

Religious Education in Secondary Schools

THE SITUATION TODAY

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TWENTY years have now passed since the Education Act of 1944. It is surely right to seek some assessment at this time of the achievements and failures of the system which has grown out of the Act, in so far as it relates to religious education. Every person under the age of thirty and over the age of fifteen will have received at least three, and more recently four, or more years of instruction in religious knowledge at school. Both the nation and the church are vitally involved in the matter as they are both providers and beneficiaries of the enterprise.

This particular inquiry emanates from the parochial experience of a minister of the Church of England. Frequent contact with ministers of other Christian denominations leads to the conclusion that most of them agree to a common experience in their day-to-day dealings with this generation of 'teens and twenties. These reveal that there is widespread misunderstanding of the nature of the Christian faith, that the majority regard the Church as an irrelevance and that, in a growing number of cases, there is acceptance of ideas and standards which are sub-christian.

Yet, beneath an outward show of self-sufficiency there are also signs that the young people today would gladly embrace any solid foundation upon which they could build their lives and which would provide an assurance of security. There is always a tendency for the youth of the day to speak and act as if they knew all the answers, a disinclination to accept the advice which comes from the experience of more advanced years. This phase develops later into a search for such a foundation as will sustain them in the face of their own sense of inadequacy. The unfortunate fact is that the vast majority have to face this problem with only a second or third rate account of what Christ can do in and for those who trust Him. Either they have never been told or, if they have, they have never understood the full truth of the Christian faith, that it is not just a series of theological and moral propositions, but that it is primarily a personal encounter with God in Christ. In the absence of the full Christian Gospel it is hardly surprising that they turn to some other concept which seeks to overcome their sense of personal inadequacy by promulgating the erroneous notion of human self-sufficiency at the racial level.

This situation has arisen in a country where religious education is compulsory in schools, state and independent. It is therefore inevitable that the present state of affairs among the younger generation should be attributed, in part at least, to what they have been given in

school. Other factors have an important bearing on this matter, but our present study must be limited to the influence of religious education in schools. Clergy often have the feeling that the teaching received in school is a hindrance rather than a help to them in their pastoral and evangelistic work. Such generalizations have notable exceptions, but even so it must be recognized that the introduction of religious education in schools has been followed by a period in which the work of the churches among young people has become increasingly difficult. The least that can be said is that the religious education received has failed in a large measure to combat the other, irreligious, influences to which they are becoming increasingly subjected.

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The Education Act of 1944 provides that religious education be given in all schools. It is typical of the age in which we live that no specific religion is mentioned. Clear cut ideas are at a discount today and dogma is almost a swear word. In the fifth schedule to the Act, which covers the drawing up of an agreed syllabus for religious education, it is left almost entirely to the discretion of the Local Education Authority as to which religious denominations shall be represented on the body to which this task is given. The only exception is, in England, that a member of the Church of England must be included. By the wording of the Act this need be the only Christian representative included, and is no doubt entirely due to the established position of that church. Even the worship to be conducted daily in schools is not specifically required to be Christian. A term frequently used is "religious denomination". Whilst the word "denomination" is, in England, used almost as a technical term for the different branches of the Christian Church, linguistically associated with the general term "religious", it could be construed to cover any religious body. The impression given is that the Act requires only general religious teaching accommodated to a diversity not only of Christian Churches, but also to all religions.

The gratitude of a Christian for the provisions of the Act may therefore be tempered, on second thoughts, by the fact that in a nominally Christian country the Act is not specifically Christian in character. This is a fatal weakness which would not have been allowed in Moslem, Jewish, Hindu, or Communist countries. The withdrawal clause is entirely adequate to cover genuine scruples of conscience—there is no real danger of Christianity being imposed upon those who do not want it. With this provision there would seem to be no real reason for the vagueness of the Act—except in so far as it reflects the syncretistic religious thought of our age.

Largely as a manifestation of the nominal Christianity still to be found in this country, Local Authorities have assumed that the Christian religion is the one to which the Act refers, and have largely interpreted the term "denomination" in the technical sense to which reference has been made. Thus the Bible is central to the Agreed Syllabus in practically all cases, and the departures from it are the life studies of Christians of historic importance. Nevertheless the course outlined is mainly moral, historical, and religious teaching of a

general nature based largely on the twin conceptions (only too often based on a misunderstanding of biblical meaning) of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Mainly through the lives of great heroes of faith and the moral teaching of Jesus, it is sought to impress upon the student the general value of morality and religion. The view of the Bible appears to be that it is a valuable source of information about man's understanding of God and history, and that it is a record of the religious insights of great men, from whose lives and teaching we can learn much. It is a source of useful information which we may consider in relation to other ideas in formulating a personal opinion and philosophy of life.

Whatever the influences behind each individual syllabus, the fact remains that what comes through them is but a muted version of biblical Christianity. The impression is difficult to avoid that those who compiled these works were led to settle for a version of the Christian religion which is little more than an attempt to make it purely a character-forming influence. There is little to indicate that a vital spiritual experience might be involved. Whether all who take part in the compiling of these works are entirely happy with the obvious compromise which results from their labours, it is impossible to know. It is clear, however, to the reader that they are very anæmic from a Christian point of view.

There are those who would like to see the principle of the secular state established, some of them in influential positions. Involving as it would the elimination of religious teaching in schools, this would be a national disaster. Whilst we may criticize the Act for its vagueness and its application in the Agreed Syllabus for its shortcomings, the fact remains that the Act does provide unrivalled opportunities for the teaching of the Christian faith to the majority of our young people. This is entirely right in a nation which still claims to be nominally Christian. In spite of surface appearances the influence of the past is dominantly Christian and our institutions today (even those of government) are largely based on Christian conceptions. That these are blurred cannot be denied, but the answer to the problem lies not in abandoning religious education in schools and revoking the Act, but rather in using the opportunities which it provides to better purpose. In this way we shall see the day when there is less of the nominal and more of the spiritual in the Christianity of our people, and more of them consciously Christian by virtue of personal commitment to Christ who is, when all else has been said, the person in whom each individual finds the true heart of Christianity.

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In order to throw more light on the problem, and to supplement the evidence of contacts made with young people in the course of a parochial ministry, some inquiries were made in several secondary schools. For this opportunity the interest and co-operation of heads of schools are responsible and sincere thanks are due to them. Not all of those approached were willing to co-operate, and it may be that the results of these inquiries come mainly from schools in which the heads are sympathetic to the problems involved. If this is in fact so,

then the information gained may be biased towards a happier picture than complete information would warrant. As, however, even this inquiry did not reveal a very encouraging state of affairs, it could well be that the overall situation is even less satisfactory from the Christian point of view.

Several different types of school were visited, their only mutual property being that they were secondary schools. All were state schools or (in one case) church controlled schools. All the heads showed real concern for the success of religious education, though what they were looking for as a criterion of this success varied, and was not always identifiable as specifically Christian. The relation of the daily service of worship to the curriculum was a matter which they were at pains to establish. Indeed for some the fact of this relationship was seen as the means by which religious education was distinguished from, and raised above, the level of other subjects. It is apparent that many heads attach great importance to this point, though obviously some do not—and the difference between them is not directly related to the type of school for which they are responsible. It is the policy of some to seek the maximum involvement of the students in this daily worship by their participation through reading the Bible or the prayers, and also in some cases by less conventional means. All this is for good, and the value of it cannot be doubted. The results, however, from the churches' point of view are meagre.

This might be less surprising were it not for the fact that a majority of the heads interviewed were members of a church, and most of these regular attenders. One fact emerges time and again from the contacts made—namely that even the heads and teachers who were active church members were not always too clear as to their aims, and therefore achieved only limited success. To this point it will be necessary to return later.

What results are achieved? To supply an answer to this question a cross-section of students in each school (except one) was interviewed. No detailed statistics were attempted since the subject does not lend itself to such treatment, nor is the author qualified in this direction. It is clear, however, that the conversations revealed certain trends of a definite character.

The first thing that struck the interviewer was the fact that this was a subject about which many of the young people were prepared to argue—indeed, self-restraint was required in the interests of time! It was also equally clear that those who had the strong views which encouraged such an attitude were the anti-religious group. Beside their fervour the zeal of most of those who were church-goers paled into insignificance. The crusading spirit is found among the scientific materialists rather than the Christians—with one or two notable exceptions. Those who claim that the present education system is producing, by and large, a generation of humanists, would find much to support their contention in the evidence gained, and it might be maintained that religious education itself is, to a considerable extent, contributing to this.

Whilst some of the belligerence may have been a screen behind which they sought security from one they considered to be a professional

expert, it is equally clear that the divinity teacher faces the same problem in class every day. It may go a long way to explain the popularity of discussion periods as divinity lessons. Quite obviously, for those who held these strong views, this was the most popular approach. Being provided with an opportunity to express their own views is just what they want—and not one single pupil could say that their views had been changed, or even consciously modified by these discussions. Others less strong in personality and thought found the whole process confusing. Discussion can be confusing—it can also be a smokescreen behind which to shelter from other, more authoritative, ideas. That “no one is ever argued into the Kingdom of God” is a true dictum, and, whilst a free exchange of ideas is not a bad thing, it is to be questioned whether this is the best method of teaching Christian truth. Certainly the remarks of the vast majority of students would give grave reasons for doubt. The fact that it is popularizing the divinity lesson ought not to blind us to the fact that it is not really accomplishing anything positive.

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Lest we should be misled into thinking that a complete return to ordinary classroom methods will, of itself, yield results, it must be noted that very few pupils were aware that their religious education had any influence whatsoever on their way of life or belief. This is somewhat surprising in view of all the effort which is put into the teaching of this subject. Due account must be taken of the unconscious absorption of ideas and values presented by the lesson and the whole standard of the school. In education there will always be a certain amount which is caught rather than taught. However, are we justified in being satisfied with this, or is it right to seek a conscious response to the claims of Christ on the part of the student? Surely in no other subject would any teacher be satisfied with the unconscious absorption of a few ideas as the result of his labours. One is only too well aware of the fact that the student who is good at divinity, that is, able to pass examinations, is not necessarily the one who follows the precepts of biblical teaching, still less a committed Christian. The memorizing of a multitude of facts concerning the Bible, the life of Jesus, and His apostles and certain Christians of the past, does not necessarily involve a personal commitment to any of the ideas and principles mentally retained. This is amply illustrated by the fact that many of the students interviewed were taking, or had taken, the subject in G.C.E. at “O” level. Yet this fact was quite unrelated to any spiritual response; indeed those who were taking the subject in these examinations were just as surprised at the thought that religious education might have some effect upon them as were those who took little interest in it as a subject. One or two exceptions were found, but in such small numbers as to emphasize the general trend—that religious education at school resulted in no conscious response at all. From mild surprise to arrogant scorn, reactions to this point were at one in being negative. The one or two exceptions were at one school, where the teaching had evoked a very definite response (whether

positive or negative). They are worthy of note in relation to the declared aims of the teachers involved.

In general these young people held a conception of religion which allowed full credence to any opinion which could be cogently expressed. Any idea that there was an absolute standard of religious truth was generally absent. Since, to most of them, all religious ideas are basically human conceptions and aspirations, there was no reason to believe that one is better than another. It all depended on the personal appeal—whether or not a particular view fits comfortably into a way of life and thought derived from other sources. It was for each of us to make up our own minds as to which we accept and to evolve our own religious thought with the help of the thought of others.

Their evident satisfaction with this state of affairs was alarming to a minister of the church, as one who believes that in God is absolute truth. Whilst very few indeed were willing to deny absolutely the existence of God, equally very few had any firm belief in God. The general impression was one of uncertainty and vagueness. Most could say that they held to the view that there was some supreme being or force but could not go further than this. To most it did not appear to be a matter of any great moment. A considerable number confessed to belief in Jesus Christ as a historic person and a great teacher. Anything more than this was confined to those who also professed to be regular members of a church. The facts relating to Christ's death and resurrection were matters of considerable doubt to the non-churchgoing student.

It will not come as a surprise, therefore, that very few indeed of the young people interviewed were able to say definitely that they were Christians. Of those who did, some did so on the basis of having passed through the formal processes of church membership which pertained to their denomination. Just one or two bore witness to a personal faith in and experience of Christ as Saviour and God. The overriding feature was, once again, that of uncertainty, and these few exceptions added emphasis to this. The truth seems to be that very few indeed have gained any real conception of what a Christian really is, unless they gained it at church or through some wider ministry of the churches. Often, when asked whether they are Christians, adults will answer, "I hope so", or, "I try to be". Such answers were notably absent from the contemporary secondary school student. "Yes," "no," or "I don't know", are answers which reveal at least that they have not been entirely captivated by the heresy that Christianity is one long struggle to live up to impossible standards with the hope that in the end, if we try hard enough, a kindly father-figure will "pass" us. The idea that Christianity did in fact set standards was accepted, and that those who accept these standards as right are Christians. Whether or not Christians achieved these very high and difficult standards was another matter. The point at which they differed from many of their elders consisted in their readiness to admit that they did not necessarily hold to this Christian standard as being right. This represented an honesty and absence of ambiguity which many of their parents and elders might do well to ponder. "I don't know," or, "I do not accept this standard," are answers which

concede nothing to a desire to be well thought of implied in "I hope so".

With the exception of one school (already noticed) all those interviewed attributed the main influence in their religious lives (in so far as they had any) to their home and/or their church. That these should be prominent is not surprising in itself since the former is the natural cradle of faith and standards, and the latter is the appointed body for teaching and preaching the faith to those who will receive it. What proves disappointing, even alarming, is the exceedingly small number, limited to one school, who were able to say that their school had any influence in this direction at all. Even of these only some could ascribe to it their main influence. All those interviewed were in the fourteen to sixteen age group and had therefore benefited from three to five years of religious education. Relating these findings to those of experience among people who have left school since the late nineteen-forties, one is faced with the somewhat depressing fact that religious education in schools has not had any significant influence on the religious life and belief of the young people of our land.

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The vagueness and uncertainty already noted in respect of belief in God and the divine nature of Christ reaches its natural conclusion in the almost complete ignorance revealed concerning the distinctive redemptive nature of Christianity. As far as most understand it, the Christian religion is a matter of acceptance or rejection of a code of conduct, some version of which they have accepted or rejected as received mainly from their homes, sometimes from church, and only seldom from school. Doctrines concerning the nature of sin and its consequences, redemption, and grace, the Holy Spirit and His power, are a closed book, in most cases because they are subjects which have not been treated in class. To judge from the students it would appear that classroom Christianity has nothing of the supernatural or spiritual in its content. If it has, then it has not been conveyed to the members of the class.

The Cross, central to the Christian faith, meant little to all but the few exceptions. Although accepted as an historical fact, doubts concerning the divinity of our Lord deprived it of special significance of a spiritual nature and its personal meaning from them. The completely dispassionate way in which they were able to think of the life, death, and, in some cases, the resurrection of Jesus protected them from any sense of personal involvement in these events. Certainly without home influence or that of a church the knowledge of the biblical facts has no influence of itself upon the lives of these young people.

It is therefore not surprising that questions concerning the purpose of life received answers which ranged from the humanistic to the selfish, only seldom touching on a characteristically Christian view. Economic security was at the heart of most answers, with a few genuinely seeking a way of helping others, but usually only from humane motives. One or two would-be philosopher-scientists had comments about the nature of the universe and the discovery of further scientific truths. By this

they did not imply belief in God, although they did reveal an interesting dissatisfaction with what science and philosophy have so far provided. The tragedy is that religious education had failed to shew them that without Christ any basis of life is inadequate and unsatisfactory. The position would seem to be that most secondary school pupils leave without any really adequate purpose in life. Apart from looking after the immediate interests of themselves and theirs, life would appear to be approached in an aimless fashion. The desire for economic security fills the void left by unsatisfied spiritual need.

Many of the young children coming into our primary schools are the children of parents who have left school since the 1944 Act came into effect. It is to be feared that they have not the benefits of their parents in the guidance and influence of home. This is a vicious circle which will continue to tighten unless a means can be found of breaking it. It is obvious from experience among children of primary school age that they receive little or no specifically Christian guidance at home and a commensurate amount of encouragement in church attendance. This is the church's vital task in education.

One encouraging feature of this inquiry was the finding of a few who had a living, vital, personal faith in Christ. As this was almost always the result of contact with a live church or Christian organization, it tends to support the general findings of this study. In one case a schoolgirl had won her friend for Christ and both were unashamed to bear witness to their trust in their Saviour. Other contacts with the same class revealed the wider influence of these two. Faith and effective witness are possible at this age, and yield fine fruit.

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Places in church training colleges are being greatly increased as one of the church's chief methods of meeting the present problem. This is a good thing in itself, but will have little effect on the general situation unless these extra places, which take so much of the church's financial resources, are properly used. It would appear that, if they are but to extend the present system over a wider field, then little dividend can be expected in the shape of a decisive effect upon the students of our land. With only a few notable exceptions the church training colleges do not appear to have been of any significant spiritual help to student teachers passing through them. It would be a tragedy if all the present expansion were to shew no fruit in the changed lives of school children. Apart from the expansion of colleges something else is needed if the present situation is to be improved. There can be no doubt that the failures of the past twenty years are due not so much to the Act itself as to the practical use to which the opportunities which it affords have been put. This in turn resolves itself into the question of an adequate supply of teachers *of the right kind*.

The first need is to recognize the special qualities required in a Christian teacher, and more particularly the teacher of religious education, and to ensure the most careful selection. Here it is necessary to draw a distinction between the nominal Christian and the committed one. This is not a question of sincerity, the majority of religious education teachers are not lacking in this respect, though it must be

admitted that some are, even to the extent of being professed atheists. Accepting their sincerity, we may well find also that the difference lies not in matters of church attendance nor necessarily in moral standards. The real issue is that of personal religious experience of Jesus Christ. If any Christian is to be effective in reaching others with the Gospel and winning them not merely to an acceptance of Christian morality, but to a personal encounter with the Christ who redeems, they must themselves be people who have experienced such dealings with Him. Church colleges should be looking for candidates for whom Christ is a living reality, redemption a real experience, and the Holy Spirit a present power. In the face of the present situation the question must be asked whether this is in fact what they are looking for.

Not all will be young people with such qualities. The state cannot be expected to choose this kind of candidate for nomination to the places in church colleges reserved for them. Indeed the college itself will be hard put to it to find candidates of this quality to fill but a proportion of places. It must be assumed that the majority of students, even in a church college, will be either Christians only in a nominal sense or not at all. The college is therefore itself a field for evangelism. It must become so if the spirit of evangelism is to reach out into the schools of our land.

To what extent do teacher training colleges seek to evangelize their students? This inquiry did not investigate this matter directly. Indications are, however, that it is the exception rather than the rule in church colleges. Indeed the view has been expressed by more than one Christian student and is also held by some Christian lecturers that there are greater opportunities for evangelism in Local Authority colleges through the Christian Unions and similar organizations than there are in most church colleges.

Academic lectures in divinity and chapel services are naturally part of the life of the college, but they are not necessarily evangelistic unless consciously made so by staff and chaplains. Mr. Leslie Paul is right to emphasize the importance of college and university chaplaincies—and in the light of the present position in religious education there is a desperate need to reconsider the use to which they are put. Thousands of students, the majority without real Christian experience, pass through these colleges and present an unrivalled opportunity for the church to evangelize those who themselves can become evangelists in a vital sector of the church's ministry.

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This matter really begins in the churches of our land. It is to be feared that a large proportion of the young people who are within the fold of the church drift into spheres of work which are far below their capabilities and which offer comparatively little in the way of Christian service. With the challenge of the Gospel to full commitment to Christ there should come also the challenge of vocation. Involving, as it well may, much harder work in training and even the stretching of capabilities to the limit, the call to train as a teacher can come as a vocation to those who are willing to give themselves completely to Christ. Teaching is, of course, only one sphere of Christian service

and must compete with the claims of the ministry, medicine, welfare, and all the other possibilities, as well at home as overseas. If the message of the Gospel of redemption precedes the challenge of vocation as it should, there will be an increasing number of young people willing to serve Christ to the full, and teaching will benefit in both the quality and the number of those coming forward.

The passing out of an increased number of technically well qualified teachers is not the only need and will prove fruitless without the other qualities which we have seen are needed in teachers of religious education. However, assuming that these qualities are present, the academic qualifications are also of great importance. Unfortunately the qualifications of many of those who are at present teaching religious education do not appear to be very high. There appear to be few who have a degree in theology, even among heads of departments. A few more have a diploma of some kind, which is helpful, but the greater number have only the general divinity course of a training college behind them. Whilst personal faith and conviction can overcome deficiencies in this respect to a certain extent, what we have noted of the widespread lack of these essential elements in the teaching of so many only adds emphasis to this point. In some schools religious education is becoming the poor relation because of the lack of qualified teachers.

A combination of living faith in and experience of Christ as Saviour and God with high academic and technical qualifications is required of teachers of this, the most vital subject in schools. A teacher trained in another subject, having similar faith and experience, will be able to give welcome support in the school in many ways. It may be possible to help with the religious education, but just as important will be the Christian background in other subjects, co-operation with the extra-curricular group, and the presence on the staff of committed Christians who are not religious professionals.

Many of the teachers who have the qualities which are required are lost to the schools of this country. In answering the call to the overseas work of the church they do right, but leave our own schools the more impoverished. The position could be to a large extent restored, however, if these teachers who, in addition, have gained vital practical experience could be drawn into the training colleges to give aspiring teachers the benefits of their evangelistic zeal and practical experience. Surely returned missionaries are a providential source of recruitment to the staff of church colleges. It is not easy to avoid the conclusion that the educational world is anxious to escape any sort of challenge to its spiritually moribund condition and is not therefore particularly keen to make the fullest use of the best material available to it. The attitude of the education authorities and the church at home to returned missionary teachers is little short of scandalous. The knowledge of the treatment which they realize awaits them on their return to this country is a deterrent to the recruitment of teachers for missionary work well known to the missionary societies.

Anything which is done in the educational world, however, is but tinkering with the symptoms and not dealing with the root of the problem. This lies in the Church itself. The present situation in

religious education is neither the fault of the 1944 Education Act nor even due to the shortcomings of the Agreed Syllabus. The former offers unrivalled and unlimited opportunities and the latter is only an obstacle where it is allowed to be so. If we look deeply enough we find the real cause of the failure in religious education to be rooted in the Church's drift from all that is essentially Christian in what it proclaims. This tendency has snowballed in recent years until dignitaries of the Church and prominent academics can openly subvert the Christian Gospel without causing much more than a ripple in the Church generally. Those who do voice their opposition to this trend are labelled as being out of date, obscurantist, or worse. If the modern generation is to be won for Christianity it cannot be done by abandoning the essential nature of the Faith. Even if the erasing of all that is supernatural, redemptive, and revelational in Christianity did render it more acceptable to contemporary society (and there is no real evidence that it does) it would not in fact be Christianity, still less Christ, which is accepted.

If religious education is to become the power and influence which it could be in the personal lives of our young people, and the social life of our nation, the Church must cease this folly. When it returns to the true Gospel young people will experience changed lives through accepting Christ as Saviour and will seek to serve Him to the utmost of their God-given capabilities. There will be more Christian teachers, not only in name, but in reality. Training colleges will be vital places in the spiritual understanding and pilgrimage of many more, and the children in our schools will, through the religious education period and the extra-curricular group, be reached with the only true Gospel, God's remedy for sin, the only power available to change permanently the life of anyone.

When all else has been said, what is really needed is for young people to come to know and love the Lord Jesus. The doctrinal, biblical, and moral teaching involved in religious education rightly so called are but the proper means of achieving this end from the human point of view. The real worker of this miracle is the Holy Spirit, working through these means, but supremely through the life and witness of Christian teachers who themselves know Jesus and are under the control of the Spirit of God. All technical ability, professional ethics, subject matter, doctrine, and morality is lifeless without the Breath of God. When the Church has ministers who know and preach Christ, there will be aspirants to the teaching vocation who know Him and as a result there will be younger people who also come to know Him and hear Him calling them to experience salvation by Him and service for Him.