




Religion, Science and Truth in the School Curriculum


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 Newbigin.net page186

In June of last year the United States Supreme Court struck down an act of the Louisiana State Legislature which provided that 'creation-science' should be taught in the State schools alongside 'evolution-science'. The Legislature had claimed that by providing

 Newbigin.net page187

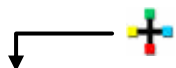
'balanced treatment' in the matter, it was promoting academic freedom. Two other cases concerning public education are also going through the US courts and are arousing immense public debate. A group of Christians in Greenville, Tennessee, filed a suit in court to the effect that a large number of the textbooks used to teach English in the public elementary schools contain material which violates their religious liberty. The judge in this case, judge Hull, has found in favour of the plaintiffs and consequently banned about 145 of the English readers currently in use. The list covers a literary spectrum running roughly from The Wizard of Oz to The Merchant of Venice. And in Mobile, Alabama, a group of Christians have successfully sued the local School Board on the ground that the books in use, mainly English readers but also books in other subjects, are teaching secular humanism; that secular humanism is, or is the functional equivalent of, a religion; and that since the compulsory teaching of religion in the public schools is a violation of the First Amendment, the School Board is guilty of this violation. The judge in this case, judge Hand, has also found for the plaintiffs. In all these cases powerful and well-financed bodies have been involved, huge amounts have been spent in legal proceedings, and reams of newsprint have been filled with comment. The Tennessee and Alabama cases have not yet reached the Supreme Court, but it is to be presumed that neither side will rest until they do.

These cases are liable to be regarded as a matter for laughter in this country. But they deserve more serious attention-an attention which they are receiving in the States. They raise issues which go to the heart of our present cultural malaise.

Take first the Louisiana verdict. 'Creation-science' undertakes to demonstrate by the canons of modern scientific method that the early chapters of Genesis provide a factually accurate account of the beginnings of the universe and of the human race. It is unlikely that its apologists

will win any Nobel prizes. But the grounds on which the Supreme Court has struck down the Balanced Treatment Act have nothing to do with the truth or otherwise of what is taught. They are twofold: firstly, that the act has as its primary purpose the promotion of a religious opinion, namely that 'a supernatural being created humankind', and is therefore in violation of the First Amendment; and secondly, that the claim of the Louisiana legislators that the act had a secular purpose (namely the promotion of academic freedom) was invalid. In fact, the Legislature had 'acted with the unconstitutional purpose of structuring the public school curriculum to make it compatible with a particular religious belief the "divine creation of man" '. The issue is thus not whether the things being taught are true or false; it is whether they are scientific or religious. If they are scientific they may be taught, whether true or false; if they are religious they may not be taught, whether true or false.

This immediately leads to the noose into which Judge Hand of

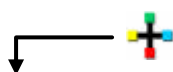


Alabama has inserted his judicial head. What is and what is not 'religion'? There is no question that the textbooks in use in the public schools of the United States, as anywhere, teach children a certain set of beliefs, a certain view about what is the case. And there are fairly reliable, non-partisan grounds for thinking that 'secular humanism' is not a bad description of this view. The US National Institute of Education recently commissioned Paul Vitz, Professor of Psychology at New York University, to make a study of the contents of school textbooks and basal readers. He and his team of assistants studied the material in the textbooks issued for grades one to six in the public schools by thirty-one leading publishers of school textbooks. Their research reveals what the authors call 'a pattern of censorship' which has eliminated almost all references to the role of religion in American history and in the human story generally.

It would take too long to document this. To give just a few examples: the fact can hardly be concealed that the first Pilgrims celebrated Thanksgiving Day, but the fact that they thanked God is eliminated. Even such apparently innocent phrases as 'Thank God' are replaced by 'Thank goodness'. The introduction of ice-hockey at Yale University is a significant event which earns a place in history; the fact that missionaries from the United States were working in every part of the world is not. Martin Luther King has a place, but there is no suggestion that he was a Christian pastor. In the forty social studies textbooks in the survey there is not a single reference to marriage, husbands or wives. And so one could go on. The Christians in Mobile, Alabama, do not have to be crazy fundamentalists (though some of them probably are) to sense that a particular view of human life is being communicated to their children, and that it is one they do not approve of. They call it 'scientific humanism', and they say it is in effect a religion which has replaced Christianity in the school textbooks. And Judge Hand agrees. I am sure the Supreme Court will not, but before they rule on the subject, let us follow the debate.

The chief witness for the plaintiffs is none other than the great liberal theologian Paul Tillich. If there is a place for such characters in heaven, he must have looked down from there into that Alabama court-house with astonishment. But did not Tillich teach us that religion is ultimate concern? Does it not follow that whatever is your ultimate concern is your religion? The ultimate concern of the writers of the textbooks is plain from their choice of material for exclusion from the American story. They are in fact teaching a religion and are thus in violation of the First Amendment.

For the defendants, the School Board, it is argued that religion requires a supreme transcendent being, and that since scientific humanism is not furnished with a supreme being it is not a religion but a world-view. In that case, of course, Buddhism is not a religion. And even if secular humanism is not a religion but a world-view,

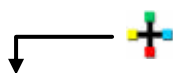


every religion is also a world-view, an account of what is the case. What then is the difference, the absolute distinction upon which the Supreme Court entirely relies, between science (the intellectual core of the 'scientific humanism' which the plaintiffs in Alabama are protesting) and religion? Both claim to be accounts of what is the case.

The answer will be, of course, that the one refers to what we know and the other to what some people believe. As one of the many journalists in the battle has written: 'The faith of the Enlightenment was a faith that believed it had transcended the need for faith ... Even the deistic wing of the Enlightenment regarded its affirmation of the existence of God not as an act of faith, but as an act of knowledge.' The God in whom every dollar bill affirms our trust is or rather was once-part of what we know. The debate produces some fascinating and unexpected alliances. Thus the plaintiffs, in claiming that secular humanism is a religion, put themselves alongside Marx who said that the real religion of the capitalist world is money. If they were successful this could lead to the demand that wherever capitalist economics is taught a course in Marxism should also be compulsory. And the defendants have in all probability long accepted in practice the functional definition of religion which they have to resist in the Alabama court.

But the mention of Marx reminds us that the boundary between science and religion is certainly not as clear as the Supreme Court requires for its purpose. Marx, we remember, made a sharp distinction between religion-which is not science but ideology, a system of ideas whose real origins are to be found by understanding the operation of the productive process-and his own system which was, as some Marxists still love to say, scientific. Marx's account of things was, he believed, not ideology but science. But the argument destroys itself. If the Marxist account of the origin of ideas is true, then Marxism is itself an ideology-and most Marxists today do not quarrel with that word. Similarly, if Freud's account of the origin of our conscious thoughts in the hidden dynamics of the subconscious is true, then there are no more grounds for believing the products of Freud's subconscious battles to be true than for believing anyone else's. The work of historians and philosophers of science has surely shown conclusively that the attempt to draw an absolute boundary between science as what we all know, and religion as what some of us believe, is futile. Both science and religion claim to give a true account of what is the case, and both involve faith-commitments. In this sense, the Alabama plaintiffs have a point.

In the list of best-selling non-fiction in the United States the two top places are (or were until recently) *Spycatcher* and the book by the Chicago academic Allan Bloom entitled *The Closing of the American Mind*. The latter is a devastatingly bleak account of the present state of the American academic world. The part I found most illuminating was the long central section in which Bloom analyses



the movements of thought which brought us to where we are. Most of the threads lead back to Nietzsche who was, says Bloom, the first to realize with terrible clarity that the operation of the modern critical scientific method must make it strictly impossible to assert of any proposition 'This is true,' or of any course of conduct 'That is right.' The critical principle 'must necessarily destroy all such pretensions. There is left only the will-the will to power. And, says Bloom, what has happened is that this truth has caught up with us, albeit in a kid-gloved form which conceals the brutal reality. We do not talk of right and wrong; we speak of values, lifestyles, orientations. We do not ask of a world-view: 'Is it true?' but 'Are you sincere?' We do not speak of grasping the truth, but of being an authentic person. In the caustic language of Newsweek, 'when questions of morality arise in public school classes, they are routinely processed like cheese into the individualistic jargon of humanistic psychology. Thus pupils are encouraged to discover their own

"identities" to learn how to express their true "selves", and to clarify their values'. All of this, Bloom would say, is just Nietzsche packed in cotton wool. The final revelation of where we are, says Bloom, is when even the Pope begins to talk about 'values'.

Here, I think, is at least part of the background for understanding these court cases. In one of the statements filed by the defendants (the School Board) in the Tennessee case, the Following sentences occur: 'The schools seek to teach students to be autonomous individuals, who can make their own judgments about moral questions. The schools believe that students should be able to evaluate and make judgments on their own, based on their experience and beliefs, not on those of their teachers.' On this the *Christian Century*, not noted as a cheerleader for the fundamentalists, comments: 'We take so much for granted the language of individual autonomy that it requires an effort to remember that there is another way of seeing the task of education, one involving exposure to a tradition representing accumulated (even divinely revealed) truth.' For my own part, in reading these words I was reminded of the opening sentence in the report of the Muslim representatives to a conference of educationists jointly sponsored by Cambridge University and a university in Saudi Arabia. The opening words of the Muslim statement were: 'The aim of education is to produce good men and women.' I was also reminded of a recent remark of a teacher in an English comprehensive school, who told a friend of mine that he now found it impossible to teach Milton to any of his pupils except the Muslims. For them there were still the concepts of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, heaven and hell; for the native English, no more. Milton was incomprehensible.

It is at this point that the nature of the distinction upon which the Supreme Court relies becomes clear. The teaching of science in our schools corresponds to the description just quoted from the *Christian Century*. It seeks to expose the children to a tradition representing

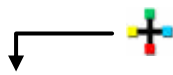
accumulated truth. The children are not left to find out for themselves how to do science. They are taught to understand and accept a tradition in which there are authoritative guides. If all goes well they will reach the point at which they can raise questions about the tradition, suggest changes, even make radical innovations. But they will be competent to do so only in the measure in which they have first submitted to the tradition, trusted its authorized guides and followed them.

One of the leading legal experts defending the School Board, David Remes, writes: 'Public education is not and cannot be an education that instructs children in the orthodoxy of their parents.' Maybe so, but it is certainly instructing children in something. It is telling them what kind of a world it is. There are other orthodoxies than those of southern fundamentalists, and the evidence of Professor Vitz's study suggests that it is the advocates of freedom who are exercising the censorship.

Our situation in Britain is not, of course, identical with that of the USA, but we share a great deal of the same culture. We do not have the First Amendment, but we have a very powerful educational lobby which considers it improper to teach children the Christian faith in public schools, and claims rather to offer (in the words of one syllabus for religious instruction) an objective and critical view of all the religious and non-religious stances for living. This programme, of course, conceals from the children's sight a whole range of assumptions on which such a critical view rests. It denies to the children the possibility of criticizing that. The facts about the world's religions can be taught because they form part of knowledge. It is a fact that people have religious beliefs. But the things which religious people believe are not facts. They may not be taught, because they are not knowledge but belief. The same dichotomy runs through our education, even without the fortification provided by the First Amendment.

On the other hand, we have a powerful lobby-composed mainly of parents-pleading for the recovery of 'values' in education. But what are these 'values'? Are they rooted in our understanding of the real world, of what is the case? If the real truth about human life is that it is

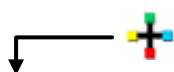
the accidental result of a ruthless process by which the strong survive and the weak die out, what kind of 'values' can be derived from this perception of reality? If, on the other hand, 'values' are something which middle-aged and middle-class people desire to have taught to their children because that makes life more agreeable for everyone, we are back at the place where Nietzsche said we were bound to arrive. We are not talking about truth, about what is actually the case; we are in the business of the will to power. 'Values' are what some people want. The only question is: whose will prevails? If we are not willing to accept this, we have to go back to the frontier between science and religion and ask: 'What are we teaching children to believe about the real world?'



When we ask that question, we are undermining the basis on which the decision of the Supreme Court rests: the absolute disjunction between science, which may be taught, and religion, which may not. Contemporary debates among biologists make it abundantly clear that there has not been, and there cannot be, a 'proof' that natural selection by the survival of the fittest among random mutations is a true account of the origins of life. Not only are there vast gaps in the evidence and huge unanswered questions, but (even to the untrained layman) it is obvious that teleological language constantly creeps into the writings of even those biologists most committed to the denial of purpose. When, for example, Darwin writes as follows: 'Natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing of every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good, silently and insensibly working at the improvement of every organic being' (Origin of Species, p. 83 1959 edn), it is obvious that he is talking about a supreme being with a highly moral purpose. But is this science or is it religion?

I am certainly not interested in defending 'creation-science' as an alternative to Darwinism. I am concerned to suggest that what these legal battles demonstrate is the untenability of an absolute dichotomy between science and religion, between a public world of 'facts' which provides the substance of the curriculum in the public schools, and a private world of 'beliefs' and 'values' which must be excluded from the curriculum. I am concerned to suggest that these legal battles are not a laughing matter, but are a symptom of breakdown in our culture, a breakdown at the fundamental point of epistemology, of the answer we must give to the question: 'How do you know?'

The same dichotomy is manifest in the domestic battles within the Church between fundamentalists and liberals. It is the issue with which Michael Polanyi was wrestling in his major writings, the breakdown of the connection between what one may call the objective and subjective poles in the human enterprise of knowing. Perhaps it goes back to Descartes, who usually gets the blame for these things. It is the false ideal of a kind of knowledge which is immune to doubt, which involves no faith-commitment on the part of the knower, in contrast to everything else about which we can only say 'I believe,' which means, 'I do not know.' In the field of Christian spirituality this leads to the dichotomy between a fundamentalism which wishes to affirm indubitable propositions about everything in earth and heaven, and a liberalism which sees the affirmations of religion merely as symbolic expressions of something which is at heart a purely inward, psychic experience. In fact fundamentalism and liberalism are twin children of the Enlightenment, Tweedledum and Tweedledee who have always agreed to have a battle but never agreed on anything else. It is not, as W. G. Pollard suggests in a recent article, a matter of reconstructing the



fragments ('arts and humanities') which are all that remain on this side of the wall that divides C. P. Snow's 'two cultures'. It is a matter of removing the wall and recovering the unity of human knowledge, of the endless and enchanting enterprise of discovering how things really are. The only place where we can attack the malaise of our culture as it is expressed in these distressing legal battles over the schools, is at the place where we ask about what it means to know, about epistemology.

Thousands of Christian parents in the USA are withdrawing their children from the public schools and setting up their own schools because they think that their children are being given a false account of the world and of human life. People who call themselves 'mainline' Christians dismiss them as fundamentalists and think that if the rest of us laugh long enough they will go away. They show no signs of doing so. What is needed is to attend to the real issue they are raising. You cannot add 'values' (even if free of VAT) to a curriculum that teaches a view of what is the case which provides no grounds for thinking that 'value' talk has anything to do with the 'facts'.

The Church exists as witness to certain beliefs about what is the case, about facts, not values. This view is excluded from the realm of public truth as taught to children in public schools. The authority for the Church's witness is God's revelation with its central point in Jesus Christ. (It is not-in spite of the Bishop of London-a resuscitated natural law.) When a theologian in our culture appeals to 'biblical authority' he is met with politely raised eyebrows. But unless there is some intellectually coherent way of affirming what we know of God's revelation of himself, we have no standing ground in the contemporary confusion about 'values'. And we shall not find such an intellectually coherent way apart from the tackling of the fundamental question of epistemology: 'How do we know?' I think that there are signs of an attempt to do this, but they are as yet small. Christians cannot evade this tough intellectual task if they are not to become irrelevant to the real world.

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