

On Teaching Religion in School ⁸¹

by Emma Shackle

Cardinal Heenan's pastoral letter on the importance of retaining Catholic schools even at an increased financial burden to the Catholic community has provoked these reflections on religious education.

The bible or major talking point in religious education today is the *Schools' Council Working Paper 36* put out by the Project on Religious Education in Secondary Schools based on the University of Lancaster. Many teachers, including Catholic teachers, have been working on this project. The fundamental premiss of much of the thinking of this group, and of such pioneer groups such as the SHAP working party on world religions, is that an adequate understanding of religion can only be achieved in the context of learning not only about the child's own religion (if he has one) but also about other major world faiths. The rationale for this stance varies from one apologist to another: we live in 'one' world; we are part of a multi-religious society—these are commonplaces. A more valid reason is, perhaps, that we have now reached a stage of self-consciousness in the West such that, even those souls who are naturally religious, let alone the majority who are not, are no longer content with understanding religion only from the inside: they seek also to understand it from the outside, from the stance of the anthropologist, the sociologist, the psychologist, and the philosopher. Another important movement in a related field is that which seeks to understand how schools can best perform the task of the moral education of children.

These new approaches to religious and moral education have made their impact on Catholic education as much as anywhere else. Cardinal Heenan assumes, somewhat naïvely, that the purpose of Catholic colleges is to produce teachers capable of teaching the Catholic religion to Catholic children in the context of a Catholic school. There are different ways of understanding this proposition as can be seen by recent disputes in the field of catechetics. However, the argument has now progressed beyond this stage—not only the meaning but the validity of the aim is under attack even in the Catholic colleges themselves. This was evident in a recent study of third-year students carried out by the author in a Catholic college of education. Three groups could be identified whose aims in religious education differed considerably from those of other groups.

Forty-four respondents were taken into account in the final analysis of the answers to the question, 'Write down in your own words what you consider the most important aim, or aims, in religious education'. The *confessionalist* group (that postulated by Cardinal Heenan) consisted of fourteen who thought that religion should be taught to foster the child's understanding of his own faith, and four who thought that the purpose of religious education was to bring

the child to knowledge of God. The *moral education* group included six people who thought that religion should be taught to foster eventual moral autonomy and five who thought that the purpose of religious education is to teach the child to love others. The third group, the *progressive* group, which has obviously been most influenced by the trends in religious education sketched out above, included ten who thought that the purpose of religious education was to help the child to understand what religion is, and eight who thought that the child should be taught all religions so that he can choose ultimately what suits him best. This progressive group equalled the confessionalist group in numbers and members of this group tended, in response to another question, to pick out these four aims as most important in religious education: ability to think clearly on religious issues, knowledge of world religions, moral responsibility, and understanding of people. The confessionalist group were more likely to opt for such aims as development of the capacity for prayer, meditation, and religious experience, and knowledge of the Christian faith.

My reason for reporting these results in some detail, even though this piece of research, and a previous study of some of the teachers involved in the Schools' Council Project, is no more than a prelude to more serious research, is to indicate that the analysis of the situation in religious education today that follows is not based merely on knowledge of the literature but on some soft, but nevertheless empirical, data.

My view is that problems and views on religious education are increasingly common both to the teacher of religious education in a state school and to the Catholic teacher in a Catholic school. This development should be welcome to Catholics since they, of all people, should surely be interested in the religious education of all children not just in that of the minority of Catholic children who attend Catholic schools. The discussion that follows concentrates on this wider perspective with particular reference to secondary education.

One fundamental difficulty that arises in religious education derives from the close connexion between religious knowledge and religious identity. That which is known by the religious man ranges from 'God' to 'true knowledge of what I am and what I am not' but the Christian is more likely to know the former and the Buddhist the latter. In addition there is a difference between the Christian who is aware of God within his own experience and the Christian who has no direct knowledge of God just as there is a distinction between the novice and the enlightened Buddhist.

The practical question that poses itself here is how far we are justified in accepting the accident of birth to parents involved in a living religious tradition as the crucial determinant of religious identity. John is born and baptized a Catholic. Therefore the

teacher has the right to teach him to know God? A Singalese boy is born into the Buddhist tradition. Therefore the teacher has the right to teach him how to discover what he is and what he is not?

Right at the beginning of any consideration of this topic the problem then arises as to what is and what is not indoctrination. The recent literature on this topic¹ tends to use the paradigm teacher passing on one belief to his pupil. This does not seem to fit the situation. The teacher wishes to pass on a living tradition not just a set of beliefs. In other words he does not wish to produce someone with an entirely closed mind with respect to a particular belief but to dynamize his student with respect to the tradition of which the belief forms a part. There seems room for this more positive formulation of indoctrination as well as the negative one mentioned above. The aim of the positive indoctrinator is not so much that his student should believe a certain doctrine but that he should become a truly religious man.

This understanding of positive indoctrination, the passing-on of a living tradition, is not open to the same educational and moral objections as can normally be levelled at more negative forms of indoctrination, *if* certain conditions are observed. The two conditions that seem more relevant are *first* that the student should wish to be inculcated into the living tradition, that he has chosen to learn to know whatever it is (e.g. God) in such and such a way (e.g. in terms of Catholic tradition) and therefore to be of such a kind (e.g. Catholic). *Secondly*, the aim of the teacher should be religious rather than ecclesiastical. The difference between the two is summed up by Milburn.²

'The term "religion" stands for two entirely different things. On the other hand it means a certain sensibility, a certain energy, a certain activity of soul. It is essentially creative and inspired. . . . This is primary religion or religious inspiration. . . . On the other hand we have the products of a bygone religious activity which have come down to us as a system of institutions, dogmas, observances, and prohibitions, and the term "religion" is often used to denote a *spiritual bondage* to these. . . . This is secondary religion or ecclesiasticism' (my italics).

The second of these conditions can be (although it often is not) fulfilled within the Catholic school. The first—the willingness of the student (particularly the adolescent) for inculcation or initiation—is obviously more problematic. It is clear that a child cannot escape influences from the religious traditions and anti-religious traditions in his culture so that the argument that all religious education should be postponed until adulthood is unrealistic psychologically. The same objection applies to the teaching-of-all-

¹B. Mitchell, 'Indoctrination', *The fourth R* (SPCK, 1970) pp. 353-8. J. Wilson and R. M. Hare in T. H. B. Hollins (ed.), *Aims in Education* (Manchester University Press, 1964).

²R. Gordon Milburn, *The Theology of the Real* (London, 1925), p. 13.

religions-for-choice school of thought. A child with Catholic parents or a Jewish child will willy-nilly acquire a Catholic or Jewish identity with which they will ultimately have to come to terms. It is equally clear that a child cannot become truly religious without personal commitment as opposed to the commitment wished on him by his life-circumstances. It follows that a dilemma arises for the teacher of religion in the classroom context.

This runs as follows:

1. Religious knowledge (knowledge of religious reality) is usually acquired through participation in the life of a religious group.
2. Participant education in religion *in a classroom context* is indoctrinatory where there is no personal commitment within the tradition that is inculcated.
3. The problem of identity is a paramount problem of adolescence. The adolescent experiments with a variety of identities and this process of experimentation is necessary if he is to achieve maturity.
4. It follows that the majority of adolescent students will be subject to indoctrination in the negative sense if the aim of the teacher is 'to teach the Catholic religion'.
5. BUT participant education in religion is a condition of acquiring genuine religious knowledge.
6. Hence *EITHER*, the teacher teaches religion adequately and indoctrinates the majority of his pupils *OR* he teaches religion inadequately and does not indoctrinate.

This dilemma has been at the heart of the revolution in religious education which is beginning to take root in the state school. Evangelism is now out and 'world religions' are in. However, the proponents of new-style religious education, in the first flush of enthusiasm, may have found themselves on the other horn of the dilemma: they are not teaching religion adequately. If religious knowledge is, as argued earlier, in its primary sense, to know and be dynamized by 'religious reality' then, unless this is taught, at least to those capable of and desirous of this knowledge, then the teaching is inadequate.

The dilemma cannot be avoided. However, it is clear that the vast majority of children, not only do not wish to encounter religious reality, but would deny that there is such a thing, and have, in addition, very little understanding of the phenomena of religion. The dilemma can be by-passed if the aim adopted by the teacher of religion (who may not himself be a believer but may be sincerely interested in religion from another point of view) is not to help the child progress in religion but is rather the more minimal aim of enabling the child to understand religion.

What then is meant by understanding religion? The authors of *Working Paper 36* argue that the phenomenological approach to religion should be adopted in schools. This means that while the student looks at religion from the outside he does so with sympathy.

Smart writes of this approach:¹ 'In describing a human activity, we only describe fully and correctly if we include in the description the meaning the activity has for the person or persons participating'. In terms of religious identity this approach can be seen as one that fosters an attitude of non-commitment minus antagonism. The initiate is taught to look at something which is important—he is not to get his feet wet but just watch from the bank and see how others learn or have learnt in the past how to swim. What is crucial to note is that the knowledge-identity tie-up does not break down here even though the point of view adopted by the group is more that of the observer than the participant. Confessionalism and progressivism involve different stances and different identities: neither stance is more 'objective' than the other.

The best approach to what is meant by understanding religion was hinted at at the beginning of this paper. Religion has an inside and an outside. The inside point of view brings genuine knowledge, but, equally, so does the outside point of view. Phenomenology, history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy are valid approaches to religion from the outside just as theology and the discipline of the spiritual life are valid approaches from the inside. The person who has a real understanding of religion, is religiously literate, is the man who can take up and understand more than one point of view on religion. It is the man who is wedded to one point of view to the exclusion of all others who is most likely to be a religious illiterate and a fanatic whether he be phenomenologist, Freudian, fundamentalist or whatever.

If this point is valid a major part of religious education would be to help students to experiment with different views of religion whether as participant or observer. Those who wished to learn aspects of spiritual technology such as meditation or Yoga could be introduced to these disciplines; those who wish to explore their own inherited faith could be encouraged to study and play an active part in the community of believers; those who wish to study world religions should be introduced to the 'feel' as well as the 'thought' of a religion and should be given such necessary intellectual tools as an understanding of the nature of myth and symbol. If religious education gave the student an opportunity to take up temporary and playful religious identities with varying degrees of commitment to roles the whole vocabulary of religious identity might become closer to psychological fact. This type of programme could achieve the minimum goal of helping the student to some understanding of religion and the maximum goal of helping him to become religious himself.

Such a programme would involve far-reaching changes in the style of religious education common in both Catholic and State schools.

¹N. Smart, 'The Comparative Study of Religions and the Schools', *Religious Education*, LXIV, p. 26, 1969.

The content of the courses would be wider and would include a sound knowledge of at least one non-Christian religion (this was a commonplace in the heyday of classical education and is far from a revolutionary novelty). The student would be introduced to some of the wide variety of views on religion and helped to grasp something of the methods and disciplines involved. Participant education in religion would be available to those students who wished to understand their inherited religion in greater depth. These measures would ensure a proper respect for the fluidity of the religious identity of children: religion can only live if it is genuine, and genuine religion (however primitive it may seem to the observer) is worthy of respect in itself (as is any other genuine attitude to religion). This respect would do more to ensure the possibility of honesty and integrity *vis-à-vis* religion in mature life than the compromises and implicit dishonesties of the present system.

'Teaching the Catholic religion' has always been accepted by Catholics as a limited activity. The grace of God is a gift not of the teacher but of God. My view of religious education is wider than that of the catechist—is it also more catholic?

Some Eighteenth-century Remarks on Clerical Celibacy

by J. Derek Holmes

Of course, a serious question deserves a serious answer, but is importance necessarily associated with solemnity, especially if the problem is unlikely to be solved in the immediate future? Might it not be possible or even desirable in such a situation to relax, if only for the moment, and treat the problem neither indifferently nor lugubriously, but with a certain degree of *panache* or even irresponsibility—for our own sakes, if nobody else's? Such thoughts were prompted by reading through one particular controversy among English-speaking Catholics during the eighteenth century. At the time, many Catholics were dissatisfied with the attitudes and laws of the Church, not least on the issue of celibacy. Furthermore, these critics, no doubt largely influenced by the temper of the time, regarded themselves as liberal and enlightened in their own religious approach. How then were they to regard the clerical 'vert'?¹

¹Incidentally, this controversy also helps to illustrate the fate of publications issued on one side of the Atlantic at the hands of publishers on the other!