Religion in Our Schools

K. M. L. BENSON

THE CASE for Christian teaching is strong. Until recently it has scarcely been called in question, but over the past ten years there has been increasingly vocal criticism of what some regard as its specially privileged position. Much of this opposition has come from Humanists, but some has come from within the ranks of those engaged in teaching Christianity, or more precisely in training future teachers. Notable among these is Dr. Goldman, and the term 'Goldmanism' has been coined from his name.

In their book *Religion in Our Schools* (Hodder & Stoughton, 25s.) the authors Philip R. May and O. Raymond Johnston have put the Christian public in their debt, for in seven useful chapters they have surveyed the position and in doing so have challenged strongly some of the loaded criticisms that have recently been pressed. In their first chapter they ask in what sense can Britain be called a Christian country. Accepting in the main Karl Popper's definition of the 'open' society as 'the society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions' they maintain that Britain is not a fully 'open' society since as a democratic society we choose to impose certain restrictions upon ourselves, and it is questionable whether in the matter of religious belief and moral behaviour the nation is completely open. The authors see evidence of the United Kingdom's official stand as definitely Christian in its observable attitudes and social behaviour, citing for example the position of the Monarchy, the Christian basis of Government, of the Judicature, of local government, the Armed forces, the Press and communications. Education is no exception, for as the 1944 Education Act lays down 'It shall be the duty of the local education authority for every area, so far as their powers extend, to contribute towards the *spiritual*, moral, mental and physical development of the community'. And the authors draw attention to the order of words.

Of course, they are not unaware of the nation's failure to practise the Christian standards which it officially professes, nor do they overlook the decline, even officially, that there has been from those standards, but it is their view that 'we have not yet completely overdrawn at the bank of our spiritual heritage' and fairly conclude, quoting T. S. Eliot, that 'A society has not ceased to be Christian until it has become

positively something else'. The real cements of a society, claim the authors, 'are religion and language'. If this is accepted, the main 'task of educationists is twofold, to help future citizens to communicate . . . with understanding, and to know about and understand Christianity'.

What is the real purpose of religious education? Is it evangelistic and proselytising? Has it a moral purpose? The authors state clearly that in their view 'evangelism is not the function of religious education' (p. 39), but, though they recognise that it has an important moral function they stress that 'the Christian believes what he believes because it is true, not merely because it is useful'. They see the chief aims as philosophical and cultural, the former because in the words of the Spens Report 'no boy or girl can be counted as properly educated unless he or she has been made aware of the fact of the existence of a religious interpretation of life'. Cultural justification rests upon the inability 'to understand the nature of our present society, or of its past growth without some knowledge of the ideals and beliefs of leaders and movements of former times . . .'. It is at this point that the present reviewer finds difficulty and suspects that many others do also. It is, of course, possible to state the main framework of belief of Christians, to show how this arose and how these beliefs have been, and are still applied by the main body of Christians, and to illustrate the influence that these beliefs have had on action and the creative impetus that they have given in art, music and literature. The snag comes because, as the authors recognise well enough, no study of Christianity can proceed far without reference to and study of the Bible. This book is dynamite, it is a book that demands a verdict. By the reading and study of it lives are changed. This is true, of course, of other books beside the Bible. *The Ethics of Aristotle* have been described as a 'cathartic' book. A study of *Das Kapital* or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* should not leave the reader unaffected, but there is ample evidence to show that when people of any age take the reading of the Bible seriously, positive reactions may be expected as a result of which, a person may become a 'new creation in Christ Jesus' or consciously reject the revelation of God's truth.

There is a thoughtful chapter on 'Objections to Religious Education'. The authors do not see the churches as being privileged, for the present position of RE is an expression of the general will. There are safeguards against denominational emphasis, though these may require strengthening. They recognise the dangers of hypocritical conformity and regard the dangers of 'fundamentalism' as largely misconceived. Indoctrination, however, leads to a considerable necessary digression on the views of the American educational philosopher John Dewey, and to the authors' conclusion that 'indoctrination is essentially a word which applies to *method*' and not to content, and that this is an issue common to the teaching of all the humanities where value judgements are inevitably involved. 'The precise meaning of indoctrination in

terms of methodology can only be established by examining both the particular topic and the teaching situation in which indoctrination is said to occur,' is the authors' conclusion.

In Chapter IV on Content and Method the authors recognise the value of the heuristic methods advocated by Harold Loukes in his book *Religion in the Schools*, but state their own position 'that while, especially with older pupils, lessons must proceed with full and free discussion and through personal search, there must also be essential guidance from written sources particularly Scripture, and from the experience of the teacher, if the discussion is to be fruitful and purposive'. Wisely there is no attempt to give a summary of the views of Dr. Goldman's book *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*. The authors' agree that 'religious knowledge, like any other subject requires that the best teaching methods, the most modern audio-visual aids and the most up-to-date text books shall be used in its service', but the demand that the present content of RE as defined in the Agreed Syllabuses should simply be abandoned is far too sweeping. The authors summarise criticisms as follows:

(i) The Agreed Syllabuses are too academic and therefore irrelevant to the needs of modern pupils in all schools.
(ii) Their almost exclusive biblical emphasis makes them peculiarly unsuited for primary schools and secondary modern schools.
(iii) They are unsound educationally because the material presented is unsuited to the pupils' various stages of development.
(iv) They are unsuited to the needs of the average non-specialist teacher.

and make the following useful suggestions 'as a contribution to the present discussion'.

(i) Existing Agreed Syllabuses must be retained as a basis for revision. Complete abolition in order to begin afresh would lead to uncertainty and possibly to chaos.
(ii) The new syllabus should be prepared in three parts—
(a) for the primary school pupils (b) for the less able secondary school pupils, and (c) for the ablest secondary school pupils.
(iii) Help should be given in the preparation of schemes of work suitable for different conditions in the schools.
(iv) Material should be selected in order to meet the needs, spiritual, moral and mental, of the pupils from five to eighteen years.
(v) Sections should be included on methods of presentation with lists of suggested textbooks, audio-visual aids and other helps to teachers.

The value of modern methods of programmed learning is recognised though the procedure is not without New Testament precedent. The

authors give some helpful guidance on the literature available here. They see this as a means of providing the requisite factual knowledge from which informed discussion can proceed, and while favouring the right use of the so-called 'open-ended approach' to discussion, point to the dangers of what Professor Nineham has called 'the exchange of mutual mystification'. Two other important ingredients in the authors' view are 'the quality of the teacher himself' and the presence in the school where possible, of an 'active Christian group . . . as an indispensable adjunct, because it brings religion into a wider context of worship and community activity'.

Some light relief as well as real-life illustrations occur in the chapter entitled 'The Lion's Den', and one can only wish that there were more teachers of RE capable of applying the Great Train Robbery as one secondary modern school teacher did. 'The train robbers were fit men (PE), they knew the best place to go (Geography), they knew all about timetables and the value of money (Mathematics), but somehow all this fitness and knowledge had only been used to harm others.' There are examples given too, of the penetration found in children, missing in adults so often: 'Please sir, if God hates war why do ministers of religion hold a service on board a nuclear submarine when it's launched?'

Two other chapters deal with 'School worship', and the way ahead. Worship is important for the sense of community it can give, for the example that it supplies of civilised group behaviour and for the opportunity that it provides of showing 'respect for authority and the deference due to the speaker', though he is properly seen as 'one under authority'. (The reviewer made it a habit to read at the beginning of every school year the story of the centurion, 'a man set under authority', feeling the need to emphasise this to his pupils and to himself.) The authors show themselves well aware of the difficulties attached to school assembly but conclude in effect that 'the abuse does not hinder the use' according to a wise principle of St. Augustine. From this point they illustrate a number of ways in which assembly may be conducted, and suggest others, quoting in conclusion the headmaster of a Lancashire grammar school:

'In the end, I'm afraid I think that it all comes back to me, largely which is a solemn and sobering thought. I wish I didn't think this really. Nevertheless what is done is much less important than how it is done.' Once more this reviewer endorses from limited experience this view. The quality of the morning assembly in his own school seemed very much to depend on his own preparation for it, not least his own prayer-time long before the assembly itself.

What of the future? Having identified seven main areas in which change is demanded, the last chapter is concerned to point out that there is no great outcry from the schools or from parents for sweeping changes though there is a widespread desire for changes in the Agreed Syllabuses. The starting point must be the nature and needs of

children, 'the content of religious instruction should be both Bible-centred and child-centred'. There is need, too, for more ethical content, but the authors quote with approval the statement of John Wilson on comparative religions that most children 'do not want to be taken for a conducted tour round a world curiosity shop; they want to know whether any of the (different religious and moral) beliefs are true'. There is great need, as the authors see it, for better conditions for RE teaching and there is a strong plea for more committed Christian teachers who must be supplied from church members who not only believe but are prepared themselves for preaching and teaching the Word of God.

'Pray, what is religious education?' asked A. N. Whitehead in his essay *The Aims of Education*, having concluded that 'the essence of education is that it be religious'.

'A religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence. Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events. Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice. And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity.' Even the funeral cortege of prominent Communist leaders bears witness that 'God has set eternity within men's hearts'. How do we prepare ourselves and our children for it?