

# REVELATION AND CHRISTIAN LEARNING

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## Abstract

The subject of the thesis is the relation between the mechanisms of human learning and the appropriation of divine revelation. Its conclusion is that while revelation may be understood in the traditional sense as a definitive divine disclosure, the means by which such a disclosure is received and understood are those of the ordinary processes of human learning.

The study draws on the full range of disciplines integral to Christian education, particularly the philosophy and psychology of perception and learning and the theological doctrines of humanity and revelation. In the first chapter, a methodological framework is offered by which to relate these disciplines.

The conclusions of the thesis are as follows: Learning is an interactive process of "assimilation and accommodation", in which a psychological "world-model" is gradually developed. Such world-models, whose basic units are termed "schemata", consist of "tacit" rather than explicit knowledge. They are affectively or evaluatively structured, reflecting the fact that their formation is the result of the development of a sense of coherent identity. Revelation takes place by means of the gift of a new identity, characterised by a relation to God in Jesus Christ mediated by the Holy Spirit. Christ is the "exemplar", or concrete pattern of Christian identity, knowledge of whom is available

as an historical figure interpreted by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Christian learning is the development and maintenance of that new identity. In revelation, God acts by his Holy Spirit in such a way as to preserve both human autonomy, which is itself a gift of God in creation, and the active character of the learning process.

A final chapter investigates some of the implications of the paradigm presented here against a wider philosophical background.

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## DECLARATION

No part of this thesis has been submitted for a degree in this or any other university. All the research has been the author's own work.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is intended primarily as a contribution to the field of Christian education. The expression, "Christian education" is currently used in a number of ways, which may be summarised as follows:

1. Christianity as "curriculum content" in the context of public education. The usual reference is to the teaching of religious education in schools, but it may be extended to include adult education courses.

2. A Christian approach to or philosophy of education, taken as a whole.

3. All that educational activity which takes place within the context of Christian commitment, the means by which Christians grow in the understanding of and commitment to their faith.

These three senses of the term "Christian education" may legitimately be distinguished, and in discussions of a practical nature it is usually clear which sense is intended. From a theoretical point of view, however, the distinction is less helpful, because similar issues arise in each context. In particular, both senses 1 and 3 are vitally affected by the major issue which arises from sense 2, whether a distinctively "Christian" approach to education is possible or legitimate.

It has been argued, in particular by Paul Hirst, that the idea of a "Christian education" is a "contradiction in terms".<sup>1</sup> Education, Hirst believes, has its own, rationally derivable criteria, independent of any particular belief system, such as that expressed in Christian theology. The methods of teaching and learning a particular

concept are determined by the inherent and autonomous rationality of the subject area in question, and cannot be affected by criticism from the standpoint of theology.<sup>2</sup> If Hirst's view is accepted then not only is a Christian philosophy of education excluded, but the idea of educational activity within the context of Christian commitment becomes problematic. Either such education takes place according to rationally definable and publicly recognisable norms and values, unaffected by the Christian context, or something other than "education" is taking place. This view appears to drive a wedge between "education" and "Christian nurture" or formation, which must be regarded as less than educational, and possibly as indoctrination.

Against Hirst's "secular" point of view, with its distinction between public, rationally-based values, such as those expressed in his definition of education, and the "private" values of religious belief, the argument of this thesis is that theological criteria are applicable to every area of life, including education. A Christian philosophy of education is one in which the concepts of the teacher, the learner and the teaching-learning relationship, the aims of the curriculum as a whole and the values expressed in the choice of material are all informed by theological criteria. In particular, it is shown that the study of the way people learn is informed by philosophical anthropology, in the development and criticism of which theology has an important role to play.<sup>3</sup>

Although a Christian critique of education taken as a whole is to be understood as valid and possible, the best way of describing such an exercise is probably as "theology of education". The term "Christian education" is to be used in this thesis in the third of the senses listed above. Christian education is defined as the educational activity which takes place within the sphere of Christian commitment, that is to say, within the

Church.<sup>4</sup> Its main task is the facilitation of the growth to Christian maturity of adult believers. It also includes the initiation of children and adult converts into the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith and the training of men and women for Christian ministry in all its many forms. Christian education is both "formative" and "critical". It is formative insofar as its aim is to "nurture" Christians in the understanding of, commitment to and ability to practise their faith. Its critical task is to enable Christians to reflect on the grounds for and consequences of their beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

While Christian education defined in this way applies mainly to those areas of the Church's ministry particularly concerned with teaching and training, there is also a sense in which Christian education has to do with the whole life of the Church. Every other aspect of the Church's life, such as worship, evangelism and political and social involvement, has an educational aspect. Christians learn their faith not only in formal educational contexts but informally through the whole of the shared life of the community. As John Westerhoff in particular powerfully argues, efforts to enable Christian men and women to reflect on the practice of their faith are likely to be of little value if these are undermined by the "hidden curriculum" expressed in the actual practices of the community.<sup>6</sup> The deliberate attempt of the Christian educator to facilitate learning in formal settings must be matched by deliberate and sustained efforts to ensure that the practices of the church in every other area of its corporate life adequately express the ideals it professes to believe.<sup>7</sup>

The task of the theoretical side of Christian education is to reflect upon the Church's ministry of teaching and training. Like the wider field of education, to which it is related, Christian education is a "practical discipline". A practical discipline is one, like

medicine and civil engineering, which, in contrast to theoretical disciplines such as physics, economics or history, is defined by its relation to a particular field of activity. A practical discipline draws on a number of theoretical disciplines relevant to its task. Those relevant to the field of education include psychology, sociology, ethics and philosophy. As a discipline which takes place in the context of Christian commitment, Christian education must include theology as an additional and vitally important element.<sup>8</sup>

There are three main requirements for the effectiveness of Christian education:

1. It must be securely grounded in those areas of theological understanding relevant to the Church's ministry of teaching, such as the nature of man, the nature of revelation and the nature and task of the Church.

2. It must be securely grounded in the various disciplines contributory to the study of education. The theological understanding of the Church, for example, must be supplemented by an account of the Church as an organisation with a social context. The description of man, from a theological standpoint, as creature and as the object of divine grace must be supplemented by an account of man as a learner and as a social being.

3. The work in these two areas must issue in a viable theory of educational practice.

Unfortunately, however, these requirements have proved difficult to meet, with the result that Christian education currently faces something of a crisis of identity. In 1978, a collection of articles on the discipline and methods of Christian education was published with the title, *Who are We?*<sup>9</sup> Seymour and Miller's book, *Contemporary*

*Approaches to Christian Education*, published in 1982, lists five separate approaches, each with contrasting understandings of scope, aims and methods.<sup>10</sup> One of the problems underlying these differences of approach is a failure to resolve the basic question implicit in the nature of Christian education as a composite discipline, the relation between the theoretical disciplines on which it draws. In Christian education, the practices of education and theology meet. What is to be the relationship between them?

One of the reasons for this failure is the division between a "theological approach" to Christian education and an alternative "social science" approach. Advocates of the theological approach argue that since Christian education takes place within the context of Christian commitment, it is to be understood as a branch of practical theology.<sup>11</sup> In the words of Randolph Crump Miller, theology is the "clue" to Christian education.<sup>12</sup> Advocates of the social science approach, on the other hand, reject what they see as "theological imperialism". In their view, Christian education is a type of education, to be governed by the complex of disciplines relevant to the educational task, particularly the social sciences.<sup>13</sup>

The argument between the two approaches centres around the relation of theology to education on the one hand and the relation between social science and education on the other, with the question at issue, which discipline has the most valid claim to dictate the norms for education in a Christian context. What neither side has attempted, however, is a systematic enquiry into the relationship between theology and the social sciences. But if the three requirements for Christian education, listed above, are to be adequately met, some account of the relationship between its principal constituent disciplines is necessary. Accordingly, as an attempt at a genuinely interdisciplinary

approach, the thesis begins with a second-level argument, whose purpose is to establish a theoretical foundation for Christian education by setting out in general terms the relationship between the various disciplines upon which it draws, theology, philosophy and the social sciences, and in particular to demonstrate both the possibility and the propriety of bringing the study of learning within a theological perspective.

The second main aim of this initial argument is to establish the meaning of the term "revelation" from the theological, philosophical and indeed the social science points of view. Revelation stands in a peculiar relationship to theology. Although expressed as a doctrine, it is not an ordinary part of dogmatic theology. Theological doctrines are usually tested by their conformity to revelation. The doctrine of revelation itself, however, cannot be brought within this test. Nor is revelation a part of philosophy. The idea of revelation refers to something which, although decisive for human self-understanding, could not have been discovered in the course of philosophical enquiry. The God of revelation is something more than the ideas of transcendence thrown up by philosophical speculation.<sup>14</sup> Revelation has a status which it is difficult accurately to pin down. It stands at the boundary of both philosophy and theology, circumscribed by neither. The attempt to delineate the relationships between the component disciplines of Christian education serves as a useful platform from which to explore the meaning, in philosophical as well as theological terms, of the concept of revelation.

The doctrine of revelation is an essential part of the theological foundation of Christian education. It deals with the availability of the knowledge of God. Christian learning may be validly understood as the "subjective dimension" of revelation, that aspect of the doctrine of revelation which deals with how revelation is received.<sup>15</sup>

Traditional approaches to Christian education have been based on a highly transmissive view, in which revelation has been understood as a set of propositions which form a "deposit of faith" to be handed on from one generation to the next. On the other hand, from the point of view of what is often called an "experiential approach", the idea of definitive content is rejected and revelation can come near to being treated as any experience which contributes to a person's full humanity.<sup>16</sup> Neither of these accounts is adequate. Revelation is to be understood as a process in which the knowledge of God, while historically and definitively given in Jesus Christ, requires continual appropriation and reappropriation in the life of the Christian believer. Christian education is the name of the field in which this process of appropriation takes place. It is, in the words of D.Campbell Wyckoff, "An enquiry into teaching and learning as modes and means of response to revelation."<sup>17</sup>

This being the case, Christian education has an important contribution to make to theology. The "subjective" and the "objective" dimensions of revelation are correlative. "If revelation is really encounter," writes Emil Brunner, "then we cannot understand it without knowing something of him to whom it is made."<sup>18</sup> Brunner's argument is that man is created for revelation. That being so, revelation is to be understood as laying hold of man *in his natural state*. Revelation is given in such a way as to meet the capacity of man to understand it. Earlier in the same work, Brunner writes,

Revelation is always a mystery, but it is never magic...Revelation always passes through a process of understanding by man. Even if revelation creates a new understanding, it does not create this without laying claim upon the natural understanding.<sup>19</sup>

In revelation, something is learned. A new understanding is created, but not by setting aside the way understanding is normally gained. What is learned in revelation is learned by means of the normal processes of the understanding. This is the key to the contribution made by Christian education to theology. If revelation is given in such a way as to lay hold of the capacity of man to learn, then the study of human learning plays a vital role in the theology of revelation.

The purpose of the thesis is to establish the position that it is Christian learning which constitutes the subjective dimension of revelation. In particular, it is my concern to show that there is no discontinuity between the appropriation of revelation and the learning processes involved in "ordinary learning". This involves an enquiry into the relationship between revelation and the natural processes of human learning, in order to show that it is these processes which are involved in the reception of revelation. In particular, it must be shown that revelation does not override the proper autonomy of mankind which is expressed in and through the processes of learning.

The natural processes of learning which are to be the subject of investigation are the psychological changes, cognitive, affective and attitudinal, which take place in learning and the social context in which learning takes place and which affects its course. These two aspects of learning, the psychological and the social, are united by the development of a sense of personal identity.<sup>20</sup> It is the unity inherent in personal identity which gives coherence to a person's understanding of the world he encounters with all its diversity. It is personal identity which brings cohesion to the wide range of social roles demanded of him. The construction and maintenance of identity is the principal motivation for the psychological changes involved in learning. It is identity which

provides the connection between learning and revelation. The process of revelation involves the gift of a new identity which can be understood in a variety of ways, including "disciple of Jesus Christ", "citizen of the Kingdom of God", or "son or daughter of a heavenly Father". Christian learning consists of the establishment, maintenance and development of that new identity, the original of which is Jesus Christ, who, as the image of God, is the pattern of redeemed humanity. The goal of Christian education, therefore, is individual and corporate conformity to Christ.

The argument as a whole traces a course through a wide variety of topics and involves conclusions each of which is potentially the subject of a thesis in itself. These include the nature of the social sciences, the nature of perception, the relationship between the cognitive and affective aspects of learning, the mechanisms of socialisation, the nature and significance of human subjectivity and agency, the sphere of man's proper autonomy in relation to both his creatureliness and his fallen nature, the work of the Holy Spirit in revelation and in relation to the human spirit, and the way in which the relation between Christ and the believer is to be understood. In dealing with each of these subject areas, it has been necessary to draw heavily on the conclusions of others, and it is recognised that if the position put forward in any one section of the thesis were to be revised, the argument as a whole would be affected. At the same time, however, it is maintained that the cumulative force of the argument adds weight to each of its individual sections. The thesis represents the outline of an approach to Christian education developed as a result of attention to one of its most fundamental questions, the relation between learning and revelation.

## **Notes**

1. Hirst, "Christian Education". Hirst is criticised by John Hull in "Theology and Educational Theory".

2. See also Orteza y Miranda, "Problems". The discussion in this article is, however, seriously inadequate. The "problems" arise from a narrow definition of "education" as correlative with "knowledge" and a correspondingly narrow empiricist definition of knowledge. There is no mention of the *values* expressed in the aims of education, the selection of curriculum content or in the "hidden curriculum" of the institution.

3. See below, p.27-29.

4. The first possible sense of "Christian education", the teaching of religious education in schools, is also excluded for the purposes of this thesis. The justification for the inclusion of religious education in the school syllabus is increasingly coming to be recognised as "educational" rather than "confessional", in the sense that its aim is the *understanding* of the religious beliefs and practices of a variety of faiths rather than the nurture of children and young people into commitment to one faith in particular.

See Hull, "Christian Nurture to R.E.".

5. Melchert, "Church", gives a number of criteria by which a genuinely educational activity may be recognised. Melchert's definition of "Christian education" is however, confined to its critical aspect.

See McKenzie, *Religious Education of Adults*, p.36f.,63f.

6. Westerhoff sums up his approach, which he calls "catechesis", in a large number of writings. One of the best short summaries is that in *A Faithful Church*, p.1-9.

7. See further my article, "Christian Education as Enculturation".

8. See Wyckoff, "Religious Education as a Discipline", for a proposal for an outline of Christian education which takes into account its interdisciplinary nature.

9. Westerhoff, *Who are We?*

10. Seymour and Miller, *Contemporary Approaches*.

11. Wyckoff, "Religious Education as a Discipline", Westerhoff, *op.cit.*, p.173.

12. Miller, *The Clue to Christian Education*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.

13. See in particular, the works of James Michael Lee: "Key Issues in the Development of a Workable Foundation for Religious Instruction", *Foundations of Religious Education*, ed.O'Hare; "The Authentic Source of Religious Instruction", *Religious Education and Theology*, ed.Thompson, as well as works listed in bibliography. See also McKenzie, *Religious Education of Adults*.

Not all writers accept the issue as a question of dominance. For Thomas Groome, the relationship between theology and the praxis methodology is one of dialogue, a "two-way street" which "holds *theoria* and praxis in a dialectical unity" (*Christian Religious Education*, p.228). James Fowler takes the concept of faith, giving it a particular theological significance as a "human universal", and then attempting to place it in a psychological and a social context (*Stages of Faith, passim*). Groome uses a particular teaching and learning method and draws theology, sociology and philosophy into his exposition of it. Fowler does something similar with a particular concept of religious education's aim. Neither attempts a study of the overall relation between the different fields.

14. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, p.14.

15. Stroup, "Revelation", *Christian Theology*, ed.Hodgson and King, p.90f.
16. Astley, "On Learning Religion", p.32-33.
17. Wyckoff, *loc.cit.*
18. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, p.48.
19. *ibid.*, p.15.
20. "Personal identity" is understood here from the psychological rather than the philosophical point of view. An exploration of the relationship between these two aspects of the meaning of identity is found on p.146f.