

HALF OUR FUTURE:

The Newsom Report and the Church

Peter Cousins

It is only a minority of British children that receives a grammar school education. About three-quarters attend non-selective (modern or comprehensive) schools. Here a small group take some G.C.E. subjects, another small group struggle to master the rudiments of reading and calculating. It is the education of the remainder—the average boy and girl of 13 to 16—that is discussed in the Newsom Report. Issued in August, 1963 and unfortunately overshadowed by the almost simultaneous appearance of the Robbins Report on higher education, *Half our Future* is worth the attention of all who wish to think seriously about our society. It is compulsory reading for all concerned with work among adolescents. The report deals with the education of the normal citizen. The Church in this country is mainly a middle-class organisation. Its members, themselves largely the products of grammar or private schools, assume that folk who have not passed through a similar educational process are abnormal, even inferior. The facts are otherwise. The very title of this report reminds us that we are failing to reach—let alone convert—the bulk of our fellows, the backbone of the nation, the majority (to put it in political terms) of the electorate.

Christians know that justice is unattainable outside the Kingdom of God. But if they take the Bible seriously they will be concerned to fight injustice. The Newsom Report reveals an appalling state of affairs in our educational system. We are both sinning against our fellows and squandering our national assets, so that God and Mammon may here agree on the need for reform. Consider the facts. About seven per cent of the schools are classified as in slum areas. A chapter is devoted to their problems. Here boys are an inch shorter and four pounds lighter than their fellows elsewhere. The accommodation in seventy-nine per cent is seriously defective. Only a third of the women and half the men have been on the staff for more than three years.

In general, the report shows that much 'backwardness' is not at all the result of inferior 'intelligence', but is associated with disadvantages in social and physical background, and sheer lack of practice in what most of us would regard as normal forms of speech. Said one boy, 'By the time I reached the secondary school it was all Chinese to me'. This indicates not only a need to reconsider our preaching, but to press for a national policy to help those who are thus being prevented from growing up into full human stature.

In an attempt to examine the 'average' in some detail, the report has drawn three portraits of Brown (representing the top quarter in ability), Jones (representing the middle half of the sample) and Robinson (the lowest quarter in ability). There are fascinating tables of their differing backgrounds and attitudes. It becomes plain that we are nowhere near the ideal of equal opportunity for all which (it is sometimes suggested) we have attained. The Browns tend to live in the Home Counties; the Robinsons (even after we have discounted the 'problem areas' involved) tend to come from our neglected North. Still we reap the harvest of national laziness and lack of social love, or simple justice.

Yet the report is not wholly pessimistic. As against the gutter press and Christian people who uncritically echo its findings (sometimes with a religious obbligation) *Half our Future* finds some cause for encouragement in the rising generation. Television is not simply the devil's black box. It extends knowledge of the world and sympathy with others. It provides a wide store of information, such as would not be read in books. Films, plays and ballets are of a higher standard than is available locally. What of behaviour? Less than five per cent in the Fourth Year, say their teachers, present serious problems of discipline. They are kinder, more tolerant, more understanding than their counterparts of fifteen or twenty years ago. Schools of the 'blackboard jungle' type are rare, and would be more so if the staffing situation were better. Some will feel these comments are unrealistic, but they come from men and women who are in daily and close personal contact with the bulk of our young people. Nor are we justified in complaining generally of a deterioration in standards of attainment; between 1948 and 1961 the reading age of the average school-leaver increased by almost two years. The Newsom Report gives little encouragement to those who tell us that the youth of the nation is rotten.

What does the report have to say about our approach to the adolescent? Its findings deserve close attention. They come with the authority of a most distinguished and experienced group of educationalists; they are based on evidence drawn from schools and youth movements all over the country; they look like becoming the standard approach in most schools for the next generation. Secondary education, say these authorities—and their words have importance far beyond the classroom—is concerned, first with self-conscious thought and judgment; secondly with the relation of school and the work done there to the world outside of which the pupils form part and of which they are increasingly aware; and thirdly with the relation of what is done in school to the future of the pupils, that is to the part they see themselves playing, or can be brought to see themselves playing in adult life'. Nothing could be further than this from the tendency that has too long existed in religious circles to encourage young people to accept on the authority of the speaker or the religious group theories or 'doctrines' which remain wholly unrelated to daily life or experience. As against all attempts to construct an ivory tower of belief and experience, the report demands that at school the programme 'ought to be deliberately

outgoing . . . taking the pupils mentally and often physically beyond the school walls'. It is a commonplace of educational thought that such an approach stimulates the will to learn as well as preparing for life. For 'long before they leave the secondary school they have ceased to think of themselves as children, and are beginning to reach out to the life they will lead as adults'. While children may be expected to take something on trust from their teachers, they are right in demanding relevance to life. Plainly we must ensure that our Christian teaching is related (as was that of our Lord) to conditions of daily living, not in any negative way, but as showing how the divine salt may season the whole dish of human existence.

There can be no doubt of the value to adolescents of contact with adults. In many homes there is little or no rational contact between the generations. The report says what many youth leaders will confirm, that young people crave the opportunity for mere adult conversation with folk who accept them as individuals rather than 'teenagers' and that such intercourse may be of great value. And in time of need such an adult may be turned to: 'If it hadn't been for the games mistress I would have left home at one time, but she made me see reason'.

In the light of all this, the churches must rethink their approach to young people. A Christian should be more not less mature than his fellows, and we shall fail utterly unless we can be as realistic, honest and outward looking as the schools. But how many churches, how many groups of elders, really want people of any age—let alone the young—to be characterised by 'self-conscious thought and judgment'? Yet it is lack of these qualities that has repeatedly led to spiritual shipwreck, both among new converts and those from Christian homes.

So far we have purposely ignored the very important section on spiritual and moral development. It might be thought that here above all we have what is relevant to the Church. In particular, there is a temptation to seek in this section for some effective *technique* for putting across the Christian message. It must be realised that as Christians, however, we are concerned with something more than problems of technique. Unless we take seriously all that has been mentioned so far we shall fail in our mission.

Yet there is both help and encouragement to be gained from the chapter. The recommendations based on it are worth quoting in full: (a) Religious instruction has a part to play in helping boys and girls to find a firm basis for sexual morality based on chastity before marriage and fidelity within it, (b) the schools have a duty to give specific religious instruction, which is more than general ethical teaching. The essential conditions for doing this are an improved supply of suitably qualified teachers and an adequate time allowance in the schools. (c) Local education authorities should consider a review of their Agreed Syllabuses to determine whether adequate provision is made for the needs of the older boys and girls of average and below average ability, and whether they leave sufficient scope for the teachers to develop methods which start

with the actual problems which the pupils have to face. (d) We reaffirm the value of the school act of worship as a potent force in the spiritual experience of the pupils.

The factors to be considered, says the report, are (1) that the staff are probably divided in philosophical and religious allegiance, as would be any group of Englishmen. (2) The questioning spirit of adolescence, which must be saved from degenerating into cynical disengagement. (3) The inescapable fact that teachers influence their pupils whether they give formal religious instruction or not. (This is true of other adults besides teachers!) (4) The contrast between the standards inculcated at school and those accepted at work—there is no automatic transfer, and children must be shown the value of these higher standards in all spheres.

In spite of the differences of viewpoint, yet the corporate life of the school can exercise a strong and helpful influence over pupils. (How much more might the corporate life of a Christian community! How often does it do so?) All staff can show their concern for moral issues. (Whereas we too often in the churches seem concerned only about theological ones.)

Guidance is particularly needed about sexual morality, though without any effort to hide the fact that different viewpoints exist. It must be made clear 'that "going off the rails" does not involve for Christians losing the fellowship of the church, still less of forfeiting the love of God'. (The writer remembers cases where a local church has succeeded in giving an impression directly opposed to this.)

What is religious education? It is not simple moral instruction; the R.E. teacher is not primarily an aid to discipline and a 'good tone'. Nor is it simple Bible reading—a sure way to lose the attention of most boys and girls. It is not ancient history. It must provide both objective knowledge and contact with religious experience; no teacher can succeed unless he can offer both together. This means that teachers must be qualified, because one just does not pick up by chance the sort of systematic and detailed knowledge that children have a right to expect of those who teach them. A man who stopped thinking about problems of religion and life twenty years ago may be a perfectly good churchwarden, but he will not be in a position to help adolescents today. *'For this his scholarship must be up to date and he must move on the Christian frontiers of today'*. Yet the teacher must also be able to communicate with his pupils, and talk to them in language they can understand. The report calls for more qualified teachers. (It is plain that these will not be forthcoming unless the churches encourage young people to take up the ministry. Their work would be helped by prayer support—far more useful than the pious moaning about apostasy in the schools that is more often heard in prayer meetings.)

Finally, a recommendation about technique. The report is emphatic that the most promising approach to teaching the Christian faith, once the simple story-telling stage is over (should it ever begin?) is to take a present-day problem of life or thought and to explore it fully and honestly, using whatever light is found in the Bible and Christian experience. Questions

about life after death, suffering, mercy killing etc., arise in the minds of all whatever their social or intellectual level. 'They need to know what answer the Christian faith gives'.

Half our Future makes it plain that in the foreseeable future the education of the average child will be based on the problems and opportunities of real life. It will encourage independent thought and moral judgment. Its objective will be maturity of thought, emotion and conduct. Christians must re-examine the basis of their church life as well as their youth work, to see whether these things are first of all consistent with Christian ideals (which they surely are!) and secondly whether the local church is doing anything to encourage them.

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