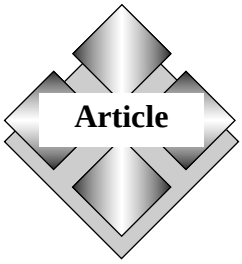
Education: a Christian view



Jeff Astley considers the search for truth which is inherent in all teaching and learning, and goes on to argue that learning can be a spiritual discipline and teaching can be a prophetic ministry.

by Jeff Astley

Caring teaching

Christian formation is often described as a pastoral activity. Thus John Westerhoff has presented catechesis as 'a pastoral ministry of continual change and assimilation, reform and growth'. James Michael Lee agrees that the teaching of religion is part of the Church's pastoral work. He takes care to distinguish it, however, from the task of pastoral care, a category that incorporates guidance and counselling. But he argues that, like pastoral care, Christian nurture is part of the Church's work 'to develop or enhance the religious life of an individual'.

For my money this sounds very much like a shepherding, guiding and protecting sort of activity – i.e. like pastoral care. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines 'care' as a verb as 'feel concern'. As a noun – for example in the 'care of souls' – it is defined in terms of a charge or oversight, 'with a view to protection, preservation, or guidance'. There is no need to restrict the word 'pastoral' to a healing concern for those in trouble or distress; it can refer more generally to a 'carefulness ... for the soul', and 'care' may be construed quite broadly as 'devotion to the well-being of ... others'. School teaching, surely, is one of the 'caring professions' on this understanding, and is rightly thought of as a pastoral calling. More generally, all our work as educators and as Christian educators is an expression of care.

Teachers then are ministers, and ministers – we too often forget – are servants. Craig Dykstra has written of the teachers 'who have really served us' as being those who we sense know the way, but who were 'willing to wait and see what happens on the journey this time'. He writes of one such, presumably an adult educator:

> 'Everything is not all decided in advance, and what happens in my learning will make a difference to her. She is willing to become my equal and to be vulnerable to what takes place. I see in her face that my own learning moves her, and that she is committed to me and my learning over the long haul.'

William Willimon, in writing of education as 'one aspect of pastoral care', offers insights that apply to education outside as well as inside the Church:

> 'People can be healed, supported, and cared for by helping them clarify their values and concepts, by putting forward a conceptual framework upon which they are able to make meaning of their often disordered world, by telling them the Story in terms that can be heard and affirmed as their story, by proclaiming the faith in such a way as it becomes their faith.'

Teaching – at any rate proper teaching – is a task as pastoral as they come.

But not all care is pastoral care in a narrow sense. Donald Evans has distinguished two types of care or helping 'concern' (itself a dimension of love): the pastoral and the prophetic. The former, admittedly, is the more usual understanding. It is the 'good shepherding' that is particularly directed to the needy and powerless. Prophetic care is more a matter of telling forth God's will by criticizing the powerful of society. While pastoral concern nurtures and encourages, prophetic concern probes and judges. It may hurt more in the short term, but prophetic love in the end is often as caring as non-directive counselling. If it is God's truth that we tell forth, it will not harm – and may indeed redeem – its recipient. Teaching can constitute this sort of prophetic concern.

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Spiritual learning

So much for teaching; what of learning? Some years ago, on leaving my first teaching post, I was given a book by a grateful department (who were doubtless mainly grateful for my leaving). It was Peter Hunter Blair's *Northumbria in the Days of Bede*. My attention was particularly drawn to the quotation on the dust jacket from Alcuin, the eighth century Yorkshire scholar who became educational adviser to Charlemagne:

> 'Never give up the study of letters, but have such young men with you as are always learning and who rejoice more in learning than in being drunk.'

This is perhaps not a bad motto, appropriately reworded, for any educational

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institution and enterprise. Rejoicing in learning, not just theological learning but all learning, is theologically appropriate. Learning about the world is thinking God's thoughts after God. Much learning in the humanities is thinking the thoughts of God's rational creatures or using my God-given wit to think my own thoughts.

The true scholar should be concerned in the end with the truth alone, and hang the glory

Learning, scholarship, research – these are high vocations, and who is worthy of them? I do not merely mean by that pious thought that they are difficult, and that we may prove in the end to be too stupid to do them. I mean what I say. They are high vocations, vocations of high value – indeed of virtue. Scholarship, research and learning can be expressions of Christianity. My main ground for this claim is that the learner is a servant, subservient before the truth. The learner should therefore show a proper humility. And the learner should be disinterested, as – in the end – the Christian lover must be.

The Christian's love and the Christian's learning are both passionate activities

This is a contentious claim, but I present it here quite baldly. The Christian's love and the Christian's learning are both passionate activities. We are deeply 'interested' in the beloved, and in the truth. But this 'interest' is not self-serving, or should not be. To be disinterested is not to be uninterested, without curiosity or concern. 'Disinterested' means 'not influenced by', 'unbiased by' my personal benefit, profit or advantage. The universal, unconditional type of love, which in the New Testament is referred to by the Greek word *agapé*, is so difficult because it is other-serving, rather than self-serving. This is disinterested love. The disinterested love of truth is also very demanding. The true scholar should be concerned in the end with the truth alone, and hang the glory. The truth alone whatever it is: however ugly, however unrewarding, however little it is concerned with the needs of the scholar. True learning is not done in, or for, our interests.

If necessary, teachers will decrease that the learners may increase

This is, surely, the glory of scholarship and its spiritual power. The true scholar or researcher is 'devoted' to her subject. Her family and friends may complain that she loves Aristotle or condensed matter physics more than she loves them. That is not a happy situation; but if the scholar reveals a pure love for a subject – a love independent of reward or recompense – then we may forgive her. If we love our subject for itself alone, then this is our pure love, of our pure learning. It is something almost holy.

Of course, there are rewards. The rewards of research and scholarship may be tangible and spendable, such as Nobel prizes; or they may be rewards that are less easily stored in bank accounts, such as the respect of our peers. Or they may not come at all, in either form. And that latter state is the true test of the scholar. Here too we are to seek first the Kingdom, in this case the Rule of the Truth. Then these other things may be added to us as well, if we are lucky.

But if not, well what does it really matter? They are not what it is all about. They do not constitute the heart of the gospel of true learning.

Perhaps that is why one ideal of scholarship is anonymity. It is well expressed by the authors of the four Gospels, of whom we hardly know even their names. It is not, in the end, important to know who the scholar or researcher is. We don't have to recognize who sings the song. They will eventually all be forgotten. It is the truth, the song itself, that is the important thing.

The centrality of disinterestedness

And what of the teachers? We recall that teachers are servants. They work for others. If necessary – and it sometimes is necessary – they will, like John the Baptist, decrease that the others (the learners) may increase. They are 'facilitators' of others, in the current jargon. But that only means that they are servants. Yet not 'only', or 'mere' servants; for in the Christian gospel the servant-role is the true, responsible, vocation. And having done all, servants remain 'unprofitable'. No wonder St James advised, 'Let not many of you become teachers', adding 'for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness' (James 3.1, RSV).

So true teachers are disinterested also. The disinterestedness of the teacher has been powerfully expressed by the Jewish scholar Martin Buber in his essay on education. The translation is not exactly gender-free, but it is worth quoting at some length nevertheless. Buber discusses here another Greek word for love, *eros* – the earthly love that responds to the lovableness of its object. This is what others have called need-love, the love that expresses our need for one another, indeed our craving to be loved. He writes of its limited role in the work of education. Here eros must be transcended, for 'only an inclusive Eros is love'. 'Inclusive Eros' is gift-love: the unlimited, other-regarding, unconditional love that seeks no reward. It is the *agapé* of the New Testament. Buber writes:

> 'However mightily an educator is possessed and inspired by Eros, if he obeys him in the course of his educating then he

stifles the growth of his blessings. It must be one or the other...

'Eros is choice, choice made from an inclination. This is precisely what education is not. The man who is loving in Eros chooses the beloved, the modern educator finds his pupil there before him. From this unerotic situation the greatness of the ... educator is to be seen ... He enters the school-room for the first time, he sees them crouching at the desks, indiscriminately flung together, the misshapen and the well-proportioned, animal faces, empty faces, and noble faces in indiscriminate confusion, like the presence of the created universe; the glance of the educator accepts and receives them all. He is assuredly no descendant of the Greek gods, who kidnapped those they loved. But he seems to me to be a representative of the true God. For if God 'forms the light and creates darkness', man is able to love both – to love light in itself, and darkness towards the light...

'In education, then, there is a lofty asceticism: an asceticism which rejoices in the world, for the sake of the responsibility for a realm of life which is entrusted to us for our influence but not our interference – either by the will to power or by Eros.'

'A lofty asceticism.' Such disinterestedness is very hard for a teacher, and most of us fail at it, sometimes spectacularly. The ideal remains, however, that teaching is for the learners. It is not for our own self-aggrandizement or the satisfaction of our needs.

I argue here, then, for disinterestedness in learning and teaching. Touched by this virtue, learning can become a humble, spiritual discipline, and teaching may recapture its sense of being a pastoral-prophetic ministry of concern. Any form of education may properly be counted Christian if it strives to fulfil such a calling.

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