



The Place of Christianity in Religious Education

(89pcrc)

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

A paper written and presented in March 1989 in relation to the passage into law of the Education Reform Act (1988).

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.

The passage into law of the Education Reform Act (1988) has necessarily given a new impetus and new direction to the continuing debate among teachers, parents and the general public about the place of Religious Education in the state schools and about what its content ought to be. I suggest that the issues can be conveniently grouped under three heads (1) The debate about method, centering around such words as 'instruction', 'indoctrination' and 'confessional versus educational'; (2) The debate about content: what exactly is religion and why should it be part of the curriculum? (3) The inter-faith debate: should Christianity have a special place and, if so, why?

I

Teachers of RE frequently seek to distance themselves from the suggestion that they are 'indoctrinating' their pupils, or even 'instructing them'. To instruct children in the truths of religion is, they say, the business of churches, mosques and temples, not of schools. Children should be made aware of the religious dimension of human experience, as illustrated in the many religious traditions of the human family, but it would be improper for the teacher in a state school to use his or her authority to persuade children of the truth of one of these religions. Children must make their own decisions about what religious teaching they should follow.

Religion is thus handled in a manner quite different from that which operates in other disciplines. A teacher of physics is expected to believe the truth of what she is teaching and hopes that the children will also come to believe it. She will not, of course, be satisfied if the children simply believe it on her authority. Certainly the child will have to begin by accepting the authority of the teacher, but the teacher's aim is that the child should come to see it for himself. The teacher will not be satisfied with a syllabus which explores the scientific dimensions of human experience, illustrated by examples of the scientific beliefs of the people of the Solomon islands or ancient Egypt. She will teach what she believes to be true, and will hope that the children will come to understand and accept it as true. In proceeding thus, she will not feel that she is guilty of 'indoctrination'. But with the teaching of religion it is otherwise; we have to ask why.

The same debate is sometimes cast in the form of a contrast between a ‘confessional’ and a ‘critical’ approach. But this rests on misunderstanding. Criticism is an activity which presupposes ‘confession’. You cannot criticise any belief except on the basis of beliefs which, at that moment, you do not criticise. When a ‘critical’ approach is proposed as an alternative to a ‘confessional’ one, what is really happening is that one confession, one credo, is being used as the basis of a critical approach to another. One has to uncover the credo which lies concealed beneath the criticism. A teacher of physics may well draw attention to scientific theories which have a critical relation to the accepted teaching and may discuss the pros and cons in the debate between them. But the whole discussion will pre-suppose that there is truth to be established. The students will not be left to suppose that physics is a matter of private opinion.

Why then, does religion require a teaching method which is quite different from that which operates in the rest of the curriculum? That brings us to the second issue in the debate.

II

The idea that ‘religion’ is something quite apart from the shared life of human societies as a whole is one of the peculiar features of contemporary ‘western’ culture, setting it apart from the great majority of human cultures. It is “ something which has developed during the past three centuries and has resulted in the bifurcation of our culture into two parts: a public world of what are called ‘facts’, and a private world of what are called ‘values’. The roots of this development are complex, but are certainly partly to be found in the shift from a model of explanation which used purpose as a clue, to a model which excluded teleology and used cause as the sole clue. In the first model things are not truly understood without an understanding of their purpose. Now, it is only if we know the purpose for which a thing exists that we can judge whether it is good or bad. If we do not know the purpose it is just a ‘fact’ (in the modern sense of the word), a ‘value-free fact’. These ‘facts’ are the building blocks for our contemporary world-view and from them no ‘values’ can be deduced. ‘Values’ are a matter of personal preference; they have no ontological basis. Not very long ago, among the first things a child learned was that God is the source of all explanation, because he is the author of all that exists. To learn about God was as much ‘factual’ as to learn about physics. In the contemporary world-view, statements about God are not factual statements; they are symbolic ways of expressing personally chosen ‘values’. They cannot be taught as part of public truth.

I have spoken of this dichotomy between a public world of ‘facts’ and a private world of ‘values’ as the peculiar mark of our contemporary ‘western’ culture. We have recently been forcefully reminded by Muslim leaders in this country that they do not accept this view of things as truth. They complain that they are required to commit their children to an educational system which teaches as truth what they believe to be false. They are not, of course, here making any reference to what is called ‘RE’. They are referring to the curriculum as a whole, which teaches that the world is to be understood apart from the hypothesis of God, that ‘religion’ (whether Moslem or Christian or whatever) is a matter of private opinion, not a matter of truth. They justly complain of the arrogance of those who are so blinded by the assumptions of our culture that they cannot see that what they teach as ‘facts’ conceals a whole credo which a Muslim must reject. In my opinion Christians ought to have made this protest long ago. Now that it has been made it will not go away. Mere repetition of the standard language of ‘the modern world view’ will be quite useless. We shall have to come to terms with the question of truth. Whatever we do in schools, children are being taught to believe some things and to disbelieve others. The question “What is the truth’ cannot be permanently evaded.

What is to be said, then, of the role of Christianity in RE? In the contemporary culture, Christianity is one among a variety of religions. These all represent different varieties of the same thing, which is ‘religious experience’. We do not talk about ‘scientific experience’ because – although we know nothing about the physical world except through our experience of it – we are not interested in the experience itself, but in what it tells about the facts. For the reasons indicated in the previous section, religious studies take the opposite course. Religion is about ‘experience’,

not about 'what is the case'. This pervasive mental climate has deeply effected even the way theologians talk. It will be said that Moses had a religious experience rather than that God spoke to Moses. If 'experience' is what RE is about, then of course Christianity can be slotted in as just one among a large class.

In fact Christianity, like other religions, makes claims about what is the case, about facts. Fundamentally Christianity is an interpretation of world history, and therefore of the human person as an actor in world history. It thus has more in common with Marxism than with Buddhism, although – like Buddhism – it acknowledges reality beyond mere sense experience. If it is to be understood, it must be understood on its own terms and not as one of a class called 'religion'. The same is true of all the other world faiths. If it is taught as one of the 'varieties of religious experience', its truth-claim has already been set aside by another view of 'what is the case'.

Does this mean, then, that no one can do RE except by teaching the religion which one believes to be true? I do not think so. I have only had the experience of teaching Hinduism but I think what I learned in doing this can be generally applied. I tried to follow three rules. First, I did not conceal my own religious commitment, or pretend that I had a 'neutral objective' standpoint. There is no such standpoint. Second, I encouraged the pupils to immerse themselves in Hindu writings, suspending their critical judgement and trying to see how these writings were dealing with the problems that every human being has to wrestle with. Thirdly, and only after that, I encouraged them to discuss the issues raised and begin to form their own judgements. My own teaching experience is limited. Others must judge whether these suggestions are helpful. What is, I think, fundamental is that any teaching of religions must make it clear that religion is concerned with questions about truth, about what are the realities with which every human being has to deal. It is about facts, not about values. To concentrate on 'religious experience' would be like devoting all attention to one's spectacles while ignoring the text one is asked to read.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.