

Is Talk of ‘Christian Education’ Meaningful?

John Shortt

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I comment briefly on how people who find it meaningful to talk about Christian education may nevertheless mean somewhat different things by their use of the phrase. I then outline and briefly discuss some arguments put forward by those who regard the whole idea of a Christian approach to education as a kind of ‘non-sense’. I go on to respond to the charge made by some that Christian or any other faith-based education is necessarily indoctrinatory and therefore fundamentally anti-educational. Finally, I attempt to sketch out a positive alternative in the form of a Christian vision for education centred on the biblical concept of shalom.

WHAT PEOPLE MAY MEAN BY ‘CHRISTIAN EDUCATION’

When people talk about ‘Christian education’ they may have one or more of a range of meanings in mind. Some think of it as mainly or only the teaching or discussion of Christian beliefs in educational settings. Here what makes the educational activity Christian is a matter of content and a typical setting would be a religious education class. Other people with a focus that

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is wider but still primarily on content think of Christian education as being a matter of what is often termed ‘faith-learning integration’ (see, e.g., Heie and Wolfe 1987). Here the talk is often of how Christian presuppositions may shape an approach to content in different curricular subject areas. For example, a personalist view of the human being may be preferred to a behaviourist one in the teaching of psychology.

Another conception of Christian education sees it in terms of institutional forms. Christian education is viewed as that which takes place as part of Christian church programmes or in Christian schools, colleges and universities. These may be the church schools or the older independent Christian schools found in the United Kingdom or the relatively new Christian schools that have multiplied in the last few decades across Europe and in other parts of the world. The Christian ethos of the institution is often seen as a main ingredient of the Christian education that it provides.

Others think of Christian education as the education of Christians or of the children of Christian families. Some of the newer independent Christian schools are closely linked with churches and provide exclusively or primarily for children whose parents are church members or otherwise closely linked with the churches. An example of this is Christian Education National, one of the main associations of Christian schools in Australia (formerly known as ‘Christian Parent Controlled Schools’).

Later in this chapter, I will sketch out a more holistic vision in place of one that reduces Christian education to content or ethos, institutional form or pedagogical approach, important though these are. It will not be restricted to the education of Christians or the children of Christian families.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

Some argue that all talk of ‘Christian education’ is a kind of non-sense. The most forthright, influential and possibly the strongest case was put some years ago in a paper entitled ‘Christian Education: A Contradiction in Terms?’ (Hirst 1971a).

The author was Paul Hirst who was shortly afterwards to take up the post of Professor of Education at Cambridge University. He is a philosopher of education for whom I have a very high regard and from whom I have learnt much, having been a student of his. However, on this matter,

I think his arguments are answerable. It is quite a while since his paper was published but there are many today, especially among secularist and humanist educationalists, who advance cases similar to those put forward by Hirst against Christian schools, colleges and universities (see, e.g., Copson 2012). This is notwithstanding the fact that philosophy of education has changed markedly since those days so that contemporary writers in the field would now be generally much less convinced of the rationalist approach that Hirst and others were taking at the time.

Paul Hirst's twofold argument against Christian education is that (1) in practice, little if anything can be produced under the label of 'Christian education' that is both distinctively Christian and educationally significant; and (2) in principle, the pursuit of a Christian approach to, or philosophy of, education is fundamentally mistaken.

On the first point, Hirst says that what is offered under the label of Christian education is often 'very dubious from both an educational and indeed from a Christian point of view' and he continues:

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. ... 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 can simply not produce anything that is in any significant sense a distinctive Christian view of education. (1971a, pp.44–45)

The case is that general moral principles alone do not determine particular educational principles. There are many other considerations we need to take into account, for example, 'matters of psychological and sociological fact, the structure of our social institutions, the availability of money and manpower, and so on', and, he adds, 'none of these considerations has anything to do with Christian beliefs' (pp.44–45).

Hirst considers another possible starting point—what Scripture says specifically about education—but he concludes that this too produces little, if anything, that is both distinctively Christian and educationally significant. He writes,

If one works 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. ... The problem then is how to extract 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. (p.45)

With both these starting-points, Hirst sees the development of an approach to education to be a matter of moving logically from principles to their application in practice. This is, I believe, too narrow a conception of the possibilities for relating Christian faith or other faiths to educational practice. In a book entitled *The Bible and the Task of Teaching* (Smith and Shortt 2002), David Smith and I have argued that there are a number of strands to a rope linking the Christian scriptures to teaching and learning in a contemporary twenty-first-century classroom.

Statements of principles or statements from which principles are derived have their place as one of the strands. The fact that they are not sufficient to determine education practices does not mean they have no part to play in the development of a Christian approach to education. The relationship between beliefs and practice is not only a matter of strict logical *requirement*—biblical statements or principles derived from them may commend some attitudes and practices, they may permit others, they may debar others.

But the Bible is not only a source of principles: its images and metaphors may resonate or clash with the dominant images and metaphors we live and teach by. The Bible tells us an ongoing story, a meta-narrative in which believers are called to live and work. The Bible provides models for teaching—most obviously Jesus himself who is widely acknowledged to have been an outstanding teacher. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann (1982) finds three distinct modes of teaching in the shape of the canon of Scripture—the Torah mode, the prophetic mode and the wisdom mode—and David Smith and I suggest that Jesus exemplifies all three modes (Smith and Shortt 2002).

In a recent book (Shortt 2014), in place of the rope image, I have suggested that a helpful metaphor for the Bible can be that of an environment in which we may live and move and have our being, an environment in

which we may be shaped in different and interrelated ways through principles, stories, metaphors and so on.

As with aspects of our physical environment, we may never have noticed many elements of this spiritual environment before or may have only the vaguest sense of their influence. While we may be more familiar with certain elements, we may not realize the full extent of their influence or be too preoccupied to see how they relate to form the larger whole of how we are shaped. The central idea is that teachers are shaped as whole persons for relationships with students as whole persons in the community of the classroom and that, for Christian teachers, the Bible can be a shaping influence or, more precisely, God the Holy Spirit can shape them through their reading of the Bible and meditation upon it. This formation cannot be reduced to the rational consideration of principles and their application to practice. However, that is not to say that our critical faculties have no place in this formative process—on the contrary, they have a very important role in our coming to think for ourselves. The formative process of being shaped by the biblical environment is one in which the Christian educator is actively engaged.

Does this produce anything that is distinctively Christian? Hirst's case is that, in practice, it is not possible to produce 'anything of substance that deserves to be labelled a Christian view of education' (1971a, p.46). Even at the outset of the process of building an approach to education based on principles, he says, the general moral principles and specific educational principles appealed to are not distinctively Christian.

I think there are several points to be made in response to this. First, I would suggest that Christian education should aim at faithfulness rather than difference. In an important paper entitled 'The Distinctiveness of Christian Learning in Church of England Schools', Trevor Cooling interprets Christian distinctiveness in terms of 'faithfulness to a Christian vision of life' (Cooling 2012, p.168).

Nicholas Wolterstorff has much to say on this. In response to Christians who seem to expect uniqueness of Christian scholarship, he asks,

Why assume that the scholarship of Christians and non-Christians *must* always and everywhere be different except for ... thin points of commonality? Why not instead let the differences fall where they may? Why should the Christian project be defined primarily in terms of its *difference* from that of others? Why is fidelity not enough? Why is it not enough to urge that Christians be *faithful* in their scholarship? Why not be thankful for genuine

agreement rather than ever suspicious and querulous? (Wolterstorff 2004, pp.77–78)

I suggest that Christian beliefs in general revelation and in God's common grace to all give grounds for such questions.

Wolterstorff goes on to say, 'Faithful scholarship as a whole will be *distinctive* scholarship, I have no doubt of that. But difference is to be a consequence, not an aim' (p.78). Wolterstorff's talk of scholarship *as a whole* brings me to a second point about distinctiveness. Both critics and advocates of attempts to develop a Christian approach to education may share the expectations that distinctiveness means uniqueness at every point and that this should be an aim of Christian education. However, Wolterstorff is arguing that distinctiveness is a matter of the whole rather than of every part and that this is a consequence rather than an aim.

If education is a matter of promoting human flourishing, as I believe it is, and if this has a lot to do with developing moral and intellectual virtues, the constellation of virtues the Christian educator seeks to develop may contain the same stars, the same elements, that those who are not Christians seek but the appearance of the whole may be different.

In part, this may be because certain stars shine more brightly in a Christian constellation than they do in another constellation and vice versa. Take the virtue of humility for example. This is a virtue that is not only prominent in the Bible and supremely modelled in Jesus but it is also a virtue some degree of which is, as Mark Schwehn puts it, 'a precondition of learning' (1993, p.49). (I would argue that it is also a precondition of good teaching!) I therefore suggest that it should be a bright star in a Christian constellation of virtues. It may shine rather less brightly in another constellation or even be entirely absent. David Hume dismissed it as one of the 'monkish virtues' that are vices rather than virtues (Schwehn 1993, p.46).

Distinctiveness is therefore both a matter of faithfulness to a vision rather than difference from others and also a matter of the whole rather than of parts. This is helpfully commented upon in the website of the What If Learning Project in talking about distinctiveness of the exemplar classroom activities suggested in their materials:

(T)aken piecemeal and one by one it may well turn out that many of the particular actions suggested in the examples on this site could be adopted or invented by teachers of various beliefs. We make no large claim that at the

level of individual strategies these examples are unique to Christians, though many of them occurred to the teachers concerned because of their faith. We are more concerned with whether they represent a way of teaching that is faithful for Christians, and we suggest that it is when the individual examples come together into a consistent pattern over time and get connected with the Christian story that we can talk about distinctively Christian teaching. It's a matter of building a rich whole that is informed by faith, not of whether each component part is trademarked. (Whatiflearning 2017)

Paul Hirst's first argument against Christian education is that in practice little, if anything, can be produced that is distinctively Christian. I have argued that this is based on an inappropriate view of distinctiveness in matters of religious faith.

Hirst's second argument is that, in principle, the search for a Christian form of education is a mistake. It is the central thesis of his paper and he writes,

(T)here 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. (1971a, p.43)

He opposes this view of education to what he terms 'the primitive concept of education', the idea that 'education ... is concerned with passing on to children what we believe, so that they in their turn come to believe it to be true'. He writes,

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. (p.47)

He goes on to ask,

(I)s 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 now increasingly considered immoral, wherever it is conducted. (p.51)

In contrast with this 'primitive concept', there is 'a second, sophisticated view of education' and on this second view, Hirst says, 'the character of education is not settled by appeal to Christian, Humanist or Buddhist beliefs ... for the basis is logically more fundamental, being found in the

canons of objectivity and reason' (p.48). Elsewhere, Hirst talks of the development of rational autonomy as being the central purpose and defining characteristic of education and of developing in human beings the 'final court of appeal in all human affairs' (1972, p.300). In reply to one of his critics who put to him the *tu quoque* argument that no education was ideologically neutral, Hirst writes,

To the suggestion that no education is ideologically neutral, so why not speak of Christian education, I would reply that it seems to me we are now able to see what an ideologically neutral education can be—one committed to the development of reason. And to reply in turn that this is to follow the ideology of reason, is, to my mind, no answer when the term ideology only has meaning if contrasted with the tenets of objective reason. (1971b, pp.190–191)

These quotations come from several decades ago and are, it seems to me, rooted in a quite rationalist, individualist and reductionist view of human nature. It was the dominant perspective in philosophy of education of the time and, although it is no longer so, I suggest that something of it is at the root of at least some contemporary opposition to Christian and other faith-based forms of education.

IS CHRISTIAN EDUCATION INDOCTRINATORY?

I will shortly attempt to sketch out some features of an alternative view but, before that, I want to comment briefly on the charge of indoctrination that is suggested in Hirst's statement that bringing up children in the faith is increasingly considered immoral and unacceptable.

It is true that the way some children and young people are taught as members of a captive audience in day schools, Sunday Schools and in homes may be indoctrinatory and manipulative. There may be little or no place for helping children to develop their critical faculties, little by way of encouragement to think for themselves. It may seem at times that anything goes where teaching is concerned provided the desired outcome of firmly implanted beliefs is achieved. What is lacking in such situations is a proper respect and indeed love for the learner as Other. Teaching and learning are at heart relational matters and they call for humility before the Other as well as humility before what is being taught and learnt. This is

especially important when what is being taught and learnt is a matter of ultimate commitment.

Such a relational and humble approach was advocated by Wittgensteinian philosopher D. Z. Phillips when he suggested that the teaching of religious beliefs was a matter of 'elucidation ... displaying a thing of beauty' that:

calls for a sympathetic relation to religion in the teacher, since ... it involves unpacking the significance of values, ideals, different conceptions of worship and love, and the roles they play in people's lives. (1970, pp.163, 166–167)

Teaching that something is beautiful involves talking about it and drawing attention to its features in the hope that learners will come to see for themselves. They should not be indoctrinated or brainwashed into seeing it and they cannot be argued into seeing it but, in the appropriate conditions, they may find themselves with the belief that it is beautiful. Christian education can be indoctrinatory but it is not necessarily so.

EDUCATION FOR SHALOM

I turn finally to a positive alternative vision for education—a relational education that aims at shalom. I have written elsewhere on this in greater detail than is possible within this chapter (Shortt 2016), so I will limit this account to a sketch drawn with broad brush-strokes.

The Hebrew word 'shalom' is usually translated in English as 'peace'. English dictionaries define 'peace' mainly in negative terms as the absence of war or conflict but shalom is a rich, full and positive concept in the scriptures of the Old Testament. It signifies wholeness, completeness, integrity, soundness, community, connectedness, righteousness, justice and well-being. Its New Testament Greek equivalent of *eirene* (the word that is also used in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament in place of 'shalom') is also full, rich and positive.

Shalom embraces the idea of human flourishing and it includes the idea of the common good but it predates Aristotle because, for example, the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter in which he called on his readers to seek the shalom of the city. What city? No, not Jerusalem! Jeremiah was in Jerusalem writing to the exiles in Babylon. The call to seek shalom is a call to be outward-looking and inclusive, not inwardly and exclusively focused on fellow-believers. This was the city of Babylon with

its wonderful Hanging Gardens, a city where there were ziggurats dedicated to the worship of gods other than Jehovah, gods like Marduk and Shamash.

The Jewish exiles may have sat by the rivers of Babylon and, in the words of Psalm 137, wept as they remembered Zion and longed to be back home in Jerusalem. However, the call is not to retreat from the world but to seek the shalom of Babylon, the alien and pantheistic community in which they were living.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, in a volume of his writings on education, has this to say about shalom:

Shalom is present when a person dwells at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature. ... To dwell at peace in one's relationships, it is not enough, however, that hostility be absent. Letting live is not shalom. Shalom is enjoyment in one's relationships. A nation may be at peace with all its neighbours and yet be miserable in its poverty. (2002, p.101)

He goes on to say:

Shalom is enjoyment in one's relationships. ... To dwell in shalom is to enjoy living before God, to enjoy living in one's physical surroundings, to enjoy living with one's fellows, to enjoy life with oneself. (p.101)

Shalom is therefore relational. And it is a matter of right and good relationships, a matter of justice and fairness. Wolterstorff is adamant that justice is indispensable to shalom (p.103).

If the calling of the Christian educator is to faithfulness to a Christian vision of life, I suggest that shalom is central to that vision. We were created for right relationships, relationships with our fellow human beings, with our physical environment and supremely with God but these relationships were broken by our self-centred sinfulness. Christ came to restore these relationships and bring peace through his death on the cross, thereby bringing in a kingdom of shalom which is both now and not yet.

The focus on relationships that teaching for shalom therefore calls for is, I suggest, quite a way removed from the rationalism and individualism that is implicit in the attacks on the idea of Christian education at which we have been looking.

This focus upon relationships is faithful to a Christian vision for life and education. It is about knowing but not just any kind of knowing. It is about what I call 'knowing of the third kind', not 'knowing that' (factual knowledge) or 'knowing how' (skilful knowing) but knowing with a direct object, knowing a person, place or thing. It includes 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' but is not reducible to a combination of them. It coheres with a biblical view of knowing. The word used almost always in the Old Testament for knowing of any kind is *yada*. This is the word used when intimate sexual relations are written about in terms of 'knowing' a man or a woman. The same word is used for knowledge of God.

Knowledge in the scriptures is therefore not the detached contemplation of reality of the Greeks: it is about relationship with the experienced world of people and things and involves being and doing as well as thinking.

Education is therefore not simply a matter of minds in the making or limited to the development of reason. It is about persons in relation to one another, persons in relation to Otherness of the physical creation and persons in relation, people of many faith traditions believe, to the Transcendent Other, to God, whether or not he is acknowledged by all and whether or not he is even explicitly mentioned.

On relations with our fellow human beings, Scottish Christian philosopher John Macmurray writes,

The thesis we have to expound and to sustain is that the self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in its relationship; and that this relationship is necessarily personal. ... We need one another to be ourselves. This complete and unlimited dependence of each of us upon the others is the central and crucial fact of personal existence. Individual independence is an illusion; and the independent individual, the isolated self, is a nonentity. (1991, pp.17, 21)

In a similar vein, Archbishop Rowan Williams, drawing upon the work of the Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky, writes of 'an essential mysteriousness about the notion of the person in the human world, ... which is something about the place I occupy in terms of being the point where the lines of relationship intersect'. He continues:

To be the point where lines of a relationship intersect means that we can't simply lift some abstract thing called 'the person' out of it all. We're talking about a reality in which people enter into the experience, the aspiration, the sense of self, of others. And that capacity to live in the life of another—to have a life in someone else's life—is part of the implication of this profound mysteriousness about personal reality. (2013, p.12)

Our interrelatedness is also present in the idea of Ubuntu in the language of the Xhosa people of South Africa, often translated as 'I am because we are'. Another archbishop, Desmond Tutu, writes,

Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. (Tutu n.d., cited in Deardorff 2017, p.15)

One of the things that follows from thinking of knowing, teaching and learning in this relational way is that it is not only about teacher–student and student–student relationships. It is also about everything we know and come to know. It therefore has implications for the whole curriculum.

In her book *Loving to Know*, Esther Meek writes this:

We will be better knowers if our epistemic efforts more fully conform to the dynamics of a healthy interpersonal relationship. The process of coming to know in some way transforms knower and known. The paradigm, of course, applies well to knowing people. I believe it applies well to knowing muskrats and cures for cancer, also. And if it feels a bit strange to think of knowing, say, trees or car motors interpersonally, let me offer a deal. For centuries we have construed all knowledge on an impersonal paradigm, and, in the process, we have damagingly depersonalized people and known defectively. Let's try it the other way for a while. (2011, p.100)

In her book, Meek draws from a number of writers whose works resonate with one another, including John Macmurray's *Persons in Relation* (Macmurray 1991), Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (Polanyi 1958), Parker Palmer's *Knowing as We Are Known* (Palmer 1983) and *The Courage to Teach* (Palmer 1998) and, perhaps towering above all of these, Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (Buber 1937).

Meek points out that we have been dominated by an I-It paradigm for all knowing and she calls us instead to see all knowing through the lens of I-You knowing. This resonates with what Parker Palmer says about 'the grace of great things':

(O)ur conventional images of educational community ignore our relationships with the great things that call us together—the things that call us to know, to teach, to learn. ... By 'great things' I mean the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered—not the disciplines that study these subjects, not the texts that talk about them, not the theories that explain them, but the things themselves.

I mean the genes and ecosystems of biology, the symbols and referents of philosophy and theology, the archetypes of betrayal and forgiveness and loving and loss that are the stuff of literature ... the artifacts and lineages of anthropology, the materials of engineering with their limits and potentials, the logic of systems in management, the shapes and colors of music and art, the novelties and patterns of history, the elusive idea of justice under law. ...

(H)umility is the only lens through which great things can be seen—and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible. (1998, pp.107–108)

We teach and learn in community before the Others of those whom we are teaching and alongside whom we are learning and also before the Others of the 'great things' around which we are gathered. We teach and learn *coram deo*, before the Transcendent Other who is God.

This suggests a meta-narrative within which Christian education can be meaningful. It is not limited to relations with fellow human beings. The idea of Ubuntu on its own is humanist: a fuller Christian picture is framed not only by 'I am because we are' but also by 'I am because the physical world is' and supremely by 'I am because God is'. To focus exclusively on the second of these is materialist and to focus exclusively on the third is spiritualist. All three are fundamental to a Christian view of reality and knowledge.

The Christian belief is that without God we would not be. This is the primary relationship in which we live, move and have our being. I am because God is.

The Christian belief is that we are made of the dust of the earth. I am incomplete without my body. He gave us work to do to care for the physical world and to teach others to care for it. I am because the physical world is.

The Christian belief is that we are made in the image of God, the relational God who is Three Persons and One God. He made us for himself and he made us for each other. That is why Ubuntu is true. I am because we are.

It is this Big Picture that makes talk of Christian education meaningful.

CONCLUSION

Is talk of ‘Christian education’ meaningful? Not if we assume with Paul Hirst and some contemporary secular humanist writers that the central aim of education is the development of rational autonomy. I have argued that this is based on a reductionist view of human nature and knowledge. It assumes that the only way to develop a Christian approach to teaching and learning is to proceed from Christian or biblical principles to practical applications and that the outcome must be distinctive in the sense of being unique. I have argued that a meaningful Christian vision for education seeks shalom. It is focused on formation of the whole person in relation to other persons and in a caring relation to the physical world. Ultimately, it is all done in relation to God.

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