

Journal of Education & Christian Belief

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Book Reviews

Terence McLaughlin, Joseph O'Keefe SJ & Bernadette O'Keefe
The Contemporary Catholic School: Context, Identity and Diversity

Reviewer: Joseph Sowerby (p.170)

Melanie Phillips

All Must Have Prizes

Reviewer: Richard Wilkins (p.171)

Graham Haydon

Teaching about Values: A New Approach

Reviewer: Arthur Jones (p.174)

Graham Haydon

Teaching about Values: A New Approach

Reviewer: Brian V. Hill (p.174)

Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis & Colin Crowder (eds)

*Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation:
a reader on theology and Christian education*

Reviewer: Andrew Wright (p.176)

John Van Dyk

Letters to Lisa: Conversations with a Christian Teacher

Reviewer: John Hallett (p.177)

Richard Wilkins

Time for Christianity

Reviewer: Penny Thompson (p.178)

Ian Lambert & Suzanne Mitchell (eds)

*The Crumbling Walls of Certainty:
Towards a Christian Critique of Postmodernity and Education*

Reviewer: David I. Smith (p.178)

Daniel Murphy

Comenius: A Critical Reassessment of his Life and Work

Reviewer: David I. Smith (p.179)

Nigel Biggar

Good Life: Reflections on what we value today

Reviewer: Andrew Marfleet (p.181)

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Editorial

THE PRAGUE DECLARATION on Christian belief and education published in this issue is the product of a quite remarkable gathering of Christian educationalists from across Europe (see Notes and News). Its appearance in this journal is in line with our move to a more international perspective and its contents illustrate how the same educational issues can be of concern in quite different countries.

We would welcome discussion of the Declaration in letters for the *Correspondence* section that we plan to include in future issues – or a more extended response in the form of an article for possible publication. The inclusion of ‘1997’ in the title of the Declaration was intended by those who met together in Prague to indicate their hope that it would be received as a contribution to an ongoing discussion rather than any attempt at a final word on any of these issues.

The Declaration states that ‘the existence of God as three persons provides the foundation for human individuality as well as for relationships in community’ and goes on to affirm that education should provide opportunities for people to learn ‘to live as responsible citizens in relationships of mutual love, respect and service with one another in families, communities and societies’. David Cracknell, in his paper on ‘joined-up thinking’, argues for a renewed emphasis on interdependence in community, in teaching and learning, and in educational leadership. He says that our job as Christians in education is ‘to communicate the truth of an interdependence that has cosmic and eternal dimensions’.

William Cox tackles the issue of an appropriate Christian stance for public education. He argues that, in public education, Christians should promote for other religious faiths the same privileges that they reserve for themselves. This, he says, is ‘the proper Golden Rule response’ and, as such, is required by biblical teaching rather than standing opposed to it. The alternative, again required by the Golden Rule, is that children be educated ‘where their specific religious needs are met yet where others are neither forced to attend nor to support financially’. These are undoubtedly controversial theses and the Editor looks forward to hearing what others have to say!

Two papers on aspects of Religious Education follow. RE does not exist as a separate curriculum subject in all national education systems or in all schools but the issues raised here are important for the teaching of religious beliefs in whatever context or form. Anthony Thorpe looks at the aims and methods of the ‘Philosophy for Children’ movement and finds in them the educational benefits of enabling children ‘to make the connections and put together the fragments’, helping them to identify, understand and examine other people’s assumptions as well as their own, encouraging discussion of ultimate questions, promoting understanding rather than information for its own sake and active rather than passive learning. These are all proper concerns of teachers of RE and of Christians in education. Indeed, several of them find echoes in the Prague Declaration and in David Cracknell’s call towards the end of his paper for the establishing of connections across the curriculum and for communities of learning.

Anthony Thorpe rejects the confinement of the development of philosophical thinking to sixteen years and upwards that he finds in the writings of Jean Piaget and Ronald Goldman. Elizabeth Ashton also rejects some of Piaget’s and Goldman’s thinking and says that their work has contributed to a serious under-estimation of children’s potential for understanding scriptural narrative. Religious Education in primary schools would be enhanced, she says, ‘by allowing studies of scripture to regain a place in the curriculum’ in place of much current practice which is based on misleading theories.

Harro Van Brummelen sees contemporary education as ‘precariously balanced between secularized modernism and individualistic, relativized postmodernism’ and he outlines what he sees as an alternative Christian approach, a third way which embraces strengths from both and avoids their weaknesses. His ‘transformative, vital and transcendent’ educational programme includes, among other things, ‘collaborative strategies that rely on teamwork in posing, analyzing and solving problems’. There are resonances here with both David Cracknell’s focus on interdependence and Anthony Thorpe’s endorsement of insights from the Critical Thinking Skills Movement. Harro Van Brummelen’s paper applies directly to the context of teacher education in Christian colleges in North America in which he works himself but it has implications for teacher education and all education in any context.

This issue of the journal contains more articles than usual and so has less space for reviews than we would normally expect to have. We plan to restore the balance next time but all of the books reviewed here are significant for the development of Christian thinking on educational issues. One of them, Graham Haydon’s book on teaching about values, has been accorded the accolade of reviews by two different writers and, we feel, deservedly so. Even though the writer reveals little of his own core beliefs, both reviewers recommend it to the readers of this journal.

John Shortt