

Journal of Education & Christian Belief

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Editorial: Images of Christian Reflection

THERE HAS BEEN in recent decades a growing awareness that theorizing about education cannot be reduced to the collection of a growing pile of true propositions. Many other factors are at work in the formation of our educational views, including the metaphors embedded in our educational thinking. Whereas metaphors were once thought of principally as optional poetic decorations, to be stripped away if we want to talk about important things like the facts or the truth, it is now widely recognized that metaphors play an unavoidable role in directing our attention and shaping our thinking.

It is not hard to discover patterns of imagery influencing the practice of education. Groups of metaphors drawn from the domestic sphere (seeing teachers as parents or schools as families), from the horticultural sphere (seeing teachers as gardeners, learners as plants, learning as a process of natural growth, teaching as watering) or from the world of printing (seeing learners as blank pages on which lessons are imprinted) have each held sway in the thinking of influential educators and helped to give rise to distinctive patterns of educational practice. In recent times it would be hard not to notice the predominance of metaphors that picture education in economic terms - schools as factories or marketplaces, teachers as managers, learners as consumers, the curriculum as a product which is delivered and subjected to quality control. Like the images of families, plants or printing presses, such economic imagery can even come to define the learning process itself, as in this example from an article on second language learning:

‘if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on their investment - a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources.’ (B. N. Peirce, ‘Social Identity, Investment and Language Learning’ in *TESOL Quarterly* 29:1, 1995, pp.9-31, (p.17)).

The closer one looks, the more ubiquitous the presence of metaphorical language appears. As soon as we speak about learners mastering material, cracking a problem, or floundering we are using metaphors which image learning as the application of superior force or the ability to navigate in a viscous environment. Our choice of metaphor directs our attention to certain features of the learning process, but usually also obscures other features, making it less likely that we will notice them.

There are good reasons for Christian educators to be critically aware of the metaphors shaping educational practice, for those metaphors embody ways of seeing and their associated practices which may be problematic when examined in Christian terms. There are also instances of metaphors with biblical origins playing a role in educational reflection (see D. I. Smith & J. Shortt, *The Bible and the Task of Teaching*, Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre, 2002). There is, however, a reason even closer to home for Christians to attend to the role of metaphors, for our metaphors not only influence our views of education, they can also shape our sense of what it is we are doing when we try to think Christianly about education.

Consider the image of foundations, a common metaphor in more conservative Christian writing on education. According to this metaphor, the Christian faith or often more specifically the Bible provide us with certain foundations for educational thinking (see e.g. R. W. Pazmiño, *Foundational issues in Christian education: An introduction in evangelical perspective*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997). This image draws upon biblical talk of building upon the foundation of Christ, like a wise man building on the rock (see e.g. Romans 15:20, Luke 6:48). It focuses on the importance of the deep roots of educational thinking and emphasizes getting the basics right before elaborating further. The

image suggests time being taken to establish a secure, well-located, stable footing, so that further developments can proceed with confidence.

The foundations do not fully determine the design of the subsequent building – the real work is still ahead once the foundations have been laid. Nevertheless, along with the connotations of care, security and good beginnings, the foundation image also has a certain static quality. Once the foundations are dug, they tend to remain out of sight unless something goes wrong with them. They also stay put – in fact that is what they are designed to do; all the subsequent building goes on in the space marked out by the foundations. Foundational imagery pictures the Bible or the content of Christian faith as marking out a determinate area within which all subsequent topics can be addressed, and downplays the possibility that fresh developments might cause us to rework some of our basic views.

John Calvin provided another influential image in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (chapter 6), when he compared the Scriptures to a pair of spectacles with which the believer looks at the world. The idea that Christian educational thought involves the development and application of a Christian ‘worldview’ echoes this image. The image here is of faith not as a settled basis to build upon, but rather as a lens to look through. Rather than remaining safely (if vitally) hidden below ground level, faith is to colour our perception of all that we survey, leading us to see, evaluate and therefore eventually to act upon things differently. The idea of faith as a lens or angle of view also implies attentiveness, an interest in the world and an attempt to see it clearly and coherently – it is an image which has us engaged in scrutiny of our surroundings.

Here, too, there are further connotations. Some have felt that foregrounding the worldview spectacles places too much emphasis on a rather detached gaze rather than the actions or passions which should characterize the Christian’s walk in the world. (see e.g. H. Fernhout, ‘Christian schooling: Telling a worldview story’ in I. Lambert & S. Mitchell (eds.), *The crumbling walls of certainty: Towards a Christian critique of postmodernity and education*, Sydney: CSA, 1997, pp.75-98). It might also seem to suggest a well-lit world in which all is laid out before our gaze – at least as long as we are wearing the correct spectacles. With the spectacles on, says Calvin, we see *distinctly*. Complexity and mystery are what could get downplayed under the sway of this image.

In counterpoint to the spectacles, with their danger of a merely spectatorial attitude, stands the common image of Christian educational endeavor as a form of incarnation. Christian educators, this image suggests, should not rest content with abstract argument or theological assertion – they should concretely embody the Gospel in imaginative daily living. (See e.g. M. Harris, *Teaching and religious imagination*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987, pp.8, 20). The appeal here is obviously to the Word who became flesh and lived among us, living as the way, the truth and the life rather than sending instructions from a distance.

Even here there are connotations which may give us pause. In our post-Enlightenment culture, the language of incarnation can end up suggesting a turn from distant, detached rationalistic speculation to a full-bodied, engaged practice. But does this really reflect the incarnation as understood in Christian theology? Did the incarnation mean a detached, distant, coldly calculating God taking on flesh in order to achieve greater authenticity? Or did it not rather show a passionately engaged God condescending to take on the insubstantial frailty of human flesh? Our modern use of the imagery of incarnation can end up overrating our actions in the world.

Finally, what of an image drawn from the Psalms? Psalm 119:105 pictures God’s word not as foundations, spectacles or bodily presence, but instead as a light carried while out walking at night: ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’. The image of a torch shining on someone’s feet suggests a very limited range of vision – the light is shone downwards at the section of path immediately at the walker’s feet, so as to avoid stumbling; no panoramic vistas here. It also suggests motion – the picture is not of an individual standing staring in fascination at his or her own feet, but rather of someone in motion on a dark night; the small pool of flickering light moves along the path as the walker strides forward, showing enough light for the next step. This stands in contrast both to the static image of foundations and the expansive language of worldviews. Here the light is local and moving, surrounded by dark mystery but sufficient to make the path ahead clear.

The point of this brief sketch is not to try to show that any one of these images is the ideally correct one, or even to attempt a systematic arrangement of them into a single whole. One of the lessons to be learned from contemporary discussions of metaphor is that all metaphors both reveal and conceal. They direct our attention in certain ways, causing us to notice certain things that may otherwise have gone unremarked. At the same time, this very process puts other aspects into the shade, directs our attention away from them. This is why the dominance of a single metaphor can be debilitating – if we are too focused in our mind’s eye on laying the foundations of Christian education we may lose sight of the fact that we are in motion, that things are changing around us. With the hand-held torch only we may neglect to build coherently and systematically, or forget how much has been revealed. This is why Christian educators should pause every now and then to give critical thought not just to the contending metaphors that strive for the right to describe education, but also the metaphors that shape our idea of what it is we are doing when we try to think and teach Christianly.

* * * * *

In the opening article in this issue, Marshall Gregory takes us into the classroom and opens up for us possibilities for our practice of the Christian law of agapic love, a love ‘that evades sentimentality and yet respects its recipients, that challenges students and yet mediates toughness with charity’. This is not a way of living which is detached from understanding but rather an approach to teaching that links with a specific Christian view of the human nature and of the ends of education.

From her experience of the theology classroom in a secular university, Harriet Harris encourages us to engage in teaching that has transformative effects, that deeply affects lives, not least because this is what she finds students expect when they choose to study theology. The teaching of theology can often have what she terms ‘a deceptive veneer of neutrality’ and can often present the subject ‘as detached from practical, living concerns’. She offers reflections from her own teaching experience to show how teaching can be transformative.

Mike Goheen makes use of the metaphor of God’s word as a light as he writes of the growing darkness of our post-Enlightenment times and calls Christian educators to shine like stars or, changing the metaphor, to live in the Christian counterstory that ‘stands in contrast to the Western story’. He argues that education should be seen as witness because this avoids the danger of a form of Christian education that prepares students to fit in rather than to transform their world.

Harro van Brummelen responds to Clarence Joldersma’s ‘Educating for Social Justice’ article in the last issue of this journal. He allows that the book *A Vision with a Task* (of which he was a co-author and upon which Joldersma’s article was a comment) could have made more of the cultural and social context of schooling but he suggests that Joldersma lets the pendulum swing too far in its focus on the community rather than the individual. Perhaps other readers may wish to enter his discussion? If so, it would be good to hear from you on this – or, indeed, in response to any of the other articles in this issue.

The final article takes us to the world of religious education as practiced in the UK. However, what Philip Barnes has to say in it has implications for education in other countries as well and not only for the subject or what the British term ‘RE’. His arguments in defence of a more confessional approach to education have interesting resonances with what Harriet Harris says in her article about ‘advocacy scholarship’.

We hope that you will find these articles and the set of reviews both inspirational and enlightening as you reflect on your educational practice.

John Shortt & David I. Smith