7. ‘THE TRUTH LOOKS DIFFERENT FROM HERE...’

Faith, Education and Dialogue

TOLERANCE: THE CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

Young people today grow up in a world of radical pluralism and consumer omnipotence, for theirs is ‘the age of over-exposure to otherness’. Esoteric as postmodern philosophy is, something of its ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ has filtered into popular consciousness with the sense of suspicion towards those who profess bold truth claims about their beliefs. Along with a new postcolonial consciousness, we have become more aware of the ethical challenge of ‘the other’. However, recent world events have also complicated our consciousness with the spectre of growing terrorism and fundamentalism. Who wields the totalising metanarrative? Who is the other? To whom should we extend tolerance? Is tolerance always a virtue? Should it be nurtured? What are its limits? What part should education play?

These are big questions and hide further ones addressed by contributors to this volume. While the concept of tolerance suggests something of value and has obvious educational appeal, it also raises its own complex questions as we have seen. For this reason, it is more fruitful in the educational context to focus on the notion of ‘dialogue’ to address the concerns raised by tolerance—in particular, the achievement of mutual understanding and coexistence. Furthermore, it can be argued that ‘dialogue’ in its various senses is intrinsic to the aims and processes of education, exemplifying relationships that occur within it of an inter-personal and intra-personal kind. The former includes interactions between students, teacher and students and between learners and the content of learning. The latter refers to what the learner experiences in her effort to gain understanding of knowledge, a process which involves rationality (obviously), but less obviously, also emotion, imagination, empathy and will as well as epistemic virtues like courage, humility and concern for truth.

Now it is often supposed that the capacities for dialogue outlined above are significantly reduced if not totally inhibited within those who hold strong conviction, especially of a religious nature. Indeed, the belief that religious faith leads to closed mindedness is a deeply held presupposition in western philosophical thought. The perception may be based on the common sense deduction that those who believe they hold true beliefs are unlikely to seek illumination from the views of those of a different persuasion. Of course, the case of religious fundamentalism looms large in public consciousness today to reinforce that perception. While this presupposition has historically occasioned extensive debate between philosophy and theology, as
shown in papers in this volume, we have recently been faced with an analogous presupposition in contemporary thought. Widespread relativism in our societies (paradoxically with growing fundamentalism in others) has weakened traditional notions of truth and conviction, giving rise to the parallel perception that unless one is relativist with respect to truth claims, one cannot be tolerant. The view, in short, is that only relativists can engage in genuine dialogue because only they are able to hold their own opinions lightly and exercise some detachment from them.4

In view of the fact that most adolescents and teenagers in western societies today are relativists in inclination, their teachers (and not only those of religious studies) are faced with a challenge. How do they speak about truth claims, values and personal conviction? Can they defend the idea that non relativism is compatible with open mindedness and dialogue? How should educators conceive of truth in our pluralistic environment?

These are complex questions, but teachers of religious education are attuned to analogous ones within religion and theological debates. Questions such as: Is religious conviction necessarily fundamentalist? Does conviction produce closed-mindedness? What kind of open-mindedness is consistent with faith? What does it mean to believe in transcendent truth? have produced a range of interesting responses that are relevant and illuminating to the educational questions.

In this chapter, I will assume this narrower focus within the religious debate to consider whether dialogue is compatible with religious conviction, further confining myself to the example of Christian faith. Theological discussions on these questions within Christianity are illuminating to the broader questions also because they bring an important distinction into focus: viz, the distinction between the ‘epistemology’ and the ‘psychology of dialogue’. The first aspect of dialogue refers to the evaluation of truth claims in interpersonal dialogue, that is, when individuals consider arguments for their positions and reasons that count against them. The second refers to the personal capacities of individuals for dialogue, that is, as mentioned earlier, qualities of emotion, imagination, empathy and will, as well as virtues like courage, humility and concern for truth because of the significant part they play in how well dialogue fares between people.

It can be argued that education is concerned with both aspects of dialogue: the first corresponds broadly to its cognitive aims and goals and the second to its affective and attitudinal ones. However, the two senses, while distinguishable, are not distinct. The capacity of individuals to engage in dialogue do, to a greater or lesser extent, also depend on the question of truth, in particular, on how individuals conceive of truth. Both senses must be born in mind in the educational task. While the ‘epistemology’ of dialogue directs attention to the educative role of developing the capacities of individuals to understand the assumptions behind and arguments for various positions that people hold, the ‘psychology’ of dialogue refers to the part education plays to develop depths of the self sometimes referred to as ‘inwardness’.5

The discussion that follows proceeds on the assumption that contemporary education faces us with the challenge of promoting well-informed tolerance. Furthermore, it is based on the assumption that the educational challenge can be illuminated by analogous religious questions outlined above. However, the picture for contemporary