Whitefield BRIEFING

July 2001 (Vol.6 No.3

Christian Belief and the Spirituality of Education

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Christian interest in what goes on in schools has understandably tended to focus on particular parts of the school's task. The teaching of religion, the role of festivals such as Halloween, teaching about family life or morality more generally, the daily act of worship – all of these are natural and important points where Christians should be and have been engaged with our education system. While these may be central concerns for Christians, however, they are not all accorded the same importance in the wider educational world. The bulk of the day's energy in schools goes into the teaching and learning of apparently more mundane matters like mathematics, history or languages. Should Christians have any special concern for these parts of education? In this paper I will suggest that recent shifts in educational legislation underscore the need for just such a concern on the part of Christians.

'Spiritual Development' in schools

In recent years there has been vigorous public discussion of the spiritual and moral dimensions of schooling. This is in some ways nothing new. The 1944 Education Act required every local education authority to "contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community" through its educational provision.[1] This requirement was reaffirmed in the 1988 Education Reform Act, with the significant difference that the placement of the relevant clause in the Act implied that the adjectives listed applied across the *whole* of the school curriculum.[2] This shift was reinforced by the implementation in 1992 of a new inspection regime, which had the inspection of schools' provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils as one of its central tasks. Subsequent literature from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) has emphasised that "spiritual development is emphatically not another name for religious education … [it] is a responsibility of the whole school and of the whole curriculum, as well as of activities outside the curriculum."[3]

What does this mean? What should it or could it mean? That is exactly what is currently subject to vigorous debate. Views of what spiritual development in school should be about range from those which equate it with Christian growth to those which see it in terms of a more universalised encouragement of wonder, creativity or introspection. In this paper I will not enter this debate in general terms (on this, see *Whitefield Briefing* 3:1), but instead explore some of the implications of examining what we commonly think of as "secular" areas of the curriculum with a concern for the learner's spiritual development in mind.

The particular curriculum area which has been the focus of my research is modern foreign language education. This is not an area which usually strikes people as being ripe for theological engagement. In fact a common response to the notion of a Christian perspective on

teaching foreign languages beyond the level of very broad aims is outright disbelief: "is there a Christian way to boil water?" was the response I received from one teacher. If we can show that there are indeed issues in this unlikely area which should concern Christians, then we have some grounds for expecting that the same will be true in many other areas of the school curriculum.

Humility and language learning

Let's begin by selecting a more concrete yardstick than broad talk of spirituality or Christianity. There are many possibilities, but for present purposes let us focus narrowly on humility. Humility might reasonably be taken to be a desirable outcome or a plausible evidence of spiritual growth, and it is a virtue which holds an important place in Christian reflection on the life of the spirit.

We should immediately note that humility has always been controversial. Alasdair MacIntyre notes that for Aristotle humility was more like a vice, the negative counterpart of the virtue of magnanimity, than a virtue.[4] More recently, philosopher Susan Mendus has argued that Western liberal education excludes the possibility of pursuing humility as an educational ideal. Liberal democratic education, she argues, must oppose humility with an emphasis on fostering individual autonomy, self-assessment, self-determination and self-esteem.[5] Mark Schwehn, in contrast, has argued that learning itself is dependent upon the exercise of humility: we need a certain amount of humility to be able to learn from others or to have patience with texts which do not immediately make sense to us.[6] Humility is controversial, and this makes it helpful for present purposes, because it both highlights the controversial nature of spiritual development in schools and represents a spiritual virtue concerning which Christians will have particular views.

Suppose, then, we take growth in humility to be a desirable component of spiritual development. Will this have anything to do with what goes on from day to day in a foreign language classroom? With the idea of humility in mind, let's look a little more closely at some examples of advice offered to teachers concerning how to teach a foreign language.

Some ways of teaching languages

Consider first the following statement from an influential article by leading applied linguist Henry Widdowson. Widdowson claims that "you are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form…Real proficiency is when you are able to take possession of the language, turn it to your advantage, and make it real for you. This is what mastery means."[7]

This claim has a surface plausibility given that learners must progress beyond mechanical repetition of formulae. But consider some alternative formulations. How would the spirit of teaching and learning be different if "real proficiency" were, for instance, formulated in terms of a playful and appreciative enjoyment of the language's resources and possibilities? Or in terms of the ability to turn the language to the purpose of serving, encouraging or consoling others? Or in terms of the ability to form strong relationships with others through its medium? Regarding any of these as simply specific instances of asserting oneself, bending the language to one's will or turning it to one's advantage would seem incongruous to say the least. Widdowson's comment thus seems more than common sense; he has a particular vision of "real" proficiency which is closely tied to self-assertive mastery.

A second example is taken from Claire Kramsch's creative articulations of a "critical foreign language pedagogy". For Kramsch, the learner is one who is disempowered by the educational setting but is trying to seize the power embodied in language. Learners must try to *possess* the new language, to impose their own meanings upon it. This, of course, results in conflict – the different learners and the teacher are each trying to impose their own agenda on the language used in the classroom. Such conflict between the various voices present in the classroom is, Kramsch argues, to be encouraged through learning activities which bring it to the fore. Kramsch suggests that since the conflict between different voices disrupts our taken-for-granted sense of meaning it can generate learning.[8]

A third example comes from Gertrude Moskowitz's handbook of humanistic language teaching techniques, which is designed to make learners realize that "we all know what we need and what is right for us. We just have to tune into ourselves to find the answers. We are our own gurus." One activity has each student imagine that he or she is going to give a speech before a group of people. The person who is to chair the event does not know the speaker and so each must draft a complimentary self-description which can be used for the purpose of introduction. Students are told that "they don't have to be modest but should point out all of the terrific things about themselves and be honest".[9] The activity is titled "Me Power".

The next example is taken from government advice to foreign language teachers. In a training pack produced in conjunction with the National Curriculum some examples of existing practice were included, apparently for emulation. One describes a teacher who invented an identical twin sister who spoke only French. Having persuaded at least some of her young students that this sister was real, she used the ploy as a basis for speaking only French in some lessons and English in others. In her description of this ruse she comments: "It becomes a sort of game and whichever sister I am I adopt a very scathing attitude to the sister who isn't there. The kids like the bitching and insults."[10]

Finally, a textbook published by the Stapleford Centre includes work on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem *Wer bin ich?*, which reflects on the gap between others' perceptions of him and his own inner experience while in prison. Students are first presented with a collection of German adjectives which could be used to describe character - honest, determined, foolish, serious etc. They are asked to draw a circle round any words which others have used to describe them, a rectangle round any which they would use to describe themselves, and a triangle round any which they would not use to describe themselves at present but which represent aspirations. Once this is done, the sorted vocabulary can then be used by students to write a simple imitation of Bonhoeffer's poem, using a framework provided. By now students are in a better position to tackle Bonhoeffer's original poem, in which he contrasts others' words of admiration with his own sense of inner desolation..[11]

Teaching as a spiritually controversial activity

Compare the examples with one another: what visions of the learner's spiritual growth do they imply? The Moskowitz activity encourages learners to see themselves in entirely positive terms through the glasses of ritualised public praise; proud self-affirmation is the goal, and sober self-examination is discouraged. Widdowson and Kramsch see proficiency in terms of bending language to one's will; learning is, for them, an autonomous seizure of power which becomes hard to square with love of one's neighbour. The National Curriculum example models to students an abuse of power: bitching and scathing insults directed at an absent relative. The Christian spirituality of Bonhoeffer's poem stands in sharp contrast to this fostering of pride and power. Bonhoeffer's poem is explicitly suspicious of public praise, and looks upon the self with more sober eyes. He meditates on his powerlessness and dependency on God, modelling a basic attitude of humility rather than one of self-assertion through the seizure of power.

I suggest that two points are by now fairly obvious about these various suggestions for language teachers. First, each of them is likely to have an effect not only upon the learner's language skills but on his or her spirit. Each has its own spiritual trajectory, and to adopt any of these ways of teaching is implicitly to declare that its spiritual trajectory is one which students should follow as they grow into maturity. Second, these suggestions are not all equally conducive to the learner's growth in humility. In fact several of them seem likely to run directly counter to any such growth.

A peek into any given classroom may or may not reveal one of the particular suggestions described here being put into practice. But the examples discussed here are only meant to be illustrative of a more general point. Teachers must make choices, and over time those choices can begin to mould students. Because teaching is not merely a matter of efficient technique and high standards, but rather shapes the experience of learners in a rich variety of ways, it is

never spiritually innocent.

This has implications for the way Christians approach education. I suggested at the outset that Christian concern has tended to cluster around areas which, while important in their own right, are only a subset of what goes on in school. The issues surrounding religious education, school assemblies and moral education do indeed require our energy and attention, but does not justify the easy assumption that the rest of learning (what secular educators may see as the real bulk of learning) can be safely left to run its course. If pedagogy opposes growth in humility, that is surely of concern to Christians, and should provoke us to chart further the spiritual dimension of teaching and learning. The recent discussion of spiritual development across the curriculum will have performed a significant service if it leads us first to realise that teaching across the whole curriculum is a spiritually controversial activity, and then to respond thoughtfully in the light of Christian faith.

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For Further Reading

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The Charis Project textbooks, available from the Stapleford Centre; see

David I Smith completed his doctoral studies at the Institute of Education, University of London in 2000 with support from the Whitefield Institute and the Stapleford Centre. His thesis examined the relationship between spiritual development, Christian belief and foreign language pedagogy. He is now Assistant Professor of German at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is an editor of the *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* and also of the *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages*. His recent publications include *Making Sense of Spiritual Development* (Nottingham, The Stapleford Centre).