

Transforming Faith: Teaching as a Christian Vocation in Today's Culture

The fishermen of Misali were ecstatic. They had discovered a new technique that promised to increase their catch dramatically. It was dynamite fishing. Unfortunately the waters in which they fished were home to valued coral reefs. Dynamite fishing was not good news for such a finely balanced ecosystem. Local government officials soon moved to stop this lucrative practice, but their efforts proved ineffective. The fisherman ignored their exhortations and responded no better to threats of legal action. When the gun boats eventually appeared, they simply evaded them. Finally someone had a bright idea. It occurred to him that the fishermen were all Muslims. So he contacted the local imam and explained the problem. The imam was horrified and started to teach his congregation that care for the environment is an Islamic duty. The dynamite fishing stopped.

The story reminded me of a meeting I attended a few years ago on recruiting RE teachers. Someone commented that more teachers were needed from the minority faith communities. I suggested that, if this was the case, then we needed to offer *religious* reasons for why they should value RE teaching. There was an awkward silence. I had tickled a taboo. Since the middle of the last century, British educationalists have been bewitched by the prospect of neutrality. To be a professional means you keep the sacred and the secular aspects of your life in carefully labelled compartments.

But then British educationalists haven't heard about the fishermen of Misali. Their story offers a contrary perspective. It shows that religious reasons can be a potent force for the good of all. In this paper I shall explore their importance through reflecting on the idea that teaching today is a Christian vocation.

Anyone considering teaching as a vocation needs to understand the context of teaching in modern Britain. In the rest of this article I propose to focus on two aspects which are particularly important for the Christian. As the fishermen of Misali discovered, I will propose that it is possible to integrate a distinctive Christian faith with fulfilling the professional responsibilities of the teacher in the context of state funded schools in twenty first century Britain.

The Role of the Christian Teacher in a Religiously Diverse Context

If there is one characteristic that defines the context in which teachers today have to work it is surely religious diversity. Perhaps the most challenging question a Christian teacher today faces is this: how does my faith contribute to my professional responsibility to promote community cohesion in a context where there is little agreement on matters relating to religion?

The knee-jerk Christian response can perhaps be illustrated by the recent remark by Richard Branson that a "businessman's (sic) job is to try to dominate" following his tussle with Rupert Murdoch. This might be called the *market share* model for dealing

with diversity; the aim is to beat your competitor by gaining as much of the market share as possible with the ultimate goal of putting your competitor out of business.

The market share model is one that many Christians feel, somehow, they *ought* to adopt. It depends on a model of thinking that brands most other people as, at best, the competitor and, at worst, the enemy. It encourages Christians to see the world as “enemy territory” where the evils of secularism threaten. But it doesn’t appear to be in tune with Jesus’ understanding of ministry since, when offered the possibility of a huge market share by Satan, he declined (Luke 4:5-8).

I suggest that Daniel in the Old Testament provides an alternative model for those, like teachers, whose vocation means that their working life is spent immersed in a religiously diverse world. Taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel found himself an alien in a foreign land, but also a public servant in the emperor’s court. He can, therefore, be described as a resident alien, someone whose working context was amongst people who did not share his commitment to God. From everything written about him, it seems Daniel excelled in his role and was highly regarded. However Daniel’s ultimate loyalty was not as faithful and successful public servant, but as follower of Yahweh.

In an important speech, Tony Blair reflected on the issue of loyalty to nation and faith¹. He said:

Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and other faiths have a perfect right to their own identity and religion, to practice their faith and to conform to their culture. This is what multicultural, multifaith Britain is about. This is what is legitimately distinctive.

But when it comes to our essential values – belief in democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, equal treatment of all, respect for this country and its shared heritage – then this is where we come together, it is what we hold in common; it is what give us the right to call ourselves British. At that point no distinctive culture or religion supercedes our duty to be part of an integrated United Kingdom”

It is an interesting question as to whether Daniel would pass Tony Blair’s test. I am pretty sure that if he felt able to serve Nebuchadnezzar, that he would have not been too troubled to have been a public servant under Blair. However I also suspect that his understanding of that loyalty would have been very different. Blair seems to regard faith as being about culture or lifestyle; areas of life where he believes citizens are free to make their own choices. Citizenship however is related to values; here, it seems, there is no freedom. Unfortunately, these comments reveal a failure to understand the true nature of the relationship between faith, citizenship and values. It was Daniel’s loyalty to *Yahweh’s values* that made him a loyal public servant. His faith was not simply a cultural or ritual matter that could be privatised; it was the very heart of his value system. Blair

¹ In a lecture entitled the *Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values* delivered on 8th December 2006 at Downing Street. The lecture was sponsored by The Runnymede Trust. See <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page10563.asp>

has much to learn from the fishermen of Misali. A wise leader seeks to harness the energy of faith rather than confront, suppress or overwhelm it.

Daniel's incarnational approach as a public servant meant that he sought to transform the culture around him so that it was shaped more by Jewish values than the prevailing Babylonian values. His skill was in identifying the shared territory where Jewish values and Babylonian values overlapped and then reinterpreting the Babylonians' experience such that they became convinced of the excellence of Daniel's Jewish vision. But when asked to make loyalty to the state his ultimate loyalty, Daniel chose the lion's den. Had Daniel been a teacher in modern Britain, he would have been well-equipped for embracing his profession as a Christian vocation.

Teaching Distinctively as a Christian

If it means nothing else, to have a vocation as a Christian teacher surely means working under the authority of the Christian tradition. But what does this mean in practice when in the classroom?

Tom Wright, now Bishop of Durham, has developed a most helpful analogy. He asks us to imagine that a previously unknown Shakespeare play has been discovered, but with the fifth act lost. How best, Wright asks, to complete this play so that it can be enjoyed by theatre audiences? His suggestion² is that we commission several experienced Shakespearean actors to complete the unfinished play. Their task will be to immerse themselves in the first four acts and then to use their extensive knowledge of Shakespeare to write an ending. The result, suggests Wright, will be a number of different endings, all of them written under the authority of the original four acts, but each of them reflecting a contemporary application and interpretation. The important point Wright says is:

The authority of the first four acts would not consist – could not consist! – in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, containing its own impetus and forward movement, which demand to be concluded in an appropriate manner. It would require of the actors a free and responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order to understand first how the threads could appropriately be drawn together and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both consistency and innovation. (p140)

The first time I came across this analogy was a liberating experience. It helped me to understand my experience as a Christian teacher. Allow me to give an example. At the very start of my career as a secondary teacher I was asked to teach about animals with backbones. We were issued with booklets, covering fish, amphibians, birds, reptiles and mammals. The message embedded in these booklets was clear. "Look how good fish are at turning into amphibians. Look how good reptiles are at turning into birds." The

² See *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1992, pp139-143.

implicit story was that all of this came about *by chance*. The same message was being reinforced in the humanities lessons where pupils were being exposed to textbooks with pictures of apes “turning into” men. I also taught a bit of religious education. It was hard work as the idea of a creator God was being squeezed out of the pupils’ consciousness by the implicit story told elsewhere in the curriculum that everything happened by chance. This particular fifth act was hardly in line with the Christian tradition’s first four acts.

A friend and I offered to rewrite the booklets with a view to making them more consistent with Christian belief. We didn’t want to write an anti-evolution curriculum, but we did want to embed the concept of a creator in the biological story that we told. So we utilised the biological principle of adaptation. Again the message was clear. “Look how good fish are at being fish. Look how good reptiles are at being reptiles.” In contrast to the previous lessons, this writing of the fifth act was “Christian-tradition friendly” since it resonated with the message of *created design* rather than the message of *chance evolution*. In retrospect, I can see that we were utilising Wright’s fifth act approach as we sought to follow our Christian vocation to teach.

Conclusion

To have a Christian vocation to teach in modern Britain is to be called to a transforming, professional ministry. It is to have the privilege of being able to work out our loyalty to God in the cause of the common educational good. Personally I am grateful to the Muslim fishermen of Misali for helping me to understand that better.

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