

WORD MADE FLESH -
HOW THE CHRISTIAN WORLD-VIEW AFFECTS
TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Our title is deceptively simple. It conceals all kinds of complexities philosophical, psychological, pedagogical and otherwise, which are far beyond the scope of this paper. Indeed, a whole literature is being developed in an attempt to address precisely this issue. The whole impulse of the integration of faith and learning movement derives from the need to ensure that what takes place in church educational institutions is uniquely Christian. So we must immediately scale down the size of the enterprise and set ourselves a more manageable task. We must set ourselves some limits.

"CHRISTIAN"

The allegory of the asylum made it clear, I hope, that one cannot really speak of the "Christian world-view" with any sort of precision. Christians from varied traditions look at the world in very different ways, and accordingly make conflicting moral and spiritual commitments. We shall confine ourselves here to assessing the impact of our own Adventist Christian world-view on practice in our own institutions.

"AFFECTS"

The word "affects" might well elicit a sort of sociological account of how Adventist ideals actually fare in the classroom. But I want to go beyond that and suggest some ways in which we might be more faithful to the ethos of our Adventist Christian tradition. To that extent this paper will tend to focus on some blemishes on the face of Adventist pedagogy.

"LEARNING AND TEACHING"

It is easy to slip into the error of thinking that "teaching" is that activity engaged in by a minority of salaried people, in authority,

in an educational institution, and that "learning" is the function of the large majority of people there who may, or may not, themselves pay for the privilege but who are definitely consumers, and who are subordinate in status. That, of course, is not the case. Teaching and learning are complementary parts of the same process - the uncovering of newness. One cannot really teach well unless one is constantly learning about the world one is uncovering, and about the people to whom one is uncovering it. Those who officially are learning are constantly teaching those who teach and their peers, whether they know it or not. In the end, learning and teaching involves the formation of relationships in a particular context, and the nature of those collegial relationships will profoundly affect the way in which those human beings, particularly the less mature ones, will come to view their relationships to the wider world.

"WORLD-VIEW"

That brings us then to the "world-view" which is held in the institution, the ethos which pervades it. Some writers use the term simply to refer to intellectual entities, theoretical constructs. I hope that my allegory of the asylum has made it clear that this is an inadequate understanding of the term "world-view". It was not that the inmates simply perceived the quadrangle in a particular way: their perceptions led them to engage in different kinds of response and action. Your world-view is the structure by means of which you integrate and interpret all of experience. Your world-view is your set of presuppositions about the world which has been established in many and varied ways. Tradition, intuition, prejudice, emotion play a part just as important as that played by the intellect. And presuppositions are, by their very nature, things which do not stand in need of further

justification. They provide your starting point; it is not negotiable. You think it the best vantage point on the world, and perhaps have difficulty in understanding why others occupy other ground. Further, my inclusion of non-academic figures - Jackie Kennedy, Ben Johnson, Hugh Hefner, Idi Amin - was designed to indicate that a world-view is not merely the property of philosophers. All people have a world-view regardless of their formal academic achievements. A world-view is pre-theoretical, almost instinctive.

What we have said here about individuals applies also to groups of people. According to Langdon Gilkey, our membership in a particular community depends on

a shared consciousness, a shared system of meanings To be a member of any community is to be aware of, to participate in, and to be oneself shaped, energized, and directed by this common symbolic mythos. Society and the Sacred, p. 43

Gilkey adds that this mythos is a secularized equivalent of salvation history. "It tells us who we are in history and why we are here. It forms the ultimate set of presuppositions for most of our aims and so for our patterns of education" (ibid., p. 24). Our world-view then has endless implications for praxis.

There may come a time, however, when our world-view is found wanting. It may fail to match quite the reality on the ground. It may lack the capacity to analyse and resolve problems. It may lack currency. At that point, one holding the world-view may return to it and demand greater "value-for-money", as it were. An individual has the right, even the responsibility, to demand that a world-view "work" or function adequately in the wider world without conceding that the wider world dictate terms. Inevitably, the wider society largely creates the agenda to which a Christian must respond. As someone has said, "The world provides the context, the church provides the text".

So the point of this paper is to assess the Adventist mythos and see how the educational system operated by the church can give greater "value for money".

As I have already sought to argue, the strength of the Adventist Christian world-view is its emphasis on wholeness. I want thus to comment on different aspects of the same whole, and so deal with the following - mind, body, emotion, sociality, volition, spirit, identity - before concluding with some general observations on wholeness.

MIND

I find it difficult to locate a term which will adequately describe the intellectual ideal I wish to recommend here. I want to argue for true intellectual openness and against rigidity and intransigence, while avoiding the slide into a mediocre liberalism, pure subjectivity or mere eclecticism. I want to argue in favour of the stimulus and excitement of genuine intellectual enquiry, and against the enervating preservation of the status quo for its own sake, while retaining the maturing and energizing element of commitment to a cause or ideal above and beyond oneself. From what I have just said, it will be apparent that I am interested in cultivating in students the ability to sustain tensions of various kinds, and for that reason I shall employ the term "intellectual suppleness". Suppleness is a term which we normally apply to muscles which are able to relax, absorb shock, and then tense for action and work when required.

Intellectual suppleness will demand the development of critical analytical faculties which are able to sustain logical argument but it will recognize that even the most inexorable logic will only complete a journey begun from certain presuppositions. Critical reason is necessary but not sufficient for the making of the whole person. We

need at the same time to cultivate the imagination. Those who worship a God creative enough to form the elephant and the hedgehog, the sunflower and the orchid, creative enough to produce the incarnation as a solution to the human problem, must surely place a high value on the imagination. And yet Christians, particularly those from Puritan stock such as ourselves, have been fearful of the imagination. We have been suspicious of the novel, the theatre, the visual arts. And not entirely without reason. The imagination produces much nonsense and needs to be disciplined by reason, but the subjugation of the imagination makes us dull, unable to sense what the quadrangle may look like from another window, unable to understand why another may be weeping on a bright summer's day, uninterested in another's story.

This means that we must encourage the development of an attribute which is all too rare in the classroom - genuine intellectual curiosity and often to do that within the confines of a system which operates a rigid syllabus and with students who too often see a course basically as a means to a vocational end. We must constantly seek to show the familiar world under an unfamiliar aspect. To become blasé about our Lord's creation is a kind of blasphemy.

Intellectual suppleness demands that we not be afraid of doubt in the classroom. On the contrary, we absolutely need our students to be sceptical of many of the claims which are being made on behalf of commercial, political and religious interests. Our students need the freedom of being able to visit, in their imagination, other cells to sample the the view on the quadrangle. And yet unfettered scepticism is arid and cold and deathly. Scepticism must eventually give way to commitment if it is to have value.

Our students need to know the importance of paradox and be freed from the tyranny of undiluted Aristotelianism. They need to know that,

on occasion, it is more faithful to the truth to say "both . . . and . . ." rather than "either . . . or . . ." They need to develop a sense of mystery, mystery not in the sense of a problem which is merely awaiting solution, but in the sense of a phenomenon which is beyond our capacity to comprehend. As Aquinas once put it, we are unable to see the brightness of the sun not because of any fault in it but because we lack the apparatus to cope with the excess of light. We need to teach a generation which seems unhappy in the absence of noise, to seek the silence. Having been in the presence of many voices, our students need the opportunity to find their own voice. We need to wean them away from their adiction to constant stimulus.

Our students need to develop the ability to sustain the tension between the priestly and the prophetic, between the traditional and the radical. They need to learn respect for authority sources; authorities, after all, are only established after much testing and can save us from turning into many blind alleys. Teacher, textbook, tradition must be respected but not rendered infallible. Authorities are slow to respond to change. The prophetic voice must be heard in the classroom and yet separated from the merely eccentric.

The "Idealists" in our asylum then, with their commitment to rational reflection, have important things to say to us. But there remains the ever-present danger of treating the material world, the scheme of things as it now is, with a touch of disdain. The important counter-balancing principle here is what I would call "connectedness". Neither students nor teachers can afford to wish for very long that thing were other than they are. For if the wish endures for very long it will become a fantasy. We, as teachers, must be "in touch" with events unfolding in our society, on the international scene and in the youth culture. We show this by our brief asides and by the content of

our classes, by our humour, by interests, by our dress and so on. We must be viewing the same quadrangle as the one contemplated by our students. Jesus, in His interview with Nicodemus, recognized the principle that you cannot expect others to listen to what you have to say about the next world unless what you have to say about the present world is plausible.

The principle of connectness applies also to the curriculum as a whole. A liberal arts education, in principle, is well suited to establishing connections between disparate facets of human experience and human enquiry. Too often it is separated into modules which tend to be self-contained. Teaching myself in such a system, I find too often that I am quite unaware of what is going on in other classrooms. Team-teaching, inter-disciplinary teaching has much to recommend it as a means of bringing variety into the lives both of students and staff. Some teachers avoid it because they feel threatened by it or do not wish to lose their sovereignty in the classroom. Others avoid it because they fear that a confusing message may come across. Yet it does seem to me that a conversation between teacher and teacher, teacher and student, and student/teacher and the world must be in progress all the time if we are to progress any way towards the ideal of connectedness. It seems to me that the staff as a whole ought regularly to consider the academic package which they are jointly offering and be able to pronounce it good.

BODY

The "Materialists" have something very important to say to us. Over against the "Idealists", they say that material reality is the ultimate reality. In so saying, we believe, they go too far but we ignore at our peril the fact that the body, and matter in general, is an

important part of reality. And Christianity in many forms has in fact wanted to deny that. The Adventist mythos has always been basically sound on this. Both spirit and body are good insofar as they are created, and both are corrupt insofar as they are fallen. The body is not evil but, on the contrary, the temple of the Holy Spirit, an indispensable part. There can be no soul, no human being, without a body. Having a body is part of what it means to be a soul, to be a human being.

Though that important foundation has long been in place, we have made some mistakes in the edifice we have erected upon it. With many Puritans, we have tended to see the body primarily as a source of temptation and therefore evil - passion, greed, pride, envy. But the Adventist mythos has changed, for example, in the area of sex. We have moved from regarding sex as something vaguely dirty, self-indulgent and unseemly, to viewing it as being something to be celebrated and enjoyed within the constraints of marriage. This raises problems for those who are sexually mature -and this happens earlier and earlier these days - perhaps at the height of their sexual powers, and yet who are tending to defer marriage to a later date. It means that we have to help our students to find strategies for dealing with their sexuality over a period of about ten years when they will not have what we regard as a legitimate sexual outlet. Part of the solution lies in insisting that intercourse between the sexes does not have to be genital to be satisfying.

We have, at the same time, to help our students to come to terms with the guilt which they may feel at experiencing strong desire or simply being curious. We have to help them to recognize that beyond their desire for excitement and the satisfaction of curiosity is a deep desire for affection which is legitimate but which may easily be

replaced by the insidious desire for possession. They need to learn that in this area, as in many others, while excitement may be easily found, happiness is more difficult to achieve. Perhaps the best we can do is to provide good role models of male-female relationships among the staff and ensure that we teach out of good marriages or contented singleness ourselves.

We have, of course, a responsibility to encourage our students to keep their bodies in good health without attaching too great a moral significance to that. More than that duty - which we talk about a great deal - we need to teach our students to feel comfortable in their bodies, something we talk far less about.

It seems to me that we have made progress in helping students to feel at home in their bodies. Whole generations of young Christians learnt to feel ill at ease in their bodies because movement of the body in dance, mime, theatricality was regarded as seductive, provocative, exhibitionist. It is perhaps not surprising that the main form of activity involving movement of the body which we permit is formal and rule-directed, sport in various forms. While I would not want to discourage the playing of sport, I do feel we should make more room for dance, movement, mime and theatre which, unlike sport, has a purpose beyond itself and is not competitive in nature. It is perhaps the powerful spontaneity of such activities that we find threatening.

In the Protestant tradition, it is easy to slip into the belief that wealth is a sign of God's favour. As we gradually equip students to look after their own material needs by teaching them important vocational skills, we need to sound a warning. As we lead them towards taking their place among the educated middle-classes, we need to tell them that being a yuppie and enjoying all the comforts and gadgetry that

modern technology has to offer is not in itself an ideal which is worthy of them.

Unfortunately, we have tended to equate good stewardship with the faithful payment of tithe and offering to the church. For Christians nowadays it must extend further. Good stewardship must involve care for our environment, which God created and pronounced very good. Neither can it neglect the needs of the less fortunate on our planet. Good stewardship must now involve assuming responsibility, financial and otherwise, for our eco-system and all its inhabitants. To deny this by conspicuous consumption to satisfy our own material needs is a modern form of idolatry. An organization such as our own, which tends to make its members upwardly mobile, expecting their share in national prosperity, may encounter considerable difficulty in this area.

EMOTION

We must accept, I think, that the "Subjectivists" have something to teach us which we individually, and in our educational systems generally, often prefer to avoid. We must pay due attention to our emotions, listening to what they tell us, seeking to understand and educate them. We must help our students to discover whether their guilts, anger and fears are justified. If they are, we must help them to deal with them; if they are not, we must help them to eliminate them. It is simple to say but difficult to do because some of these emotional reactions have roots going deep into our own psyches. This is an area of life which we tend to screen off from the rest because our emotions are difficult to manage and make us vulnerable. Christians particularly have been suspicious of the emotions but we do our students a grave disservice if we fail to equip them to deal with their emotional selves. Part of the problem may be that we have not been good learners ourselves in this matter.

Students must learn what devastation is caused in life by apathy and indifference, that the latter is the true opposite of love, not hate. We must provide them with a context in which to try and to fail safely; indeed, we may have a responsibility to see that they do experience failure and develop strategies for dealing with it. Similarly, they all need to experience the elation brought by success. Success and failure must be experienced relative both to others' achievements and to their own. To concentrate on the former is to make the student unduly competitive, to concentrate on the latter is to ignore the harsh realities of a competitive world.

Students need to learn to laugh, to laugh at things other than others' misfortunes, else they become malevolent; to laugh at things other than crudity, else they become coarse; to laugh at their own foibles, else they take themselves too seriously. Humour has its place in the classroom as in life; we fear it, I suspect, because it often threatens to get out of hand.

We need to create such respect for persons in the classroom that students do feel freedom on occasion to expose their pain and their passion. Through all the mosaic of human emotion they should find contentment. We need to be models of those who have found a way through life, not sought to escape from it.

Students, then, need to learn an appreciation of the proper expression of emotion. On the one hand they must be able to identify emotionalism, sentimentalism and romanticism for what they are. On the other hand, they need to recognize the dangerous consequences of repressing emotion for mental health. It means we shall have to be prepared to do some work, formally or otherwise, with concepts of macho and wimp; seductress and virgin; masculinity and femininity, for there is considerable confusion over these in the wider society.

SOCIALITY

We can look to the "Humanitarian" to teach us important lessons about our social selves. These are lessons which the church as a whole has not been slow to learn. The ideal in any Christian educational institution must surely be to forge a community where every individual has significance and undertakes to make his/her distinctive contribution to the health of the community. It is not as easy as it sounds. There is a tendency nowadays to treat a college or school rather like a supermarket where one goes simply to take those things provided from the shelves. It is a dangerous development. Students who, when confronted by questions about their behaviour, complain that "they haven't done anything", are admitting their guilt when their words are intended to be a plea of innocence. Community can only exist where people do something, accept responsibility for the well-being of the group.

It is important that the institution is pervaded by the spirit of respect for persons. Christians must acknowledge the dignity of other persons, whether of equal rank or not; they must protect their legitimate rights, pay due deference to their ideas and ideals whether or not they share them. Much importance attaches to the way in which we treat those who are less powerful among our number, whether that may be because of their race, the fact that they are female, or because of some personal fragility. Any society must ultimately be judged according to the way in which it treats its more vulnerable members.

For that reason, students need to be made aware of the way in which the larger society of which they are a part treats its weaker members. It seems to me that this requires an awareness of socio-political questions, an acknowledgement of the fact that many social problems are so large that they can only be solved by political means. For this reason, Christian teaching cannot be narrowly individualistic

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nor concern itself solely with the interests of a narrowly defined group. We must therefore attempt to raise students' political awareness, though at the same time it may be advisable to avoid the pitfalls of party politics. We have, I think, been too timid in this regard.

Our colleges are places where young maturing adults should have the freedom to experiment with behaviour, with the assumption of roles and personae. This experimentation has to be within certain agreed limitations because the staff, as well as having a responsibility to allow students to mature without undue confinement, also have the duty to preserve a certain ethos in the institution. It requires considerable wisdom to arbitrate between the two.

An important part of any social education is to learn how power hierarchies work. Students will almost unconsciously observe how the staff hierarchy functions and operate similar principles as they establish their own pecking order. They will also witness how staff treat students and will learn either to respect or to exploit those who are lower in some formal or informal hierarchy. The model from our Lord, who was pleased to talk with pharisee and leper, is clear. It is important that they develop a sympathetic spirit.

Lastly, students need to learn a sense of gratitude, a recognition of their indebtedness to other people. It is a guard against arrogance. Students have to learn to operate the tension between autonomy and dependence. They must learn to carve their own way through life and yet recognize that it is both inevitable and desirable that on occasion they should lean on others, as it is inevitable that others should lean on them. A spirit of gratitude is a mark of the mature person, though there are dangers in trying to force its development too early.

VOLITION

The debt we owe to the "Determinists" is that they at least have mapped out the territory though we cannot entirely agree with the route they have chosen to travel through it. The Christian world-view does make room for the fact that our environment, our childhood experience, our body chemistry, our cultivated habits and so on, all have an important bearing on the way we develop and on the way we face the demands of the present moment. However, the Christian world-view ultimately stands for the position that we individually must accept responsibility for our choices. Most of us have a tendency to plead mitigating circumstances when we are under pressure: "I'm sorry I'm late but" We must teach our students to accept responsibility, just as we must discourage the over-conscientious from accepting responsibility which is not properly theirs. A further difficult task lies in getting groups of people to accept responsibility corporately, particularly for a matter which may not be sharply focused.

Part of accepting responsibility is learning to cultivate the discernment necessary to know God's will. There are no short cuts, though we sometimes try to develop a superstitious equivalent of the Urim and Thummim. Talk of "open" and "closed" doors can easily degenerate into a kind of fatalism, or situational determinism. It is more difficult to be quiet enough and open enough to hear the voice of God.

This brings me to the whole question of ambition. It seems to me that we have the difficult task of helping the students to wrestle with the dichotomies between service and career, between ambition and sacrifice, between a sense of vocation and enlightened self-interest, between accepting the cross and seeking self-fulfilment according to the modern fashion. These are hard lessons to learn, lessons that take

many years to learn. Young people who feel they want to go out and make their mark on the world are not likely to listen very carefully to talk of self-denial. And neither perhaps should they. One can only truly deny oneself of something whose benefits one has enjoyed. There is a time for self-indulgence, or better self-realization, and a time for self-denial. Our students are perhaps at the stage where they should think more of self-realization. But it is important that they should be able to remember our words and ideals about service, sacrifice and vocation. Those of us who have long worked for the church and at some stage in our lives have felt trapped by that employment, and left with few occupational options, may not always be the best ones to talk to them about such matters.

There are many other things our students need to know and little time to describe them. They need to understand that from time to time a gap will open up between live faith and the mythos. They then are faced with a most significant choice. They may mindlessly seek to preserve the institutional status quo, they may have a vision of how to bridge the gap and so keep the church on the cutting edge of faith, or they may part company altogether with the household of faith. We need to encourage them away from the first and the last by making it evident that we always run risks when we dig around our roots, personal or institutional, just as we run risks when we fail to prune the plant. We need somehow to pass on to them the vision of a church radical but secure, a church ready to respond to the demands of a fast-changing world yet resolute in its defence of eternal principles. They need to learn enthusiasm and commitment, and at the same time recognize that often the zealous shout the loudest because they are trying to convince themselves. The frightening thing about all these things which I have said that our students need to learn is that they will learn them from

us largely incidentally. They will learn and we will teach often without our being conscious that the process is going on.

SPIRIT

Little perhaps needs to be said here. It is an area of life which we talk about frequently. The problem is not with knowing but with doing and the will to do. Furthermore, since man is a unity, much that has been said hitherto might as well have gone under this heading. There are however, perhaps a few things which will bear repetition.

The first is that there is no such thing as a comfortable or static relationship with God. The Spirit is forever active, prompting, foraging, wooing. We in religious institutions seek to stabilize, formalize, for fear that religious zeal might become esoteric, eccentric, anarchic. And rightly so, but we must be careful not to domesticate the Spirit who is forever on the move. We must be careful not to equate religiosity, respectability, orthodoxy with true experience of God. These may be parts of it but true religious experience is saying "yes" to God at a deep personal level, whatever the implications.

We must expose them to the mystery of God, help them to listen to the silence, to meet the personal God who often takes us by surprise, to sense that the Creator of the universe does indeed want us. It means providing them with a model of God based on the model of our closest relationships where we are content, get angry, feel hurt, resentment, feel elated, and above all feel the freedom to admit to all of that. We shall find that difficult if our own relationships are formal and secretive. We must in some dim way try to make our relationship with them a model for their relationship with God.

We must help them to realize that genuine faith at base is always passionate, radical, battling to sustain itself, though it may often be

concealed under a calm exterior. The passion must be there ready to break forth. This will be reflected in prayer which will refuse to utter tired old phrases which we do not really mean. We must teach them to pray. We must teach them to worship, to find new ways of coming before God to express joy, devotion, regret. We must teach them to forgive, to let go of cherished resentments and long-held memories, for in the end they will be injured most by holding on to them. We must at all costs avoid passing on to them a spiritual elitism which holds that we are precious to God in a way in which other people are not.

That means that we must have the courage to take a fresh look at our own identity, at creation, the fall, controversy, remnant and disappointment. Our students need roots, they need an identity which is realistic and serviceable. We need therefore to take a gentle look at the Adventist mythos and be ready to "prophecy again". We must not feel too threatened by the process; it is essential that it be done, by the students. Every generation must solve perennial problems in its own terms.

Adventists have always faced a profound tension - to seek personal purity on the one hand and, on the other, to be "salt to the earth", to infiltrate the wider society. It is always difficult to influence without being influenced oneself. Former generations of Adventists have tended to err on the side of purity at the expense of involvement in the wider society. Modern generations of young Adventists I find less willing to do that. They feel that the faith must work, must survive and prosper in the wider society, and if it does not, then it deserves to perish. It is therefore our solemn duty to demonstrate that Adventist Christian faith works in contemporary society, that it has currency, that it addresses contemporary dilemmas, that it can generate the energy to resolve those dilemmas. It must

avoid the tendency to become self-absorbed; we all need roots but they are of little value ultimately unless they produce flower and fruit.

And so, what to say in conclusion? You will have noticed that the six schools of thought which I identified in the allegory of the asylum have had their counterparts in the component parts of the human being which I have just described. That is no accident. I believe that all of these systems of thought identified something vitally important about the human spirit. Distortion crept in when these systems created the wrong centre around which all else should orbit. The genius of Christianity is that it holds all these elements in a proper tension around the focal point of Jesus Christ - the Word made flesh. "The Word made flesh" is a supreme expression of that tension. The Gospel demands that we, as educators, in our own unique way, become "the word made flesh" to our students.

I hold before you a high ideal, impossibly so. All I can recommend is that you seek personal wholeness yourself, with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul - and step into the classroom and be as fully as you can. That is incarnational teaching - I know of none better.

QUESTIONS

1. Are there problems in the European context, for the ideal of wholeness, for a faith system which has its roots in North American soil?
2. How might our institutions tend to domesticate the Holy Spirit, and how might they teach a radical faith?
3. How might we engage in the education of the emotions?
4. How is it possible for systems which are established, and teachers who are experienced and set in their ways, to change their educational practices?

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