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Christian Thinking in Education Reconsidered

Amid growing interest in the question of what Christian influence on the whole curriculum, beyond the confines of religious education, might look like, attempts to define the proper relationship between theological and educational ideas are both topical and important. In two recent articles in this journal, both bearing the title 'Christian Thinking in Education', R.T. Allen¹ and Dieter Velten² have both sought to refine our understanding of this relationship and to offer responsible models of faith-discipline integration. Models adopted in this area have the potential to greatly hamper or to facilitate, to inhibit or to motivate our efforts at fruitful Christian involvement in educational discussion. In view of this, the aim of the present article is to probe the two models offered and to question their adequacy for the tasks in hand.

1. Defining the Dilemma

Allen and Velten both present their arguments in the context of a particular dilemma, and so a first item for examination is the way in which this dilemma has been defined. Both offer an attempt to steer between two extremes which they find equally unacceptable. One is a strict compatibilism which sees educational and theological thinking not only as logically distinct types of thinking, but as incommensurable, each appropriate to its own sphere but debarred from crossing the boundaries of that sphere. This, of course, makes talk of Christian education a category error, a kind of contradiction in terms. Such has been the approach of Professor P.H. Hirst³, whose position Allen sets out to oppose.⁴ While Velten at first gives the distinct impression that he himself might embrace such a position, with his early emphasis on the need to distinguish educational from theological thought, his dissatisfaction with such an approach becomes clear from the second section of his paper, where he states that:

'a sharp distinction between faith and education does not do justice to the unity of human

1 R.T. Allen, 'Christian Thinking in Education', *Spectrum* 25:1 (Spring 1993) pp. 17-24

2 Dieter Velten, 'Christian Thinking in Education', *Spectrum* 26:1 (Spring 1994) pp. 59-70.

3 Paul Hirst, 'Christian Education: A Contradiction in Terms?' in *Faith and Thought* 99:1 (October 1971) pp. 43-54.

4 Allen, op. cit. p. 17.

personhood. There is no absolute distinction between the various areas of life and aspects of reality. All stand in relationship to one another. Education must also take this into account.⁵

Clearly, if opposition to Hirst's denial of a vital relationship between Christian and educational thought is to move beyond mere counter-assertion, there needs to be a defensible definition of the kinds of relationship which do hold between the two fields. This is what both Allen and Velten attempt, but they do so in reaction not only to a Hirstian position, but also in opposition to a definition of the relationship which they do not find defensible. This may be briefly characterised as a position which sees the Bible as a sufficient foundation from which educational methods and contents may be deduced. Allen compares this to an Islamic view of religion as a 'code' containing detailed cultural prescriptions and argues that Christian faith is not of this nature, offering instead some general metaphysical principles⁶; Velten terms the rejected approach 'pious rationalism'⁷, arguing that it simply presents human ideas in pious, quasi-biblical garb and does violence to the proper function and scope of the Scriptures. The dilemma is thus between all and nothing – does the Bible provide everything or influence nothing?

Both writers' rejections of this second horn of the dilemma seem to me to be somewhat less satisfactory than is the case with the first. For Allen, if Scylla is clearly identified as Professor P.H. Hirst, Charybdis is a little more shadowy – 'many of the North American school of Dutch Reformed provenance' and 'books by Wedge Publishing Co., Toronto, and Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Ill.'⁸. Mention of a continent, a denomination, and two publishing houses would seem to leave open a variety of theoretical options. If my understanding of Allen's position as outlined below is correct, I find this attack a little puzzling. Is there such a fundamental difference between Allen's filter of commendations and debarments and, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff's

5 Velten, op. cit., p. 63.

6 Allen, op. cit., p.17.

7 Velten, op. cit., p.63. The approach attacked, insofar as it is identifiable, seems to be that which has elsewhere been termed 'reconstructionalist' or 'hard-presuppositionalist'. For the former, see Ronald R. Nelson, 'Faith-Discipline Integration: Compatibilist, Reconstructionalist, and Transformationalist Strategies' in Harold Heie and David L. Wolfe (eds.), *The Reality of Christian Learning : Strategies for Faith-Discipline Integration* (Grand rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) pp. 317 - 339; for the latter, see John G. Shortt, *Towards a Reformed Epistemology and its Educational Significance*, Ph. D. Thesis, University of London Institute of Education, 1991, chapter 5.

8 Allen, op. cit., p. 18, text and footnote 4.

‘control beliefs’⁹, which are likewise expounded in a context of denying the propriety or possibility of simply deducing logically from a base of Biblical statements? what of Roy Clouser’s similar rejection of what he terms the ‘encyclopedic assumption’ of ‘fundamentalism’ in favour of the operation of a more high-level filter, which he presents as standing firmly within a Dooyeweerdian tradition?¹⁰ It seems that many of those identified as Allen’s opponents share his rejection of a purely deductive approach.

Velten does not identify any specific opponents¹¹, but bases his opposition to attempts to ‘derive the subject disciplines from the Bible’¹² on hermeneutical consideration – the Bible has an ‘eschatological’ focus.¹³ The Bible is said to be ‘not about chemistry, geography, grammar or industrial arts; rather it is about the question of how a broken relationship of man with God can be healed again,’¹⁴ containing ‘the answer which I need to be saved’ rather than the answers to any other questions.¹⁵ The Bible is ‘as little a textbook for geography or history as it is an historical novel’.¹⁶

The last comment is undoubtedly accurate and refers to an important and frequently discussed aspect of the Bible. However, the way in which Velten frames the issue begs questions. The Bible contains the answer which I need to be saved, but also a great deal of information about how I am to view and interact with the world once I am saved.¹⁷ Moreover, the advent of salvation is not something restricted to a personal, private sphere. My healed relationship with God is not something separate from the ways in which I understand and act in God’s world. In other words, to point out the redemptive

9 See Nicholas Wofterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

10 Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991) pp. 94-101, and, for the relation to Dooyeweerd, p. xi.

11 In view of his characterisation of the position attacked as one in which ‘Biblical references should be substantiated scientifically and scientific ones grounded in the Bible’ (p. 64), one might suspect ‘creation science’ as a sample target; however, his later opposition to ‘the theory of evolution as a refutation of the Biblical account of creation’ seems to run counter to this.

12 Velten, op. cit., p. 63

13 *ibid.* p. 61.

14 *ibid.* p. 31.

15 *ibid.* p. 64.

16 *ibid.* p. 63

17 Velten’s choice of sample scriptures seems to cloud this issue further; if, say, Proverbs 13:24 had been chosen, rather than Roman 3:28, the claimed disjunction between ‘eschatological’ scriptural statements and ‘ethical’ educational ones might have seemed less immediately obvious.

focus of Scripture does not of itself exclude Scripture having implications for other aspects of life, unless the scope of redemption is restricted to private, personal piety. As Frame comments:

‘The fact that Scripture has a redemptive focus gives us a rough-and-ready guide, a general rule, as to what we should expect to find in Scripture. But this focus does not answer all detailed questions about Scripture’s contents: it does not make exegesis unnecessary; it does not immunize us against the power of God’s Word to surprise.’¹⁸

Velten does, of course, move on to argue that Christian thinking does have implications for other areas of life; the point here is that the way in which he frames the hermeneutical issue seems to be in some tension with these later efforts to bridge the gap.¹⁹

The question which emerges from the issues addressed by Allen and Velten may be expressed thus: given that the Bible presents a particular perspective on (all of) reality, and that straightforward deduction from the Bible to educational contents seems inappropriate, what is the appropriate way of relating beliefs derived from it to Christian educational beliefs and practices?

2. Allen: Filter not Pump

Allen argues that if attempts to deduce specific educational practice or curriculum content from Christian beliefs are misguided, then so are attempts to deny any relevance to Christianity because of the impossibility of such a deductive approach. The proper relations between Christian belief and education are rather:

- ‘1. debarment whereby practices are disallowed;
2. permission, whereby they are not required nor debarred but are allowed;
3. commendation, whereby it is required that some of a set of practices be adopted but

18 John N. Frame. ‘Rationality and Scripture’, p. 297, in Hendrik Hart, Johan Van Der Hoeven and Nicholas Wolterstorff(eds.), *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition* (Lanham, N.Y.: University Press of America) pp. 293-317.

19 C.f. James Olthuis, ‘Towards a Certitudinal Hermeneutic’ in John Kraay and Anthony Tol (eds.) *Hearing and Doing – Philosophical Essays Dedicated to H. Evan Runner* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979) pp. 65-85: ‘If we – at the beginning – conceive of the Scriptures as a ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ word to the heart supplementary to or even over against the ordinary, ‘natural’ creational word to the body, it becomes problematic to integrally relate the two.’ (p. 71).

which ones of that set are left to choice.²⁰

This means that Christian beliefs are to operate as a selective filter, not a generative pump. Since Christianity, not being a Code, has few requirements and prohibitions, and since our culture contains fewer objectionable elements than some, the results of the application of Christian beliefs may look like RE plus a secular curriculum. It would, however, not be correct to understand it in these terms since a Christian filter is being applied, however unobtrusively. Allen goes on to propose nine beliefs which should form part of the filter, and concludes with the suggestion that a Christian re-orientation of education will proceed mostly in informal ways. Allen's account raises the following questions.

2.1. How Noticeable Should Christian Thinking be?

Firstly, I am a little puzzled by an apparent tension. On page 19, Allen seems at pains to defend a filter which has to do very little in the current climate, i.e. which leads to minimal changes in the non-RE curriculum. He states:

'It may then appear that metaphysical principles are idle and superfluous, for they often seem to do nothing.'²¹

and adds:

'a Christian education will not include those practices which are incompatible with the faith. In Europe there may appear now to be none. If so, then a Christian and a sensible secular curriculum will largely coincide.'²²

Later in the article, however, the tension between 'a Christian and a sensible secular curriculum' seems to grow by comparison with the earlier discussion. Thus on page 21 we find a call to oppose 'the ruling orthodoxy of Hirst and Peters', while on page 23 we are warned against 'the subjectivisms and relativisms and the autistic nonsense of child-centred education which have wrecked so many of our state schools'. These would seem to be fairly major objections to contemporary education, and they cannot be restricted to the level of general educational principle; as Allen himself notes, they have far-

20 Allen, op. cit., p. 18

21 ibid. p. 19.

22 ibid. p. 20.

reaching implications for the choice and organisation of educational practices.²³ This leaves a question: how noticeable or radical would Allen expect a Christian reorientation to be?²⁴

Two of the comments quoted above point to a second, related tension. Allen appears to employ the device of excluding child-centred education from 'a sensible secular curriculum' by declaring it to be 'nonsense'. This surely begs the question: sensible to whom? Sensible to the board of the Hindu university mentioned on page 19? Sensible to one committed to relativistic humanism? Could it be that 'sensible' as used here means something like 'compatible with my beliefs', and therefore, in this case, 'compatible with Christian beliefs'? I find this impression hard to avoid. This would obviously lead to the circular argument that a Christian curriculum will largely coincide with the kind of secular curriculum which is compatible with Christian beliefs, or which a Christian would find 'sensible'. This is true, but not very helpful. If the basis of reorientation is Christian belief rather than 'common sense', this should be stated, and may lead to a more aggressive approach.

The point of highlighting these two tensions within Allen's argument is to question quite how passive we can afford to be with regard to a contemporary secular curriculum. 'Sensible' begs too many epistemological questions to serve as a criterion for acceptance; indeed Allen, in elaborating on his filter, offers a number of criteria based more explicitly on Christian belief. The comments which I have made so far do not touch on the validity of Allen's central argument for his filter model, but rather suggest that it may have to be applied more vigorously (and therefore may be rather more threatening to the secular-curriculum-plus-R.E. status quo) than he seems at times prepared to countenance. I would now like to move on to question the filter model itself.

2.2 Is the Filter Model Adequate?

The statement which sets up this guiding metaphor is found on page 19:

'Our Christian beliefs should act, not so much as a pump, pushing fuel into an engine, but more as a filter, letting through what is clean and keeping out what is impure. That is, we should abandon the deductive model and follow a selective approach.'

23 *ibid.* pp. 21, 24

24 Here the question ought to be faced of whether part of the reason why Allen can contemplate a relatively passive approach lies in more active, generative efforts by Christians in our past history. A certain amount of current 'secular' practice has its roots in past Christian contributions. If, as at times in the past, the Christian is faced with options none of which seems to be entirely acceptable, she will need more than a filter.

From what follows in Allen's article it is clear that the deductive approach is, however, only abandoned at the level of choosing concrete educational contents and practices. For the filter, as outlined on pages 21-24, consists not so much of Christian beliefs per se as of deductions from those beliefs which are then applied to education. Thus, for example, Allen moves from 'Christian anthropology' to the inclusion of PE²⁵, argues that 'Respect for Creation and its diversities should lead us to expect there not to be but one pattern ...'²⁶ and states: 'God likes diversity... Consequently we must definitely think in terms of diversity of provision. . .'²⁷ The last statement in particular is clearly couched in deductive terms, and is neither self-evident ('sensible') nor an article of Christian faith, but rather a belief about education deduced from a Christian belief (deduced in turn from the Scriptures). It thus appears to be Allen's position, despite his earlier comments, that the deductive model does operate, but only at a high level of general principle, not at the lower level of concrete practice. This puts some strain on the metaphor chosen, as the pump seems to be generating the filter. Allen's initial argument is that Christian beliefs should not be viewed as operating deductively in education, but rather selectively by 'permitting and commending'. What his subsequent comments seem to suggest is rather that general Christian educational principles should be deduced from (are required by) Christian belief, but that these principles then operate in the filter-like manner described. The more this set of principles is expanded and restated in relation to specific contexts and problems, the greater will be the generative role of Christian belief.

As suggested above, this raises problems with Allen's rejection of other positions. For example, Allen writes:

'Whereas Hirst denied that there can be a Christian mathematics, some of them say that there is. But the examples they cite are forced and artificial, and have nothing to do with mathematics itself. They concern either philosophical theories about mathematics or the moral, and not the mathematical, aspects of problems set'²⁸

But is this kind of approach not correct if we are in fact to deduce high-level consequences from Christian belief in order to use them as an educational filter? Surely in this case the philosophy of mathematics and of mathematics education are precisely the areas where a Christian influence might be conceivable. The assertion that

25 *ibid.* p. 21.

26 *ibid.* p.23.

27 *ibid.* p. 23.

28 *ibid.* p. 18.

philosophical theories of mathematics have nothing to do with mathematics itself is an odd one. Such theories and perspectives certainly have a great deal to do with the content and organisation of mathematics curricula, and with how mathematics is perceived and used by pupils.²⁹

This brings us once more to the key issue – how will concrete practice be affected by Christian belief (mediated through Christian educational principles)? Allen speaks in his conclusion of a more generally focused ‘reorientation’ of the curriculum:

‘My conclusion is that, as Christianity is not a Code, there cannot be one, universal and uniform scheme of Christian education, but there will be many, each appropriate to its own pupils and their milieu. In some cases they may not obviously differ in their broad content, apart from Christian RE.... from other schemes. Yet beyond being appropriate to our place in a world, which is not closed, they will be open to the God who created and redeemed it, and to our destiny and fulfilment beyond it. Christian education... will therefore select the best of human practices, and exclude whatever is not good, and add to them its own re-orientation of human life. I suggest that ... a Christian education will accomplish that re-orientation more by informal than by formal means.’³⁰

The difficulty with this conclusion is that this more comprehensive and pervasive ‘re-orientation’ seems to be added as an afterthought after the content and organisation of the formal curriculum has been dealt with by means of the more negative selective filter, i.e. it seems to be added to an already complete curriculum, which deny it any relevance for the design and organisation of that curriculum. The further restriction to ‘informal means’ (unspecified – presumably the general ethos and witness of teachers’ lives (?)) compounds this impression.

Perhaps part of the difficulty which Allen seems to have in relating a Christian re-orientation to the formal curriculum comes from a focus on individual practices or contents rather than their interrelations and configurations within a curriculum. Allen is quite correct to point out that general educational principles (Christian or not) do not lead by a single chain of linear deduction to an invariant set of educational contents or practices; he also correctly identifies some mechanisms by which they can place restraints on the range of practices and contents chosen. What receives less attention in his account is the way in which such principles will guide the organisation and sequencing of practices and contents into curricular wholes which tell a certain story

29 For a helpful overview of the effects on mathematics teaching of different philosophical stances, see Paul Ernest, *The Philosophy of Mathematics Education* (Basingstoke: Falmer Press, 1991) pp. 138-139.

30 *ibid.* p. 24.

about reality.³¹ A rationalist curriculum is no more likely to be uniform across different contexts or schools than a Christian one,³² but it is likely to be identifiable by its assumptions and by the way in which those assumptions are embodied in the organisation of curricular content and combination of educational approaches, through the messages which are explicit, implicit or absent in the overall shape as well as the detailed content of the curriculum. Allen is correct to point out that Christian belief does not require the study of a specific style of art. It may, however, govern our approach to, treatment of, or understanding of certain styles and movements within art. Thus while the specific curriculum content may be open to variation within bounds (e.g. pornographic art may well be excluded), the way of tackling and arranging that content may be 'identifiably Christian'. The cultural specifics which form the context and potential content of curriculum are not identified with the curriculum itself, in which they are selected, arranged and presented in order to convey certain explicit or implicit messages. In this way high-level beliefs, whether they be those of Professor Hirst, of child-centred education, or of Dutch Reformed Christians may have a considerable influence on concrete classroom practice in terms of how curriculum content is configured, understood and mediated to pupils.³³

In the light of this, perhaps a fourth relation of Christian belief to education could be added to Allen's three (debarment, permission and commendation), detailed above:

4. recombination, whereby it is required that practices are selected and organised in such a way as to tell a certain story about reality, but which practices and contents are to be chosen in a given context is not specified.

This restores a positive, generative role for Christian belief, and for creativity rooted in that belief, without returning to a model of linear deduction which fails to account for the lack of uniformity in Christian education. It also points to a weakening of the divide between an informal/ethical reorientation of the curriculum and a more formal/worldview-based one. If we as Christians wish to orient our teaching towards an idea of

31 As Wright notes, worldviews 'are that through which, not at which, a society or an individual normally looks; they form the grid according to which humans organise reality, not bits of reality that offer themselves for organisation.' N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992) p. 125.

32 Shortt makes this point contra Hirst in Shortt, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

33 For an account of how a re-organisation of material can communicate a very different view of the world to pupils in a biology class, see Mark Roques, *Curriculum Unmasked – Towards a Christian Understanding of Education* (Eastbourne: Monarch, 1989) pp. 161-164.

justice,³⁴ this will need to be reflected in the structure and content of our curriculum. If we wish to teach cooperation, we will need to be aware that there are ways of organising a classroom, presenting material and carrying out assessment which are more likely to foster competition.³⁵ There are ways of teaching in a language classroom which are more likely than others to lead to truth-telling.³⁶

Complaints about gender-bias, racism and class-bias in teaching materials over the last few decades have been drawing our attention to the fact that teaching materials tell a story which can come to be viewed as normative.³⁷ Christian education is thus not Christian because the material which it uses is all in the Bible or exclusive to Christianity, but because of what it seeks to do with its material and what interpretation of it it seeks to convey. Given that Allen allows for a generative role for Christian belief at the level of general principle, and that general principles have wide-ranging implications if followed through thoroughly in practice, it seems premature to conclude that no generative thread runs from Christian belief to classroom practice or that Christian contributions will be largely invisible.

3. Velten: Filter, Transformation, Incarnation

Velten's account, while displaying many similarities with that of Allen, seeks to move beyond both a deductive model and a filter model. Having rejected the former, he does advocate a filter model as part of the answer. He points out (with Allen) that the construction of a curriculum must take account not only of theoretical factors but of context (the child's background, experiences and aptitude, cultural and economic factors, etc.). These other factors must, however, be weighed against a set of values when determining curricular goals and contents: 'Cultural offerings must go through the filter

34 C.f. Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Teaching for Justice' in Joel A Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps (eds.), *Making Higher Education Christian; The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America* (St Paul/Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1987) pp. 201-216.

35 See David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson and Edythe Johnson, *Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom* (Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co., 1986) and the discussion of its ideas in Ronald Takalo, 'Teaching Spanish as a Christian: The Road that was Taken', in *Language in God's World*, No. 11 (May, 1994) pp. 38.

36 See Patricia Myhren, 'The Nature and Role of Personalized Questions in the Foreign Language Classroom', *North American Association of Christian Foreign Language and Literature Faculty Proceedings Journal*, Volume 1 (1991) pp. 132-143.

37 The very RE/secular curriculum divide, of course, tells a story about the relation of faith to reality which many find unacceptable.

of Christian thinking and be proven against Christian standards.³⁸ Velten does not describe this filter process with as much clarity or detail as Allen, but something like Allen's account seems to be intended. However,

'The filter of Christian thinking is important for education but does not suffice. Education from this standpoint remains reactionary and defensive. That is, however, too little for a Christian-oriented education that carries great possibilities within itself for offensive power.'³⁹

Velten thus seeks to tackle the question which we have seen Allen's paper begging: how might a more positive Christian approach be conceived?

Velten's answer centres on the idea of 'transformation', illustrated with reference to Christ's incarnation. God

'did not create a new mankind in the secure immunity and distance of heaven from sin. He came into this world, became a person like us, ... He gave Himself up to this world. In this act lies the decisive impulse for the renewal of man's life.'⁴⁰

This forms a pattern for our interaction with education. We are not to sidestep existing educational practice and seek to invent a new, pure, safe version *ex nihilo*; we are rather to enter into existing educational thinking and renew it from within, taking existing educational practices and concepts and endowing them with new connotations as they are 'filled with biblical contents'.⁴¹ Thus, in one example given, Christians can accept and work with the idea that education is for freedom, but must nevertheless work with a particular concept of freedom which does not associate it with autonomy. In this way,

'Biblical standards and contents... no longer work simply as a filter, but as a motor and impulse.'⁴²

The rejection of a purely defensive role for Christianity in education is welcome, and the incarnation analogy is helpful in moving beyond a purely formal model to one which explicitly recognises that God works not only through his words but through his people,

38 Velten, op. cit., p. 65

39 *ibid.* p. 66.

40 *ibid.* pp. 66-67.

41 *ibid.* pp. 66.

42 *ibid.* pp. 66.

and that their efforts to live in faithfulness to him involve creative interaction with the world in which they live, not just the methodical application of a set of rules or principles. This is one reason why a focus on pure deduction misses the mark. Biblical concepts are as much to be worked *with* and looked *through* as to be deduced *from*. However, the need to relate Christian *beliefs* to education remains if any given efforts are to be recognised as Christian. Thus Velten's examples show him deducing certain principles from the Bible (specific understandings of man, of freedom, of performance, worth and justification etc.) and applying these to education. Here we are left with something similar to Allen's account as analysed above, i.e. a movement from the Bible to education via general Christian educational ideas. Velten edges closer than Allen to the detailed content and method of the curriculum,⁴³ although most of his examples still skirt the edge of the formal curriculum; he stops short in his examples of the kind of reorganisation of curriculum content suggested above as an expansion of Allen's account.⁴⁴

4. Concluding Comments

Having examined the contributions of both writers and suggested some avenues which need to be pursued further, a few general observations seem appropriate.

Firstly, general attacks on attempts to deduce detailed subject content from the Bible can be misleading and lapse into stereotypes. Even those who are most vehement in their emphasis on the importance of the Bible being the foundation of education do not generally mean, for example, that only the geography of the Middle East and the history of Israel or the church should be taught. They rather intend that the data gained through study of the world should be organised and interpreted in the light of a Biblically

43 'By a normative didactic we understand a system that proceeds from the highest pre-pedagogical norms over people and their position in the world, extracting educational goals out of those norms and, finally, deriving the contents of education and methods as well as educational forms from them. An interlocking chain of deduction results from this, which says how educational reality will look.' (ibid. p. 65) This leaves the question of the relationship between the Bible's authority and that of the other sources of the 'interlocking chain of deduction'; Velten's account suggests that the Bible does have a pre-eminent place and should be the basis of transforming other ideas.

44 Even when we get into specific curriculum areas, such as science, the examples reflect the addition of occasional comments ('How wonderfully God made everything') and the disallowing of certain contents (evolution) rather than a more radical reorganisation of curriculum content (p. 70). Perhaps a fear of lapsing into 'pious rationalism' has inhibited the development of a more robust application of the idea of 'transformation' along the lines which I have suggested above.

directed view of reality.⁴⁵ Perhaps the real point at issue here is that the rhetoric of some writers is misleading when compared with the actual practice advocated. The question, then, for them as well as for Velten and Allen, is not whether or not all of the raw content of education can be derived from the Bible, but in what way the Bible is authoritative with regard to the handling of information derived from other sources and how that information is to be structured and used to make up what we call 'education'.

Secondly, a reaction against the perceived attempt to derive the building blocks of the curriculum from the Bible seems to lead both Allen and Velten into a wariness of emphasising the Bible's possible influence in the content of the formal curriculum. It is not simply the atomistic pieces of information in the curriculum which educate, but the way in which they are put together and delivered and interpreted, the implicit and explicit story which the overall pattern tells about the world. To view the Bible as the foundation is not the same as to view it as providing all the bricks for the building;⁴⁶ and the same bricks can be used to build a house of worship or a tower of Babel. It might be possible to go further and suggest that facts and statements could take on a different significance according to the whole within which they take their place.⁴⁷ The issue is not whether a Christian curriculum teaches about a different world, but whether a curriculum can communicate a worldview.

This broadening of focus allows a more generative role for Christian faith in education. Given the nature of the redemptive message applied to us as persons, which is specifically said not to be to do with negative rules and regulations,⁴⁸ it would seem on the face of it to be odd if its effects on our public behaviour (here, education) were

45 Compare Stephen Perks, who, as the leading U.K exponent of 'Christian Reconstruction' might be taken as an example of the kind of view which Allen and Velten think they are opposing: 'Generally speaking – though perhaps with the exception of 'religious knowledge' – the non-believer will teach the same subjects and the same facts that the Christian teaches, but he will attempt to fit them into a view of reality which denies the existence of the God of Scripture and which seeks to explain all things in terms of that world-view.' see Stephen C. Perks, *The Christian Philosophy of Education Explained* (Whitby: Avant Books, 1992) p. 27.

46 The 'foundation' need not be conceived in terms of a mathematical model of a set of axioms from which to deduce; it may be viewed as that which provides an integrating framework or perspective. This perspective may still be viewed as 'foundational' in underpinning and guiding the whole.

47 This also renders less urgent the question of whether a practice can be said to be Christian if it can also be derived from other sets of beliefs. That worldviews overlap does not mean that they cannot be distinguished or that a given practice may not be the product of one of them, and find its significance within one of them, in a given instance.

48 See Colossians 2:20-22.

largely a matter of ruling out certain options. Perhaps Allen's insistence that Christian belief, not being a Code, 'has few requirements and prohibitions and many permissions'⁴⁹ may be overstated or at least misleading. What if its few requirements are in fact all-embracing in scope? I am of course thinking of examples such as 1 Corinthians 10:31 ('whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God') or 2 Corinthians 10:5 ('we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ'). If all things are to be approached with the glory of God as our conscious goal, perhaps it is not appropriate to suggest that because Christian belief does not require a single set of cultural and educational practices then it can be viewed in a more passive role of selecting among existing alternatives. Attempts to find a distinctive Christian approach to curriculum are rooted in a desire for a conscious orientation of all curriculum areas towards the glory of God, rather than a belief that Scripture contains detailed regulations for all curriculum contents. Part of the difficulty may be that this will often involve judgements which are more aesthetic or intuitive than logical. This is to be expected if worldviews are primarily lenses with which we look at the world rather than premises for deductive systems. What we need is not a blueprint but a sense of meaning and direction which will be clear enough to guide our efforts.⁵⁰ Thus Wolterstorff argues that:

'Control beliefs function in two ways. Because we hold them, we are led to reject certain sorts of theories – some because they are inconsistent with those beliefs; others because, though consistent with our control beliefs, they do not comport well with those beliefs. On the other hand control beliefs also lead us to devise theories. We want theories that are consistent with our control beliefs. Or, to put it more stringently, we want theories which comport well with those beliefs.'⁵¹

A recent suggestion from another writer, N.T. Wright, concerning the nature of Biblical authority, may help to illuminate what the notion of 'comporting well' might entail:

49 Allen, op. cit., p. 19.

50 C.f. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision-Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984) p. 151: 'Societies are dynamic; blueprints are static. A Christian cultural witness is long-term; blue-prints are short-term. Cultures are organic; blue-prints are mechanical'. C.f. also Berkouwer's comment: 'the gospel, heard and accepted, is not being carried along as a rigid and erratic block, just as the people of Israel – certainly from a desire for continuity – took the bones of Joseph with them from Egypt. It is a living thing with its own dynamic.' G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) p. 300.

51 Wolterstorff, 1984, pp. 67-68

‘Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play, most of whose fifth act has been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearean actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.’⁵²

This illustration seems to have a number of merits in relation to our present discussion. It makes allowance for the concerns raised by Allen and Velten with regard to viewing Christianity as a code, entailing one and only one set of practices, or crediting human ideas to God, claiming his authority for the fruit of human invention. It allows for different (yet perhaps equally faithful) performances for different audiences and in different theatres, thus making room for the fact that the same principles will have different practical outworkings in different educational contexts. An accurate idea of the intended audience becomes important. If the task were attempted by several theatre companies simultaneously, we could expect variety in the results; it might not, however, be a matter of general agreement which was the most appropriate or faithful.

It also allows for active development which is creative and for Velten’s incarnational emphasis.⁵³ The actors are not simply passive functionaries following a detailed set of instructions – they are exercising – indeed stretching–their human faculties and taking responsibility for what they create:

‘the initial task of the actors ... will be to immerse themselves with full sympathy in the first four acts, but not merely so as to parrot what has already been said. They cannot go and look up the right answers. Nor can they simply imitate the kinds of things that their particular character did in the early acts. A good fifth act will show a proper final development, not merely a repetition, of what went before.’⁵⁴

52 N.T. Wright, op. cit, p. 140. See also by the same author ‘How can the Bible be Authoritative’, in *Vox Evangelica*, 21 (1991), pp. 7-32. His suggestion is made with reference to church life and the doing of New Testament theology, but it be equally relevant to efforts to develop Christian education. In what follows I am basically following and applying Wright’s own account of the implications of his model.

53 This model, like all others, obviously has its weaknesses. One, in relation to the idea of incarnation, is that it cannot reflect the role of the Holy Spirit. Christians do not merely work with a text but are worked in and through by its author.

54 Wright, 1992, p. 141.

Our role as Christians in education is surely not to unthinkingly implement a blueprint, but to seek creatively and responsibly to create something which honours God and reflects something of God. This is a part of our calling as human beings, and derivatively as educators, which is not to function as automata, but to image God in our works in the world.⁵⁵ Christianity is not simply a static picture of reality, but an account (among other things) of man's rightful tasks in a world which is moving towards a conclusion. Obedience in specific circumstances is not described in detail in advance, but requires faith and careful listening. One reason why the results are not uniform is human sin; there is no safe process of deduction by which we can transfer infallibility from the Scriptures to our attempts in an educational sphere to live in the light of their authority. To extend the illustration, if the actors come to the performance steeped more in contemporary ways of thinking and seeing than in those characteristics of the play and its author, or if the limitations of their own abilities and motivations lead to misunderstandings or ideas imperfectly executed, the fifth act is likely to lose out in terms of coherence with the first four. Our Christian contributions to education presuppose a good deal of renewal of our own thought processes, and will remain fallible and open to review and criticism.

At the same time, the creativity implied is not autonomous or unbounded. There are still public criteria by which the results could be criticised as being inconsistent, improbable or out of key in relation to the first four acts of the play. This will form a key part of discussions among the actors themselves, and is likely to feature heavily in the comments of the critics when the play is staged. The question of whether Christian education can be shown to be genuinely Christian is not, then, brushed aside by the emphasis on creativity. The way in which the authority of the existing acts (representing the Bible) operates is clearly complex, but would certainly include the four relations discussed above (debarment, permission, commendation, recombination) as well as, in a limited role, requirement – it is quite conceivable that some things will be clearly required by the earlier acts and not open to variation. The final judgement on the final act produced will involve more than logical evaluations: 'there will be a rightness, a fittingness, about certain actions and speeches, about certain final moves in the drama.'⁵⁶ Christian education, likewise, will be recognisable by its spirit, not separately from but as reflected in and through its practices, its story about reality.

Finally, the model seems to me to have the merit of a sense of excitement rather

55 See Anthony Hoekema's helpful and readable discussion in his *Created in God's Image* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986) chapter 5.

56 *ibid.*, p. 141.

than drudgery, of pressing ahead with a stimulating and challenging task. For all that it is important to work hard at clarifying what exactly it is that we are trying to do as Christian educators, this is only the background to the question of whether we are actually doing it. We need to be actively developing Christian contributions to education which do indeed embody light and truth and honour God; this will include, but should not be reduced to, removing that which is unacceptable. This is but part of living our lives in intellectual as well as moral accountability to the God who made us. A model which would liberate us to set about the ongoing task of developing Christian contributions to education without being inhibited by the inadequacy of purely deductive models has much to be said for it.

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