Learning to Become Persons: A Theological Approach to Educational Aims

I

Christian theology, because of its concern with 'all things' is sometimes able to provide salvific insights into academic areas far removed from theological syllabuses. In this article I take one such example and show how theology can make a rich contribution to the understanding of another discipline. The example is education.

Theologians who keep an eye on developments in British education know that much attention has lately been given to its overall aims (1). Perhaps all disciplines are paying attention to their aims in the present accountability-conscious period. One influential statement of the aim of education is that to become educated is to learn to become a person (2). If, as I think, this statement is best understood as a practical, informative one, helpful to educators, then the sort of person that education is to help individuals to become has to be prescriptively spelt out (3). A prescriptive or ideal concept of person, squarely based on acknowledged beliefs and values, is what this approach to the aims of education needs, and Christian theology is able to provide it.

Christian faith and theology have specific things to say about what persons can become. What theology says in an educational context must be judged on its practical usefulness in that context, a single criterion which in the present case can be easily met. In this article I shall first state what I believe to be the outstanding contribution which Christian theology can make to a discussion about personhood, especially in an educational context; second, some remarks about the status of theological beliefs within educational theory will be made, followed thirdly by some brief comments about the educational application of theological ideas. What follows, though, is only a sketch, rather than a completed picture, both of Christian theology's view of the Person of Christ, and of some of the ways in which such a conception may have application in discussion of the aims of education.

II

The only adequate theological answer to the questions 'What is meant by personhood?', and 'Where is the authentic statement of what is human being can become?', is: Jesus Christ.

There is more to this answer than a naive imitatio Christi. Christians confess unanimously that Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation of God while being at the same time the decisive revelation of man. Whereas different interpretations of these beliefs may be given within Christian theology, there is almost total unanimity about what needs interpretation. That Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation of man, a basic datum of Christian theology, is a matter of particular interest in the context of the discussion of concepts of personhood, 'models of man', and so on. Its significance is pointed up when the question is asked, 'What is meant by "man"? when it is claimed "Jesus Christ is the decisive relation of man"?'.

The Latin fathers of the early church sometimes spoke of Christ's divinity and humanity by means of the formula vera deus et vero homo, 'truly God and truly man'. In unpacking the phrase 'truly man' it is necessary to substitute the modern word 'person' for man'. 'Man', of course, is no reference to Christ's maleness but a reference to his belonging to humankind. The ancient word persona, the theological use of which probably originated with Tertullian, could not at that time have been used to express the solidarity of Jesus with humankind (4), and all beginners in historical theology are warned never to confuse the modern philosophical concepts of person with the ancient trinitarian one (5). So in translating vero homo as 'truly a person' one is only connecting up with modern usage, not confusing the modern 'person' with its classical homonymous counterpart. 'Person' has the further advantage of not being associated specifically with the male gender. This has become an increasingly sensitive point when speaking of Jesus as 'truly man'.

But to say Jesus is 'truly a person' is to say different things. First, it rules out the early heresy of docetism which denied the real humanity of Jesus, preferring to see him instead as a God who only appeared to be a human person. Here the simple point of the affirmation that Jesus truly is a person is the denial that Jesus only appeared to be a person. But another reason for saying that Jesus is truly a person is to affirm the belief that Jesus was more truly a person than anyone else. And now something more than full membership of the human species is being asserted. What is being asserted now is that in Jesus Christ Christians claim to see what true humanness is, what true personhood means.

In the famous Chalcedonian definition of 451, Jesus is confessed as 'one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man ... of one substance with us as touching the manhood, like us in all things apart from sin ...'(6) Now 'perfect' (teleios) means 'complete', and

'perfect in manhood' (teleion en anthropoteti) may be fairly translated 'completely a person', or 'complete in regard to his humanity'. The phrase 'perfect man' or 'perfect in manhood' is often misleadingly allowed to suggest that Jesus was scarcely a man at all, but a God-Man with little or no connecting links with the rest of us. What the phrase instead conveys is that Jesus was completely a human being and that as a human being he was more completely or fully a person than anyone else. Unlike us, though, he is sinless. But he is a person, and because of his perfection as a person he is the revelation of personhood. He is 'the norm of what a truly human existence should be'(7). In referring to patristic theology I have wished only to draw attention to what is already well known and to introduce it in a modern secular context where a prescriptive account of a person is badly needed. Christians have long held that Jesus Christ is what it is to be truly a person. What it might be like to be completely a person has, as its concrete non-speculative answer: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the definitive pattern of personalness for Christians. They believe that 'God in and through Jesus has afforded us a new interpretation of personalness, a new definition ... of what it ... might be, to be human, of the end God purposes for man' (8). Such an estimate of Jesus Christ is common enough in modern theology nowadays, and as far as it goes is scarcely controversial.

There are of course several internal theological difficulties in the way of accepting Jesus Christ as a definitive pattern or paradigm of true personalness, before this belief is offered in a secular discussion of these matters. Two of these concern our historical ignorance of the life of Jesus and the cultural relativism of our judgements about him. Claims that Jesus was unique, perfect, sinless, God, the Incarnate Word, and so on, cannot be shown historically to be true even if they are. 'It is impossible to justify any such claim on purely historical grounds' (9). This is widely enough agreed today, even though it still results in occasional shock to say so. What is worse, when the attempt is made to penetrate to the 'Jesus behind the gospels' from the 'Jesus in the gospels', we find a figure 'whose understanding of moral priorities and motives was sometimes very much of his time and rather different from ours. If the rich man, for example, was to sell all his goods and give the proceeds to the poor, that was for the good of his soul, not the good of the poor' (10). Worse still, it is said to be impossibly difficult to extract from the gospels in any objective way a picture of what Jesus was 'really like'. Even when we find elements of Christ's life that we may wish to heed or emulate, worship or copy, the nagging problem remains that in emphasising some elements rather than others we may be unwittingly constructing a Jesus in our own image as other generations of Christians can be fairly accused of doing. 'An immense variety of ideals of character have been ostensibly based upon the example of Jesus; an historical man who lived only one life has been made the exemplar of a great range of different forms of life. Jesus has been declared to be a model for hermits, peasants, gentlemen, revolutionaries, pacifists, feudal lords, soldiers and others' (11). 'It seems there are as many images of Christ as there are minds' (12).

These problems are being written about extensively in theology at the present time. But perhaps a great danger for some modern theology is that it has become so preoccupied with its internal problems that the external application of its insights and ideas to other areas of life and study is frequently overlooked. This is a great pity. The historical and relativist problems are severe enough, but there are equally severe problems in almost every other applied discipline of study (especially in those social sciences that contribute to the theory of education), yet these problems are never allowed to veto the continuous attempts being made to apply theory to practice. Perhaps theologians have something to learn from the sheer temerity of the social scientists in their application of theory to social life. However the main defence in theology against historical scepticism is that when a Christian does consciously accept Jesus as inter alia the model of personhood he or she does not express this acceptance only by trying to emulate the Jesus of the gospels or by trying to discover behind the gospels the 'historical Jesus' so that there is someone or some pattern to imitate or follow. The centre of Christian faith and experience is, theologically put, the risen Christ in whose risen life all Christians share. 'Participation, not historical argument, guarantees the reality of the event upon which Christianity is based' (13). The dominance of empirical methods of investigation in the sciences must not be allowed to influence the Christian understanding of Jesus to the degree that our knowledge of the mind of Christ becomes confined to what historians think Jesus reliably said and did. This issue is a particularly contentious internal one for theology. Without minimising the importance of history in the origin and development of Christianity I simply wish to insert, by way of support for the view that Jesus Christ is the authoritative model of personhood, the reminder that for Christians the Christ is the anticipation and embodiment of a new humanity, a new sort of personalness, known not simply by the application of historical methods to historical sources but in the present experience of the church, very broadly understood.

These kinds of claims frequently generate misunderstanding. They are said to be pretentious, or falsified by the actual record of the churches in their historic past. But there is no need for Christians to claim a monopoly of love, trust, forgiveness and the like. As sinners they should know just how far short of these things they themselves continually fall. Their claim is something different. Rather wherever and in whomsoever there is forgiveness, love, openness, trust, acceptance and the like, there is the spirit of Christ irrespective of the formal allegiances of the persons involved. And when the Christian speaks of the risen Christ, he or she is speaking of a form of life that seems to be 'non-natural-, that is a state of being which fragmentarily occurs when men and women live together and relate to each other understandingly and lovingly, and when their inherent condition of sinfulness, i.e. their natural inclination to refuse to live in love, is replaced by contrary attitudes. Only the terminology is exclusive. One does not need a label to concur with the judgement that the values exemplified in the life of Christ as it is commended in the gospels provide a blueprint of developed personhood, or that the form of social life in which people are committed to each other in love and trust is preferable to one dominated by hatred and suspicion. Whether or not one calls this 'life in Christ' is partly a linguistic, rather than an experiential matter. Christians have no monopoly on what they call 'life in Christ' or 'life in the Spirit'; they have a monopoly only on the theological terms which are pressed into use to articulate truly human values and patterns of living.

Christians belong historically to the community of people (the church) which produced the gospels. They were written with the purpose of commending belief in Jesus Christ as God's way for humankind. What Christians will find compelling in the tradition about Jesus may vary from place to place and from time to time. And there are things about Jesus which general readers of the gospels find compelling before they are even aware of scholarly historical study. Thus, the teaching of Jesus about the need for unconditional love of one's neighbour, say, or his forgiveness of his executioners, his intolerance of hypocrisy and cant, his remarkable understanding of and acceptance of other people (Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery) and his passion for social justice, even his death as a self- enacted parable of vulnerability and openness; these are some of the brush strokes which paint the picture of Jesus as the revelation of true personalness.

III

What possible status can theological assertions have, derived as they are from theological premises, in non-theological areas like education? More colloquially put, Christians can believe what they like, but when it comes to matters of educational policy and the like are we not dealing with secular matters? Do we not need a very different kind of expertise to help us here?

Theologians can make several replies to this question. The formative influence of the Christian churches on our modern educational system is well known, and as a matter of historical record the belief that Jesus is vere deus, vero homo has always been a central one. There is a sad irony about the fact that when distinctive Christian insights are brought nowadays into the arena of education theory (and it happens seldom enough) there is likely to be incomprehension and even embarrassment. But considerable sympathy with Christian ideals and values still remains among the largely non-church-going population of Britain and other western countries, and the cliche that 'we live in a secular society', together with the assumption that religion has lost any social influence it may have had, is misleading, question-begging and sometimes downright false. The 'secularisation thesis' is being increasingly modified, and one writer has claimed, 'There is no reason to think that agnosticism, atheism, skepticism and irreverence are any more common today than they were in other societies, and equally no reason to think that faith, devotion, religious commitment and sanctity were any more common in the past than they are today' (14).

But the theologian has higher cards to play. First, however tedious it sounds, he or she can observe that education considered as a branch of intellectual study which exists to serve educators engaged in practical activities, has been formed by drawing upon other, more established disciplines whose concerns include matters affecting education (and these, as everyone knows, are mainly philosophy, psychology, sociology and history). The single point to be established here is that, in the field of education, the only criterion which an issue, a technique, a body of knowledge, an idea and so on, has to meet in order to be regarded as rightly belonging to the study of education, is that it can be directly related to the practice of educators. In education theory there is ample precedent for heeding and assimilating contributions from whatever source provided they throw some light in some way on educational practice. To say this is to begin to justify on educational grounds a whole range of issues in the theology of education. Theology, too, has its own distinctive insights, waiting to be applied.

A second card up the theologian's sleeve is a methodological one. It may be objected that every article of faith in Christian theology, because it is an article of faith, falls short of demonstration and so cannot be classed as knowledge. Whether the content of faith is to be regarded as knowledge is much discussed in the philosophy of religion (15). But here the much-maligned 'forms of knowledge thesis' is helpful to the theologian. There are different kinds of knowledge and different ways of demonstrating something, so Christians concede nothing when they insist that their assertions about Christ exhibit a different logical character from say, assertions about what is empirically probable. The theologian's answer to those who say to him or her, 'What you say about Jesus is only a matter of faith', is twofold: first, that Christians do have distinctive presuppositions about the significance of Jesus Christ; but second, other contributing disciplines to education theory also have pre-suppositions which, while different, are as contentious as any the theologian can be fairly accused of entertaining. A detailed justification of this second point requires a further essay, but in the space of a single paragraph here is how such a justification might look.

All subjects whatsoever have presuppositions. Sometimes these presuppositions are unacknowledged and tacit. Theology too has presuppositions but these are usually acknowledged and explicit. All subjects have 'framework principles' which are not questioned, but within which everything else is questioned. Wittgenstein used the term 'system' to indicate the unquestioned framework or frameworks within which a subject operates. 'All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the nature of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life' (16). Now, for the record, presuppositions have been made in education theory on the basis of which practices have been prescribed and policies formulated. It is easy to see how, for example, radical empiricism, or utilitarian attitudes, or the various forms of determinism have merely been assumed, not examined. But we are now paying dearly for these assumptions. Radical empiricism, a narrow development of a noble tradition in philosophy, readily brings about an implicit identification of the real and the worthwhile with the purely observable, and collapses into materialism. It produces a theory of knowledge which is atomistic and objective; it divorces the knower from what is known, and in positivism it explicitly relegates theology and ethics to the status of 'non-sense'. The widespread acceptance of utilitarianism as a secular theory of ethics has done untold damage to the human moral consciousness because it reduces all values to what can be cashed in terms of happiness. In the various versions of determinism, a distinguishing feature of personalness, viz. responsible freedom, is explicitly denied. It ill behoves educationists to attack the freedom principles of theologians when some of their own framework principles turn out not always to have served them well. The main framework

principle of Christian theology, belief in Jesus Christ as truly God and truly a person, does not rest on the eclipse of reason. If theological assertions have a partly autonomous character, no conclusions can be drawn from this about their lack of intellectual power or truth-conveying status. A theologian might also observe that ideal concepts of personhood are already embedded in the practice of education. So, for example, when education is regarded primarily as the training of the mind or intellect, the individual so educated is already regarded primarily as a Cartesian res cogitans, a mind which can conveniently be abstracted both from the physical body and the total person whose mind it is. The child who learns at school to be an aggressive and successful competitor in the examination and employment stakes has already been influenced by the ideal of a person as a self-reliant autonomous individual, which has more to do with Victorian capitalism than anything else. And such is the baleful influence of behaviouristic learning theories on a whole generation of educators, that they can be forgiven for assuming that learners are no more than programmable machines (17). But the practice of education needs to be informed by other concepts of person, and one of these is provided by Jesus Christ who has been believed by countless millions of people to embody as the full revelation of personalness that set of social attitudes the traditional names for which are love, justice, trust, forgiveness, openness, gentleness, and the like.

IV

Suppose it were to be agreed that to become educated was to learn to become a person, and that the figure of Jesus was significant for stating practically what sort of a person an individual might be educated to become. What actual difference would this make? How would the teaching of, say, science, literature and physical education (three subjects randomly chosen for their lack of obvious connexions with theology) be affected by the 'intrusion' of an unwanted religious model? These questions are raised deliberately because of their awkwardness. They test whether, after all the theorising has been done, theological insights have any widespread practical application. And they assume that the contribution of theology to education is far more significant than talking about what to do in R.E. and what to do about church schools (18).

Links between these three subjects and the model of personhood which is the gift of Christian theology may be made by inter alia looking at some of the aims of their teachers. It has been calculated that 50% of all employed science graduates end up with jobs in the design, production and maintenance of weaponry, or in industries serving the machinery of war. Is this why schools bother with science education, or are there better reasons? But a study of science may also invoke a profound sensitivity in the face of the 'fundamental mystery of reality', a sense of wonder in the face of both 'the quantity of the unknown' and 'the quality of the known' (19). How unlikely that there should be a world! How improbable that there should be a 'panorama of emergence' for science to study (20), culminating unpredictably in personkind! Science can, and happily often does, instil in its students a deep sense of the mystery of existence, of 'reverence for life', a sense of wonder akin to religious awe that there is a world at all. It can and often does emphasise that humankind, in whom the history of evolution on our planet comes to its culmination, is now wholly responsible for its social evolution and its continuing existence. The attitudes which Christians believe Jesus Christ perfectly exemplified have never been more needed to help to bring the natural and human worlds to their completion and integration, by means of the love which transforms personal, social and global relationships, whose religious name is 'God' (21).

The aims of teaching literature might well include helping students to write their own poetry and so to acquire skills of imaginativeness and expressiveness which the mere memorising and criticism of the poems of others, usually for the sole purpose of assessment, can never generate. Does not delight in poetry help to produce an inner sense of tranquillity? Is this not important if education is about learning to become a person? In 1821 Shelley claimed 'the cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave ... The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of nature' (22). Literature and poetry open up subjectivity; they are the manifestations of human imagination and feeling: they raise value-questions. They are not means to ends; but they certainly can be means of self-expression and self-knowledge. Through them one can confront one's own inwardness and understand other people more readily and deeply. For Shelley poetry helps to produce and is produced by 'the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire' (23). Christian faith is also deeply concerned with the promotion of such attitudes and states of mind.

The contribution which physical education can make to the development of persons is consistently undervalued. A teenager who has learned to be unselfish on the football field, or who can survive a night on Dartmoor in the winter has acquired knowledge which, while not primarily of the intellectual kind, is nonetheless knowledge, and it may well aid his self-confidence and self-expression more than any other kind of knowledge. The delight which is to be had in self-affirmation through one's body is among the highest that human existence has to offer, and teenagers who can affirm themselves in sport may be less likely to want to affirm themselves in less socially approved ways. If one understands a person in a more philosophical sense as being an unbreakable unity of body-and-mind (24) and education as having to do with learning to become persons, then education must be concerned with mind and body together, and physical education has an indispensable part to play in the general curriculum (25). Links between the characterically Christian concept of personhood and the aims of teachers of physical education can quite easily be forged, however improbable they appear at first sight. P.E. stresses the importance of the 'whole person'. It can contribute to the overall health of persons, and 'health' is the root meaning of the term from which the Christian idea of salvation is derived. (26). It can encourage co-operation in team games. It can encourage delight in the body. It can be an aid to self- expression and to

pride in personal achievement.

These examples show that Christian theology can contribute helpfully to education. It is part of the purpose of a modern theology of education to develop at greater length and sophistication the sort of links that in this article have scarcely even been sketched. A school leaver may, one hopes, be able to read and write and be initiated into a cultural tradition. But if he or she does not know what love is, and does not know how to give or receive it, or perhaps even to recognise it, that child is not educated according to the sense developed here of 'learning to become a person'. The semantic slipperiness and frequent misuse of the word 'love' should not prevent us from continuing to use it. The sort of love which it is appropriate to speak of in this context is the love which, for example, sees war as a sickness, nuclear weapons as unspeakable blasphemy, poverty as a crime, involuntary unemployment as a betrayal, and purely material values as the bankruptcy of spirit. With 'A' levels to pass, jobs to find, and University interviewers to impress, it still remains true that 'Man cannot live on bread alone'.

NOTES

1 See e.g. R.F. Dearden, P. Hirst, R.S. Peters (eds), A Critique of Educational Aims, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1972.

2 The best known exponent of this view is Glenn Langford. See e.g. his Philosophy and Education, Macmillan, London, 1968, p. 60; 'The Concept of Education' in G. Langford and D.J. O'Connor (eds), New Essays in the Philosophy of Education, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1973, p. 3; Teaching as a Profession, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p. 4.

3 See my 'Education and the concept of a person', Journal of Philosophy of Education, xiv, no. 1, 1980, p. 123. I develop here Langford's basic position that 'learning to become a person' expresses a conceptual truth about what education is. I want to make the concept of a person a prescriptive one which provides practical guidance for educators, and Langford welcomes this as a 'different but complementary task' to the one he has set himself in his writings. See Glenn Langford, 'Reply to Adrian Thatcher', Journal of Philosophy of Education, xiv, no. 1, 1980, p. 129.

4 In Roman law a persona was a party to a contract. In the Roman theatre a persona was the role of an actor throughout a drama and this use is preserved in the phrase dramatis personae which is still to be found at the head of cast lists in modern theatre programmes. It was also used of the mask worn by actors.

5 When Augustine used the formula 'one substance and three persons' he warned that '"three persons" ... is understood only in a mystery ... in order that there might be something to say when it was asked what the three are which true faith pronounces to be three'. (De Trinitate, 4.7)

6 Text in e.g. J. Stevenson (ed.), Creeds, Councils and Controversies, S.P.C.K., London, 1966, p. 337.

7 J.A.T. Robinson, The Human Face of God, S.C.M., London, 1973, p. 67.

8 A.R. Peacocks, Creation and the World of Science, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 245.

9 Dennis Nineham, 'Epilogue', in John Hick (ed.), The Myth of God Incarnate, S.C.M., London, 1977, p. 195.

10 Dennis Nineham, 'Jesus in the Gospels', in Norman Pittinger (ed.), Christ for Us Today, S.C.M., London, p. 61.

11 Don Cupitt, 'One Jesus, Many Christs', in S. Sykes and J.P. Clayton (eds), Christ, Faith and History, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 137.

12 Hans Kung, On Being a Christian, Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1978, p. 129.

13 Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Volume Two, J. Nisbet, Digswell Place, 1957, p. 131. In following Tillich here I am not trying to evade the historical problem in Christology as Tillich was often accused of doing: I only emphasize that for Christians being 'in Christ' is very much more than 'following Christ'.

14 Andrew Greeley, The Persistence of Religion, S.C.M., London, 1973, p. 241.

15 See the recent re-issue of John Hick's Faith and Knowledge, Collins, Fontana, 1974 (1st edition 1957).

16 L. Wittgenstein, On Certainty (eds G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright), Oxford, Blackwell, 1974, para. 105.

17 See my 'Education and the Concept of a Person', art. cit., pp. 124-6.

18 I sharply disagree with Leslie Francis who seems content with this truncated view. See his 'Theology and Education: a Research Perspective', Scottish Journal of Theology, xxxii, no. 1, 1979, p. 62.

19 H.J.K. Schilling, The New Consciousness in Science and Religion, S.C.M., London, 1973, p. 30. The phrases are borrowed from the theologian Jaroslav Pelikan.

20 Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958 (1969 edn.), p. 358.

21 See A.R. Peacocke, op. cit., especially parts 6-8. The writings of Teilhard de Chardin are obviously relevant here.

22 P.B. Shelley, In Defence of Poetry,, in A. Clayre (ed.), Nature and Industrialisation, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 213.

23 op. cit., p. 214.

24 Here I follow P.F. Strawson, Individuals, Methuen, London, 1957, ch. 3.

25 'Education and the Concept of a Person', art. cit., pp. 124- 6.

26 The Greek verb sozein can mean 'to heal' or 'to save'. The modern term 'salve', meaning a 'healing ointment', preserves the Latin salvus, 'healed'.