

Professor Ian Markham is the holder of the Liverpool Chair of Theology and Public Life at Liverpool Hope University College. He is the author of *Plurality and Christian Ethics (CUP)* and *Truth and the Reality of God (T & T Clark)*. He is currently the Director of the Engaging the Curriculum Programme. He is a Director and Council Member of the Advertising Standards Authority.



Faith and Higher Education

by Ian Markham

The growth of higher education in recent years has meant that a great many more young people go from school to universities and colleges. The choices facing them seem endless and they have to take into account a variety of factors from the content of the course to the cost of accommodation. Institutions of higher education are judged on their academic achievements and the quality and quantity of their research. Ian Markham identifies other characteristics which have a very real bearing on the nature of the various institutions. Here he discusses the distinctiveness of a Christian vision for education and identifies the contribution of Church colleges to broadening the agenda of higher education.

Education is the major battle ground. Both the Jesuits and the Communists knew if you capture children when young then you have them for life. The assumptions about life are shaped in one's youth. What one finds "plausible" and "implausible" are determined by the general environment of childhood. So for example numerous studies have shown that a violent environment experienced in youth creates the assumption that violence is acceptable. In a similar way antagonism to religion is shaped by an antagonistic environment. Although, of course, no one wants to say that atti-

tudes of adults are determined by their childhood environment, one must concede that many of the prejudices (some good, others less so) are certainly shaped in this period.

Given this, it is vitally important to think through a philosophy of education. One needs to handle one's power (as parents and as teachers) with respect. Probably most educators would concede that two values should be central to any morally acceptable philosophy. First, an openness to truth from whatever quarter; and second, which is linked to the first, an intolerance to irrational prejudice.

Engaging the Curriculum

The Engaging the Curriculum Programme has been posing a question. Are the values celebrated by our secular institutions really upholding these two values? Engaging the Curriculum is an initiative emerging from the Church Colleges. These are relatively small colleges, often specialising in teacher education, which were founded in the nineteenth century. Thus far the Programme has organised four forums tackling a range of topics, and published a bi-annual journal. The Programme believes that secular institutions thwart openness and toleration by excluding all the questions that really matter.

This will come as a surprise to some. The popular perception is that secularism is built on the values of toleration and openness. The truth is less clear. There are two difficulties with a secular framework for education. First, it excludes judgments and debate about value; and second, it denigrates a religious framework. On the first, secularism claims objectivity, but under that rubric excludes all

question of value. Objectivity implies detachment; judgements about value require involvement. If you are objective then you are required to simply report dispassionately the different cultural practices in the world. To pass a judgement on, say female circumcision, is an act of cultural imperialism. The impression created in the classroom is that female circumcision might be acceptable. A proper education needs to educate children about values. Objective detachment ends up imparting certain very questionable values: children might imagine that all sorts of cultural practices may be acceptable. Debate and guidance about the issues are essential for a good education. Ultimately, the secular approach forbids such debate and guidance.

On the second, the secular approach creates the impression that religion is tangential to real education. Religion for religious people is that which dominates a human life: it is the perspective from which everything is judged. Yet a secular approach to education creates the impression that religion is an optional extra to life which does not affect things very much. It is naturalist in philosophy by default. This links with the first difficulty because the whole agenda of moral values is excluded because it is linked with religion. The end result of a secular approach is a narrow education that excludes the most important questions of all. In short, it is neither open nor tolerant.

Changing Perceptions

Tackling the philosophy of education is the task of those of us in higher education. We need to change perceptions. Change them at this level and the arguments will persuade educators responsible for our schools. The Church Colleges of England and Wales recognise this dilemma of education as part of their dilemma. Christian institutions gave birth to these Colleges, yet they compete in a higher education market that demands openness and tolerance. The temptation is that they endorse the majority consensus and ape their larger secular neighbours by creating equally secular institutions.

However, the Programme is suggesting that such a strategy would be very unwise.

Christian institutions should be open and tolerant ones. The vision of education that we are trying to realise at Liverpool Hope is as follows. We believe in a God who has created a complicated world. Everything from the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle in Physics to the problems facing a modern economy illustrate the complexity of the world that God has created. After thousands of years of human thought there is still much to discover and sort out. And if we are to understand this world we need a variety of perspectives. Working things out together is clearly intended. Argument and disagreement should characterise a Christian institution; we need the disagreement so we can learn more about the truth of God's world. Christian institutions encourage atheists and peoples of other faiths to participate in the discussion. Atheists are good at pointing out the darker side of religion: peoples of other faiths have vast resources from their traditions to draw upon. In understanding God's world, we welcome this diversity. We believe it is God-given and opens up the exciting possibility of authentic conversation.

It is a conversation that is committed to discovering the truth. Granted, the truth is complicated and, in many areas, we are not going to be in a position to know whether we have discovered it. But we can expect to arrive at positions that are more likely to be true than other positions held previously. It is a conversation that is willing to allow the metaphysical and moral questions to be central. The result is an education that seeks to deal with the whole person: it does not create needless boundaries and restrictions.

Church Colleges should not seek to imitate our secular neighbours. Rather, we should be persuading them to imitate us. Faith and higher education are not opposites, but necessary, complementary and mutually essential. This is the challenge; this is the future.