

History of Education: why bother with it?

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So much of the time our thinking about and practice of educating is locked into the present and tied to ways in we ourselves have been formed and educated. The status quo seems common sense, normal and unquestionable. There seems to be no realistic alternative. And when we struggle to formulate what alternatives we have as Christians our proposals often sound thin, marginal and unconvincing - even to ourselves.

It is precisely in this context that the history of education (and likewise comparative education) can serve two vital functions. First it can awaken our sense of alternative views of education with their different assumptions about God, people, society and knowledge. Second, it can alert us to the pedigrees of the educational ideas and practices that often seem so obvious to us. So much of our educational common sense is actually - as we will see - the precipitate of Greek pagan and modern humanist philosophical visions of reality.

Through the study of the history of education we can begin to gain some critical distance from the present practices that are so close to us - indeed part of us - that we cannot focus on them. Or to use another image - it is like looking at the tinted spectacles through which we have habitually viewed the world.

This can be very disturbing. "If God had intended Christians to think he'd have given them the brains!" we splutter in self-defence. But we are called to repent of the vain educational traditions of men (Mark 7:8,9) and to seek out what is good, pleasing and acceptable to the Lord (Romans 12: 1, 2) . We are warned against vain educational philosophies that are rooted in idolatry. We are mandated to develop ways of thinking which acknowledge Jesus as the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of Creation (Colossians -1: 16-20; 2: 8).

Seldom is obedience to the Lord a matter of opting for old ways against new ways - the old ways were new once and were reactions against even older ways. And even if the old ways were obedient at the time they can become disobedient and

irrelevant under new circumstances or in different societies. We will find no golden age of Christian education to which we can or should return. But we can draw inspiration from some past phases of Christian involvement in education and be warned by some of the errors and blindness of Christian communities of the past. But having said that our hope is directed to the future, building an educational highway for our God into our culture now and into the future.

There are many risks and many unknowns. There is no blueprint - but we can have directing dreams and visions also for this important area of life. We desperately need prophets and pioneers in education from primary to university levels. And just as our church life has seen renewal in the last couple of decades - new joy and a clearer sense of direction - so we need a new joy and direction in learning, knowledge and wisdom in our educational enterprises.

It may not be easy for most British Christians who would rather die than think. Words like "theoretical" intellectual", "academic" or "philosophical" are used to damn things as Godless. The sad truth is that such Christians do not want to go beyond the ABC of the Gospel and simply want tranquil, pleasant and affluent lives. They will make sacrifices for the latter, but have little stomach for the intellectual and spiritual warfare that the servants and soldiers of Jesus Christ are called to in every area of human life. In the words of Abraham Kuyper "There is not a square inch of creation of which Christ does not say 'It is mine! '" Our task as ambassadors of the Kingdom in the field of education is to reclaim every area of educational thought, learning and practice for the One who alone is the way, the truth and the life, the One through whom and for whom all things exist. (Col.1:16, Heb.1:2).

This is a vital and strategic part of the Great Commission, both for the next generation of the Christian community and in the battle of conflicting worldviews for the heart and mind of our non-Christian contemporaries. There is little point in deploring the hollow secularism and the new age occultism to which it has given rise if we, the Christian community are unable to provide a substantial alternative vision and Biblical framework for the concerns of our contemporaries. It is said that the early church "out thought and out. died 11

the opposition of their pagan contemporaries. Those called the "apologists" were skilled at giving the reason for the hope that was in them concerning the ways in which the Gospel of the Kingdom brings healing to the whole of creation and to every phase of human life and culture.

Likewise they were able to explain to their contemporaries why their pagan Roman culture, rooted in idolatry, was disintegrating and destined to pass away. The tragedy is that for the most part the modern churches of the west are providing little by way of *interpretation* and *hope* to our contemporaries who are ransacking world cultures past and present in search of some illumination of their lives. A sentence from one of Arthur Koestler's last book - before he and his wife committed suicide - was: "God has left the phone off the hook and time is running out".

Rather than blaming God for the silence we must rather look to ourselves and our failure to provide prophetic interpretation of modern culture, searching insights into the media, technology, politics and law, science, the arts, the industry and agriculture, and not least the education of our times. Is Jesus for whom and through whom all things exist delighted or appalled or what by what He sees of the life of Britain in the 1990s.

As ambassadors of the Kingdom of Christ we should know and communicate these things. Mostly we don't know and what we do communicate to our contemporaries is that Jesus has a very small agenda or moral and ethical issues about which He is upset and about which we are to *protest* - a few letters to MPs and a few marches does the trick. The public concludes - not unexpectedly - that we and our God (if he exists) are negative and narrow and irrelevant to most of what goes on under the sun.