

Going Round the Prickly Pear of British Education

Interview with Richard Russell
by Gerald Vanderzande

G. What do you think is at the root of British violence we have been reading about in the daily newspapers last summer?

R. I don't know whether one can find a single factor to lay the blame on. It is my opinion that the young people involved in the riots are reacting not only to their home situation and to unemployment, if they have left school, but also to their experience of their schooling. In British education the view has developed that education ought to be something neutral. This attempt to be neutral has hollowed out British education. Things which are controversial, that is, important to human beings, get eliminated as being not neutral.

G. Are you suggesting that secularization of society in general but of educational institutions in particular is contributing to the sense of meaninglessness that these young people are giving expression to?

R. Yes. A great number of parents because of a lack of fundamental convictions about life hand over their children to the schools, feeling that the schools probably know how children ought to be brought up. They tend to wash their hands of their children very early. They like their babies, but when the children get a bit older they don't know what direction in life to point them; so, they hand them over to the schools. But then the schools are committed to a sort of official neutrality, and they don't want to point the children in any direction either. In other words, none of the adult community will take responsibility for helping the children find a direction in life. That means that the children very much have a feeling that they have been fed stones instead of bread. They react to this. They realize they are getting very little from their education. School seems like a prison they have to stay in until they are sixteen. This in turn in many of the large British schools is producing increasing violence in the schools themselves. Keeping discipline is becoming incredibly difficult in many schools, and the amount of learning seems to be decreasing and decreasing. A clear expression of the kind of feeling that the adults are letting them down, which has been around for a while, is the punk rock music. Now these feelings have gone into the streets instead of getting a musical expression.

G. Do the educational authorities realize what is happening and are they taking steps to correct the situation?

R. I think for the most part the educational authorities are thinking in terms of containing the frustration, punishing it, or bringing in more social agencies and counsellors to help dissipate it. But I don't think there has been any acknowledgment that it's the very nature of the schools, their curriculum, their perspective which is causing the mischief. Most of the educational theorists are happily secluded at Oxford, Cambridge and other places and have no experience of what the schools and the classrooms are like.

G. What about the political powers? Do they realize what changes need to be brought about in order to curtail the frustrations and introduce people to a more meaningful way of living?

R. One of the peculiarities has been that even though huge amounts of public money are spent on education (it's one of the biggest items on the national bill, and about nine-tenth of British education is state education) the state seems to see

education mostly in terms of preparing a young person for the job market, and see that tied in with the problem of maximizing the gross national product. Other aspects of education don't seem to be taken at all seriously.

G. What about the church leadership? Does it point to the need for looking at more than simply training people for the marketplace? Do they push for the need to come to grips with the basic values that should govern British society?

R. There is not very much church or christian commentary on education. What little there has been seems to have been against narrowing the curriculum, not excluding such subjects as art, English and geography from the general curriculum. But there has been no penetrating critique of it. Mostly it is maintaining the traditional patterns of education and stopping the narrowing trends.

G. What kind of penetrating critique do you think should be offered?

R. Several things need to be done here. There needs to be a recognition that education cannot be neutral, that it always has to have a vision, a direction. The attempt to be neutral is intrinsically an impossible task. The teachers themselves who have convictions should not be allowed to articulate them. Now they've got to be neutral teachers.

G. Is that what the law says?

R. This is the dominant ideology of all the teacher training schools and it is part of the whole idea of what it means to be a professional teacher. You leave all your own personal convictions and concerns behind and you put on this mask of professionalism as you go into the classroom as a professional, neutral teacher. So there is a lot of frustration among the teachers too. My feeling is that a lot of exceedingly good teachers are going into other professions and tasks.

G. You are painting quite a gloomy picture. Is there any hope for the educational institutions?

R. If there could be a very decisive break between the state and schools; the state may still be raising money through taxes so that all the children are educated but the schools are free to go their own direction, free from state control, or equally from pressures of industry. Structurally we need to work in the direction of a real pluralism. At the same time there needs to be a much closer connection between schools and parents. There has been this alienation, particularly of the working population, from the schools, and this continues when they have their own children. They are frightened of the schools, and the professionalism of the teachers just pushes them at a distance. So I think the parents need to be pulled in and involved with the schools much more than they have been.

Richard Russell is awaiting ordination in the Church of England and is presently Director of the Christian Studies Unit in England.

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