

## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN THE WORLD OF TODAY<sup>1</sup>

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**W**E are all of us unconsciously influenced by the atmosphere or climate of thought of the world in which we live, though upbringing and mature thought may have taught us to analyse and at least partially discount this influence where it runs counter to the principles of our Faith. The children who come to us come from this same atmosphere; with some their upbringing in a truly Catholic home has gone far to fortify them against the absorption of what is bad in the atmosphere of the modern world, but with many more this is by no means so, and our main educational problem is how to train them in such a way that they grow up to judge the world in which they will have to live by a scale of values drawn, not from the general climate of opinion of that world, but from the principles of their Faith applied to the problems of every-day living.

It would be an impossible task to give a complete analysis of the elements which go to make up the atmosphere or climate of thought which the children who come to us begin to breathe long before they come to the age of reason, and which they will almost inevitably absorb completely, unless they are fortified against it by their homes or their schools or, better still, by both. I propose, therefore, to enlarge on three main elements in this atmosphere, all of which are inter-connected: and these, I think, will give a sufficiently clear view of the problem we have to deal with in trying to give an integral Catholic education to our children which will fortify them against taking harm from it. These three elements are:—

- (a) The loss of a sense of direction as to the ultimate purpose of human life.
- (b) The deterioration of the idea of truth which is characteristic of our age.
- (c) The widespread distrust of authority of every kind which has as one of its consequences the surrender of parental

1. The substance of an address given to the Convent Schools' Association.

responsibility and the undermining and disintegration of family life.

(a) Half a century ago it was still true to say that an accepted view of the nature and purpose of human life was a common possession of Englishmen. There were exceptions—atheism and agnosticism are nothing new—but they hardly influenced common opinion. It was taken for granted that men and women were made by God, that this life is a training ground in which we have been placed to prepare ourselves for life after death. Moreover, even among those who were agnostic about the dogmas of Christianity, there was almost universal acceptance of the Christian ethic based upon those dogmas. Today these things are no longer taken for granted. It is an open question, debated on the radio and in the Sunday papers, as well as in the more serious journals, whether there is a God at all. And if there is no God, there is certainly no purpose in life, except the individual and temporary purposes which man, in whatever sociological group he may find himself, thinks out for himself.

The world around us is dividing into two well-defined groups—materialist and religious. At present they are only a small and coherent nucleus on either side. Between them lies the mass of ordinary men and women who are still uncertain or indifferent, halting between two opinions or blind to the tremendous issues involved. Our difficulties and problems as Catholics working within the educational system of the country arise very largely from the error or doubt in the minds of so many of our countrymen, including those who most influence the development of the general educational set-up, as to the ultimate nature and purpose of human life, and in consequence, error or doubt about what we are educating for. Parallel with a very great advance in educational technique and in the desire for wider education there has been a growing blindness and loss of a sense of direction in regard to this most fundamental question.

(b) Closely connected with this loss of a sense of direction in human life is the widespread deterioration in the idea of Truth. The traditional conception of truth is that it is founded upon God. God exists and he is the groundwork of all other existence, the eternal, immortal, invisible King who supports and rules the universe he has created. All things were made by him. Creation has its varied natures and purposes made by him, and the nature

and purpose of created things can never rightly be violated. It is true that many created things were made by God for man's use, but in using them there is a law and order imposed on them by God, which man must not abuse; if he does abuse them he does so at his own peril. In man's conquest of nature through the ages—and particularly in the present industrial age—there have been many instances of such violation, in the interests of man's selfishness, of nature created by God for man's use. The one that comes to mind most readily is the ravages of soil erosion, which today are such a menace to the food supplies of the world. The moral law then, right and wrong, good and bad, is something immutable, embedded in the very nature of things as God has made them. Truth and reality are something outside of us and quite independent of us, something to which we have a moral duty to conform our minds and actions. It was upon this conception of truth that the Christian civilisation of Europe was built up. But this traditional conception of truth is giving place today to a new conception based upon the new attitude to the nature and purpose of life. Nothing exists outside the evolutionary life and growth which has culminated in man, save matter. The only things we know with certainty are our own needs and rights. The world of nature is something to be conquered and subjugated to the service of our own needs and rights, and the mind and genius of man is the sole measure of truth, the sole judge and law-maker in dealing with the needs and rights of the human mind and the way in which they are to be fulfilled. Things are true and false, not by a fixed standard which exists independently of us; they are true and false only in so far as they suit our varying needs at any given moments. And our needs? The measure of them is what man thinks out for himself by experiment as he goes along, and so truth is no longer immutable, having its origin in the laws which govern the nature God has created, but a temporary and relative criterion of judgment, suiting man's convenience at the moment, but liable to be changed according to the different arrangements of human society which he thinks out experimentally for himself as he attempts gradually to evolve the perfect mode of living.

At the moment we are living in a transition period. Materialist assumptions have penetrated without our realising it, into the ordinary thinking of our daily lives, so that even Catholics are unconsciously influenced by them; though, on the other hand,

many professed materialists are influenced in their turn by the Christian thinking still largely implicit, thank God, in the civilisation in which we live. The subjective attitude to truth, characteristic of materialism, has a long philosophical history behind it dating back to Descartes in the seventeenth century and passing by way of the German philosophers, Kant and Hegel, to the English universities. There throughout the nineteenth century they had very great influence. Thence their teaching seeped gradually downwards into literature, art and journalism, so that today the whole of contemporary life—newspapers, novels, pictures, films and theatres, even the text-books we expound in school—are liable to be penetrated by it and soaked in it. It is an all-pervading atmosphere, which can be breathed and absorbed into our mental and emotional system without our being aware of what is happening unless we are fortified against it. Right and wrong, true and false, not judged by objective standards which are absolute, but by the measure of human desires and feelings. A thing is good if I like it or if it suits me. Things and circumstances must conform themselves to the measure of the human mind—not the human mind and will must conform themselves to the truth and goodness that God has set in things.

Here lies hidden the most insidious danger that we have to combat in the battle for Christian education, and it is here that teachers can play a big part. It is not enough to teach the objectivity of Truth only through the medium of religious knowledge instructions; that is very important, it is the necessary foundation, but it is not enough. If we teach the existence of God and his Law governing the whole of life and at the same time allow by default a subjective conception of truth to come in unchecked through the medium of our English literature and history teaching, and even through our teaching of nature study and biology, we shall be creating unconsciously two areas in the child's mind—one in which the teaching of religion will take root, and the other where what he will take to be our teaching about real life will take root. Real life and religion will tend to be kept in separate compartments of the mind, the opposition between them not consciously realised during school days. But when school is left behind the tension between them will be increasingly felt, and it is likely to be the false ideas about truth which will develop in the congenial atmosphere of the outside world, and the true religious

teaching which will become sickly and perhaps eventually die.

I think we have some really hard work to do as teachers in thinking out ways in all our teaching of bringing home to those we teach the objectivity of truth, helping them to transfer it in their own minds from the realm of the notional to that of the real. If we succeed in doing this we shall be giving them, though they may never know it as such, a sound philosophical ground-work in which the Truths of their Faith will flourish. Take for instance the teaching of the use of words, in their own and in classical and modern languages. Here is a wide field for showing that words represent realities, and that those realities have a goodness, beauty and truth which are quite independent of our feelings or sentiments about them. When we teach them to describe the glory of a sunset, or the freshness of a spring morning, or the mystery of the sea, we can teach them at the same time that these realities which the words describe are something to which proper sentiments are due because they are realities—their beauty and goodness are something inherent in them and quite independent of our feelings about them, because they are the creation of God who has given them the being and the goodness, truth and beauty which are theirs. And in teaching them this we shall lead them on to look with a critical eye for the goodness, beauty and truth in the human situations which they meet with in their study of literature; we shall teach them to distinguish good from bad—true sentiment from false—real values from sham. What a tremendous field there is here for showing them through the literature they are introduced to, the true art of living—true because in accordance with the law which Almighty God the Creator has embedded in the very nature of all things he has created.

We should constantly examine our consciences as teachers whether we ever by default allow it to be thought by our children that a thing is beautiful or good merely because we like it; that appreciation in art, music, or poetry is only a matter of feeling and does not depend upon standards which are objective, to which our feelings ought to be disciplined and conformed. In the study of history do we leave our pupils to conclude that the highest factor in the moulding of events is the will of man, not the Providence of God? There is a passage in the preface to H. A. L. Fisher's 'History of Europe' in which he says, with a charming humility: 'Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in

history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave, only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalisations, only one safe rule for the historian: that he should recognise in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen.' But for all the humility of that passage it remains that he has written the story of European civilisation from the earliest times without reference to God's guiding Providence in it, because to this guidance he was probably blind. I wonder sometimes how often such books as this have been put into the hands of our Sixth Formers for Higher Certificate and Scholarship history because of their factual accuracy, their acute assessment of natural causes, and the grace with which they are written, and yet nothing has been done to counter the unconscious impression which must inevitably be derived from them; that there is, in fact, no higher power in the shaping of events than the will of man. And so the truth of God's Providence tends to remain notional only, not merely in their view of history but perhaps in their personal lives.

I am not suggesting for a moment that we should not put such books into their hands. I think we should, but the moral and intellectual influence of a Catholic teacher is absolutely necessary if we do. It is our business to think out in our whole course of teaching how to make the truth of God's guiding Providence real and not merely notional. It can be done by carefully thought out teaching; by hints and obiter dicta planted here and there where opportunity offers; by pointing out that the pattern of providential guidance may not be humanly visible till the ages ahead are able to look back and see the tapestry of history in retrospect. All this necessitates much thought and the working out for ourselves of a Christian philosophy of history. May I suggest that the best foundation for such a philosophy is the diligent reading of the Old Testament Scriptures, for the sacred history of the Chosen People is penetrated through and through with the sense of God's guiding Providence.

If we sin by omission in these matters we are preparing the way for a practical atheism which in later life our children may all too easily absorb, because we have neglected to prepare the natural ground in which the supernatural truths of Faith may become

firmly rooted. As I have said, all this affords a very wide field of study in which we Catholics should lead the way because we are privileged by God to be Catholics and to know better than any others the true principles on which human life should be based if it is to be lived in accordance with his will. I believe that in the future we shall have very great opportunities, because so many of our countrymen, whose instincts are on the side of the angels, are looking to us for leadership in the struggle for Christian principles.

(c) One of the results of loss of belief in the objectivity of truth is a widespread distrust of any kind of authority and the consequent surrender of parental responsibility which has led to a general break-up of family life. If there is no fixed immutable law embedded in the very nature of things, it follows necessarily that the purpose of human life, if it may be said to have one, is only what men choose to make it, and also that every sort of experiment may rightly be tried to train human beings for the purpose that society at any given time chooses to think out for them. But God's law of nature, interpreted to us by the Church, teaches that the family, after the individual person, is the most important unit in society and is the God-given means of laying the foundations of a true education for living. The parental instinct is the most powerful and compelling of all instincts: it is planted in human nature by its Creator and is the bond which binds the family together into a unity. In the family the all-important foundations of character are laid. Psychological research seems to show that the earliest years are of supreme importance in the building up of a human person. In the family children begin to learn from their earliest years the nature of the world around them, and in a true Christian home they are surrounded from their earliest years by an atmosphere of prayer. Prayer puts us into contact with the world of spiritual things and in a truly Christian household the unseen world, where God, our Lady and the Saints and Angels live, becomes from the first as real a world as the world of tangible things. This element in the education of a child is of supreme importance. Where the parents, through their faithfulness in prayer have retained and developed a sense of the unseen, that sense will communicate itself to the children. Their young intelligences will be framed by precept and example to judge the world by the standard of values of Christ and his Saints, and a

Christian character will be built up in them, impervious by God's grace to the inroads of the spirit of materialism by which they are surrounded. But if in the lives of the parents there are two competing areas—one, and that perhaps the larger one, ruled, often unconsciously, by false standards which place material welfare, wealth, position, power above all other considerations; and the other an area consciously governed by the precepts of religion—if as a result of this tension between conflicting loyalties the sense of God's rule and the realities of sin and grace become obscured, and the daily intercourse of family life is saturated with a spirit which is an uneasy compromise between the spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world, then the character built up in the children will be an unsettled character, part Christian but part pagan; susceptible while at school to the influence both rational and emotional of Catholic surroundings, but all too susceptible also to the influence of materialism from the world outside.

And it is with children affected in a greater or lesser degree by these competing influences that our Catholic schools are largely filled. They come to us young and docile; often in a Catholic atmosphere, where sound piety and the grace of Holy Mass and the Sacraments surround them, religion grips them and strikes its roots deep down into their souls, and they grow up into true and wholehearted followers of Christ. But with others their religion, though at the time they accept it, only penetrates as it were a little way below the surface; deeper down they remain agnostic, often quite unconsciously, hiding even from themselves the conflict of loyalties between home and school. The world of school on its religious side tends to be a world of unreality in which they live a life very largely unrelated to their lives at home. They learn their Faith as they learn so many things at school, notionally only, and they practise it as they do other things which belong to school routine. But their living of it is counteracted by their home life, and the influence of this tends to increase the older they grow; so that when they leave school and go out into the world they easily cease to practise their religion or allow the practice of it to become almost nominal, because, by contrast with what seems to them the realities of day-to-day life, spiritual things have come to appear unreal.

I have dwelt at some length on these three elements because they are the main constituents of the atmosphere of the modern



world with which we all come into contact and against which we all need to be fortified by a conscious application of the principles of our Faith to every branch of our lives. The basic educational problem for us Catholics is how to secure that the education we give has the maximum power in it, to secure that Christian standards and Christian values are drawn, not only from our explicit religious teaching, but that these and not the materialist values of the modern world are also implicit in our teaching of what are commonly thought of as secular subjects..

The major obstacle to the complete achievement of this lies in the fact that our syllabus, and to a certain extent our methods of teaching, are imposed on us by the requirements of the certificate examinations and of State and open scholarships to the universities. Fortunately it seems to be becoming more clearly recognised by the highest educational authorities that the whole educational set-up of the country from the universities downwards is suffering from the loss of a single unifying principle, and that our culture has during the past hundred years been steadily degenerating into a series of unrelated or atomised subjects. There is now no possibility of agreement as to what the unifying principle should be; for Christians it is the Christian philosophy of life, founded upon and drawn from the dogmas of the Faith, for the scientific humanist it is the philosophy of life which pins all its faith to the gradual evolution and progress of mankind by the application of scientific technique to the solution of all human problems. A hopeful sign for the future is the wide recognition in recent times, by competent authorities, that this atomisation of subjects is bad for education. To quote Professor Graham Cannon, of Manchester: 'It has led to the requirement of a ludicrously high standard of information for honours examinations, which are becoming, if they have not already become in many cases, merely memory tests on the profundities of the latest pieces of research instead of being searching tests of understanding of wide ranges of the subject concerned.' And what is true of degree examinations at the universities, Professor Cannon goes on to say, is true also of scholarship and faculty requirements for entrance to them. A standard of specialised information is demanded for these which used to be considered necessary only for first, and even second, year university work. The result of all this is that our Sixth Form boys and girls, and later our university graduates, are being

turned prematurely into high-grade technical experts in all that pertains to knowledge of their respective specialist subjects, without that training in critical judgment about life as a whole, which is the basis of wisdom in living, and which should be the fruit of education as distinct from technical or vocational training. The bearing of all this on our own particular problems is plain. We are forced, to some extent at least, by the system within which we must work, if we wish, as we must wish, to send our pupils to the university, to sacrifice true Christian culture which is wisdom in living Christianly, to what is really little better than information-cramming, with the superficial appearance of real learning artificially raised to a high utility value. I think we are on the eve of great changes in the present set-up, changes which may be greatly for the better if the right influence can be brought to bear: educational opinion is becoming more fluid and educationists more and more dissatisfied with the present state of things. As Sir Walter Moberly's *Crisis in the University* shows, Christian opinion is mobilising to tackle this and allied educational problems. It is a pity that the Catholic educational body has not at present a more positive contribution to make towards their solution.

One thing I am sure we might do, and that at once. It is to get to work to think out and present to the various examining bodies a syllabus of studies drawn up in such a way as to make the Catholic Faith, with its doctrines and history, the core and unifying principle of the whole range of humane studies. The Catholic body is surely influential enough to ask that our children should be examined by the examining boards on a syllabus of our own choosing. It would be a great step forward if we could secure it. At Laxton, the masters in charge of the different subjects are constantly discussing and trying out in their classes ways in which scripture, doctrine and Church history can be correlated with history, literature and geography in such a way as to make the Faith the heart of Christian education, giving life and meaning and value to the whole.

For the time being, however, we have to put up with the system to this extent imposed on us from outside. And that is where Catholic schools under the care of religious orders score. The most effective antidote to the penetration into the lives of our pupils of what is harmful in the atmosphere of the world of today

is the growth of personality in the free and friendly give and take of true community life; a community life which is true because based upon and penetrated by religion and supremely conscious therefore of the ultimate purpose of living. The primary function of school is to be an extension of the family—all the more so in a world where family life is at a discount and the school must perforce undertake the specific educative work of its restoration. In the true family, education proceeds from the intimate and loving companionship of the personalities that compose it; it is out of the loving companionship of husband and wife that the atmosphere of home is first created, and as the children are born and grow up the circle of that companionship is extended and enriched. It is an intimate contact of personalities at every level; of parents with children, and children of differing ages with parents and with each other. At every level there is instruction and development of the intelligence; but there is also loving affection, the powerful force of good example, of unselfishness and co-operation in a common life, of a deep spirit of community fostered by love. In a Christian school all these elements must be present; there must be instruction and development of the intelligence, but there must also be intimate contact of personalities between teacher and taught in every department of life; in class-room, in recreation, in hobbies and particular interests, and in the deep confidence of friendship and affection. There must be a strong community spirit, a family life, fostered by love of Christ and of each other in him.

In addition to this background for Catholic living I think there is a great need in our schools for definite and explicit instruction in a pattern of living when school is left behind. This should include instruction both for boys and girls on marriage, on home and family building, on the difficulties they will encounter in university, in business, in shop and in factory. To meet this need we have planned two things at Laxton. One is a feature of the fifth and sixth religious instruction classes. These boys form a discussion group of their own in which Christian life and its difficulties in the modern world are thrashed out as far as is possible in a way suited to their age and experience. The discussion is slow and thorough, one topic often lasting for a considerable number of classes. Sometimes the boys bring their own difficulties, intellectual and otherwise. Perfect freedom of

expression is encouraged and difficulties are often put forward in unconventional but convincing terms. Newman's aphorism, 'a thousand difficulties do not make a doubt,' is kept well to the fore in these discussions.

To meet the need of explicit instruction in the problems and difficulties which face Catholics today in the contemporary world, the other thing we have planned is to use our Old Boys' Association as a continuation school for further instruction in Catholic living, and to correlate the experience of life during the first two or three years after leaving school with the principles of their Faith. Two main meetings take place at the school each year and meetings at centres such as Birmingham and London (generally at the homes of old boys themselves) are held every few months. At these a talk is given on some problem of Catholic living, followed by a discussion. These meetings have proved very successful as a means of helping and encouraging young people when they are first starting out to face the world after school is over. I do not know whether other schools have anything similar, but I am certain from our own limited experience that much good would come of it if they had.

I fear you will say that like a true Dominican I have stayed too long over the discussion of abstract principles and have not dealt nearly enough in the way of practical suggestion as to ways and means of training our children on lines which are thoroughly Christian and at the same time appropriate to modern needs. My apology is this: I think that in the past we have been very much occupied, and rightly so, with securing the explicit teaching of the doctrines of our Faith in our schools, and that we have in consequence taken over too readily and without sufficient examination, as far as the teaching of secular subjects is concerned, the methods of the educational system of the country and what is necessarily implicit in them. Those responsible for carrying out that system are now beginning to see for themselves that it is unsatisfactory, even from their point of view. Changes are coming and in those changes we have our opportunity if we are ready to seize it. But we shall need to do some hard thinking and experimenting to find out exactly how we can secure that all our teaching becomes the means of forming in our pupils a culture which is penetrated through and through with the Christian spirit, and which gives in consequence an almost spontaneous

realisation of Christian values and Christian standards by which to judge the world in which they live. And when we have done this we shall have something of very great value to offer to our non-Catholic countrymen which will do more than anything, save prayer, to draw them into the unity of the Faith.



*Eric Gill*

*The Driving Out of the Money-changers*  
(from *Welfare Handbook*, No 10, cf. p. 8 of this issue of  
BLACKFRIARS).