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"That Damned Subject"

Religious Instruction is a compulsory subject in our S. African schools. Has scripture a place in our schools? If it has, how effectively are we teaching it? The teacher of scripture, the writer asserts, must help the adolescent especially to grapple with the ethical problems that confront him.

by H. HOLMES

"WHAT'S the use of scripture, sir?" is a question that a good many teachers have been faced with, for young people today in both primary and high school, seem to be concerned with the direct value that a subject has for them, and quite often set up a hierarchy of subjects ranging from say mathematics and science, or perhaps even shorthand and typing, at one end of the scale, to those subjects which are tolerated as a special favour to the teacher at the other. There are inevitably subjects of high prestige and others of low, and in observing a protocol, often purely utilitarian, it is true, young people are merely imitating their elders.

The two strongest nations in the world today have removed Religious Instruction from their curriculum. Lenin wrote in 1905, "The state must not be concerned with religion. Everybody must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases or not to believe in any religion at all," and Article 124 of the U.S.S.R. constitution reads, "In order to ensure the citizens freedom of conscience, the church in the U.S.S.R. is separated from the state, and the school from the church. Freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda are recognised for all citizens." But "supreme moral ideals" must be inculcated, inter alia, love of one's country, respect for every people, international friendship, comradeship towards each other, subordination of personal interests to the public interest, love of work and a desire to work as well as possible, a thoughtful and careful consideration of public property, honesty and truthfulness in behaviour." (Esipov: Year Book of Education, 1958, p. 142).

The exclusion of Religious Instruction from the schools of the United States was largely because educational leaders like Horace Mann feared that religious instruction would mean sectarian teaching and that the latter would wreck the schools. "The absence of anything like religious *instruction* in our public schools must be considered as inevitable under our form of government," said H. H. Horne, the philosopher (The Philosophy of Education, p. 124), but the Education Policies Commission's Report (1951) adds, "Education uninspired by moral and religious values is directionless, values unapplied in human behaviour are empty . . . The public schools must increase their efforts to equip each child and youth in their care with a sense of values which will lend dignity and direction to whatever else he may learn." (pp. 7, 13). So in the United States, as in Russia, the exclusion of formal religious instruction from the curriculum almost automatically leads to an assertion that moral and ethical training cannot be neglected.

In Great Britain, in contrast, religious instruction (or religious education if that term is preferred) has been put on a more stable basis in the schools by the Act of 1944. The attitude in England and Wales seems to be summarised in the following words from the 15 to 18 Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education, "The teenagers with whom we are concerned need, perhaps above all else, to find a faith to live by . . . Education can and should play some part in their search. It can assure them that there is something to search for and it can show them where to look, and what other men have found," (p. 44), or, again, "If the schools are to do their duty of moral education efficiently, they must come into the open with full and frank treatment of ethical problems." (p. 114).

Locally, both in our Republican Constitution (as in the former Union one) and in our Provincial education ordinances, we are committed to a Christian way of life and to religious instruc-

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tion in our schools, and, in spite of strong statements by prominent South Africans that the time wasted on scripture could be better spent on science or mathematics, religious instruction is an entrenched part of the curriculum. So we come back to the boy's question: "What is the use of scripture, sir?" and if we can answer this question, there is immediately another. "How successfully are we carrying out our aims, and, if we are failing, where does the fault lie?"

What Aims

In answer to the first question we have salvoes from the big guns of various education commissions: "The Commission is convinced that Religious Education is the foundation of all true education, that it offers solidity to the nation . . . that it is the means of building strong personal character and that culture without religion is not dependable." (Nicol Commission, 1939, p. 147). The Broome Commission of 1937 in Natal strongly supported the system of religious education in schools as the basis of moral education (p. 26); "We realise now as never before the significance of moral standards, and how ill-equipped youth will be to meet the realities of our time if their education does not add to the knowledge and skills they acquire an ideal based on the moral values upon which our Christian democracy is founded." (de Villiers Commission 1948, p. 22); "In the government school in South Africa religious education is synonymous with Christian education . . . Moral development is treated with religious education because the Christian believes that it is dependent on religion. The ethic is not in itself absolute, but the standards of a moral life are dictated by God and the human being must obey unconditionally . . . Sound religious teaching will lead to the acknowledgement that we live morally when we obey God". (Lynch Report 1950, p. 19).

The aims of religious education have been stated variously by less eminent 'authorities'. The goals of the Christian National Education philosophy of education have been reiterated ad nauseam; it is surely time that both the upholders and (often emotional) critics of this philosophy moved forward to new positions. Christian orthodoxy sees in the scripture lesson an opportunty for teaching "Bible history", a study which is quite often irrelevant to the needs of the day; or establishing a fundamentalism which seeks spiritual security in a form of bibliolatry; or making available a new knowledge which not only puts the Bible into its proper historical setting but shows its meaning for the twentieth century.

The aims of religious instruction as stated by education departments vary, but not greatly, and the aims given in the current Transvaal syllabus are fairly typical (the proposed primary school syllabus now under consideration, has met much criticism. It has been described as dull, unimaginative and repetitive). For the primary school— general ideas of the Fatherhood of God showing his love and care for man; the revelation of God's Fatherhood through the great heroes of Bible history and even through other great heroes of secular history; the chosen people and their history; the revelation of God's Fatherhood through the birth, life and death, and resurrection of Christ; the great brotherhood of Christ's disciples. For the high school — to give a unified survey of the Christian religion and of showing the significance and influence of the Bible, of its great men, and above all, of Christ, "upon our way of thinking and living as individuals, as members of a family, of society, of a nation and as citizens of the world."

Little criticism can be levelled at these aims if carried out in a spirit of broadmindedness and understanding and a readiness to point out the mid-century implications of teaching on the brotherhood of Christ's disciples (if not of man) or on the responsibility of the individual not only in his immediate neighbourly relations but as a citizen of the nation and the world.

Is the Teaching Bad?

From the aims come the syllabuses. So long as these are broad in conception, show a measure of agreement by all Christians, give opportunities for illustrating the spirit, meaning and power of religion, and have that admirable word 'suggested' boldly superscribed, they can be used effectively by the thoughtful teacher. There is often a tendency perhaps to stress the Bible *story* and neglect the *meaning*, the magical creeping in to create later problems, or to avoid grappling with the questions which the young adolescent especially wants answered. Vast areas of the syllabus are, however, often completely neglected. Mechanically, then, there is not a great deal wrong with either aims or syllabus. If there is failure, it must be due to our making the machine work in unsuitable conditions, or perhaps asking it to do what it was not designed to do.

Evidence before commissions has been critical. Witnesses to the Nicol Commission spoke of backwardness, sad neglect, mere form, a cruel farce, fast heading for a heathen state, etc. But that was in 1937. Twenty years later, the present writer carried out an investigation among school pupils and college students. The picture given by these young people was depressing, not merely in lack of factual knowledge of the Bible (which is not necessarily important) but in ignorance of any deeper meaning to life.

Primary School comment first: "Bible stories are very interesting if you have not already heard them three times before." "Sometimes I enjoy scripture lessons, but mostly not." Constantly recurring comments were that the lessons were too short, that the pupils should learn something new every day instead of always the same thing, and that teachers should ask more questions. About 14% named scripture as their most popular subject.

High school comment was less restrained. Pupils were fairly evenly divided on the question whether or not the scripture lesson at school served a useful purpose (57% for, 43% against). Candid opinion of the lessons was rather devastating. A random sample of 50 papers produced the following: Complete waste of time (12); quite useless unless properly taken (9); superficial; teachers never interested; a farce; terrific free periods; those showing the relation to modern life were good, etc. Thirty-nine of the fifty were highly critical.

Some of the questions used by B. G. Sandhurst in his "How Heathen is Britain?" were used with groups of post-graduate and third year professional students at the Johannesburg College of Education. One question asked whether the problem of standards of good and the origin, purpose, and destiny of man were ever discussed intelligently in their last years at school. Over 80% answered this question in the negative; 94% were of opinion that such discussions should take place, and preferably in the religious instruction lesson where there was common ground for all shades of opinion.

Teachers' views, as ascertained by a study team, help to explain their pupils' attitude. One headmaster of a high school referred to scripture as "that damned subject"; a commonly expressed view was that the churches had no business to expect the schools to do their job for them—religion was the churches' special racket; ignorance of the aims and content of scripture teaching was widespread though it was felt that it might give a useful ethical background. There is no need to multiply instances. The pattern was much the same throughout — ignorance, indifference, cynicism (Prof. Niblett has called this an anti-roll device for those spiritually at sea), exaggeration of difficulties, kindly humanism, very little conviction or commitment in the sense that a scientist is often personally committed.

Should we then, with the Americans and Russians, throw religious instruction out of the schools? Should we accept the view that religion has no relevance for today? Is religion a preserve of the churches? The answer to each question must be a negative. Two definitions of religion may illustrate this view. Bender says, "Religion is that activity of the human impulse toward self-preservation by means of which man seeks to carry his essential vital purpose through against the adverse pressure of the world by raising himself freely towards the world's ordering and governing powers when the limits of his own strength are reached" (Wesen der Religion p. 38). This is the humanist acceptance of the validity of Christian experience. The Christian view has been expressed well by Paul Tillich, "Religion, like God, is omnipresent; its presence, like that of God, can be forgotten, neglected, denied. But it is always effective, giving inexhaustible depth to life and inexhaustible meaning to every cultural creation . . . Religion is the substance of culture, culture is the expression of religion". (The Protestant Era pp. xv, xvii). We may not be prepared to subscribe entirely to either view, but can we, as Joyce Cary says, afford to stultify our minds and starve our imaginations (and those of our pupils) by cutting ourselves off from any point of contact with the actual world, from any experience of its nature — religious, aesthetic or scientific?

The old religious codes of behaviour have largely gone and new ones have not yet been sufficiently developed to replace the old, abandoned customs. "Clearly it is not possible for an educational service, which is designed to prepare the young for adult life, to establish itself by such a code . . . Teachers and youth leaders are, however, well placed to bring to attention the personal bewilderment and disaster to which this public indecision over moral issues often leads the young" (15 to 18 p. 38). Knowledge, discrimination, values — these cannot be left to

chance. "In morals, bad currency drives out good, and very rapidly." Teachers must be prepared to give guidance with integrity, humility, conviction, but never in an authoritarian spirit.

Hostile Forces

There are obviously hostile forces, among them the increasing organisation of people in masses, the standardisation and mechanisation of entertainment, the tensions of the ideological rift between communism and the west or locally of the colour-frontiers. In a way these are all manifestations of the secular society in which we live, activated by materialism. Someone has suggested that the motto of our school leavers is "What I like is beautiful; what I think is right; what I do is good," — a complete rejection of standards, relative or absolute.

Characteristic of our secular society, and the Republic is no less secular than other western countries, are the loss of influence of home and parents; the socialisation of our society; and the scientific temper of our times. These points may be examined briefly.

Spencer Leeson once said that there could not be effective Christian education where there was not a Christian home. Christian homes in the sense he means are in the minority today — a survey among English-speaking homes on the Witwatersrand indicated that only about 40% are formally Christian. This figure is borne out by Sunday School attendance among 2,000 primary school pupils in the area, (the majority of pupils leave Sunday School when they enter high school). The average attendance at Sunday School on three Sundays was 34.7%, 38.4% and 38.4%. The number of homes where character-training is consistently carried out is probably higher, but not by much to judge by what pupils say and do. Perhaps the parents are not entirely to blame — most thinking parents have doubts about all sorts of things, they do not quite know where they stand in the matter of the correct disciplining of children; economic conditions are so easy that 'spoiling' is prevalent. The teenager values the opinion of his peers above that of his parents but apparently not above that of an accepted teacher. If then, the family, "once the cradle or nursery of social training in habits, manners, discipline, religion, ideas and ideals, no longer performs this function to the same degree as in the past, the school must be prepared to undertake at any rate some of the responsibility."

The socialisation of society has not progressed so far in South Africa as in Russia or Great Britain, but nevertheless there is a growing insistence on the 'people' (volk) to accept as their motto "Yours not to reason why". We have not quite reached the stage of feeling that "Big Brother is watching", but there is always a chance that, if the individual questions his part as an unthinking cog in the greatly-to-be-admired machine — whether State, provincial, industrial or commercial — he may be disciplined. We live in a time when man is expected to be conforming and accommodating, and the schools which work under a mildly authoritarian system may be disturbed as to how they can reconcile educating a free person with producing the kind of conforming creature the state wants. Again it is a responsibility that cannot be shirked. Perhaps we can cheer ourselves with Sir Percy Nunn's words: "Nothing good enters into the human world except in and through the free activities of individual men and women."

Finally, the prevailing scientific temper of the time. The qualities of the scientific temper are, to name but three, cool observation, detachment, and non-identification. Many see in these a deep contrast with the religious temper which accepts emotional belief with faith, involvement and commitment. The language teacher faces a similar dilemma, for literature, like religion, has to do with motives, presuppositions, ideals, character — it is deeply concerned with life. A literature or a religion not true to the nature of things is doomed to fail.

Caught Not Taught?

When we as teachers use the timeworn phrase "caught not taught" as an excuse for not tackling the difficulties of reconciling science and religion, we do wrong. Our pupils should be able to catch from us that spirit of free enquiry into religion as into science. They should know what Christianity is about, how it challenges conventions. We must guard against identifying Christianity with the outworn views that are so often the fare from rostrum or pulpit. We are not concerned with doctrines (either those of fundamentalism or neo-orthodoxy) but with attitudes. Let us grapple with the ethical questions which worry the adolescent; they crop up frequently within the framework of the worst syllabus. Let us try to give our pupils such armour as we can for facing the world of work with its all too often questionable and spuri-

ous sets of values. We cannot leave our pupils to the mercy of the "ethical instinct" for, as Tillich says, this can never replace the ethical principles, the criteria of good and evil. All the teachers in the school, some more, some less, some Christian, some humanist or both, share the responsibility with the teacher of religion.

Hardly a day passes but some public figure or national newspaper stresses the importance of personal relations and suggests that many problems would be solved if such relations could be improved. No one will deny this, but unfortunately "there are social structures that unavoidably frustrate any spiritual appeal to the people subjected to them" (Tillich, op. cit. p. xviii). Nevertheless, the teacher, English-speaking or Afrikaans-speaking makes no matter, must apply himself to the question of personal relations, and in the Christian gospel he will find the most effective ground-plan for the desired structure.

But what of our original questions? Have we reached any conclusions? Is the scripture lesson any use at all? Has the scripture course any relevance to life? The answer seems clear enough. Religious education per se is no panacea for the ills we have mentioned; any success it may achieve will be through the teachers who are involved in the instruction — success comes through communication. We may go further and say that everything of real worth in life is born of communication between persons. Unfortunately, communication in religious matters is severely handicapped by the lack of an understandable language — to provide this language is hardly the task of the teachers but we can at any rate try out some of the simpler patterns. Christian principles have validity in the ordering of life. We must get rid of our reluctance to show this validity openly to young people in the schools and ask them to judge these principles on their merits.



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