TEACH[R]

Protectors or shapers?

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Abstract

In the first issue of *TEACH*, Arthur N. Patrick issued a challenge to educators:

> **grasp the opportunity to discuss the dynamic impact that Christian education has exerted and can continue to exert upon Australian society.[1]**

This article is one response to that challenge.

Models of the Church

Dr Patrick has provided an excellent overview of the H. Richard Niebuhr cluster of models of Christianity's reaction to, and interaction with, its surrounding culture. Niebuhr's typology is, however, only one of a number of models of the church. Other useful models have been put forward by scholars such as Howard Snyder, Sallie McFague, Ian Barbour and Avery Dulles.[2] It must be kept in mind, however, that a model simulates reality, but is not reality itself. It must be taken seriously, but not literally. Models facilitate exploration of the world and help explain what we find.[3]

The Niebuhr typology, as described by Arthur Patrick, identifies five models. Howard Snyder, however, opts for eight models where each model focuses on sets of perceptions about the kingdom of God. He therefore postulates that the kingdom may be perceived as: future hope, inner spiritual experience, mystical communion, institutional church, counter system, political state, Christianised culture, and earthly utopia.[4] How the Church perceives God's kingdom will determine its structure, socio-cultural norms, and its objectives. It will also determine how the Church relates to and interacts with secular culture. For exploratory purposes the components of models tend to be discrete. In reality, however, the phenomena they describe tend to overlap. What these models have in common is that on a continuum, or multidimensional continua, they move from an exclusive stance toward an inclusive orientation.

> ***The Christian Church and Christian school must walk hand-in-hand***

Although he has not stated so explicitly, I sense Arthur Patrick, implicitly, would like to shepherd us away from any model of the Church that is *anti-culture* in stance and *fortress* in mentality, toward an understanding that is transformational and conversionist. He would have us *preaching* and *living* the Gospel and seeking to influence and change culture by being involved with and in culture. This transformational model most closely identifies with the "Christianised culture" model of Snyder. He writes:

> Here the kingdom is seen not merely as present, or as the inward experience of believers, but as an active, dynamic principle of social reconstruction empowered by God's Spirit. In this model the kingdom is present, not just future; social, not just individual; and material, not just spiritual.[5]

While many Christians, and Adventists in particular, might feel uncomfortable with this, I endorse this viewpoint. My comments will therefore address two issues: *how* might we as Christian educators reach out to the world about us, and *what* might we offer Australian society? I submit two qualifications. First, my experience has been largely with the K-12 sector of schooling and my comments will reflect that perspective. Second, it must always be remembered that the Christian school is a part of the Christian Church. The former does not have a mandate to march to a different drum beat. Church and school must walk hand-in-hand.

How might we reach society?

Those who espouse 'fortress thinking' build walls for the express purpose of keeping other people out. While the fortress offers personal security and some wellbeing, it ignores the greater good of the greater number. More importantly, it diminishes and institutionalises fulfilment of the Great Gospel Commission. It also results in a 'product' unprepared for encountering the world. Unfortunately for fortress dwellers the occasional sorties outside tend to have little impact upon secular society. To reach those about us calls for the removal of the fortress walls and a radical change in one's thinking. Accomplishing this also takes considerable moral and spiritual courage.

A removal of walls should lead to openness; the world can see in and the Church can see out. This means that the basis of faith and one's

belief tradition becomes open to questioning and challenge. Indeed, to paraphrase the apostles Peter and Paul, we must not be ashamed of the gospel but be ready to give informed and reasoned discourse about whom and what we believe.[6] This requires that the Christian home and the Christian student feel confident of their belief structures. Fear and insecurity exist within closed walls; self-confidence and assurance require open space. Sara Little reminds us that belief is multi-layered: "…it has affective (feeling), volitional (willing), and behavioural (acting) components, as well as cognitive (thinking)"[7], i.e. we are what we believe. What a challenge!

Australian society is rather proud of its secular traditions. Indeed it is considered bad form to discuss religion or religious issues in polite society. It is refreshing, therefore, to note an increasing willingness on the part of the nation's leaders to declare their Christian commitment and orientation. I would argue that Christians, without taking a narrow sectarian stance, should seek elected public offices—be it at the local, state, or national levels—as worthy vocations. Furthermore, students in Christian schools should be challenged to aspire to active involvement in the decision-making processes of an Australian social democracy.

Few Christians would doubt that faith is nurtured within the context of social interaction. Too often, however, Christians have limited faith development to social settings within a particular church. Jesus, on the other hand, took his disciples into situations where they associated and rubbed shoulders with prostitutes, publicans and Pharisees; Samaritans and sinners and social outcasts. He mixed freely with tax collectors, Gentiles and poor widows. While Jesus obviously had no truck with religious, social, economic, or gender divides, he did not directly attack the structures which permitted these prejudices to flourish. Rather, he appeared to treat social structures as irrelevant and, instead, addressed the personal attitudes of his friends and associates.[8]

Let me provide a recent illustration. A Christian friend of mine, working in a large state education system, was appointed a district director of schools. He inherited a culture in which some regional and district conferences of school principals were occasions for the copious consumption of alcoholic beverages. My friend made no comment on this, but simply asked that the caterers also provide a jug of orange juice from which he filled and replenished his glass.

Within a short period, others in the group were opting for orange juice and the one jug was insufficient. Over time, at his district conferences, alcohol disappeared entirely and this happened without adverse comment about drinking or censorial demeanour toward the principals. Such is the influence of the Christian who is unassumingly self-confident. Compromise or sermonising, in contrast, is the strategy used by Christians who are unsure of themselves and their beliefs.

This is not to suggest that there is nothing for the Christian to say. There is a level at which the Christian can and should offer input. We have just had a change in national government. The leader of the incoming party has declared education to be one of his prime concerns. He has promised that there will be significant change in the purposes, delivery and outcomes of Australian schooling. This provides a climate in which Christian educators may influence the direction of Australian education. The window of opportunity is small and therefore there is no time for procrastination. Furthermore, other groups with vested interests in education will ensure their voices are heard; why not concerned and responsible Christians? This leads us to the second issue: What do Christians have to offer to Australian society?

> ***"This provides a climate in which Christian educators may influence the direction of Australian education"***

What can Christians offer Australian society?

A proposal

Fortunately, in this regard Australian Christians do not start from 'scratch'. Australia has a Christian heritage that is its most valuable asset. To use an analogy, the bonfire has been neglected and burnt down to a mound of smouldering coals and ashes. Rather than build a new bonfire, it is easiest to gather the embers together and pile upon those embers fresh sticks, branches and logs. Within a short while the bonfire blazes bright! Let us not, therefore, forget the embers of the past.

Australian schooling is enhanced by the contributions of countless skilled, committed and highly competent teachers. They do not need to be told how to implement the curriculum and how to reach their students. They do that now and most accomplish it well. What they need is that something extra that adds fullness and challenge to their work and, at the end of the day, makes them feel that their labours are worthwhile; something that makes them feel proud of the product of their classrooms and their schools. I believe this is what Christianity offers.

I propose four areas in which we might focus our efforts to enhance Australian society:

A coherent world view

Every person has a world view; a framework through which their life is ordered. This framework provides a filter for what is happening in the world; it enables decisions to be made, and facilitates the individual's functioning within society. World views are developed over time as a result of life's experiences,

the shaping environment, and through the influence of significant others in their lives. No two persons have exactly the same world view. In this sense a world view is individualistic. Nevertheless, when many or most of the elements of a world view are shared by two or more persons it is possible to idealise that perspective. Thus we can talk of a Christian world view with which the majority of a faith community can identify.

Put simply, a world view includes clusters of concepts which coalesce around three philosophical elements: *metaphysics*, *axiology*, and *epistemology*—our sense of reality, our authentic sources of knowledge and truth, and our understanding of what is ethical and aesthetic. Within the various Christian faith traditions there is ample scope for variance in the understanding and interpretation of these three elements. Indeed, we may find strength and vitality in this variance. More important, however, is the degree of coherence between these elements—making sense of the world view by tracing the relationships among the components and noting that they bring unity to the system. Thus a Christian who "honours his father and mother" and esteems family values cannot go out and violate either the fathers or mothers of others, or their sons and daughters. He is prevented by the coherence of his world view. In an increasingly multicultural society it is important that Christians talk and demonstrate the merit, importance and primacy in human behaviour of a coherent world view.

> ***Imagine the impact on Australian society if all school leavers took on a community project for a week***

Ethical education

Several decades ago, the fad in Australian education was *values-free* teaching. This of course was self-refuting educational nonsense, for to opt for a *values-free* approach was itself a value. In the real world we cannot escape values and their transmission. The question therefore becomes: Whose / what values and who is responsible for their transmission? The assessment of American historian, Robert D. Linder, that Australia is largely driven by a hedonistic world view[9] is revealing, while Margaret Reeson's comment on the qualities of the Australian character depicted in the fifteen stained glass windows at the Australian War Memorial indicates there is "…little to suggest that Christian faith has had any influence"[10].

This identifies a fruitful field in which Australian Christians might indeed influence their society. Our Judeo-Christian history provides enduring evidence of the timelessness of sound values embedded in that history. That Christians have at times acted badly over the centuries is not because of faulty values, but rather a failure to live by them.

Teachers, besides parents, have a major ethical impact on young lives. A task facing Christian educators is to identify values derived from the Christian faith that do not focus on narrow sectarian interests, but have universal application—values that help create the 'good society'. These should then be woven (as in the case of literacy and numeracy) into the entire curriculum and the culture of the school. Literature and the social sciences particularly lend themselves to the identification of values and discussion about their impact on human behaviour. Astute and perceptive teachers of mathematics, the sciences, personal development and all other subjects in the curriculum will also find scope for exploration and application. To identify and extract values from subject content does not diminish the importance of content. Rather, it enhances content and makes it more relevant to the human experience.

There is a corollary to an emphasis on ethical thinking. Thought unacted upon has no power to change behaviour. It cannot be assumed that 'knowing what is good' results in 'doing what is good'. Young people must therefore be given opportunity to translate theory into practice.

Not so long ago I sat in my local church and listened to a group of school leavers report, with pleasure and enthusiasm, their experiences in service to a western Queensland community.[11] Their week was spent cleaning public space, painting buildings, creating gardens, installing water reticulation, organising games and social activities for the community's children, and being a cohesive and bridging influence in a town with an acknowledged social divide. These youth bubbled with enthusiasm, for they had tasted the satisfaction of bringing joy and happiness to others. Their sense of personal worth was enhanced by their selfless contribution to the wider community.

This report would have won approval at any time. Its significance, however, was enhanced by the fact the project took place during the notorious Schoolies Week; a time when many of their fellow school leavers gained media attention for their hedonistic revelry and anti-social behaviours. Imagine the impact it would have upon Australian society were all school leavers to take on community projects for one week!

Character formation

Leo Tolstoy made the pertinent observation:

> Man's whole life is a continual contradiction of what he knows to be his duty. In every department of life, he acts in defiant opposition to the dictates of his conscience and his common sense.[12]

Tolstoy had little confidence in human character. There is, however, no need to share his pessimism.

The term *character*, once popular amongst educators, has almost disappeared from the Australian vocabulary. Or, when used, it is a synonym for personality, disposition or temperament. Thus we might talk about a 'funny' character, or an 'unusual' character, or a 'devious' character. This usage suggests our understanding of the term has shifted from its original ethical intent. Hence there is a need to return to an understanding of *character* in its proper sense.

Les Steele defines character as,

> …not only espoused virtues or mere behaviours, but the sense of self derived from our vision of Christian maturity, and it is exhibited in both attitude and behaviour.[13]

For 'Christian maturity' we may substitute the phrase 'responsible citizenship' without doing violence to the definition. The wellbeing of Australia is largely dependent upon the quality of its responsible citizens and therefore the development of character is of national interest. There are several things we might say about character.

First, it is not part of 'stage theory' as propounded by Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler and others. The formation of character is far too complex to follow scientific predictability. Rather character development is marked by what one educator has termed "detours and deserts, wanderings and awakenings"[14]. It is a life-long project that is never completed but always completing.

Second, character formation is never completed in isolation. It is achieved within the context of community. In that sense it is part of ever widening concentric social circles, spreading outwards from parents through the school and other groups to the wider society.

Third, just as we draw on our community in character formation, so the characters we are forming reveal our intentions toward our community. There is a dynamic interaction or reciprocity. Our faith community is particularly important in this reciprocity. From the faith community we derive values, encounter supportive structures, and witness the example set by leaders and other significant persons. A responsible faith community also provides opportunity for children and youth to apply and practise their emerging values, make mistakes, and bring correction to their lives.

Fourth, character has to do with our whole being. It encompasses our conscious and unconscious selves—how we shape our inner self, i.e. our values, attitudes and inclinations; succinctly expressed by Susanne Johnson:

> Character refers to the most basic determination of who we are as persons. It is the language of self-identity.… Character is the content of who 'I' am and who 'you' are as unique individuals.[15]

Simply put, Christian teachers have a *vocation* that is much more challenging and satisfying than being 'baby sitters' to keep children occupied, 'policemen' to prevent riots, 'caretakers' to provide a clean and safe environment, and 'mental hygienists' to pacify troubled and damaged souls.

The whole person

I have already mentioned that character formation has to do with the whole being. This brings me therefore to the fourth perspective, I believe, we may offer Australian society.

There is a need to return to the view of the learner as a whole being. Too often, students are currently encouraged or permitted to specialise early in secondary schooling. As early as 1960, the eminent educator and former headmaster of Geelong Grammar School (1930-61), Dr James Ralph Darling, warned:

> … our ignorance of vast ranges of knowledge is horrifying.… There are men, there are even professional men, there are even surgeons, who glory in their ignorance of vast tracts of human knowledge, who despise Religion and History and Literature and Art and Music and Politics. On the other hand, there are classical scholars and linguists, and even historians, who pride themselves on their ignorance of the laws of the physical world. There are economists who despise History, physicists who despise Biology, physicians who despise Psychology, and practical chaps of all sorts who despise Poetry.[16]

"Character formation has to do with the whole being—there is a need to return to the view of the learner as a whole being—too often students are encouraged to specialise early in secondary schooling"

Regrettably, the divide between the branches of knowledge commented on by Dr Darling is even more pronounced today. For Darling "nations live by the quality of their culture, and the culture depends upon the quality of the men and women whom it produces." Darling therefore urged the education of the "*civilized man*" and suggested:

> …the first essential quality of the civilized man: however much he may find himself compelled to specialize; he must never despise the specialties of others. It follows, then, that at least his early education must be as far as possible comprehensive.[17]

If an examination of available evidence supports this claim, then we should urge governments to ensure the scope and structure of the curriculum, particularly the secondary curriculum, and make

certain all students are exposed to the breadth of human endeavour and knowledge.

A final point—Dr Darling asserted:

> …a living conscience is a growing conscience, enlarging itself and becoming more sensitive as it awakes more and more to a fuller understanding and fills up in itself the great gaps in which heretofore it has failed to function at all.[18]

Here is wisdom, for it reminds us that the whole of civilised humankind is linked with ethical thinking.

Implication and conclusion

I have argued the following. First, Christian educators should accept the challenge of a view of Christianity that sees Christian institutions and individual Christians actively involved in working toward the very best for Australian society. This may and should involve Christians aspiring to representative office and active involvement in the public sector. Second, the new Australian Federal Government has signalled its intention to restructure and re-energise the educational sector. This offers a narrow window in which Christians might influence the future direction and shape of education. My challenge, therefore, to the Faculty of Education, Avondale College, and other interested Christian educators, is to write a submission to the Commonwealth Minister for Education in a direct attempt to influence the future of Australian education. Third, several areas in which we might influence Australian education toward the creation of a better citizen include: the formation of coherent world views, the identification of ethical values derived from our Judeo-Christian heritage, the formation of ethical character, and a focus on the structure of education and the curriculum in meeting the needs of the whole person. This obligates each Christian, and Christian educators in particular, to formulate a personal and coherent world view, to identify key ethical values in faith and practice, to work constantly toward character formation—personal sanctification—and to view and treat others holistically. TEACH[R]

> ***"This obligates each Christian educator to formulate a personal and coherent world view, to identify key ethical values in faith and practice, to work constantly toward character formation—personal sanctification—and to view and treat others holistically"***

Endnotes

[1] Patrick, A. N. (2007) Christianity and a 'good society' in Australia: A first response to Stuart Piggin's Murdoch Lecture. *Teach Journal of Christian Education*, *1* (1), 45-49.

[2] Snyder, H. A. (1991) *Models of the kingdom*. Nashville: Abingdon Press; McFague, Sallie. (1982) *Metaphorical theology: Models of God in religious language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Barbour, I. (1974). *Myths, models and paradigms*. San Francisco: Harper; Dulles, A. (1976). *Models of the Church*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

[3] Reye, A. C. (1996). Models of the Church: Some implications for Adventist education. Paper delivered to Education Summit 1 at the South Pacific Division of the SDA Church, Wahroonga, August 7, 1996.

[4] Snyder, H. A. (1991). Ibid.

[5] Ibid, p.101.

[6] See 1 Peter 3:15, Romans 1:16

[7] Little, S. (1983). *To set one's heart: Belief and teaching in the Church*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, p.7.

[8] France, R. T. (1989). *Jesus the radical*. Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, p.101.

[9] Linder, Robert, D. Christianity and the Australian character, in Stuart Piggin, (Ed.). (2006). *Shaping the good society in Australia*. Macquarie Centre, NSW: Australia's Christian Heritage National Forum, pp.49-64.

[10] Reeson, Margaret. Response to Robert Linder: 'The Australian character', in Stuart Piggin, (Ed.). (2006). *Shaping the good society in Australia*, pp.65-70.

[11] See the articles on STORM CO by Jerry Unser and Bruce Manners in *Teach Journal of Christian Education*, *1* (1), 50-56.

[12] Tolstoy, Leo as cited in Dallas W. (1988).*The spirit of the disciplines*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, p.263.

[13] Steele, L. L. (1990). *On the way: A practical theology of Christian formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, pp.46-7.

[14] Johnson, S. (1989). *Christian spiritual formation in the church and classroom*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, p.111.

[15] Ibid, p.112.

[16] Persse, M. (Ed). (1962). *The education of the civilized man: A selection of speeches and sermons [by]James Ralph Darling*. Melbourne: Cheshire, pp.28-29.

[17] Ibid, p.29.

[18] Ibid, p.28.