

# Religious Teaching in Schools

CHARLES BOXER, O.P.

In my experience it is certainly the case that a lot of educationalists in this country become genuinely bewildered, distressed, shocked and even angry when they hear it suggested that we should take the scriptures and not the catechism as the source of our religious instruction. Some people are willing to admit that some change in our catechism might not be a bad thing, but very few are prepared to listen to the argument that what we need is a new conception of the function of the catechism rather than a new catechism. Everybody seems to be assuming that those in favour of our present methods are loyally upholding such immunities as the Church's attitude, authority or tradition, and that those who suggest a change are propounding strange, dangerous theories culled from disreputable sources and dubious disciplines.

I have been reading Fr Hofinger's book *Teaching all Nations*<sup>1</sup> and I am happy to find myself in a position to say that the above assumption is, and apparently has been for some time, quite without foundation; this excellent book puts a quite different complexion on the Church's attitude to teaching religion. It is a collection of thirty addresses given at the recent Eichstätt Conference—a catechetical conference arranged to follow the Munich Eucharistic Congress. 'Under the presidency of the Archbishop of Bombay there were gathered more than sixty missionary bishops and almost every acknowledged leader in the modern catechetical movement.' The fundamental theme of these lectures, introduced by a letter from Cardinal Agagianian, and stated by bishops from Chile, India and Tanganyika, by bishops from China, Japan and South Africa, the Coadjutor Bishop of Strasbourg and Cardinal Gracias, by Jesuits from Brussels, the Philippines and the Congo, not to mention Fr Domenico Grasso of the Gregorian at Rome, Franciscans from Switzerland, a Dominican in Rhodesia, Benedictines and members of missionary orders all over the world, is that it is essential that we should return to the scriptures as the source of our catechetics. This is said on pretty well every other page by experts in theology, scripture, catechetics and missiology: I mean people who edit

<sup>1</sup>TEACHING ALL NATIONS, a symposium on modern catechetics, edited by Johannes Hofinger, S.J.; English version by Clifford Howell, S.J.; Herder, Burns Oates Ltd, 35s.

missionary bulletins, preside over *Deutscher Katechetenverein*, direct the *Lumen Vitae* centre and *Centre Documentaire Catéchétique*, lecture in Rome and Fribourg, and rectorially rule seminaries. It actually becomes tedious after a bit. I should point out that this is not an inspired prophetic cry from all these people demanding a change. It is perfectly obvious that the change has taken place; these ideas have been studied and developed for quite a considerable time—there is a neat little article by Fr Klemens Tillmann of the Munich Oratory telling us how long, and giving a general history of the movement. It is impossible to read this comprehensive exposition of what is happening in almost every other country in the world without being teased by the enquiry: Why have these questions not been bothering us?

Of course it would be quite unfair to suggest that educationalists in this country don't have educational problems; in many ways we are much more thorough than most other countries in the way that we have tackled the problem of Catholic education. I think that the sort of problem we tend to overlook is the inherent theological problem which this book states very clearly, and I hope it might be of some use to teachers if I examine in this article one or two of these central ideas. I also hope, in the course of the article, to recommend some recent literature that I have found helpful. On this topic I can begin by recommending Fr Hofinger's book to the very wide class of people who teach the faith. The book has been very intelligently edited; there is not too much repetition, just enough, in fact, to show how quite different minds are treating the same principles. There is a pleasant balance between the intellectuals and those who are actually engaged in this work. There is plenty of information about all sorts of practical questions—how to draw up catechisms, practical examples of how to teach certain themes, and plenty of historical summaries to give us a general view of what is happening. As I have already indicated, most of the great names in catechetical studies are to be found here. The translation is most readable and the book is attractively printed, well bound and reasonably priced. Fr Clifford Howell, S.J., who is responsible for this English edition, must once again be thanked for the way he keeps us informed of developments outside these shores. He is like a Channel tunnel for us.

The first point to notice about the Eichstätt Conference is its universal mission. It was not concerned with teaching the Faith to any particular culture. The revolution in our thinking about the basic Christian concept of handing on the Faith has been made possible to a

large extent by the fact that the Church is a mission to all nations; she has an abstractive gaze on societies, she is able to stand back and criticize the societies with which she has been associated for so long. Just as the Abbé Godin, by brilliantly applying the encyclicals on foreign missions, was able to create a fresh view of the missionary problems in Paris, so the African missionaries are teaching us a new sensitiveness to the problems in our class rooms. This conference shows how the Church realizes the truth of the equality of all societies: the difference between western culture and African culture is not being discussed in terms of higher or lower, but as two different aspects of the same problem—the world we are preaching to. It is a properly theological view of 'the nations'. I cannot resist the temptation to indicate how far this Catholic thinking is in advance of the international thinking of our politicians. There is just one society in its many aspects and one gospel being preached to it all over the world.

This view of the mission of the Church inevitably drives us back to consider the gospel. Are we supposed to adopt the method of our particular society or is there some intrinsic method in the gospel itself? All the writers in this book who deal with this question are quite clear that we must go to scripture to discover the method. Scripture itself reveals its own teaching discipline. This is the value of Fr Grasso's painstaking article on the kerygmatic and catechetical forms in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> We have been accustomed to read such theories and use them in New Testament exegesis; they set us in the life of the early Church. The work of men like Dodd and Carrington brought out new forms and meanings in scripture by showing that the Church used a theological pattern for her preaching and teaching. What these articles are saying is that these are our forms, we must enter into them and give them a new life. They are our means of entry into scripture and they are its elucidation. We find in scripture how we should teach scripture.

Do we in this country teach the Faith according to its own method or according to our secular teaching methods? Probably a bit of each. What I want to show is that we are tempted to secularize our religious teaching because of the structure of our system. I suppose most people would agree that the secular disciplines of teaching which are learned at training colleges, and which cope admirably with subjects like geography, mathematics and history, will just not do for teaching religion. Some teachers however seem to assume that there is only one discipline,

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. *The core of missionary preaching.*

a facility in teaching—and any training in another discipline would be a waste of time. Of course lots of Catholic teachers who have probably never had occasion to refer to the question, and certainly had no special training in method, teach religion all the same with exactly the right balance. This is not to say, however, that our religious teaching in general would not be very much more effective if we gave more thought to religious method, and included it in all our training. I think we tend to depend too much on the natural ability of the teacher to adapt his method to his subject. I am certain that this lies at the heart of our difficulties, for many cannot make the necessary change. It seems to me wrong that we should only insist on an above average knowledge of the faith, with no sort of emphasis on the importance of being able to teach it. The same sort of argument, which educationalists would certainly reject, would be that the expert historian is automatically capable of teaching history to children. Education diplomas gained in secular institutes suffice for the teaching element; what is taught can be mastered in a course on dogma. It will be seen at once how the modern catechetical movement must reject this notion. It is insisting all along that there is not one thing—teaching, and another thing—the faith. It rejects this tandem view of religious education. All this is a particularly important problem for us. It will be worth our while taking a closer look at the sort of difficulty that it raises.

Let us try to state the tendency as pessimistically as we can. If the discipline of theological teaching which the New Testament gives us is not followed, if the totally different kind of activity involved in catechetics is not understood, the tendency will be that the substance of our teaching will assume the form of our secular methods. No matter how excellent the caviare, it will still emerge from the sausage machine looking like sausages. Religious dogmas taught by secular methods will start to look like just another school subject. It will have that objective 'know that' look which is totally foreign to the notion of Christian education, religious facts huddled alongside historical and scientific facts. I know that one and one make two, and that there is one God—what Fr Martin Ramsauer, S.J., calls 'a whole heap of information'.<sup>3</sup> And if the teacher tries to put the emphasis on scripture, it will suffer in the same way the mangling of the machine. I suppose most of our early religious images are of this distorted, weirdly foreign sort. It becomes some more facts about the Holy Land, its geography, history and literary traditions; the pain of having to unravel the bewildering tangle

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. *A good catechism.*

of St Paul's missionary journeys; the whole world of those prae-phaelite wall charts—hooded Arabs, camels, sand, and quaint hooked noses on dark cruel faces, and the history of the Pharisaic sect that is good for another month's religious instruction. What, the child may well ask, has all this got to do with my life: I mean my LIFE. This is the irresistible tendency of the secular method, the inevitable result of using a teaching method that has been devised for facts, something separate from the child. It is very hard (if not logically impossible) to live a life applying facts. People who want to learn to play golf don't attend lectures given by the president of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, however informative, refined and articulate; they apply to somebody who has some ability in teaching the game and learn their strokes the hard way. It is certainly not a matter of memorizing anything. Knowing about golf, and knowing how to play golf are two quite distinct operations. I have a feeling that our religious teaching tends to fall into the former category.

It is alarming to come across faults of this seriousness in our educational structure: unfortunately it is still only half the story. Not only is the secular method of teaching remote and factual, but the very substance we teach has become remote and factual. The preference we give to catechism over scripture means that we are teaching dogmatic formulations of the faith with very abstract looking antecedents. The secular discipline as we have seen is just like that too: it seems to cover all its subjects with the atmosphere of the school room—somehow remote from the life that must be christianized. The two feed on each other—abstract formulation and abstract method. I want to applaud the relationship but change the elements. A thorough teaching of scripture according to its own patterns could have a therapeutic influence on our secular methods. First, then, we must try to understand what has gone wrong with the formulations that we teach.

The contributors to Fr Hofinger's book have plenty to say about what the cover of the book calls 'the compendium of theological concepts'. The attacks on the substance of the old catechisms are all of this sort. I think it is a pity that there is no article dealing with the history of this problem. People are genuinely puzzled by this scorn for the old methods, and they tend to wonder why the faith taught for so long in this way has assumed a forbidding abstract character. What has happened I think is that a depreciation in the currency value of certain philosophical words has forced the theologian out of the market. It is for instance fashionable nowadays to distinguish between those two

sorts of knowledge—'knowing that' and 'knowing how'. That seems to me to describe quite admirably the modern view of knowledge. The factual 'knowing that' about all sorts of things sums up our view of the world as given to us by all sorts of scientist. It is quite distinct from the 'knowing how' of learning to do all sorts of things (the golfing distinction we made earlier). This is the attitude of the society we are living in, and it seems to me that we cannot do very much about it. But it is very important to remember that our scholastic tradition knew no such distinction. The speculative tradition which coped with theology—the tradition that worked itself out into the catechisms that followed the Council of Trent—cannot be called 'knowing that' knowledge. For St Thomas and the whole culture he was living in, speculative knowledge about the world was every bit as concerned with human experience as moral knowledge was. Nowadays when we want to make our science human we write science fiction. This is a shift in the meaning of knowledge from the old idea of a definition of man's place in the world to the new idea of a grasping of something objective, something that is essentially apart from us, something in which we are not involved. So the trouble started when the old idea of knowledge—the idea of being clear about where you stood as a human being—moved out of a sympathetic culture into the modern one where it is now a stranger. The result is that it takes on the abstract character of our modern 'know that' and everybody who cares feels uncomfortable about it. Of course it is not so understood by theologians who realize what has happened, but it is up to those who believe that this old system can work to show how the overworked teacher is to make the necessary cultural, social and linguistic transformation effective in his children. The modern catechetical movement has seen this problem and, as is natural to Christian thinkers, has returned to the scriptures to work out a solution.

Many teachers, while perhaps agreeing with the line of the modern catechetical movement, will nevertheless feel that in the last resort this is an English problem. I am sure they are right. Theology is always a sacred teaching, its creativeness lies at the point where it is communicating with a specific society. Whereas the principles of the catechetical movement seem to me impeccable, our thinking must be directed to the point where they are meeting the ideas that sustain our own educational system—social ideas. Education is the area in which we expect to find the social ideas of a country most explicit: we are educating children into the sort of society that we believe in. We must

try to be quite clear about the assumptions that are giving the system its sense of direction. The best introduction to the sort of analysis I have in mind is contained in the recent *New Left Review* supplement on secondary education.<sup>4</sup> Here are articles that seem to be prising out questions at the right level of seriousness. Certainly we would agree with Mr David Holbrook<sup>5</sup> when he starts from the principle 'that all are equal in the sight of God', and goes on to show how this principle tends to be forgotten in our system. 'The backward child has as much right to live as we . . . it surely follows that for his education to do anything other than prepare him or her to live as fully as possible as a being is an abrogation with terrible implications—as terrible as those of racial segregation, or even genocide: a denial of the sanctity of the individual as a creature with a soul'. This indicates the parallel with the Church's view of the equality of the societies to which she is preaching, and must at least provoke Catholics to view with some suspicion any system of education which is committed to a graded principle of selection.

It is at this point that our criticism of the secular side of the educational system must be directed. It is very interesting to notice how the writers in this supplement are emphasizing precisely those elements in education the loss of which is making it difficult to teach religion in schools. The very qualities which a teacher of religion is depending upon—a sensitiveness to all the problems of human living, a poetic deepening of the child's awareness of his place in the world, the seriousness of loving—all these qualities are being stifled by the inequalities of the very system which, in the religious instruction period, is depending upon them. The sort of use of English teaching that David Holbrook recommends in his article is exactly the discipline that would make religious teaching effective. Unless teachers are able in their ordinary teaching to break out of the enclosed selective world of class-room experience, unless they are able to make their children sensitive and intelligent about their general human experience, then it is going to be very hard to show the depth and comprehensiveness of Christian teaching.

I have been trying in this article to show how many of our educational difficulties can be traced back to a structural deficiency which is primarily theological. The problem depends on the subject matter of our teaching and the social climate in which we are teaching. The

<sup>4</sup>*New Left Review*. September-October. No. 11 (3s. 6d.).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* *Education for maturity*.

importance of the modern catechetical movement lies in the fact that it understands that the problem has this dual nature. Throughout Fr Hofinger's book you can see the influence of the *Lumen Vitae* movement. It is not my business here to give an account of the growth of this movement. I only wish to indicate that its influence is already making itself felt in educational circles in this country, and that it publishes an excellent quarterly review in English dealing with precisely these scriptural, sociological and psychological problems which lie at the heart of modern catechetics.<sup>6</sup> Until our present system adjusts itself to this new movement, teachers will always be labouring under very great difficulties. But there is much that can be done meanwhile. There is an urgent need for more books on scripture written in an imaginative theological style. A series of investigations into scripture from particular catechism dogmas, starting at a profoundly human point, and developing the themes in the scriptural rhythms is just the sort of book teachers should be given. The vital point in this scheme is the ability of the individual teacher to enter into the life and thought of scripture. And that, after all, is what all Christians should be doing.

<sup>6</sup>*Lumen Vitae*. A quarterly review, edited by the International Centre for Studies in Religious Education. English edition from Duckett, 35s.

## The Death of a Christian—I: The Objective Fact<sup>1</sup>

E. H. SCHILLEBEECKX, O.P.

Throughout the course of the growing development of the kingdom of God, the death of a Christian has taken a well-defined and important place. The ending of the earthly life of a Christian man is an essential phase in the coming of the kingdom of God. What I propose to do in

<sup>1</sup>Although translations are not normally included in LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, our readers may be interested to read this work of one of the foremost continental theologians. It originally appeared in *Kultuurleven* vol. 22 (1955) pp. 421-430 and pp. 508-519.