

# FAITH AND THOUGHT

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Christian Education *is* Meaningful:  
a Reply to the previous paper

Professor Hirst's provocative paper failed to convince Mr. Geoffrey Robson. He fears the ultimate implications of the view so strongly expressed by the newly appointed Professor of Education at Cambridge.

Professor Hirst's basic point is simple: there are areas of human understanding which depend only on reason: education should now be included in their number and since religious faith is not reason, it should be excluded from education. Unlike the Victoria Institute, which exists to relate faith to thought, he settles the matter for education by rigorously severing them.

Professor P. H. Hirst's thesis is based entirely on an *a priori* dichotomy between reason and faith. Without pausing to justify this dichotomy, he hurries on, relying on increasingly strong statements asserting or implying its existence. 'If Christianity is itself held to be . . . a-rational, irrational or anti-rational . . . I can see no *reason* why anyone should take such religious claims seriously'; to do so would involve a 'glaring contradiction'. The Victoria Institute, as one member sees it, does not accept the presupposition in Professor Hirst's sentence. Its *raison d'être* is that Christianity is not a- or ir- or anti-rational. But it is not Christianity if it is not supra-rational and this is clean contrary to Professor Hirst's point: 'in so far as education . . . goes beyond . . . reason . . . I am against it'. His contention becomes so strenuous that he affirms: 'one just cannot produce anything of substance that deserves to be labelled a

Christian view of education'. 'The whole idea of Christian education . . . I am rejecting, for I wish to resist the suggestion it should be conducted anywhere'. The common man (or the popular press which writes for him) might fairly take one such sentence from the paper and conclude simply that a leader in education is against any association of Christianity with education. Professor Hirst's hope that it 'will not be thought . . . I have been maintaining something . . . either anti, or un-Christian' is forlorn. Apart from this remark he advances no objective grounds to support such a 'hope'.

Let us examine his paper further. Professor Hirst assumes, without argument, that it is legitimate to distinguish sharply between an education exclusive of all elements save the rational and objective, and an education inclusive of other elements: the first he says is right, the second wrong. Speaking of education he says 'that there is here an autonomous domain of knowledge and understanding seems to me indisputable.' Again no proof is offered. The present writer regards it as equally indisputable that in the mind, and so in education also, 'understanding' is not and cannot be an autonomous faculty. Neither in the mind, nor in education, do we find a sharp 'demarcation' between subjectivity and objectivity, or between faith and thought. A man cannot divide himself into subjective motivation and objective thinking. It is simply not the case that some men are thinkers and others believers: the thinking of a man who believes he is committed to no belief is biased by precisely that subjective belief.

Professor Hirst comes near to admitting that this dichotomy is artificial: In all areas of knowledge one is necessarily involved in presuppositions of a religious nature . . . in teaching . . . one's commitment necessarily infects all one does. To argue thus is indeed to deny the whole autonomy thesis on which my case rests'. He dismisses the point but not logically. First, there is a direct unargued contradiction in strong rhetorical language: ' . . . such a denial seems to me so patently false that I find it hard to understand what is being maintained'. What is being maintained is that in man,

reason is not an autonomous faculty. Second, the argument is shifted: 'In what way is mathematics supposed to depend on Christian principles?' This was not the point made: which was that 'presuppositions' and 'commitment' 'infect all one does'. The exposition which follows about mathematical concepts being 'devoid of religious reference' and 'scientific terms not (being) connected with religious concepts' likewise does not relate to the point raised. The subsequent statement that 'nothing . . . can in any way deny the claim that the . . . principles of science are in no sense logically connected with Christian belief' is different. I would ask: 'not logically', perhaps, but philosophically?

As Professor Hirst's paper progresses, the unreality of his dichotomy works itself out into plain contradiction: the 'not anti-Christian' but 'against' Christian education 'conducted anywhere'. 'Bringing up a child in a particular faith' is 'morally indefensible' but 'commending their beliefs and practices to others' are 'quite proper activities'. 'I am against it': 'education . . . beyond reason, be it conducted in the home or the Church'. 'Yet the home and the Church do have other functions that do not run counter to education in the objective sense' . . . 'We have by definition issues which cannot be fully settled simply on objective rational grounds'. 'There is a proper area for . . . religious concerns that do not run counter to . . . education'. 'In the Church and the home, children . . . are faced with just these aspects of religious belief'. 'There is no need for any conflict with . . . education in my . . . sense'.

The contradictions steadily lead Professor Hirst towards the abandonment of his dichotomy. The idea of filling the artificial gap he has created with a third category occurs to him. 'What we should call these quite proper activities in which . . . groups . . . commend their beliefs and practices . . . I am not sure. The term education is I suggest inappropriate'. 'To form a third concept of education lying between these two, covering both, would, I suggest, do us all a dis-service'. So he draws back from the final gap in his logic with 'I am not sure', and avoids answering the problem he has raised by saying

that to answer it would 'do us all a dis-service'. It is a greater dis-service to raise it and leave it unanswered.

However, in fairness let it be added that Professor Hirst's paper is not entirely negative. We can all share his educational aim: 'What one is trying to develop in education is an autonomous human being who will be responsible for his own judgements . . .' But, for the Christian, man's full autonomy is attained only 'in Christ'. The Christian teacher will approach his work with a dedication to absolute truth, so far as he is able, whether in physics, history, mathematics, engineering, farming or education. If he is a teacher his Christian integrity will be of supreme importance to the way he presents truth what ever he teaches.

A subordinate Christian insight is that a man in Christ only finds his own autonomy fulfilled in the community of other men in Christ: in the sharing of the ultimate common good. This inescapably involves 'bringing up children so that they believe what we believe'. But this is not to make them believe it *only because* we believe it (that produces unsatisfactory Christians) but so that they shall find it true for themselves. On this last point, Professor Hirst and I are not in dispute. Where I am in dispute is that I want the fullest degree of Christian education to achieve this outcome, whereas he says that 'this pursuit is now increasingly considered immoral where ever it is conducted' and 'I wish to resist the suggestion that it should be conducted anywhere'.

Professor Hirst's comments on Christianity as Christianity seem slight and his language exaggerated. Dispassionate objectivity cannot speak of 'Christians who are convinced of the total sufficiency of Biblical revelation for the conduct of all human affairs in all places and at all times'. 'The Bible and the most unintelligent Christian take many aspects of human affairs for granted'. 'The Bible is insufficient in what it implies for education today': 'what does it imply for education, town-planning or engineering'? The argument is shifted: 'if crudely interpreted and crudely applied (for education) its teaching is positively dangerous'. Why link 'crudely' with the Bible? Ideas from any source 'crudely' applied, are no doubt 'positively dangerous'.

The examples given seem crude. The historian with a Christianly-informed conscience, whether Catholic or Protestant, would never claim that his particular insight was needed to evaluate the Reformation objectively. A Christianly-sensitive view may, without inconsistency, desire both small schools and comprehensivization. A Christianly-sensitive attitude to social control may be far from 'patently ludicrous' in 'a 20th century East End school'. Language like 'Christians of any intelligence have long since recognised' is emotively coloured to support the author's preconceptions. As answer to the question 'cannot there be that which is educationally significant and distinctively Christian?', 'I think not' or 'very little if any' seems inadequate. Is not Christian motivation distinctive? A layman has no difficulty in understanding a Christian education as an education by teachers whose outlook is Christian. The *reductio ad absurdum*, 'one just cannot produce anything of substance that deserves to be labelled a Christian view of education', would seem to recoil on the author. There are worldwide examples at all educational levels as there have been for 2000 years. Shall we abjure the 'Christian tradition' of Bede, Comenius, Franke and Robert Raikes or our modern education's debt to Methodist day-schools in Co. Durham or to Anglican day-schools in South East London?

As a Christian who does not believe in State-Church affiliation, I would concur that 'it is improper for State institutions to align themselves with any religious group' and that 'the function of the State is . . . the more objective function of preserving freedom and liberty'. That is why some Christians, and others, built non-church day-schools in South East London. But if the State properly represents a Christianized community, which wants to act as if it were a Christian community, then I see it as having a moral responsibility, not as acting immorally, if it seeks to pass on the beliefs of the community, providing it does not do so at the expense of the liberty of parents. I do not think Professor Hirst has out-dated Lord Butler, 1944.

The State-Church school issue is not new. In the 1840's the USA settled it as Professor Hirst now advocates. There is however, one fact of history which ought not to be overlooked. Those states which have most rigorously applied to Christianity Professor Hirst's view of 'resisting anywhere bringing up children to believe what we believe', such as the USSR where even parental religious instruction under age 18 is forbidden, have filled the vacuum with the most intensive anti-theistic instruction. Panorama's film of infants chanting at the beginning of each day in catechetical fashion from Mao's book, precisely as some of us learned the Ten Commandments, or a past generation of Scots dealt with the catechism of the Westminster divines, prompts some questions: can man, being man, ever finally accept a religious void? When the void is created by casting out God is there no ground for fearing the spirit that rushes in instead?

I fear that, with the best possible intentions, Professor Hirst may be simply conforming education to the current world view which demands autonomy without God, a world view which makes man autonomously answerable to none but himself.