

Journal of Education & Christian Belief

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Editorial

WHAT DOES HUMILITY have to do with education? This is surely a question which should interest Christian educators, and it is a question which has been addressed in thought-provoking ways in two recent publications.

The first is a book by Mark Schwehn titled *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Schwehn argues that 'all higher learning depends not simply upon the possession of certain cognitive skills but also upon the possession of moral dispositions or virtues that enable inquiry to proceed' (p.44). Any community of learning is informed by a certain ethos or spirit of inquiry - if we are concerned with virtue as a part of what education is about then we should not think of adding character education to other kinds of learning. We should, Schwehn urges, be looking at how all of the existing processes of learning are informed by an implicit concern for particular virtues.

Spirits of inquiry differ. In the early part of his book Schwehn discusses the ethos of inquiry upon which the modern university has been built. He points to the writings of Max Weber as an important source of the modern academic ethos - an ethos with which the paper by Nicholas Wolterstorff in this issue is also concerned. This ethos is motivated by a desire for mastery, manipulation and control and emphasises the importance of a particular range of virtues: clarity, honesty, diligence, dedication, and devotion to rigorous procedures. Schwehn, motivated by communitarian concerns and building upon the work of Parker Palmer, wishes to emphasise virtues which are 'less matters of purely personal integrity and more interpersonal or social in character', virtues which are bound up with 'care taken with the lives and thoughts of others' (p.44). These virtues, Schwehn argues, have been historically connected with self-consciously religious communities - they are spiritual virtues, and therefore surely relevant to current discussions of spiritual development (with which Brian Hill's article in this issue engages).

Humility is one of the virtues which Schwehn wishes to re-associate with learning. He argues that lack of motivation among students often amounts to a lack of humility. He cites the example of some of his students who concluded from a quick reading of a text from Augustine on friendship and loss that Augustine was just obscure and mistaken and dismissed the passage as unworthy of further attention. Acknowledging that he may have failed to motivate them, Schwehn nevertheless argues that they ...

'could have overcome my failings had they been sufficiently humble; had they presumed that Augustine's apparent obscurity was *their* problem, not his; and had they presumed that his apparent inconsistencies or excesses were not really the careless errors they took them to be. Humility on this account does not mean uncritical acceptance: it means, in practical terms, the *presumption* of wisdom and authority *in the author*.' (p.48)

Schwehn is suggesting that growth in humility would help both with problems of motivation and with problems of poor learning resulting from superficial interaction with the material under study: 'Some degree of humility is a precondition for learning' (p.49). (Might this be one area where the evangelical spirituality proposed by Richard Wilkins in this issue could contribute?)

It is very interesting to juxtapose Schwehn's reflections, which emerge from the context of North American higher education, with an argument put forward in a recent article in this country by Susan Mendus. In an article titled 'Tolerance and Recognition: Education in a Multicultural Society' (*Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29:2, 1995, pp.191-202), Mendus addresses Raz's view that

members of cultures which do not value autonomy should be brought humanely and decently to a position where they do place value on the condition of autonomy. Mendus thinks this is problematic; it ‘threatens to drive out cultural loyalties, particularly loyalties to cultures which give priority to virtues such as obedience or humility rather than self-determination or autonomy’ (p.194). If such loyalties are driven out then those who belong to more autonomy-oriented cultures lose the opportunity to learn from them.

Turning to the Amish community as an example, Mendus suggests that while we might be able to accommodate humility by thinking of it in terms of having oneself in proper perspective, the Amish understanding of humility goes further. For the Amish, the issue is not focusing on my self in the right way; ‘in Amish culture ... what is most important is to be forgetful of oneself, to give oneself up to the community, or to “disappear rather than stand out” ’ (p.198). Our different idea of what humility might mean is tied up with the importance which we place upon self-understanding and thinking for ourselves. Placing value on autonomy is a basic part of belonging to a modern democratic society, it is part of who we are as members of such societies. The Amish might see this as an inappropriate preoccupation with self. What should we learn from this?

‘We learn that we are the kind of people for whom self-assessment is morally legitimate. But we also learn that this is something which makes humility a different and more difficult concept for us than it is for the Amish, since we are required to provide an interpretation of humility according to which it is both virtuous and consists in a concern with oneself which borders on the narcissistic. We learn that the price of self-assessment is the loss, or at least the deformation, of humility as it was originally conceived’. (p.199)

In other words, in comparing ourselves with the Amish we find that our culture’s emphasis on individual autonomy, on ‘what we as individuals want and value, as distinct from those around us’ (p.193), makes humility a difficult ideal, one in danger of becoming just another form of concern for our individual selves.

Both Mendus and Schwehn leave us with cause for further reflection. Might not pride, rather than humility, equally drive me to grapple with a difficult text in my determination to extract what I need from it or find out exactly where it is wrong? Or could it still be said with Schwehn that some measure of humility is essential if we are genuinely to learn *from* (and not just *about*) someone else? Is it true, as Mendus suggests, that the ‘original’ sense of humility excludes a sober judgement of one’s own state? And is autonomy the immovable reference point to which humility must be sacrificed if necessary?

While Mendus and Schwehn seem to share a sense that humility has become problematic in the context of modern Western education (and if they are right, then this must surely be of deep concern to Christian educators), they respond in different ways. For Mendus we are left with the uncomfortable awareness that ‘as autonomy-valuers we lack the moral language with which to provide an explanation of [Amish] humility as anything other than oppression’ (p.200). Since ‘there are virtues which are valuable, yet which cannot properly be accommodated within a moral framework which gives centrality to self-assessment and autonomy’ (p.200), we are left having learned that since autonomy is central for us, we cannot really embrace humility, even as we recognise its value. There are goods which are not fully accessible to us in the Western world given who we are. It is tempting to translate this into the point that humility is unavailable outside of repentance.

Schwehn, on the other hand, wants us to ask how things must change. Having explored the relevance of various spiritual virtues to learning, he urges that ‘to “teach” these virtues means first to exemplify them, second to order life in the classroom and throughout the academic community in such a way that their exercise is seen and felt as an essential part of inquiry’ (p.60). Rather than regarding individual autonomy as inevitably central, Schwehn wishes us to explore not only how we can model spiritual virtues, but also what changes we can make in the structure of our teaching and learning in order to make these virtues felt as necessary to adequate learning. (Here he contributes to the discussion of how Christian convictions can transform education which continues in the articles by

Elmer Thiessen and Andrew Wright in this issue.) Is this unrealistic in the wider social context invoked by Mendus? Or is it a path which Christian educators could lead the way in exploring?

* * * * *

This issue of the journal continues the wider discussion among Christians involved in education. In the opening article, Brian Hill looks at the growing credibility gap between young people whom Douglas Rushkoff terms ‘screenagers’ and those who attempt to educate them. Hill’s focus is on religious education as the article was first presented at a conference of religious educators but what he has to say has evident application to spiritual and moral education in other curriculum subject areas as well. He advocates what he terms a ‘renewalist’ religious response, as opposed to a fundamentalist one with which he feels liberal analysts are too prone to run it together.

The discussion of transformative Christian education opened in *JECB* 2:2 by Andrew Wright and Signe Sandmark continues in this issue with a response from Elmer Thiessen and some further reflections by Wright. Thiessen concludes that there is truth in each of the three alternative approaches to the integration of faith and learning of compatibilism, reconstructionism and transformationism but Wright says that he now thinks we should learn to treat the framework of these three approaches as redundant and seek instead to develop ‘a more nuanced and sensitive critical apparatus’.

Faith-learning integration is also the subject of the article by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Professor Wolterstorff is a very distinguished Christian philosopher who has a strong interest in discussions of educational issues. He has adapted for this journal a longer paper that he presented to a conference in the USA considering the idea of a Christian university. What he says applies to the world of education generally, to the ‘academy’ whether it be a school, college or university. He proposes an ‘entanglement model’ of the relation between Christianity and learning and encourages the Christian to engage in learning with both commitment and humility.

We come back to religious education with Richard Wilkins’ article on British imperialism and English RE. He finds roots of the concern among religious educationalists to avoid aiming for conversion among their pupils in the experience of empire where, in India and elsewhere, the authorities made harmonious relations with the people a priority which restricted missionary activity. The choice in managing RE in contemporary plural societies is, Wilkins says, between ‘a state religion for everyone, or everyone’s religion at state expense’. In his positive recommendations, he finds a way towards ‘renewal’ (a term used also by Brian Hill and there are also interesting resonances between their suggestions) in evangelical, non-denominational Christianity. Such Christianity is ‘profoundly counter-cultural’ and has ‘gifts for the child that make it worthy of prominence in the modern RE syllabus’.

The reviews section surveys a range of further material relevant to the concerns of this journal. Reviews in this issue include volumes of essays on Christian education, distance learning materials in religious education, books concerned with youth ministry, studies of the nature of Christian scholarship and of particular aspects of Islam, and recent work on spiritual development.

We hope that the articles and reviews contained in this issue of the journal will contribute something to the ongoing task of seeking to relate Christian conviction in fruitful ways to our varied educational responsibilities. As always, we welcome future contributions in the form of letters to the editors, articles or responses to articles, or any comments which you might have in relation to any of the contents. We also welcome information concerning conferences, publications and other similar items for our Notes and News section.

John Shortt & David I. Smith