

(seminaries) just like the state. In actual fact Catholic education is something theological, something which has to do with the nature of the Church. Why in that case do we practically entirely ignore the education of all those Catholics who are neither in schools nor seminaries? The very interesting experiments that are being made on the continent and in America of forming small groups of parents together to meet in their homes and discuss their religion seem to be the ideal form for such adult education. The LIFE OF THE SPIRIT hopes to be able to publish an article on this experiment in the near future.

Towards a Theology of Education¹

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The present debate that is going on at the frontiers about the nature of theology has for most people yet to be distilled and passed on. There is a severe and crucial change taking place that has been given a noticeable liberation through the climate of dialogue created by the Second Vatican Council. Its implications are profound and excitement awaits all who witness the extension of theology as it is brought to bear on secular social problems in particular. Indeed the very life of theology itself depends upon this extension to the creative centres of contemporary culture, with a response to the fully historical situation. Furthermore, theology requires to be done by laymen, contributing to it in their capacity as expert witnesses. The experience of adult members of the Church working in specific situations needs to be seen as the raw material of creative theology, and Christian and non-Christian experience will be at once equally valid and applicable. As an indication of the sort of raw material I mean and to illustrate the sort of direction and way in which I think theology should extend, I should like to make these few inroads into the idea of a theology of education. I feel that our thinking about the nature of a Christian education has not sufficiently progressed simply because we have not yet developed such a discipline.

¹A paper given to the London Circle of the Newman Association.

A theology of education is going to require a firm grasp of and reverence for the findings of current sociology, a consideration of all the texts of educational value, a comprehension of the totality of human experience (of which the religious experience is only one part), an acceptance of biological evidence and opinion, and an involvement in such political matters as teacher supply, pay, the cost and style of buildings, etc. For if the Catholic Church is to be accepted by the rest of society as an institution that claims to take its responsibilities seriously, then the Church will have to make many contributions on the world's own terms. In education, for instance, it is not sufficient for the Church to produce a policy of sectarian advantage. The modern educational problems will not be solved by so much energy and effort spent on methods of teaching religion. The Church has a responsibility to contribute imaginatively and creatively to the whole field of education, working equally and co-operatively with all other parties. Catholic education in England has grown largely from an implicit belief in the dichotomy of soul and body, from which it followed that our main effort should be to preserve the faith. There has never been a wide enough involvement with the issues of education itself.

I am not trying to deny that there have of course been some outstanding contributions to the idea of a Christian education, from men such as Joseph Pieper, Professor Jeffreys, Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Charles Peguy; but I find that their work, though always fascinating, has in fact tended to deal with generalised principles and attitudes, with traditional values, with the ideal, and their writings usually express a deep-rooted unease about the state of our culture. I find myself antipathetic to the Christopher Dawson school of thought, where traditional, classical, Europeanised cultural values are the mainstay of a Christian education. The discussion may remind us of possible rich areas of thought, but it doesn't really give us any immediate practical solution.

The nearest we come to a theology of education in one work is I suppose in Cardinal Newman's *Idea of a University*. Though considering ideals Newman in fact offers practical advice, and though writing about the nature of a university he gives us a surprising amount that is relevant to secondary education. When Catholics, particularly Catholics involved with the thought of Jünger, write about education there is something momentarily appealing about their penetrating surveys of the human personality and its needs, but there is still something rather deficient about their views. This is so, for instance, of Gerald Vann's

plea for a return to symbolism and for a love of the natural elements and the arts as a basis of humanity and religious experience. It somehow doesn't fit the contemporary situation of the city school. I think it is for much the same reason that the writing of Hans Küng is ultimately deficient. It is all so steeped in a middle class cultural milieu and thus does not really communicate across the cultural gulf.

Do Roman Catholic schools then bridge the gulf? Obviously some individual ones do, but by and large the system hardly begins to meet our needs, for it is a hierarchical one. There's the school for future *Tablet* readers, believing in a T. S. Eliot educated Christian élite; there's the school for *Catholic Herald* readers, bourgeois, radical without being at all non-conformist, and lastly the schools for the cosy, undisturbed world of the *Universe* and *Cork Times*. This tripartite system was not the creation of the Church, designed to embody its own educational beliefs. The Church has simply taken over a national system, virtually without questioning whether in fact it is a system capable of producing a Christian school. I believe that there are fundamental faults about this system that will always make realisation of a genuinely Christian school impossible. It is not even a practical system for giving Catholics suitable jobs. It has amazed me how tenaciously the Catholic Church has stuck to this system and how slow it has been to understand the full Christian dimensions and possibilities of the comprehensive or common school.

The style of school that a Christian body should create needs to be essentially missionary. The understanding of the missionary role of the Church is undergoing present emphasis at the Council. We need to understand the collaborative aspect of the Church's mission in human society. Pius XII required us 'first to make the human realm human, and then to make the human realm divine'. The Church has no possible chance of saving the faith of her children, or of convincingly bringing the faith to other people until Catholics work hard to find solutions to essentially human secular problems.

Now the cultural gulf is the greatest single problem preventing the growth and achievements of education in England. This gulf is partly the result of the class structure of English society, partly the inevitable consequence of an uncontrolled industrialised society. The New Left have concerned themselves vigorously with this problem, for they have seen that the loss of a common culture is the great social tragedy of our times. That is why the arts and education have been such big issues and have attracted so much discussion within the New Left. It is this sort of concern for the soul of man that as a Christian one can recognise, and be

tempted to conclude that the political left is closer to a theological disposition than any grouping on the right. An important contribution to the debate has in fact been made by Brian Wicker,² his contention being that the Church (if reformed) could offer this basis for the vital common culture.

But Brian Wicker has made it quite clear that the culture of the Church cannot develop unless it is linked in with the national cultural heritage. Theological writing in England must therefore be concerned with such debates as the New Left and the common culture. The Church's missionary role also requires it to consider urgently the elements of pressure from mass media and the values of an acquisitive and affluent generation.

The sort of education we want must be bound in closely with our belief in a common culture. I believe that there is a fundamental theological principle here, that each man being equal in the sight of God is heir to the whole of God's creation. As God's co-worker he has responsibility for it to continue it. Cultural creations of artists should speak to all men, and the only reason they usually don't is that man has created his own barriers. Most of these impediments are based on class and cultural distortion, either aggravated unconsciously or deliberately manipulated. Therefore the first job for a theology of education is to examine and bridge this gulf.

Some of the spade work has already been done, not by the theologians, but by the work of Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, who examined in depth all the grammar schools in Huddersfield. Their findings are published in their book *Education and the Working Class*. In brief outline, because I think this is an essential contribution to any Christian solution for education, these two men studied eighty-eight working-class boys and girls leaving schools between 1949-1952, and followed them through their further education to their present jobs. The book stated the values, outlook and material situation of their parents, and then alongside followed the development of the values and outlook of the children. It is a vivid and disturbing account of the tensions suffered through the social pressures that seem to be involved in educational advancement. The real tragedy of what the book tells is that the deformity of people's souls could have been avoided if we as a society were more sensitive and sympathetic to the real predicament of the natural realm in all its local, national, social variations. These tragedies are only inevitable if our schools and society continue as they are. At least one can

²In *Culture and Liturgy*, reviewed in LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, January 1963.

begin to do something about the schools.

I believe that a man's personal encounter with God and the relationship he creates with him is vastly affected by the depth of his understanding of the world and society within which he lives, for man's encounter with God is always within the society he experiences. That is why school matters as a preparation to make this encounter more possible and fruitful. Notice what happened to the majority of the working-class children in Brian Jackson's document. They sank to the B and C streams almost inevitably, for the very simple reason that they came from backgrounds that were not literate or academic, where the language of family conversation was limited, where customs and values were very different and largely opposed to the middle class values of teachers, where physical domestic conditions were cramped to make private study for homework very difficult. A strong anti-authoritarian streak was developed, and delinquency followed the national pattern which is always greatest in the last year of school life. All this evidence supported the findings of the Crowther report which so strongly decried the facts of widespread national wastage in our schools.

The authors of the study were naturally encouraged to end the work with a statement of their own conclusions about the possible remedies for what had disappointed them in these schools. They felt far greater thought should be given to the implications of the earlier growth to maturity, which might well lead to a reconsideration of our approach to and management of school children. Certainly a considerable change of emphasis and attitude on the part of teachers is required in the sixth form, a re-examination of our understanding of leadership, a far greater concern for the results of the declining powers of imagination that are encouraged by examination work, a profound distrust of the greyness of life, and the dullness of teaching. Obviously against all this we can see that any sort of religious teaching in itself will do little to help. The religious life of a school can only develop out of its total humanity.

This then is one side of the English grammar school and the selective system that goes with it. This is the school and system that the Catholic body in England accepted as the norm of education and copies uncritically.

I believe too much emphasis can be placed on school systems and types of schools in any debate on education. I think we need to begin from the growth of the child and decide first the child's need at every level. It means looking at such detail as the pattern of a child's day at school. This will seriously question the whole accepted idea of teaching 'subjects', and the pigeon-holed curriculum as we know it. We shall

instead need to think in terms of areas of study and experience. For we are after all teaching children, not satisfying our academic illusions in teaching 'subjects'. It is dangerous for a child to be bored, to lose his imagination, for his eternal salvation will be linked with his development.

Now this is a vast and complicated issue, so I will take only one area as an example of what I mean, from the point of view of the child and the content of the lesson. I will take the question of the child and the development of language. Theologically it is fair to say that a person's encounter with God and his relationship will be modulated by his own linguistic sensibility. The use of language is crucial to our development and growth in maturity. Brian Jackson found very clearly the consequences of linguistic disability on the academic and emotional development of the working class children. Here he was simply adding more evidence to the findings of other men working on the same theme, of which perhaps some of the most recent work has come from Basil Bernstein at Birkbeck.³ His conclusions are open to question but then the difficulties of complete and final analysis are almost as many as the number of people using language in the world. Broadly I would not disagree with his thesis that children from middle class homes are more easily able to organise conceptual and abstract ideas in speech, while working class children are more used to using language descriptively.

Now language cannot usefully be taught formally to children. Language must be part of experience, indeed it can only grow properly out of experience, for 'language is the texture of the mind in movement', as Professor L. C. Knights reminds us, 'the activity of the mind'. Yet schools persist in teaching language formally and in being prepared to countenance a course of literature that scarcely meets the children's needs or echoes their own experiences. So often literature is the representative of middle class values to children in the classroom. Yet the experience of literature is among the most vital for growing adolescents, for it is through the writing of other people that a child is filled with wonder both at the understanding of human experience and at human experience itself. Now just how far literature will bridge the class-cultural gulf depends less upon the quality of the literature than upon the handling of it. All discussion of creative writing whether by adults or children must be open-ended, for if a piece of great literature speaks, it speaks of the richness and depth of insight; it speaks as far as the reader is prepared to let it. And if the reader, or the teacher before him, brings preconceived judgements upon the text, he will kill it dead. Perhaps this

³*Language and Social Class.*

is especially true of response to poetry, where we need evermore to be listening to the text, not bringing predisposed attitudes to it.

Professor Knights, speaking recently of the relation between theology and literature, said that 'the teaching of literature or the understanding of poetry has what I would call . . . a religious significance, because it makes us aware of the presentness of other people, of the world and indeed of our own selves, in ways which more abstract studies can hardly hope to do'.

In looking at literature and poetry with children, there is required on the part of the teacher an essential humility and reverence for the text and for the children's responses and reactions. The text stands between child and teacher and the two meet in the text. Now this is not something highbrow and highly academic. When Coleridge spoke of poetry activating the whole soul of man he included all men, even the peasants of the world in which he lived. It is perfectly possible to achieve some degree of this activity with weak and poorly literate children. It is their own experience, which is rich and profound, that they must be allowed to talk and write about (however anti-social it might appear to our bourgeois minds) for it is only through the fabric of daily lived experiences that their language will be shaped and in turn will shape and crystallise those same experiences. And providing all discussion is open-ended, the growth can be natural and uninhibited.

The Young Christian Workers have used something like this method for several decades now, and it is becoming familiar to many in Catholic enquiry groups as the See, Judge and Act Method. But I feel that precisely because of the catholicism that is attached to it, the method carries severe inbred limitations. The tendency I have always found is for Catholics to oversimplify the See part, to fail to observe the complexity and richness of their bit of experience. The Judge part requires them too often to sit in judgment, to bring in predisposed attitudes, and the Act part is seldom continuous. Some little piece of action is chosen for the week, but hardly ever as part of a greater and more continuous theme going right through their lives and energising them in new ways. What I feel is lacking is an ability and understanding of the need to respond freely to the wonderment and subtleties of the natural realm, to see the supernatural reflected with all its kaleidoscopic brilliance in the natural.

I would level at much non-Catholic school teaching the same charge of failure to respond to experience, of bringing uncriticised social codes to bear on the situation, the same process of judging by stereotyped and narrow moralities. It is a general failure to be open, to be humble, to be

disposed. But this latter is a fundamental attitude to experience that seems to me to be on the one hand profoundly theological and on the other trained for essentially through literature and language. It was perhaps with this in mind that Professor Knights called his most recent article on the nature of criticism *In Search of Fundamental Values*.⁴

Now the implications of what I have said concerning the child and language and literature are extensive, particularly where they join up with the teaching of religion. For if this openness of response is to be the norm for children, then the codified injunctions of much religious teaching will be in stark contrast to it. But in fact that needn't be so. There is now a ferment of discussion about the need to be doing far more scriptural work in the schools. But it is precisely this response to the text that is so vital when reading the scriptures. And I will once more quote Professor Knights, because as a professional critic he seems to me to indicate clearly our direction in correlating the values of literature with the values of the Bible. In speaking of the Bible he said that 'When you regard it as the Word of God you mean something capable of unfolding with terrific power in relation to the actual life of each individual, not something to be learned up, not something to be enshrined in a moral code, but something deeply nutritive of life'.

And so I am brought back to the beginning of my paper. I believe that theology is a vast and wide activity dependent on all the other studies and disciplines for the extent of its effect and for the nutritive value of its own life; that a theology of Christian education must see the predicament and needs of a child's soul against the particular social setting of his society; that the content and method of education within a school crucially affects a child's ultimate style of response to experience and to other people; that the spiritual formation of a child depends upon the total quality of his school work and the keeping of his mind and imagination from boredom; that his understanding of the nature of language and response is common to all men and should be shared in common; and that the existence of a cultural gulf is detrimental to the life of a society yet can be partly bridged by a common school that could begin to put over a common culture.

Just as the strength of Benedictine monasticism was the embodiment of high ideals in a great organisation, so I believe could the common school be an embodiment of a universally experienced common culture. Then truly would the twentieth century have created a style of community suited to its age and capable of serving usefully future generations.

⁴*Times Literary Supplement*, 26 July 1963.