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This chapter will briefly explore Christian learning as Christian formation, before attempting an interpretation of human learning in general from the perspective of Christian theology.

**Learning Christianity**

A distinction needs to be made at the outset between (1) *learning about Christianity* and (2) *learning Christianity* (or ‘Christian learning’). (1) is the proper aim of Christian studies in higher education and in ‘community’, ‘common’ or ‘secular’ schools where Christianity is being studied as part of ‘nonconfessional’ – that is, non-evangelical and non-nurturing – religious education. This seeks an empathetic understanding of the Christian’s beliefs, stories, attitudes, emotions and practices (including the social behaviour that constitutes the Church and activities such as prayer and worship). The learner adopts an observer standpoint, and the learning is inevitably oriented to another’s truth and their way of being and living.

(2) learning Christianity, on the other hand, involves the learner in undergoing those cognitive, affective and lifestyle changes that constitute becoming Christian (through evangelism leading to conversion) and becoming ‘more Christian’ (through Christian formation or nurture). Christian learning’s more common cognate, ‘Christian education’, may be defined, in its very broadest sense, as those processes (usually intentional and teacher-facilitated) that lead to the learning of Christian beliefs, values and attitudes, and dispositions to experience and act in a Christian way. As with all religions, this form of learning is of the essence of Christianity: not only in the personal response and appropriation of the individual, but also in Christianity’s social transmission down 20 centuries and across the globe. Religious traditions are often described as ‘communicative practices’; ‘tradition’ itself means that which is passed on and learned; and ‘doctrine’ is, literally, ‘teaching’.

Christian theology is reflective discourse about the nature and activity of God, Christ, the Spirit, the Church (including its mission, ministry and worship), Christian salvation and so on. It represents a major element within the cognitive dimension of Christianity. There are, of course, perfectly respectable ways of studying theology that are quite at home in secular educational contexts. Theology as an academic subject may be done by unbelievers, who learn and analyse (for example) how words like ‘God’ are used (Wittgenstein 1968: § 373). But can learners fully understand such religious concepts unless they also appropriate them, not just as a truth ‘one knows about, but something which one possesses and is possessed by’ (McGrath 1997: 78)? The root notion of *theologia* is, in fact, a religious one. It is ‘the wisdom proper to the life of the
believer’, concerned with and developing within ‘the believer’s ways of existing in the world before God’ (Farley, 1988: 88). This is what theological truth amounts to in a religious context and it is something that is fundamental to every Christian’s piety and vocation – unlike the later notion of theology as a scholarly discipline.

Certainly, mere knowledge about God must be distinguished from knowledge of God (Holmer, 1978: 25, 189, 203), which is the first-person religious knowledge that ‘engages the affections and is embodied in the religious person’s life’ (Kellenberger, 1985: 179). Wittgenstein convincingly distinguishes between (1) the preliminary stage of learning about (the Christian) religion, and (2) this later ‘passionate commitment to [this] system of reference’, which occurs as and when the learner runs to religious belief and grasps it for herself. She then ‘seizes’ on the message of the Gospels ‘believingly (i.e. lovingly)’, and with a certainty that is characteristic of this ‘particular acceptance-as-true’. Wittgenstein calls this sort of certainty ‘faith’: ‘faith is faith in what is needed by my heart, my soul, not my speculative intelligence’ (faith, after all, ‘is a passion’). What combats doubt here is therefore redemption (Wittgenstein, 1980: 32–33, 56, 64; cf. Kerr, 1998: 77–78).

Such a passionate adoption of religious belief shares many of the qualities of a moral commitment. (And ‘moral learning’, too, involves more than just learning about moral principles, virtues, dispositions and practices; it is a matter of learning to be moral and to practise morality.) ‘Coming to God is not a change of opinion, but a change of direction; a reorientation of one’s whole life’ (Phillips, 1988: 118). Religious commitment and conversion, therefore, often seem closely parallel to falling in love (Astley, 1994: 237–41; 2007b).

The Christian critique of education

However, ‘Christian learning’ may also be employed in a more general way, as is the term ‘Christian education’ (Hull, 1984: 39, 206; Astley, 1994: Ch. 1). The latter phrase is often used of the broad range of activities leading to learning in general (both teacher-facilitated, and through the more ‘hidden curriculum’ of relationships and institutional structures) that take place in ‘church schools’ or (Christian) ‘faith schools’ and also in ‘Christian’ or ‘church’ (‘religious’, etc.) colleges and universities, or in wider programmes of adult education (see, e.g. Conroy, 1999; Wolterstorff, 2002). It could apply to secular institutions and contexts of education as well (e.g. McKenzie, 1982: Ch. 1, 1986; Shortt and Cooling, 1997). In all such cases, it would be more proper to speak in terms of a ‘general education of a Christian kind’ or a ‘Christian scheme of education’ (see Fuller, 1957; Tulasiewicz and Brock, 1988; Astley and Francis, 1994: Ch. 1.1). These labels may be taken to apply to general educational activities that are not specifically focused on converting people to or nurturing them in a full and explicit Christian faith (and may even deny such intentions), but which represent aims, content, processes and outcomes of learning that are influenced by a Christian ‘philosophy of’ – in the sense of an understanding and evaluation of – general education.

Much general education is undertaken from a Christian viewpoint: a perspective that is itself determined by certain Christian attitudes and values and especially by the Christian belief-and-meaning system. (The criteria underlying this viewpoint are the ones that also serve to specify whether a particular learning outcome of the activities of evangelism and nurture may or may not legitimately be described as ‘Christian’.)

In most cases, the Christian influence on general education will reflect those features that are characteristic of, rather than those that are unique to and therefore distinctive of, Christianity (and are therefore not shared by any other religious or secular viewpoint). Examples of such characteristic features include concern for the value of the individual, for certain interpersonal and social qualities, and for truth (cf. Conroy, 1999: Ch. 5). For this reason, much ‘implicitly Christian’ education will not necessarily differ in content or method, but only in motivation, from other loving or caring education that leads to personal growth. In a plural society this means that many Christian educators are happy to work with and support approaches to public education that arise from non-Christian (although usually not anti-Christian) sources.
Some Christians have argued that, as ‘Christian presuppositions do provide an interpretative framework for all the forms of knowledge’, ‘there must be a unique content to Christian education in all areas of study’ (Thiessen, 1985: 50; cf. Maintain in Fuller, 1957: 180). How this is worked out will vary. In the hands of many conservative Christians, Christian comment on and influence on general education may run very deep, taking a form that more liberal Christians would not endorse – for example, the rejection of ‘non-biblical’ emphases in the teaching of evolution (see Peshkin, 1986; cf. Roques, 1989). Very many Christians, however, are as suspicious of forms of theological imperialism of this kind as are non-Christians.

The utilisation of criteria that are characteristically, rather than distinctively, Christian might seem to disable the whole idea of a Christian critique of education. But Christians would say that it is a mistake to refuse to designate anything ‘Christian’ unless it is a belief, attitude or viewpoint that is only to be found within Christianity. Much that is central to the teaching of Jesus, or the Church’s doctrines and self-understanding, is simply not distinctive in that way. While these elements should always be present in what is truly Christian, it cannot be argued that they are unique to Christianity. I shall not pretend, therefore, that all of what follows represents a point of view that is specific to Christianity. Much of what Christians say is shared by other approaches to and critiques of education, both within other religious traditions and from a secular viewpoint.

Both the characteristically Christian and the specifically Christian critiques, it should be pointed out, are theological interpretations of human learning. This is because the question, What is Christianity?, is a normative question and a theological issue (Astley, 1988). Theology is here exercising its function of defining and articulating the nature of the Christian religion, although we must note that the differences of theological position that contribute to the internal variety of Christianity can sometimes produce rather different conclusions about the nature of Christian education.

Theology (literally, ‘God-talk’) has an important place within Christianity. But at its best it ‘knows its place’, which is as a second-order activity that represents the cognitive expression of – and, in turn, is expressed in – Christian being and Christian activity. Christian beliefs arise out of the attitudes, values and experiences of Christian spirituality, and they give rise to such Christian activities as ministry (service) and worship.

**Spirituality of learning and ministry of teaching**

A number of Christian writers have stressed the importance of certain moral and spiritual virtues in learning and scholarship, in addition to intellectual virtues (e.g. Sullivan, in Carr and Haldane, 2003: Ch. 9). Mark Schwenn commends ‘seeking the truth of matters’ by means of ‘thoughtfulness’ (in Sterk, 2002: 55–56). Richard Pring lists courage in the face of failure, commitment to persevere and honesty (Pring, 2000: 151–52). This last virtue is closely allied to humility, which is often cited as a key Christian virtue – although it is one that Christians individually, and the institutional Church in particular, have often found difficult to learn. Certainly, ‘Christianity at its best teaches people that they stand not at the center of reality, but on the periphery along with everyone else’ (Marsden, 1997: 109). But all learning must reflect a humility before the truth. The notion of disinterested learning – concerned for the truth alone, rather than the learner’s own interests – often figures large in accounts of liberal education, where it is perceived as an intrinsic good (the cultivation and discipling of the intellect ‘for its own sake’, Newman, 1899: Discourse V), and is not solely judged in terms of serving ‘useful’ (particularly economic) needs. Learning may also be related to a spirituality of letting go of the self and its interests, in the face of the independent significance of the thing learned. Love of a subject can lead the learner ‘away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny … ’ (Murdoch, 1970: 89; cf. 84–85). Simone Weil calls study itself ‘sacramental’ (see below) because of its element of ‘attention’: a waiting on truth that she regards as equally essential to the stance of prayer. ‘Studies are nearer to God because of the attention which is their own…’
There is a spirituality of teaching, too. This underlies the teacher’s devotion to the well-being of others and the role of the teacher as ‘ministerial agent’, in Jacques Maritain’s phrase (see also Sullivan, 2011: ch. 12). Teaching is a high form of inclusive, indiscriminate love, according to the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (Buber, 1947: 94–95). This, too, is a form of disinterestedness. The New Testament would call it *agapé*, (God’s) indiscriminate love for the unlovely. According to the Quaker, Parker Palmer, friendship-love is also involved when a teacher introduces his or her subject to the students ‘in the way one would introduce a friend’, inviting them into this ‘valued friendship’ (Palmer, 1993: 104). Friends should not be manipulated; and neither should the learner, nor the truth (Astley, Francis, Sullivan and Walker, 2004: Ch. 8).

**Respect for the learner**

As in the last section, theology serves here more as a motivation for a characteristic Christian action than as a premise for justifying a distinctive practice. Christianity identifies the high status of the learner because it recognises the high status of all. The belief of Christians and others in the sanctity of the individual human as created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27) should inform a respect for learners and encourage them in respect for their fellow learners.

Good teaching has been called ‘an act of hospitality toward the young’ (Palmer, 1998: 5). ‘Intellectual hospitality involves care and concern for the person … affirming the value of others and their perspectives’ (Kim Phipps, in Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2004: 174). Although the student’s words and thoughts may be criticised, they should always be treated with respect (Moran, 1997: 135–42). At least with regard to teaching curriculum topics that lie close to the heart, such as those with a spiritual or ethical dimension, most Christians would applaud Robert Nash’s humanistic standpoint: ‘we need to treat each other with exquisite respect and sensitivity. Critique and feedback … ought always to come out of a framework of generosity and compassion.’ Both students and teachers need to feel ‘safe and supported enough to speak their truths-in-process to others’ (Nash, 2002: 99). ‘Criticism’, of course, is simply evaluation or assessment; it may be either positive or negative. But neither the truth nor the learners are necessarily best served by adversarial educational contexts. ‘Respect for truth’ is compatible with a respect for the learners and an appropriate respect for their ‘truths’. Many would argue that this lies at the heart of Jesus’s way of teaching.

Respect for learners has motivated many Christian educationalists to criticise the commodification of education that frequently accompanies the application of the brutal, competitive logic of the marketplace to the task of learning, effectively displacing the older ideal of education as a public service (e.g. Grace, 1995, 2002). Some emphasise the fact that marketplaces and commerce are themselves parasitic on community: ‘a community that they did not create, do not pay for and have no moral right to control.’ ‘People came first … [and] people have the right to come first’ (Astley, 1998: 383, 2003).

**Holiness and catholicity**

The distinctive Christian community is the Church, and Christian educationalists have sometimes taken elements of the doctrine of the Church and applied them to educational communities. There are two particular ‘marks’ or ‘notes’ of the Christian Church that resonate with current educational concerns.

The Church is ‘catholic’ in the sense of universal or inclusive, for all are called. A Church that discriminated against people of a certain race or colour would be widely regarded as heretical, although Christians are still divided over people’s sexuality and even (with respect to ordination) their sex. Nevertheless, in the Christian perspective the logic of the Church’s catholicity is often seen to imply and support an all-embracing, indiscriminate view of education.

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soul. Whoever goes through years of study without developing this attention … has lost a great treasure’ (Weil, 1977: 51).

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But how does this square with another mark of the Church, its ‘holiness’? This seems to speak of the Church’s isolation (‘set apartness’) and to make a – surely hypocritical – claim to purity. However, Jesus’s criticism of the Pharisees (‘separatists’), and his deliberate identification with sinners and outcasts, suggests that Christian holiness is not to be seen as a closed-off species of self-concern, but a holiness or wholeness of embrace. The Church ‘is holy in its openness to the street and even the alley, in its turning to the profanity of all human life’ (Barth, 1956: 725). Christian education, therefore, should show the same spirit and tone of openness to the educationally profane. (And a Christian school or college, like the Church, is especially called to be holy in its openness.)

Gospel epistemology and values

Some Christians claim that particular ways of knowing are more compatible with the Christian Faith than are others. Palmer names four traits that define truth (Henry and Agee, 2003: Ch. 5). Truth is personal (not only propositional), for the Jesus of St John’s Gospel says, ‘I am … the truth’ (John 14.6). It is also communal (emerging in dialogue and encounter); reciprocal (we find truth, but it also finds us); and transformational (it changes us). Again, however, these are categories that are characteristic of, rather than specific to, Christianity.

Perhaps more significant is the revision, indeed overturning, of values that occupied such a central place in the ministry and teaching of Jesus, and the writings of St Paul (see Wright, 2010: 100, 198–99). The learning of values and moral virtues is central to all forms of character education. The Beatitudes, which sum up Jesus’s good news for the poor (Luke 6.20–25), and his teaching (Matthew 18.1–5) about a child being the greatest in the ‘kingdom of God’ (that is, where God’s will is really done on earth) reveal Jesus’s radical views on success and status (Astley, 2007a: Chs 1, 2, 8). The Christian gospel further affirms that ‘a real victory is the kind of thing that happens when Jesus goes to the cross’ (Gunton, 1988: 78–79). Paul therefore distinguishes God’s wisdom of the cross, revealed in the crucifixion of Christ, from any worldly-wise ethic and spirituality (1 Corinthians 1.18–2.16).

Other Christian doctrines

Doctrines are not only propositional statements that (Christians claim) correspond with a cosmic reality. They also function as ‘conceptual arenas within which Christian identity is shaped and the contours of the Christian life are formed’. And they ‘demarcate the interpretive field through which we view the world and ourselves’ (Serene Jones, in Volf and Bass, 2002: 74). A range of other Christian doctrines may serve in this way to illuminate, if not decisively to determine, the Christian’s understanding of certain aspects of the task of general education (see Jarvis and Walters, 1993).

The distinctive Christian claim is that ‘Christ Jesus … was in the form of God, [but] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself’ (Philippians 2.6–7). This ‘coming down’, or ‘divine condescension’, was eventually understood in terms of an incarnation (enfleshing) of God in Christ and a doctrine of a triune God who is eternally Father, Son and Spirit.

A broad ‘incarnational theology’ is often applied by Christians to other situations where it is said that the divine is subject to ordinary human experiences and limitations, as a treasure held in ‘clay jars’ (cf. 2 Corinthians 4.7). In educational contexts, this theological perspective may be thought to warrant a holistic view of human beings, as well as a recognition of the natural world as a vehicle of God’s truth and grace. Maria Harris even describes teaching as ‘the incarnation of the subject matter’, which makes it present (‘accessible’) in such a way that ‘the outcome is revelation’ (Harris, 1987: 59). The teacher enfleshes, and thus gives-form-to, her chosen subject matter. Harris appeals to a further doctrine in her claim that ‘teaching is analogous to any work of creation’ (p. 25) and that teachers are ‘co-creators’ with their students (p. 75).
The doctrine of creation – a belief that is shared with other theistic religions – has other educational resonances. It suggests that ‘one way to love God is to know and love God’s work’ (Plantinga, 2002: xi). This doctrine also implies that the world is real, intelligible and was created good. Created in God’s image, human beings reflect God’s rational attributes. Further, as all truth bears witness to God as the creator of all, the interconnectedness and ultimate harmony of all knowledge may be asserted (Peterson, 2001: 96–103; D’Costa in Sullivan, 2011: 219–26).

Creation also allows all material or ‘secular’ reality to be seen as the bearer of God’s grace (God’s loving forgiveness and care). This notion of ‘sacramentality’ allows for a positive recognition of secular learning. The sacraments of the Church (baptism, the eucharist, etc.) are ordinary physical objects or human acts that both symbolise and bestow grace. By extension, learning situations may be thought of as ‘sacramental’, and this is one way of describing the ‘nonseparation of sacred and secular’ (Sullivan, 2011: 104; cf. Noll and Turner, 2008: 106–7).

While some writers appeal to God’s miraculous interruption of the mundane causal pathways that constitute the learning process, most think of God as ‘teaching through’ the laws of human psychology that God has made and sustains.

It would seem repugnant to God’s nature and intelligence to suppose that he works against rather than in and with the nature he created and continues to create through his presence and power and existence in all reality. Teaching and learning are not inexplicable miracles magically wrought by proximate zaps of the Holy Spirit. If there is any miracle involved in the teaching-learning process, it is that God has magnificently designed the nature and functioning of all reality in such a way that reality is inherently amenable to human explanation, prediction, and verification on its own terms.

(Weatherly, 1982: 196–97)

It is possible, of course, to combine both interpretations, by recognising that God may work by ‘extraordinary’ acts of supernatural grace as well as through the ‘ordinary’ or natural grace of human development and explicable processes of learning (see Fowler, 1981: 302–3).

While Protestants have traditionally expected that the hand of God will frequently need to work against the grain of a ‘fallen’, unredeemed human nature, Catholics are more likely to think of grace as perfecting nature, rather than destroying it. This latter view was propounded by Thomas Aquinas, for whom the teacher ‘cooperates with God and nature in assisting students to learn’ – working like doctors do in exercising their ministry of healing (Elias, 2002: 62). Creation and salvation may thus be perceived as one continuous process, rather than viewing the redemptive activity of God as reversing the failures and inadequacies of a created order that is mired in sin.

Christians who emphasise the heinousness of the fall, however, have at certain periods believed that Christian education demands first the conviction of unworthiness and sinfulness in their children, so that they may as soon as possible repent and be converted to Christ (see Bunge, 2001: Ch. 11). But the nineteenth-century Protestant theologian, Horace Bushnell, argued for a more seamless approach of implicit Christian learning, mediated through parental love and direction, and the atmosphere of the house (Bushnell 1979 [1861]: 106). Rejecting notions of childhood depravity, Bushnell insisted that the child is to ‘grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise’ (p. 10): nurture here entirely substitutes for conversion.

Emphasis on human sinfulness is also likely to stress reason’s fallleness, at least in the area of religious truth. But all Christians affirm that there are truths that transcend merely human understanding and language (Astley, 2004) and they reject a radical naturalistic reductionism that goes beyond the reductionist methodology of science in drawing overarching metaphysical conclusions. From a liberal perspective, Jarvis points out that the myth of the fall, as a profound learning experience, additionally expresses the truth that learning leads to individuation, a process that can break human social ties (Jarvis and Walters, 1993: 150).

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Concluding remarks

Implicit in much of the above is the Christian ideal of a full and genuine personal maturity. Christian anthropology recognises both the limits and the potential of human nature. It sees the former as a function of humankind’s finite creaturely dependence and (to varying degrees) our sinful nature. Humanity’s potential, however, is marked by the hope that – despite these humble origins – our moral and spiritual character may yet be brought to ‘maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Ephesians 4.13).

The Christian doctrine of sanctification describes this in terms of a ‘making holy’ or ‘renewal’ of the inner person, marked by a change in that person’s attitudes, values, spiritual orientations and disposition to act in certain ways. Theologically, these processes are said to be informed and strengthened by – and are seen as a response to – the grace bestowed by a Christ-like God. From the human perspective, however, such changes are essentially formative processes of learning. Indeed, they represent for Christians the supreme paradigm of human learning: that is, learning to be a Christian disciple and thereby learning to be like Jesus. It is this vision and hope that constitutes the human heart of the Christian religion.

In the end, therefore, Christianity will always be more concerned with the goal and substantive content of learning (what is learned) than with critiquing its form and processes. But it will also desire that all learning might help to lead people towards, rather than turn them away from, some sort of distinctive and determinate ‘learning of Christ’. Hence the Christian’s wider view of general or secular learning is best portrayed as a perspective along the road to this ultimate, all-embracing and all-fulfilling end of growing up into Christ, in conformity with his image of the self-giving God of love (1 Corinthians 13; Philippians 2.1–11).

Note

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