

# Ministerial Education and Teaching Skill

## Why the Prince Needs to Marry Cinderella

The great Sherlock Holmes included in his method the art of deduction from surprising non-occurrences. The curious incident of the dog in the night-time, which failed to bark while a prize race-horse was led away from under its nose, supplied a crucial link in the chain of deduction that led to the thief of Silver Blaze.<sup>1</sup> In a similar way, the non-appearance of teaching skill where one would expect to find it throws an interesting light on the assumptions of ministerial educators. According to the South East Institute of Theological Education's ACCM 22 submission of May 1994, "It is necessary for the training which we offer to equip our members to preach and to teach ... In order to do this, members must be grounded in the knowledge of the Scriptures, rooted in the life and tradition of the universal Church and committed to the development of a mature and disciplined spirituality."<sup>2</sup> It is not necessary, apparently, to be a competent preacher or teacher.

Leslie Francis has documented the low priority of Christian education in the minds of many of the those responsible for ministerial training.<sup>3</sup> This is no recent development. As long ago as 1982, ACCM Occasional Paper 11, *Learning and Teaching in Theological Education*, was prepared by a working party made up both of people involved in ministerial training and in adult education in the Church of England. Its

---

<sup>1</sup>"Silver Blaze", *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, Penguin 1950, p.7-34

<sup>2</sup> South East Institute for Christian Education: Response to ACCM Paper 22 Question 1, May 1994, paragraph 23.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Francis: "Christian Education: Cinderella in Ministerial Training Priorities?" *British Journal of Theological Education VII.1*, pages 3-12

central section, "The Learning Process," reads like a brief inventory of what ministerial training could learn from its lower status cousin, including observations such as, "The primary question a teacher must ask is not, 'How do I teach?' but 'How do people learn?'" and "The conventional order in which material is presented in many books is seldom the best order for studying it."<sup>4</sup> At the time this paper was issued I was a former teacher, training at theological college for the Anglican ministry and seeking to raise the profile of Christian education as a resource for both staff and students. My impression was that the principle obstacle to progress was simply incomprehension. Overwhelmingly accustomed to traditional transmissive methods, neither staff nor the majority of students recognised in teaching a skill which could be learned and which would benefit their ministry. Not surprisingly, there were few prepared to agree with the case I wish to argue in this paper, that *a skilled teacher with an adequate knowledge of a subject will enable students to learn more effectively than a subject specialist who lacks teaching skill.*

Zoë Bennett Moore finds signs of progress at Westcott House, Cambridge.<sup>5</sup> The incorporation of the East Anglia Ministerial Training Course in the Cambridge Federation has brought the theological college staffs of the city into contact with a group of teachers conversant with educational thinking. As a result, Moore found herself studying for a Certificate in Post-Compulsory Education and transmuted from Tutor in Doctrine to Tutor in Doctrine and Education. Her article is a useful reflection on some of the issues surrounding ministerial training from an educational point of view, and here I want to take up a number of the questions she raises.

---

<sup>4</sup> ACCM Occasional Paper 11, October 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Zoë Bennett Moore: "Christian Education and Ministerial Education: Cinderella May Yet Go to the Ball" *British Journal of Theological Education VIII.1*, pages 3-12.

The first of these is adult education. Moore accepts the commonplace that teaching adults is not like teaching children and contends that the task of ministerial educators needs to be informed by the skills and understanding of specifically *adult* education. The distinction between adult education and that of children is a *cause célèbre* in the United States, where Malcolm Knowles has coined the term "andragogy" to refer to the theory and practice of teaching adults.<sup>6</sup> The principle psychological difference between adults and children is that in adults one expects to find a much more developed sense of identity and the expectation of autonomy. As a result, adults expect to be able to choose when and from whom they will learn. The authority of the teacher with her students is not bolstered by their relative status as adult and child and depends on whether the teacher can produce the goods in terms of interest and learning.

However, it is easy to overestimate the effects that the different learning needs of children and adults are likely to have on teaching strategies, and Knowles' position is by no means uncontested.<sup>7</sup> Among the most important factors said to distinguish adults as learners are the expectation of adults of taking responsibility for their own learning, the extensive previous experience adults bring to learning as well as the "baggage" adults bring in terms of previous problems with learning and practical and emotional difficulties. However, the greater autonomy and maturity of adults does not mean that children cannot take responsibility for their own learning, nor that they do not learn more effectively when they do. Although an adult may have more to *unlearn* than a child, children also learn by integrating new knowledge with their previous experience. Finally,

---

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Knowles: *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, Follet/Association Press, 1980, especially pages 40-65. Leon McKenzie: "The Issue of Andragogy" *Adult Education (Washington)* XXVII.4, 1977, pages 215-229.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, John Elias: "Andragogy Revisited" *Adult Education (Washington)* XXIX.4, 1979, pages 252-255.

any school teacher would be astonished to be told that children bring no "baggage" in the way of practical or emotional difficulties into the classroom. On the contrary, there can scarcely be a class in the country which does not include pupils who find the demands of sitting still and paying attention for long periods beyond them or whose learning is affected by emotional difficulties at home. To say that, "Those who teach adults need to be aware of the psychology of learning and choose teaching methods appropriate to the students and the subject matter,"<sup>8</sup> is to make no distinction whatever between the teaching of adults and that of children. It is merely to say that those who teach adults must be good teachers - people who understand both their subject area and the ways people learn most effectively, sense the aims of their students and are aware of their previous experience, and recognise the factors likely to prevent or inhibit their learning, .

Into which tradition of education - liberal, radical or vocational - does ministerial training fit most naturally? Unfortunately, Moore's account of the vocational tradition applied to ministerial training reads rather like an Aunt Sally, inviting dismissal. Her view of vocational training is that it consists in passing on the skills, competencies and practical tips necessary to keep "the show on the road competently." Ministers share with teachers and nurses the distinction of being trained for a specific vocation, each requiring a range of professional skills. But the education of nurses and teachers involves far more than training in appropriate skills. Nurses receive a grounding in anatomy, physiology and pharmacology, become conversant with public health legislation and learn to understand institutions. They are taught how to co-operate with related specialists, such as physiotherapists and occupational therapists, and encouraged to work out care plans for their patients by seeing them as whole persons. Teachers must have a

---

<sup>8</sup> Moore: *op.cit.*, page 7

thorough grounding in child development and philosophy of education as well as their chosen subject area. As well as teaching technique, they learn the use of resources and classroom management. Their course may also include the history of education and comparison between the education systems of different countries.

All this is comparable to the way a course of training for the ministry includes everything from theology and church history through biblical studies and spirituality to preaching and the conduct of funerals. The vocational aspect of ministerial training is no more limited to "wearing a raincoat at funerals" than nursing training is limited to making beds or teacher training to preparing a lesson plan. Rather, the essence of vocational training is that *the scope of the training is governed by the requirements of the profession or vocation for which the course of training is to be a preparation*. Seen within the vocational tradition, the training of a minister of religion will encompass three broad areas - the skills and competencies appropriate to the many and varied tasks she is called to undertake, the psychological and spiritual maturity required for her calling and the necessary background knowledge of theology, psychology, contemporary culture and human development. These three elements will be linked by the habit of "thinking (and acting) theologically" - the facility of *applying* the required body of understanding in a mature and sensitive way to underpin the exercise of the appropriate skills and competencies. Thus, ministerial training, properly understood, sits squarely in the vocational tradition of education. The fact that this has *not* been adequately grasped has two unfortunate results. First, it means that the scope of ministerial training is governed by something other than the requirements of ministry, namely those of the liberal

tradition of education. Secondly, it means that students are not taught as a matter of course how to apply theology in practice.

Zoë Bennett Moore has high hopes of the liberal tradition, finding it a repository of reason, open questions and democratic values and believing it should serve ministerial training better.<sup>9</sup> Her picture conjures up an ideal of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge governed by self-authenticating criteria of rational argument. The problems she finds in the liberal tradition - elitism, conservatism and detachment - which limit its fruitfulness in ministerial training, she diagnoses as unfortunate departures from the purity of that tradition, the result of historical accident.

I would argue, on the contrary, that these characteristics are integral to the liberal tradition. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,<sup>10</sup> Thomas Kuhn showed that each field of science consisted of a community of practitioners sharing a common paradigm. The paradigm consists not only of a body of knowledge but of common values, goals, skills and practices, all with a shared history. It is, moreover, impossible to detach the personal element from the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. A scientific community is a particularly well defined example of a reference group, consisting, like all reference groups, of the shared beliefs of the group and the actual people who make it up and linked by commonly recognised channels of communication.<sup>11</sup> The same applies to any scholarly discipline - particle physics, mediaeval history or New Testament studies, to name but three. They consist not merely of disembodied knowledge but of

---

<sup>9</sup> Moore: *op.cit.*, page 5

<sup>10</sup> T.S.Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (2nd edition)*; University of Chicago Press, 1969

<sup>11</sup> T.Shibutani: "Reference Groups and Social Control" in A.Rose (ed) *Human Behaviour and Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*. Routledge and Kegan Paul

small worlds in which all the leading practitioners know each other at least by reputation if not personally.

The paradigm also includes the criteria by which a given question is to be judged as fruitful or misguided. Before "open questioning" can begin, the student must first be well grounded in the shared paradigm. The "elitism" and "conservatism" of the liberal tradition simply reflects the way any given student must be judged on the extent to which he has understood the paradigm and whether he is ready to contribute to it before being admitted to the specialist realms of research and teaching.

Moreover, the detachment of the liberal tradition is the inevitable outcome of its distinctive teaching style. Learning in the liberal tradition consists of *initiation* into the governing paradigm, through which students develop a sense of the internal coherence of the discipline. Learning of this kind cannot hope to begin with the students' experience. It must rather abstract from the concrete experience of the everyday world in order to initiate students into a new world governed by its own internal rules and criteria. To this end, I remember Professor Stephen Sykes advising us, his students, to master the field by choosing a theologian and working out how the various elements of systematic theology cohered in the thought of that particular theologian - excellent advice for a budding theologian but only indirectly relevant to someone wishing to set up a group for young people with time on their hands or even teach a confirmation class.

However, the transmissive style of the liberal tradition has traditionally been and is still to an overwhelming extent the strategy employed in ministerial training. Its aim is to help the student to "think theologically," that is to see the world with theologically informed eyes. The means of accomplishing this is to attempt to make the minister an

expert in theology, in the belief that this will equip her with a habit of mind in which she will evaluate lives and situations with theological criteria. The failure of this strategy is evident from the number of ministers who, on leaving college, stop reading, fail to perceive the relevance of what they have been taught to their situation and forget much of it in a short time. Nor is this situation unique to theology. Gerald Collier notes the frequent failure of tertiary education to pass on the higher order skills of self-directed learning, analysis of an argument, invention, communication skills and, crucially for our purposes, application to new situations.<sup>12</sup> Liberal education cannot break the rules or bypass the conditions for effective learning. Students who are not given time to digest what they are taught by applying it to their own experience, will not learn effectively. And theology students will be no more successful than any others in remembering what they have learned beyond the final examination.

How are students, and in particular ministers in training, to be enabled to remember and apply what they learn? In his article, "Second Thoughts on Paradigms," Thomas Kuhn relates how, despite having mastered a particular rule, his physics students were frequently unable to apply the rule in specific situations by working out the example problems set them in the text books.<sup>13</sup> Mastery of the problems only came about when they recognised the new problem as *like* a problem they had previously encountered. This discovery set Kuhn off on a new track: an enquiry into the form in which the knowledge of a given academic community, its shared paradigm, was actually held. His conclusion was that the knowledge which unites an academic community consists of "exemplars" -

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Collier, *A New Teaching, A New Learning*. SPCK, 1989, pages 10-11

<sup>13</sup> T.S.Kuhn: "Second Thoughts on Paradigms" in *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change*. University of Chicago Press, 1977, pages 293-319. The same article is found in F.Suppé: *The Structure of Scientific Theories*. University of Illinois Press, 1974, pages 459-482. A brief account of the same material is found in the second edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, page 189.

concrete case histories such as celebrated historical experiments and frequently used example problems. Moreover, in terms drawn from Michael Polanyi, the effective part of the paradigm consists not of explicit but "tacit" knowledge.

In Polanyi's words, "While tacit knowledge can be possessed by itself, explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood or applied. Hence all knowledge is either tacit or else rooted in tacit knowledge."<sup>14</sup> Tacit knowledge is the knowledge on which explicit knowledge rests and includes the skill of deploying our existing knowledge to interpret each new situation. Successful science students are those with the tacitly acquired *skill* of perceiving the likeness between new situations and familiar ones. In the same way, the ability to recognise the important theological elements in a given situation is part of tacit, not explicit knowledge. It follows that what is required from a course of training for people whose vocation is to apply theology to everyday life is that *they learn theology not as explicit but as tacit knowledge*. Only in this way will theology become the world they "indwell" and their theological understanding become the spectacles through which they habitually interpret the world. This can only come about when students are taught in such a way that all new knowledge is related to their existing experience. Only then will they acquire the skill of learning to see familiar situations in a new light. The liberal tradition, in which people who know their subject inside out pass it on to students as explicit knowledge, will never achieve that. A vocational model of training may do so, so long as those responsible for the provision of training recognise the crucial importance of teaching skill in the process.

---

<sup>14</sup> Michael Polanyi: "The Logic of Tacit Inference" *Philosophy* 41, 1966, page 7. *Knowing and Being*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969, page 144.

"One of the most frustrating things in ordination training," writes Michael Williams after sixteen years experience, "is seeing people pass through a two or three year programme of studies where they enjoy the debate, relish new ideas, learn new skills, but after six months into ordained ministry they revert to the same set of beliefs and ministerial practices that they had on day one of the course."<sup>15</sup> Despite his frustration at the failure rate of prevailing teaching methods, Williams is passionate about the need for transformation if students are to become effective ministers. This, he believes, can only come about through the work of the Holy Spirit. But Michael makes no reference to the possible contribution of teaching skill to the process of transformation. His article is a good example of what American professor of religious instruction James Michael Lee calls the "blow theory" of religious education, the idea that the Holy Spirit, who blows where he will, is the only real teacher and that all actual change is due to "proximate zaps" of the Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

This despair of teaching expertise, common in theological education circles, is based, in my observation, on the assumption that "teaching" consists merely of passing on information in the form of explicit knowledge. This being the only form of teaching those responsible for ministerial training have received, it is the only form they are able to conceive. Horace Bushnell, one of the founding fathers of Christian education in nineteenth century America, would have been horrified at the idea of separating human skill and the work of the Holy Spirit. For him, the work of the teacher is one of the "organic powers God has constituted as vehicles of grace."<sup>17</sup> As Edward Farley points

---

<sup>15</sup> Michael Williams, "Theological Education and Ordination Training," *Journal of Theological Education* VIII.1, 1996, page 22

<sup>16</sup> James Michael Lee, *The Flow of Religious Instruction*. Religious Education Press, 1973, chapter 7

<sup>17</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, Baker Book House, 1979, page 187 (first published 1861).

out, there is no need to locate the Holy Spirit "working supernaturally in the gaps of the instructional processes, filling in and completing what human beings leave out."<sup>18</sup> Instead, we should see the Holy Spirit working in and through the methods of good teaching to bring about the kind of transformation Michael Williams is looking for.

Good teachers know how to teach for change. As ACCM Paper 11, still largely ignored, pointed out, good teachers ask not, "How do I teach?" but "How do people learn?" They work *towards* a systematic understanding instead of from it. They design the curriculum to lead gradually from easier concepts to more difficult ones. They use visual aids and interactive techniques flexibly to ensure maximum understanding and recall. They understand the learning that can take place through the hidden values of the curriculum and pay attention to these. They stay in touch with and relate all new learning to the students' existing experience and they set tasks which require students to apply what they are learning to familiar situations. Good teachers teach for tacit knowledge, providing students with the tools for continuing learning. In this way, any area of the curriculum can be taught effectively by a skilled teacher not themselves a subject specialist but with enough knowledge to teach it effectively.

After a course on the Old Testament, one student wrote, "I was familiar with the Old Testament before, but never understood how to 'read' it. I'm quite looking forward to preaching on parts of it in the future." Another wrote about the teaching she had received that it was, "like pulling back the blinds in a room in ancient house. It felt like you led us from room to room and showed us how to explore for ourselves and how to investigate the hidden treasures further." These comments illustrate the results of a course designed

---

<sup>18</sup> Edward Farley, "The Work of the Spirit in Christian Education," *Religious Education LX.6*, 1965, page 431.

with the foregoing principles in mind. They show students feeling "at home" in the subject, capable of going on to open it up further for themselves and eager to do so. This is the outcome of consciously teaching for tacit understanding.

It is time the prince married Cinderella! It is time to adopt a fully vocational model of training, one where the scope of the training is governed by the requirements of the vocation, instead of by the traditions of liberal education. And it is time to recognise the crucial contribution of that hitherto missing ingredient in ministerial training: teaching expertise.

David Heywood, December 1996

*Dr. David Heywood is Team Vicar of St. Antony's, Hamsey Green, in the Diocese of Southwark. Before being ordained he worked as a secondary school teacher and also took a Ph.D. in Theology and Christian Education in association with the North of England Institute for Christian Education in Durham. He is tutor in Old Testament for the Southwark Diocesan Readers' Training Course and the South of England Institute of Theological Education.*