerusalem. Stuart-Buttle argues that it is a place where encounter marked by critical openness takes place and not a place for catechesis or religious persuasion. Wolfe calls for schools to become communities which are 'rooted in the inter-play of narrative, allowing pupils the space to develop their own identity, at their own pace and in their own way'. Bowie advocates a hermeneutical approach to religious education that creates space for learners to engage with each other, with teachers and with the voices of different Christians and Christian communities and with those of other faiths. This all resonates with Ford's call for an approach to teaching and learning which is both deeply Christian and healthily plural and with his account of the practice of scriptural reasoning.

Wisdom is another theme mentioned by many of the chapter contributors. Ford expresses puzzlement at how little place it is given in educational discussion, especially in the United Kingdom, despite it being a central emphasis in the major religious and other traditions of education. Christian education, he says, should be not only for knowledge and skills but also for wisdom. Stuart-Buttle calls for an approach to theological education that is not so much about handling abstract doctrines as it is about developing spirituality and wisdom in the person and the community. Watkins talks of understanding as not so much about cleverness and

struggles to learn but more to do with 'the restful knowing of things, wisdom, an ability to look, gaze upon and see'. Bowie wants religious education to move away from studying religion and towards studying wisdom texts.

If all these are elements called for by the contributors in a Christian approach to teaching and learning, then how distinctively Christian are they? Distinctiveness is a subject discussed by several contributors. Shortt argues that Christian education should aim at faithfulness rather than viewing distinctiveness in term of difference and that this faithfulness is a matter of the shape of the whole rather than of each and every part, a matter of building a rich whole informed by faith, not of whether each component is trademarked as 'distinct'. Watkins calls for a nurturing of 'faith-full instincts' seen in contemporary Catholic educational practices—instincts 'around love, humility/*kenosis*, freedom, and relationship'—because they are deeply rooted in and with a long Christian tradition.

The themes and chapters of this book bring out the fruits of fresh thinking about how Christian faith and formation can illuminate and inspire, as well as disturb and challenge, the work of contemporary education in our schools, colleges, universities, dioceses and church institutions. It is our belief as editors that the chapters offer a rich diet and source of new thinking and scholarship in the field and we wish to express our gratitude and sincere appreciation to our fellow authors and indeed to all those who have supported the writing of this volume in any way. We hope that all who read and reflect on the chapters of this book will discover new understanding and appreciation for faith, formation and Christian education in our time.

Ros Stuart-Buttle is Senior Lecturer in Theology and Education and Director of the Centre for Christian Education and Pastoral Theology at Liverpool Hope University. She undertook postgraduate studies in New York, USA, before completing a doctorate with the University of Liverpool. Having taught across school, university and seminary sectors, her research interests now include adult theological education, professional development and the use of educational technologies, especially online learning. Her recent publications consider online pedagogy and adult theological learning, professional development for Catholic teachers, and religious education in church schools.

John Shortt is Professorial Fellow in Christian Education at Liverpool Hope University and Senior Adviser to the European Educators' Christian Association. He maintains a website for teachers at forthosewhoteach.org. His most recent book is *Bible-Shaped Teaching* which has been translated and published in five languages. He was the founding editor of *Journal of Education & Christian Belief*, the first Director of the Charis Project and co-author with David I Smith of *The Bible and the Task of Teaching*. He was formerly a teacher of mathematics at secondary level.