

**SIXTH FORM RELIGION**, by Edwin Cox, *S.C.M. Press*, 1967. 188 pp. 18s.

The prevailing scientific ethos of our age makes it natural for us to expect statistical formulations of people's opinions and tastes. It was inevitable that sooner or later the methods of market research would enter the field of Religious Education. Discontent with the Agreed Syllabus in non-Catholic schools and a growing concern amongst Catholics, first with the traditional catechism, more recently with the new 'kerygmatic' approach, have combined to make all Christians ask searching questions about their aims and methods in teaching religion.

It has, of course, been long-established educational practice to base teaching method on the psychology of the child (it would be impossible nowadays to think of doing otherwise), but the present decade has seen the first widely publicized attempts to present the complex contemporary situation in the matter of 'teenage religion' with the full panoply of statistical tables. Harold Loukes set the stage in 1961 with the famous book of that name (*Teenage Religion*, SCM Press); this was followed in 1964 with Ronald Goldman's brilliant but provocative *Religious Thinking From Childhood To Adolescence* (the subject of a recent critical attack by K. G. Howkins, *A Critique of the Research and Conclusions of Dr R. Goldman*, Tynedale Press, 1966). However, the flurry of excitement over Child- v. Bible-centred religion is mainly to do with intellectual awareness (or lack of it) in younger children, particularly those of Junior School age; and while Goldman's researches take him beyond the 'watershed of Religious 'Thinking' (which he places at the age 12-13), he is still chiefly concerned with those who leave school at the age of 15+, that is, children in the Secondary Modern Schools.

It can be argued against Goldman that he concentrates on the cognitive aspects of religious understanding to the exclusion of all others; that his largely negative conclusions about the success of Religious Instruction are predetermined by the theological orientation of questions. Edwin Cox in a new book of research, *Sixth Form Religion* (SCM, 1967), makes the valid point that 'children who are incapable of profound arguments about the nature and veracity of religion may yet have a deeply religious response to life' (pp. 14-15). Yet he wisely insists that in the modern age, when our attempts to organize our experience in all fields of endeavour are increasingly

intellectual, the cognitive aspect of religion must almost certainly assume greater importance. In any case, no one, whatever his intellectual endowment, can accept a religious outlook if his knowing mind is rejecting its basic assumptions.

Where, then, can intellectual understanding most fairly be tested? Judging that a certain maturity, combined with the ability to articulate answers to questions, is the *sine qua non* for the success of the questionnaire method, Cox adapts this technique to a searching study of the beliefs of Grammar School Sixth Formers. Here, if anywhere, it is argued, we should be able to evaluate the success of our teaching.

There is, perhaps, little in this book that will be new to practising teachers. Apart from the findings on Religious Practice defined in terms of prayer and public worship, and a follow-up chapter on Morality (showing a remarkable correlation between religious belief and moral judgement), the book falls into two main divisions: first, research on four articles of belief—God, Christ as Son of God, Life after Death, and the Bible; secondly, a chapter by H. W. Marratt which summarizes the pupils' own evaluation of the R.I. they have received at school.

On the more general topic of religious belief, it becomes abundantly clear that Sixth Form pupils show a deeply serious concern about religion—in spite of the illogicality of many of their arguments. (It is to the credit of the researchers that they respected the reluctance of the boys and girls to give answers of the Yes/No type familiar from Gallup polls; free comments were permitted and, indeed, encouraged.) To go beyond this broad generalization is to run the risk of distorting the balance of the statistical evidence, but two comparative assessments are particularly interesting: first, the disparity between boys' beliefs and those of girls; secondly, the differences between churchgoers and the rest. (There is surprisingly little variation when it comes to Home and Social Background.) The findings on the Existence of God and the Divinity of Christ show that 62.9 per cent of the girls but only 36.8 per cent of the boys are Christian. The figures for regular church attendance are closely related: 58.3 per cent of the girls, 36.7 per cent of the boys. (The preponderance of belief amongst girls is satisfactorily explained by the appeal of the emotional and mystical elements of religion.) But of more pertinent

interest is the significant fact that when we study the written comments of individuals—boys and girls—as opposed to avowals of faith (measured in degrees of certitude!), we find very little difference between churchgoers and non-churchgoers. In fact, the *apparent* superiority of the churchgoer in his/her grasp of religious ideas amounts to little more than a display of verbalisms gleaned from the pulpit.

The most prominent feature of all the answers is a basic confusion between two types of thought: empirical thinking and teleological thinking. As the writer says, this reflects the basic difficulty for all believers in a society which has been transformed by science. It is hardly fair to blame young people for theological illiteracy when theology itself is so much a matter of debate. 'Though they [the pupils] are mostly convinced that there must be some underlying purposive power to which they, sometimes grudgingly, will accord the name "God", they find difficulty in thinking about it because they have no imaginative concepts by which they can picture it to themselves and so think accurately about it' (p. 176).

It is hardly surprising that the attitude of Sixth Formers towards their Religious Instruction is closely related to this mere general difficulty. In matters where the subjective element is so strong and where traditional theological concepts have little or no meaning, there is understandable resistance to indoctrination of any kind; the opposition to having

religion 'forced down one's throat' (to quote a typical comment) is perhaps the most prevalent feeling amongst modern teenagers. What emerges more clearly than anything else in the free comments recorded in this book (and they substantiate what many experienced teachers already know) is the insistence that there should be much more class discussion at every level in Grammar School R.I. Only in this way, it is believed, can there be a genuine dialogue between teacher and pupils—a dialogue in which the pupils are learning not merely to think for themselves but to 'discover' themselves in the difficult process of growing up. Most Sixth Formers, of course, experience some teaching of this kind, and they appear to appreciate the wider opportunities for discussion which they find when they reach the Sixth Form; but they deplore the type of teaching that they received lower down the school, in particular the emphasis on Old Testament History which is both badly taught and (in the pupils' view) irrelevant.

Clearly, a number of vast issues are raised by these conclusions. Some of them are severely practical like the problem of large classes (How does one *discuss* with 30 or 40 children?). Others go to the very root of the religious problems confronting man in the twentieth century and remind us that the question we all face is, How to find adequate language to convey religious experience.

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**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**, ed. by Dom Philip Jebb. *Darton Longman and Todd, London, 1968. 275 pp. 30s.*

Here is a group of ten papers, forming the 8th Downside Symposium, on various aspects of religious education. The editor has made a gallant but unconvincing claim for their unity; in fact they have little—and are therefore very hard to review within any reasonable length. On the whole they seem very remote—almost a cry from a previous generation. The musty flavour comes partly from the cover and St Prisca, partly from echoes of battles of past years, partly from the discussion taking place mainly in the context of convents and Downside with a fleeting acknowledgement of grammar schools packed with intelligent boys—though there is one superb exception, Miss Bray's paper.

Take, for example, Derek Lance's contribution. The type of person who is going to spend 30s. on a book like this doesn't need to be reminded of the horror stories that are still part

of our teaching legacy—he knows about them and it would astonish me if the Downside conference did not. He doesn't need to be told the inadequacies of the catechism—we knew about them when I was a tot, and now they are just part of the furniture. The current problems in the classroom are caused by the absence which made the catechism so lethal and which will make any new syllabus just as lethal—the absence of theologians in schools of the same intellectual level and depth of training as the chemists who have produced the new Nuffield courses and are teaching them—an absence which will continue until Catholic schools have the honesty to advertise the highest head of department allowances for theologians and make it possible to support one's family as well that way as by teaching chemistry. Derek Lance tells us that 'the teaching must be rooted in the pupil's own