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A Discipline in Search of a New Story

by Colin Greene

This issue of *Transmission* concentrates on a number of issues which are central to the future well-being of education as it affects all of us in Britain today. This will come as no surprise to many of our readers because education is one of the key strands of *The Open Book* campaign. More to the point, the whole arena of education has in recent decades become a political battleground as successive governments have tried to rectify what they perceive to be the prevalent malaise undermining the current education system. The diagnosis has ranged from inadequate teacher training, falling standards of literacy and numeracy as compared with our European partners, or the breakdown of discipline and spiralling levels of truancy and deviant behaviour from pupils both inside and outside the classroom.

Important as these factors may be, none of them actually gets to the root of the problem that education is itself a discipline in search of a new story. The origins of our present system of state education in Europe go back to the end of the sixteenth century and the post-Reformation concern to break down the current consensus that education was only for the elite and served the purpose of maintaining the power and authority of the elite over and against the anarchic tendencies of the illiterate masses. Such an obviously laudable concern was also closely connected with the advent of the printing press and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular.

The setting up of church schools and the eventual provision of free state education was grounded in the religious ideal that the purpose of education was to produce mature, responsible, well informed, ethically attuned public servants with high ideals and healthy aspirations. Only in this way could we ensure the survival of civil society and the continued success of the then fledgling liberal political democracies. Such pertinent ideals concerning the well-being of individuals and civil society are firmly noted in a biblical faith which quite candidly regards the joy of learning and the development of personal skills and abilities as a function of our service of God and our fellow human beings.

Three of our contributors chart just how far we have travelled from these high ideals. Mark Roques reminds us that the crisis in education is part of a wider cultural crisis where consumer capitalist economics has deposed such religious and political aspirations and replaced them with either a debilitating relativism or a cynical individualism in the whole area of personal beliefs and values. In this regard postmodernity goes one step further than modernity and even values are now commodified. Ian Markham argues that higher education has all too easily capitulated to a secular mindset which borrows from science values such as dispassionate objectivity and religious neutrality. In this way education becomes another victim of the fateful dichotomy of modernity

between so-called objective facts which constitute public knowledge and private belief or opinion to which all religious and moral values are consigned. Terence Copley and Heather Savini provide us with convincing evidence that a large part of the problem was in fact the way the Bible was improperly and inadequately taught in schools. This was certainly my own experience where Scripture lessons, as they were then called, certainly took us into the world of the Bible but only to confirm what we already thought, which was the total irrelevance and inadequacy of the Bible for life in the modern world.

We are, however, often reminded that the word "crisis" implies both a time of judgement and opportunity. Trevor Cooling shows that opportunities are certainly there in regard to public worship in schools, largely because successive governments together with those responsible for our national schooling system have demonstrated a dogged determination to retain links with our national heritage and the values and beliefs of the Judeo-Christian faith. Similarly Ruth Deakin Crick alerts us to the new creative possibilities that exist to help our schools develop whole school policies that ensure that the new legislation in regard to spiritual, moral, cultural and social values does indeed become a cross-curriculum reality in our schools.

In all of this there are the present concerns that education in our schools, colleges and universities remains intellectually

challenging, personally enriching, non-partisan and increasingly participatory. It is salutary to ask ourselves whether such is the case in regard to how the biblical story is interpreted and applied in our churches. The experience of many I speak to would suggest otherwise. The reality is that many of our churches still demonstrate a practice of Christian education which is strikingly elitist. The minister alone in his study preparing for his or her weekly sermon or mid-week exposition is hardly an appropriate model of Christian education. And yet the experience of many who have both experimented with and enjoyed other models of contextualised biblical exploration is that only then are the Scriptures opened in such a way that they illuminate our present cultural landscape with the iridescent glow of Christian hope and expectation.