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Christian schools—a world of difference

Don Roy

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Abstract

Christian education is distinctly different from other approaches to education. But knowing what that distinctiveness is and acting consistently on it is vital, for Christian schools to be authentic and to justify their existence. This article seeks to identify fundamental premises underlying Christian education; then to establish a set of ground rules for critical discussion and the development of a model to faithfully represent that enterprise. The purpose of the model is two-fold: to capture realistically the dynamic nature or ‘special character’ of Christian schools as communities of faith, and in so doing, provide a useful frame of reference for critical review, strategic planning and renewal of schools calling themselves ‘Christian’.

Introduction

Become a teacher and make a difference! Who would argue with that? But these words on the roadside billboard promoting a career in the State Public Service evoked a string of further questions: What *kind* of difference did the promoters have in mind? And, *is* there a difference between the kinds of education offered by different agencies? *Should* there be a discernible difference? This article takes the position that Christian education should not only be distinctly different from other forms of education, but knowing what that distinctiveness is and acting consistently on it is vital for such schools to be authentic and to justify their existence. That expectation is not the exclusive domain of Christian schools however. In New Zealand, for example, it is mandatory for *every* school, both public and private, to clearly articulate and consistently reflect its ‘special character’ in all aspects of operation. So, what then makes *Christian* schools different?

The need for critical reflection

There is no doubting the sincerity and commitment

of Christian educators. However, evidence indicates that teachers are often preoccupied with teaching resources, strategies and techniques and tend to be cynical about theoretical concerns.¹ Consequently their perceptions about education are often based on an eclectic collection of deep-seated assumptions and presuppositions generated from personal past experience as students, hence the adage, *we teach as we were taught*.

Also, Christian education is saturated with slogans and clichés—‘teaching from a Christian perspective’, ‘Christ-centred education’, ‘teaching ministry’, ‘redemptive discipline’, ‘a caring environment’, ‘leading students to a saving relationship with Jesus’, and so on. Yet as appropriate as these may be, many Christian educators seem to have difficulty explaining with clarity and rigour what such slogans actually mean. Arguably, we can do both better for the sake of our personal potential ministry as well as facilitating credible conversation with others of different persuasions. The power of perception and its effect on how we ultimately act is compelling reason to critically evaluate our current assumptions and understandings about Christian education.

Defining the terrain

This article makes the primary distinction between *transcendent* and *naturalistic* forms of education. At the first level, this sets apart so-called religious schools that subscribe to a supernatural reality and religious ethic, on one hand, from secular schools bounded by a sensory reality and driven by a secular humanistic mindset, on the other. But while the first of these two categories would include religious schools such as Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Christian, etc., the interest in this article is with the Christian school sector in particular.

Obviously, within the Christian school sector there are numerous examples of contrasting expressions of faith and a *raison d’être* consistent with respective denominational identities. But those

“Christian education should not only be distinctly different from other forms of education, but knowing and acting on that distinction is vital”

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distinctions are not pursued in this article. Rather, it argues there is a generic, definitive character for Christian schools as a distinct type, and an assumed commonality, which it seeks to articulate. With this goal in mind, I am aware of presenting an *ideal* view and that schools continually seek to develop and hone what they profess and practise. I also appreciate that there may not be total agreement with the argument developed here, but the article is offered as a starting point for a more coherent, rigorous discussion of Christian schools as a distinct group.

Assumptions, principles and theoretical insights

An interdependent platform

The first step in articulating the distinctiveness of Christian schools is to identify a number of foundational principles. It should be recognised, however, that these principles do not exist separately. Rather, they form a cohesive, interdependent platform to inform the discussion.

Thinking worldwisely

It is widely agreed that worldviews reflect our answers to basic questions such as: What is ultimate reality? What is real and how did it come about? What does it mean to be human? What is wrong with us and our world? What is history, and what of the future? How do we know? What is good or bad? How shall we then live?²

For most people worldviews tend to be pre-theoretical and relatively unrefined in nature. But every individual has one, even if held unconsciously. Identifying its respective composition is a useful first step towards meaningful discussion and progressive refinement. In this discussion, a *Christian* worldview is adopted in particular and it follows that this perspective will be explicitly *biblical* in character and authority. Granted, other sources may be invoked on occasions to express particular meaning and to augment understanding, but the reformation principle of *sola scriptura* should remain a fundamental tenet. I am not speaking of a proof-text approach, but rather a macro view incorporating biblical metaphors and symbolism that help to make sense of basic worldview questions cited earlier. Like most worldviews, there is an underlying narrative quality. In this case, it is not simply a *single* narrative or mere collection of stories but a *metanarrative* or *master story* constituting a distinct *creation-fall-redemption-restoration* motif.³ As such, it provides a frame of reference and normative values for Christian faith communities. This places a biblical Christian worldview in stark contrast to postmodernism and its vigorous rejection of metanarratives.⁴ It is also out of this metanarrative

that a fundamental statement of belief is derived and articulated.

Thinking Christianly

In the face of deeply entrenched modernity and the secular modes of thinking in a contemporary world, I advocate the adoption of what Harry Blamires labels, “thinking Christianly”.⁵ The adoption of a biblical mindset and thinking *transcendently* sees all truth as God’s truth, thus removing the false dichotomy of the sacred and the secular. Faith, learning and practice are seamlessly and appropriately integrated. Thus it transcends a *this-world* reality by expanding horizons to an *other-world* reality, beyond the mere sensory. Elizabeth Barrett Browning reflects:

Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.⁶

This disposition engages a reality in which it is possible to *practise the presence of God* in the context of even the most mundane of actions, particularly in service to others.⁷ It goes beyond a humanistic view of values to become a sacramental expression of our love for God as expressed through our empathy, respect and behaviour towards our neighbour. In essence, it represents a spontaneous expression of an internalised Kingdom awareness.⁸

Thinking holistically

Popular use of the term *big picture* in wider society alludes to the significance and power of holistic thinking. The Greek, *holos*, from which the notion of *holism* derives, envisages not simply a collection of elements, but a macro view or pattern with elements so intertwined and interdependent (or *integrated*), that to remove one element destroys the integrity of the whole. In other words, the whole is more than simply the sum of the parts, and the presence (or absence) of the minutest, most subtle element may be valuable and influential. Understanding the interwoven nature of those parts is vital. It is *only* when a macro perspective is adopted that any sense can be made of how spiritual activities and apparently secular subjects and mundane routines, practices and elements can coexist comfortably in a dynamic, transcendent relationship.⁹

Appreciating what it means to be human

Unlike widely held assumptions of human beings evolving from some primeval state, this discussion presumes a biblical account of humans being uniquely created by God himself.¹⁰ As creatures, they are seen as primarily dependent on him as the source of life, meaning, understanding and purpose in their capacity to display intelligence, decision-

“Thinking Christianly” engages a reality in which it is possible to practise the presence of God in even the most mundane actions”

making, creativity, emotion, physicality, individuality, sociality and spirituality. From this perspective, humans are ‘image bearers’, designed to reflect, in some small measure, aspects of what God is like. Further, personality is more than merely the sum of those parts. These qualities comprise an interrelated whole, ‘the human soul’, which “lives, and moves and has its being” in the Creator.¹¹

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Recognising humanity’s predicament

A fundamental problem confronts every member of the human race. A rebellious choice by humanity’s primal parents severed the open relationship they had enjoyed previously with the Creator. As a consequence, they and their world were plunged into a conflict of cosmic proportions, with the capacity of their descendants to reflect the image of God well-nigh destroyed.¹² Despite this predicament, human nature in its very essence craves and actively seeks to be reconnected with the Creator. Thus Saint Augustine reflected: “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”¹³ The incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are God’s response to that need.¹⁴

Engaging the cultural milieu

Personhood is embedded in the culture, ethos, and environmental setting in which individuals find themselves. The beliefs, language, shared meanings, understandings and expressions, whether tangible and invisible, or symbolic, are embodied and expressed in the institutions, ritual, practices, objects, values and *mores* of the community. Clarke and his associates speak of:

‘maps of meaning’ which make things intelligible to its members ... not simply carried around in the head .. (but) objectivated in the patterns of social organisation and relationship through which an individual becomes a ‘social individual’.¹⁵

But in this milieu, enculturation seeks not only the construction of individual and social identity, but ultimately, cultural continuity.¹⁶ For this reason, this article adopts a strong sense of culture as the overarching organiser for a model of an authentic Christian school.

With the foregoing principles and understandings in mind, we may now explore their implications for Christian education as a systematic enterprise.

Implications for Christian education

The Christian school environment

Christian schools constitute communities of faith with a distinct ethos representing the culture and master story of the parent body or sponsoring agency. This community is not simply a group or structure

into which individuals fit. It is people interacting dynamically as creative agents—responding and building mental models of reality and vision that form cohesive meaning. Thus the Christian school might truly be described as a *faith-oriented learning community*.

The generic quality of learning communities as conceived by Peter Senge is especially applicable to the Christian school. Such learning communities are purpose-driven organisations,

... where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations are set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.¹⁷

The ethos of this community will be reflected in both the formal and informal program of the school. Teachers, students and others will participate in the seeking and sharing of meanings and communicating them through language, story, symbolism, ritual, standards and practices informed by a biblical Christian worldview and its implicit values. Teachers and staff will model that ethos consistently. Interpersonal relationships will support every individual in the school encouraging them to live out and share the community’s story actively and confidently. These relationships will be sensitive, accepting, inclusive, affirming and supportive of all members of that community, constantly seeking meaning, cohesiveness and *shalom*.

While the sense of community is fundamentally important, individuality and personal identity is not denied, but held in healthy tension. The approach to discipline will strive to be redemptive by engaging the will and intelligence of students in developing self-control and values-based decision making.

The ultimate goal of Christian education

In times past, the ultimate goal of Christian education might be typically expressed as the restoration of human beings to the image of their Maker. This is effected through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and the balanced development of the whole person.

The sentiments of this goal statement have not changed. However, recent discussion focusing on restorative development as *spiritual formation*¹⁸ adds new dimensions that are relevant to the nurture provided by the school community. It is for such reasons that Christian education is recognised as true ministry and each teacher an ‘agent of salvation’.¹⁹ It is also *religion in essence* (Latin *religere*—to bind together again). Essentially, this process represents a reversal of *the Fall*, and our

fundamental need for restoration of wholeness and meaning. In adopting such a vision and mission, Christian schools seek truly to emulate the redemptive, restorative ministry of Jesus himself. That ministry also has salvific significance. ‘Salvation’ is restoration in the most comprehensive sense. As Westly explains:

Salvation in the biblical sense cannot be understood in one-dimensionally, narrow, reductionist, parochial ways. The salvation the Scriptures speak of offers a comprehensive wholeness in this fragmented and alienated life. Salvation in the biblical sense is a newness of life, the unfolding of true humanity in the fullness of God (Colossians 2:9), it is salvation of the soul and the body, of the individual and society, of humankind and the whole of creation (Romans 8:19).²⁰

The Christian teacher’s role

Of central importance is the role of the Christian teacher. As well as being experts in their teaching fields with ability to facilitate learning, the teacher’s role in Christian schools is more extensive and holistic.

Teaching is ‘the sharing of reality’. It entails ‘weaving connections’ between their subjects, themselves and the world; motivating students to make their own connections. So, it is reasonable to expect professional educators to be competent in their respective fields of teaching, motivating and maintaining high levels of engagement in learning in a fair, just, non-discriminatory and emotionally supportive manner. But good teachers in non-Christian settings also do that.

Christian teachers, however, are sensitive to the spiritual context, implications and connections inherent in their learning area. They are collegial, open to new perspectives, reflective and self-critical in their quest for excellence to the glory of the Creator. As people of faith and integrity, they actively model the culture, ethos and lifestyle of the school system within and beyond their own classrooms, ever conscious of the impact they have upon the unplanned learning of their students. Although specialists may take a designated role as chaplains or spiritual counsellors, each teacher will also seek to function in a complementary pastoral ministry.

The formal curriculum

A biblical view of knowledge recognises both a supernatural and a natural order where God is acknowledged as the ultimate, essential source of all wisdom and virtue. Thus true knowledge is more than a body of factual information and marketable skills to be transmitted, learned, reproduced and applied. True knowledge encompasses cognitive,

experiential, emotional, relational, intuitive, and spiritual elements functioning as an interrelated whole. Christian education seeks to restore factual information to its true meaning—a way of knowing God and His creation. Thus Christian school community members should be acting responsibly as disciples, servants and stewards to one another and the created environment. The commonly viewed distinction between the sacred and secular is artificial and false. All truth is part of God’s order, and His presence can be recognised and practised in even the apparently secular and mundane aspects of life. Acquisition of true knowledge leads to understanding that is manifested in wisdom, integrity, appropriate action and worship. True knowledge is active by nature—‘knowing’ is ‘doing’, and ‘knowing’ comes *through* ‘doing’.

Christian educators recognise and respect the place of the traditional disciplines—fields of study or areas of learning that link with respective syllabus subjects in the curriculum. These form part of the human quest to explore, discover, understand, test, and communicate knowledge and understandings. Thus, curriculum subjects may function either as ‘windows’ through which to see, or ‘windows of opportunity’ by which to act. As ‘windows’, they provide scope to perceive and understand something of God and His activity as reflected through the created world, the Bible and the Cosmic Conflict, and to develop an appreciation for Christian heritage. As ‘windows of opportunity’, they also motivate response, application, expression and practice which are conducive to community building, citizenship, social justice, and stewardship of the environment and resources, in ways that are consistent with biblical values. These values are sometimes described as ‘Kingdom’ values because of their foundation in the New Testament account of Jesus’ life and teachings. Therefore in planning the formal curriculum, a balance is sought between spiritual, intellectual, physical, social and emotional understanding.

The nature of learning

Christian schools seek to provide a learning environment that is rich, meaningful, and spiritually and culturally sensitive. There is effort to make connections between the student and the subject matter, between the head and the heart, and to facilitate the development of ‘maps of meaning’ in the minds of the students. There is also sensitivity to the culture, typical methodology and skills of the different learning areas and where they fit within the larger scheme of learning. Teachers recognise and follow opportunities to explore new spiritual insights and understandings, both planned and incidental, and encourage personal decisions and commitment in students.

“*Christian teachers actively model the culture, ethos and lifestyle of the school system, seeking to function in a complementary pastoral ministry*”

Pedagogy acknowledges and affirms the diversity of intelligences and gifts shared among learners. It promotes excellence in all facets of development. Teachers generally function as facilitators and mentors for students, in an interactive and emotionally supportive manner. Students, on their part, will often work in collaborative, cooperative learning and peer-sharing settings in a wide range of activities, both within and beyond the school.

Towards a model of the Christian school as a faith-oriented learning community

An overview of the model

At risk of reductionism and oversimplification, I have constructed a model to represent what a community of faith might look like and how it might function. In developing this model, I have borrowed Parker Palmer's idea of the "spaces" that he argues are indispensable to effective learning.²¹ The conceptual possibilities of the 'space' metaphor are helpful in defining boundaries for the contributing elements, while on the other hand it allows openness for thoughtful, creative choices of action within that space. Thus it is consistent with the way God created us in His image. It also recognises those facets of 'being human' that come into focus when seeking the kind of restoration discussed earlier.

The arrangement of those spaces seeks to show their interrelatedness in the cultural context in which they are embedded. The model depicted in Figure 1, clusters them into three basic groupings—the *cultural context*, the *learning environment* and the *spiritual connection*, and the relationship between

them. It is important to note that, because the model is essentially holistic, the qualities of school life *outside* the classrooms will influence the ambience and quality of the learning environment existing *within* them. Conversely, the quality of learning in the various fields of study will both augment the quality of life in the school and its functioning. Ultimately, it will impact behaviour and practice beyond the school community, into the future. The fundamental *interrelatedness of these three clusters* is depicted, in Figure 1, by the arrow linkages.

The cultural context

As discussed earlier, it is culture that gives meaning and the Christian school is a site where everything is an expression of its distinct culture. As a community of faith, its vision, sense of mission, practices and structures are intended to provide a sense of meaning and identity for its participants.²² As such, it bears a striking similarity to the dynamic character of the New Testament *koinonia* or *fellowship*.²³ Both reflect a clear tradition based on a biblical worldview and master story.

Sometimes these cultural expressions and practices are visible in the regular patterns of behaviour initiated and promoted in the school and classroom as part of daily life and interaction, in times of formal prayer and devotional sharing or study and social interaction. On other occasions, they are reflected in subtle nuances that are nonetheless significant. Examples of these shared meanings, practices and procedures are:

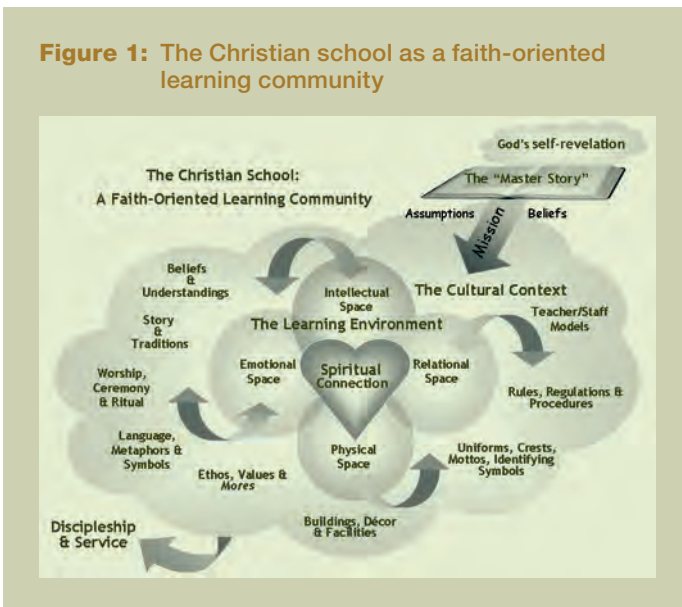
- a biblical Christian orientation that is reflected in the *foundational beliefs and understandings*;
- the cultural *master story and traditions*; the quality of *language, metaphors and symbolism*; and, the *Kingdom ethos, values and mores*;
- spiritual formation intentionally encouraged in *worship practices, ceremonies and ritual*;
- identity and belonging in the community is reinforced in the *uniforms, mottos, crests and identifying symbols*;
- *buildings, decor and facilities* are tangible expressions of values and priorities embraced by the school;
- *rules, regulations and procedures of management* seek to be sensitive, supportive, fair, just and restorative in the spirit of the example and teachings of Jesus;
- most important, *teachers, staff and administration are supportive models* of the culture.

The learning environment

This domain accounts for the conditions that support learning. Learning is much more than a cognitive

“The Christian school is a community of faith that bears a striking similarity to the dynamic character of the New Testament fellowship”

Figure 1: The Christian school as a faith-oriented learning community



exercise that focuses on information transfer and reproduction. It also occurs in the cultural context and is sensitive and responsive to the characteristics of human nature, as discussed earlier.

Intellectual Space—This dimension of the learning environment refers to the way we tend to think about teaching and learning in a pedagogical sense—subject content, concepts, the students, and teaching and learning strategies. Schools are about learning; consequently pedagogy is of major importance. It is also a significant point of engagement between teacher and student.

Traditionally, students expect teachers to teach. However, revitalised teaching and learning consistent with community building calls for a reorientation towards a rich, learner-centered pedagogy. It adopts diverse techniques promoting reflection, creativity, collaboration and decision-making and the engagement of students as agents of their own learning.²⁴ Such attitudes and behaviour on the part of teachers towards students respects the make-up and potential of human nature as created in the image of God.

Emotional Space—This dimension refers to the ambience throughout the school and classrooms. Because the ‘climate’ supports or inhibits learning, its importance cannot be overemphasised.

In essence, a safe, caring, supportive environment inspires assurance and confidence. Subject information, guidelines, expectations and procedural items are clearly organised and communicated to minimise confusion and anxiety. Students are more likely to be creative and take calculated risks if their responses are viewed with sensitivity and are affirmed by their teachers and fellow-students alike. A teacher’s ability to recognise signs of personal difficulty, confusion, frustration or interpersonal tensions, and the ability to deal with them constructively, is of paramount importance and embodies grace.²⁵

Relational Space—Interpersonal relationships between teachers, students and peers—both inside and outside the classroom, complement the emotional space in the impact on the quality of learning. In the Christian school, a pervading ethos of *agape*, mutual respect and acceptance emulates the way Jesus modelled and related to others as people of value. This ethos also reflects the active presence of ‘spiritual gifts’. Students respect teachers who, appropriately, have distinct roles and responsibilities. Conversely, positions of authority will not be abused by teachers. Rather they will be infused by a sense of empathy, respect, humility and service.

Physical Space—This fundamental part of humanness supports or inhibits the way we function in all other facets of our being. The importance of the physical dimension and its relationship to mental and spiritual vigour cannot be ignored. Energy and personal vitality are seen as being directly related to our personal capacity to function optimally in all aspects of our humanness, not only in our capacity to perceive and understand, but also in the quality of how our characters are expressed. This dimension also recognises the importance of the wider physical environment and practices that support and impact on the physical, and, in turn, the other dimensions.

Spiritual connection

In keeping with the ultimate goal, the heart of the model focuses on a sense of the transcendent in response to personal restlessness, and a craving for meaning, fulfilment, and *shalom*. For Christian teachers, the *spiritual dimension* is always a reality and an opportunity to practise the presence of God, even in apparently secular subjects. It need not necessarily be overt or directly connected to the content of the subject. Recognition of our students as fellow creatures in the image of God, and relating to them accordingly, is truly sacramental (Matthew, 25:40). For example, the Carmelite monk, Brother Lawrence, practised the presence of God through the washing of ‘pots and pans’ and serving his brothers.²⁶ It is also true in teaching from a Christian perspective. Whatever is done to foster deep connection, meaning, and purpose in the lives of students is truly spiritual, where God is truly present.

There will often be what I like to describe as ‘serendipitous moments’ when inspired, unplanned insights emerge from something being studied. Or, an incident may have nothing directly to do with the subject matter but, nevertheless, it enriches the moment being shared.

Such moments are memorable, and bonding. Sometimes they will be the product of a Christian teacher’s systematic practice, but on other occasions they will be a spontaneous manifestation of the faith, grace, and integrity of the teacher flowing into and enriching the learning community to the glory of God. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, describes such moments as “theophanies”, i.e. points at which humanity experiences “a meeting and encounter with the living God.... incarnately, in the concrete places of this life”.²⁷ Following after Buber, Westly describes such “theophanies” as:

rare and privileged moments when without warning Love (God) breaks through and makes its presence felt, revealing as it does the real meaning of salvation / reconciliation, and calling each one of

“For Christian teachers, the spiritual dimension is always a reality”

us out of our individual concerns, out beyond even our own small communities to a world that awaits 'salvation'.²⁸

These meetings and encounters with the living God in the context of the Christian school are incarnate in a personal sense. In ministering to their students, Christian teachers meet our Lord Jesus in spirit and in truth and a sense of restored wholeness and *shalom* prevails—a world of difference. Thus, in both the widest and narrowest sense, Christian teachers are ministers of restoration. As such, they themselves, as faithful disciples, 'image' the purpose of God in Jesus.²⁹

Conclusion

This article set out to identify fundamental premises underlying Christian education, and then to establish some ground rules for critical discussion and the development of a dynamic model of Christian schools as faith-oriented communities.

Should Christian educators find that the article, indeed, has provided a useful tool—a frame of reference, it will have made a modest contribution to the renewal of Christian schools in being educational faith communities where members experience a life-transforming encounter with Jesus. **TEACH[®]**

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“**Christian teachers are ministers of restoration; Christian schools are educational faith communities where members experience a life-transforming encounter with Jesus**”