

Education in God's World

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Introduction

These lectures were originally prepared for presentation in two venues: Part 1 as a series of lectures for the students at the Master's Institute, a Christian teacher's training college in Auckland, and Part 2 as part of the programme for the New Zealand Association for Christian Schools Conferences in July 1997.

I claim no special expertise in the field of education. I am not a teacher but a theologian and philosopher, and these lectures reflect a personal and not a professional interest in education. In developing these lectures I have drawn on various sources, included in the Bibliography, which also gives suggestions for further reading along the lines of the ideas presented here.

While these two series of lectures are separate presentations, they do form a coherent whole. Part 1 concerns the social and political facets of education, and in particular Christian education, in a pluralistic society, while Part 2 concerns the philosophical roots of teaching and learning itself. There is in fact one unifying philosophical perspective that undergirds both parts. And that is understandable, as education is not solely a social or political phenomenon; nor is it solely a matter of teaching and learning. Education is a complex social institution, with many facets to it. The social and political context in which teaching and learning takes place undoubtedly shapes and influences that teaching and learning, often in subtle and unexpected ways. These lectures consider some of those interactions, and together form a basic introduction to a Christian theory of education, with respect to both its social and political context, and the actual practice of education. I trust that they are of some benefit for anyone interested in education, and in particular, to encourage and stimulate those who wish to see education carried out in a way that brings honour to God, in whose world, and concerning whose world, we are to educate.

Chris Gousmett

Dunedin, 1997

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The place and task of the school in relation to the rest of society

Introduction

In New Zealand society today, the school is often considered to be an institution that stands by and large on its own. It has a place at the centre of our social system that is in many respects unrealistic, inappropriate and with excessive demands placed upon it. This attitude is at the root of many of the problems that we face in the education system. It seems that for many, the role of the school includes both social laboratory and social therapy: a place to experiment with new ideas about life, and a place to cure and correct the ills that beset society as a whole. The expectations which are placed upon the school are thus unrealistic, and often have little relevance to the intrinsic task of the school as such. The situation is not necessarily all that different when we consider the way in which Christian schools function. There too, we sometimes find unrealistic expectations placed on the school, and the way the school relates to the community is often inappropriate. We need to consider then what the task of the school is, and how the school fits into society as a whole. To do that, we need to have an architectonic vision of society. Unless we understand what society is, and how its various institutions are related to each other, and the place people have in that society, we will never be able to clarify our expectations of the school.

The nature of society as a whole

There are two basic perspectives on the nature of society which have shaped our perspectives and flowing from these, the way we live. These perspectives are the equal

and opposite errors of **individualism** and **communalism**. In either case, human life is distorted, and the characteristic features of the different spheres of life are obscured.

Individualism is the curse of contemporary Western culture, which centres our attention on ourselves. Individualism is the attempt to understand society as a series of voluntary relationships between individuals. an idolatrous absolutisation of personal relationships, divorced from the communal context in which alone those relationships have meaning. Individualism emphasises the abstract person outside of relationships, considered apart from the real context of human life. It is devoid of any conception of a wider reality which sustains and enables each person to do what they do. As a consequence of seeing society as composed of numerous discrete, independent individuals, it considers community to be only an artificial construct of real individuals - an option we can either accept or reject - and communal relationships must inevitably be only conceptual interpretations of individual relationships, lacking true reality. As a result, community is considered to be dispensable, and we are all the poorer for it.

Those who view the origin of the state as founded in a social contract between individuals (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) have fallen into this error. For them, the individual is always primary; a communal relationship, where it is considered to exist, is secondary, and not essential. This is the prevailing ideology of the Government and its institutions such as Treasury and other departments. Their understanding of the human person derives from the radical individualism of Hobbes and Locke, mediated through the economists Adam Smith and Milton Friedman. Thus in this perspective, the body of Christ, a family, the state, and every other communal structure in human life, is reduced to a conglomerate of individuals, lacking any true structural reality as a community of inter-related people of different callings and gifts. The famous comment by Margaret Thatcher epitomises this view: “There is no such thing as society, only individuals exist.” The freedom of the individual has been absolutised and made into an idolatrous spiritual force which distorts and deceives.

If society is simply an aggregation of individuals, then it is not a given but a construct arising from the agreement formed between those individuals. We then do not have a

divine mandate to fulfil, but the possibility to shape and direct society in any way we choose. Society is whatever we wish it to be, something we have invented, and it can therefore be changed, modified, abolished, in purely arbitrary fashion. The form of society can be imposed by the powerful on the weak to defend self-interest, or it can be overthrown by the oppressed and a completely new order established to replace it. This is the consequence of the idea that society is merely a human construct, established by the will of independent individuals.

We cannot in any way accept the unbiblical notion that we are independent individuals. Individualism fails to recognise the creation as context for community. It cuts us off from our roots as a community not only of human beings but as creatures, linked together and bonded to one another before God the creator. Thus being isolated first from one another and then from the whole of creation, the world that God has made becomes something apart from us that can be abused and spoiled: it does not matter what we do to the world and to each other; this is all outside of us, we are independent of it, we are unconnected to it. The consequences can be seen in the pollution of the environment, the contamination of our food supplies, the violence and crime which pervades society. All this is the consequence of being cut off from our rootedness in creation. It is a denial of the creation as the context of human life and a rejection of others as outside of us and therefore not important or significant to us, and a denial of the reality of community as merely conceptual, and certainly not founded in God's creation order.

But the idea that society is a **collective** whole in which individuals are of secondary importance is equally mistaken. We need to resist the idea that individual relationships fall within the all-embracing structure of one particular institution of society. Communist systems which absolutize the State are typical of this direction. Such universalistic views of society arise from direct reaction against the fragmenting and divisive forces of individualism. There is no escape from the dialectical tension between individualism and communalism, since both take one side of the created order and absolutise it to the detriment of the other.

The divine origin of human society

The only solution to the dilemma is to recognise that society is not a human construct, but that it is something grounded in the creation order established by God, and that human beings are created beings standing already in community from the beginning. That community relationship is distorted and corrupted by both individualism and communalism, which are spiritual forces, manifestations of the disharmony in society which comes about because of human sin, and a turning away from the creator and what he has revealed to us of the nature of human life. Nevertheless, the freedom of the individual and the inescapable structure of communal relationships form the context of human life. Only a Biblical understanding of the communal nature of human life as a created reality can avoid both individualism and communalism, which idolatrously absolutise opposing views of what it means to be a human person in community.

What do we understand society to be? If we consider human society in terms of an aggregation of individuals, each doing their own thing, then society will reflect that view in its structures and life. If we consider human society to be a collective, which has an over-riding character that subsumes individuals within it, then society will reflect that view in its structures and life. But what do we as Christians think human society to be? Often, Christian views on the subject merely reflect the convictions of the wider society around them with a gloss or veneer of religious terminology and mannerisms laid over it. Is it possible to have a distinctively Christian view of society, and if so, what would that look like? What we consider society to be will in fact reflect our view of human nature. Human society is human nature writ large.

A Christian worldview presents a perspective on human society which recognises the created basis for society, how we are to give form to institutional life, the power and deviousness of sin which has twisted and misconstrued relationships with one another, and the possibility of redemption for societal structures in Christ. Human society arises out of who we are. We are not self-made beings but creatures of God, and what we are expresses what God has made us. We are intrinsically communal creatures, because God made us that way. We come into being in community: through the union

of a man and a woman, born into a community with relationships given to us by the fact of being born. All of us stand in relationship to many other people merely by the fact of existing. We have a mother and a father, grand-parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc., and when we form relationships with a marriage partner we enter into new relationships with in-laws and their family, and so on. To survive we depend on others to supply our needs: for instance, the weekly shopping for groceries - We need paid work supplying goods and services to others in exchange for money to earn money: a system established and sustained by the community; to buy food grown and prepared for sale by others. Thus we exist in a network of relationships, and cannot avoid these relationships. They are a given for us, not in the way we express them, but the fact of their existence. These networks are extensive and inter-linked in a way we often fail to appreciate. How many of you have heard of the “party game” where you try to find out how many contacts it would take to pass a letter hand to hand, to people you know, to get from you to be handed personally to the President of the United States by someone who knew him? This was actually tried by a group of people in America, and they found it took only **five** people to achieve this. Or consider this song: “I danced with a man who danced with a girl who danced with the Prince of Wales.” Aside from the attempt to gain some reflected glory from this tenuous connection with royalty, it shows again how interlinked we all are to each other.

There are many different kinds of human relationships: familial, social, business, educational, political, cultural, ethnic, and so on. Human society and culture results from the free formation of these relationships in different ways. The shape we give to relationships is not predetermined, but expresses individual and communal beliefs, our place in historical development, our cultural heritage, and many other factors, including our acceptance, rejection or modification of those factors. We shape and mould our communal life together in response to God’s call to live together in community, based on the given-ness of that communal existence, in many and diverse ways.

We are not parts of a whole, but individual beings who **together** form a community of people. We are in a network of widely differing relationships of many kinds, and society is an interweaving of these relationships into an integral form. We are

individuals **in relationship**: not merely individuals with external relationships we can adopt or not as we please, not a communal whole which absorbs all our relationships into a collective unit, but beings who stand in relationship to one another, relationships which are given in the creation itself, originating with God, and shaped and developed by us in response to God's call to care for and love each other. Thus human society will reflect and express our understanding of who we are, what we are and what society is meant to be. If we truly have a Christian worldview, with a Christian idea of human being and human society, then that also will be expressed in the way we shape and develop society and individual lives.

The Christian task in the world is the human communal task, redeemed and renewed in Christ, and to be truly human is to be in communion with God and with other human beings. We are not a collection of unrelated individuals, but people in relationship with others. We are communal creatures; the Bible never deals with individuals alone; every person is inescapably integrated into the life of the community. Community is the complex of interwoven relationships and structures which sustains a group of people in their life together. Communities must have a goal and vision which all share, else they will fragment and fall (or drift) apart. That common goal and vision inspires and shapes the relationships and structures which the community develops both internally amongst its members, and towards other communities in society.

The creation order established and maintained by God includes not only the creatures we can see, such as animals, birds, rocks, trees and stars, but also the relationships in which they find themselves. For human beings, these relationships are much more complex than those of other creatures, and include political, economic, and artistic relationships, to name but a few. Through the development of creation, a task entrusted to all mankind by God, these relationships are unfolded to display a great richness and variety. All societal structures and institutions are shaped by human activity from the complex of possible human relationships created by God. Human beings are created in relationship to each other, to God and to the world around them. Human beings function in a wide variety of relationships, which are formed almost on an intuitive basis as to how we should relate to each other in different contexts in

terms of our differing situations in life. The institutions of society give permanent forms to human relationships, and society as a whole is a complex inter-relationship of these institutions and the communities which form them. Permanent forms of relationship, such as organisations, business enterprises, marriages, educational institutions, banks and so on, arise from these differing relationships and reflect the specific task and character of the relationship in which they are rooted. And since these relationships are created by God, and are formed by people rooted in a religious relationship with God as his creatures, then we can see how **religion** flows through all of life. And if we recognise the religious character of life, it becomes clear that to acknowledge Christ as Lord is to acknowledge him in everything we do, not just formally or superficially, but as the root and authority, the possibility and essence of human existence in every aspect.

Society is subject to the order which God gives for the creatures he has made, enabling them to give expression to the diversity of callings and relationships people have. Human society is shaped by human activity, either in obedience to God's calling for our life, or else in rebellion and unbelief. No human relationship just "exists," it is always given a specific cultural form that reflects the environment, history and worldview of the culture in which it appears. The historical development of a society results in these relationships taking on institutional form, displaying a structure that provides a certain security and strength. The structure is to serve the relationship, not vice versa. The Sabbath was made for mankind (to enhance relationships with God) not mankind for the Sabbath.

Because the development of these relationships is distorted by sin, the way in which the different structures in society interrelate is frequently out of step with the norms given by God. But we cannot reform **only** society, or **only** individuals. Christians commonly believe that while politics might be able to change the structures of society through legislation, ultimately nothing changes because the sinful human heart is unchanged. Instead, it is suggested, if we change hearts through preaching the Gospel, then society will change. But attempts to change society only on the structural (political) level or only on the individual level are doomed to failure, because of a lack of appreciation for the Biblical calling for human beings to live obediently before the

Lord in community. Human beings are created in relationship to other human beings and to the world around them, and all such human relationships, personal and institutional, stand in need of the redeeming grace of Christ. Thus human society in every sense is formed from the relationships between people, shaped from the possibilities provided by God in creation.

Society takes the character of the religious response of those who shape its nature and destiny. As human beings are sinful, their shaping and moulding of the creation reflects their sinfulness. Because of our sin, the intention of God for our human relationships has been obscured, and the relationships themselves have been distorted and corrupted. Distorted relationships are entrenched in distorted structures and institutions. But a failure to grasp the true nature of sin will prevent us from understanding how our task has been distorted and hindered, and how it has been set free from the power of sin by Christ to once again be carried out in the obedient service of God. The redemption of Christ can restore all our relationships, and the structures and institutions formed from them, so that once again we can live in the way God intended. Through being redeemed in Christ, we can gain a new vision, a new understanding, a new direction for our involvement in society, so that we can establish relationships and institutions which reflect that new way of life. We do not need merely to imitate the existing structures and relationships we see around us; we do not even need merely to perpetuate the present ways of doing things amongst Christians. We are set free in Christ to develop new responses to God's call to shape and mould our lives in a response of faith, and it is to be our faith, not the faith of preceding generations or other nations. We can have our own way of doing things, not because we are free from all restraint to do as we wish, but because God calls us all to make our own response of faith: a response governed by norms he has established, working with the possibilities he has provided for as a given in the creation, but formed and shaped according to the special gifts and the specific historical context in which we find ourselves. God is a God of variety, of diversity, of multiplicity: we are not constrained by what others have done, but can bring forth new things as the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to imagine them.

Scripture always calls us to renewed obedience as a community. We do not stand alone, but are created as members of a community. Denial of the communal heart of our existence leads to fragmentation of our lives, isolation and ultimately alienation from God, who sees us in terms of our relationships in community and not as independent individuals. We need to recapture the Biblical teaching concerning the **“people of God”** and break out of the unbiblical notion that we are independent individuals. There are no isolated individuals, only people who shut themselves off from the communal relationships God has placed them in. God does not save individuals in isolation but calls those in the community of rebellion to repent and identify themselves with the community of obedience.

Unfortunately the church is not free from the sin of individualism. For example, Christian faith is seen first of all as my personal relationship with God. Times of prayer alone with God, seeking God’s will for “my life,” concentrating on my own walk with God, and the most pernicious one of all, “God told me so,” as the ultimate response to any challenge to our idiosyncratic and bizarre interpretations of the Bible, are ultimately the fruit of individualism infecting our spirituality and not the fruit of God’s Spirit. Any expression of Christian faith which is not rooted in a commitment at the same time both to God and to God’s people is a self-centred and inadequate conception of Christian faith, and will lack the power, the vision and the insight to bring to birth new ways of living, new forms for the life we lead together, new possibilities from the structures God has provided for us in the creation order he has established.

The nature of the school

What then is the nature of the school, and how does it fit within this perspective on life? There is a common belief among Christians that God has established three institutions, family, state and church. As a result, any other institutions, such as schools, hospitals, scout groups, etc. are of necessity derivations of the first three. This then means that these other institutions cannot fulfil their own calling before God, as they must always be subservient to either family, state or church. But God has not given only these three institutions; he has made it possible for us to form a multitude

of different institutions, each with their own character and calling before God, namely to fulfil their appointed tasks in obedience to God and in freedom from control from other institutions, which have other tasks to fulfil.

While it is true that God has given parents responsibility to train their children in accordance with his Word, it does not follow that the school is an extension of the home. The school is an institution in its own right, and a Christian school must be free to be a school, not merely an extension of the home (or church or state). In the complexity of modern society, schools fulfil a function which parents are unable to do, and while parents have a responsibility to ensure that their children are taught in obedience to God, they do not have responsibility to teach their children everything. Part of that responsibility belongs to the teacher in the school, who must be free to perform this responsibility in response to God, and not as parents necessarily demand. While parents are ultimately accountable for what happens, they are not the people appointed to teach, and teachers must be free to teach as they see fit. Teachers are to be accountable to the school board, and thus to the parents and others who operate the school.

The school needs to be free from church and state control, as well as control by families, so it can develop its own calling before God as a humanly-shaped institution which gives expression to the possibilities within God's creation for human interaction in this way. That is, a school is an institution just as much established by God as any other, which we are free to develop in a variety of forms in accordance with contemporary resources, needs and insights etc. Families are established by God, but take a variety of cultural expressions throughout the world, but they are all founded in God's creation. Schools also are established by God, but take a variety of cultural expressions. They also did not develop as separate institutions until quite late, but they are none the less still established by God and provided for in his creation. Otherwise it would not be possible to have schools. We cannot bring into being anything which God has not already made possible.

Thus a school is not an extension of the home, but an independent institution established and operated by those who hear God's call to do so, and so it is not subject

to families as such. Nor is it to be subject to the state or the church (which are also culturally-shaped institutions which have their own task and calling before God), although the state has responsibility to ensure that schools operate according to appropriate standards and conditions. A school operates under the authority of those who operate it, who are thus not parents in that respect. They do not need to be parents to be involved; merely responsive to God's call to aid in this task. A school is under God's authority, just as much as the home and state and church and business enterprise and sports club. It is not subject to any other institution but free to explore its own mandate from God and to respond in appropriate ways to God. It is only in this way that a school can be free to develop its own task in response to its own inner character and calling: it does not "borrow" its character or calling from the home, which it would if it were merely an extension of the home. It is in fact an institution in its own right.

While this may seem a rather academic discussion about the nature of institutions, it in fact has serious implications for the content of Christian education, especially for teaching history and cultural studies. Unless we are able to recognise the true character of the institutions in human society, we will not be able to recognise their callings and tasks, and so we will never be able to decide what is the proper task of the state, the church, the home, the school, the bank, etc. and we will then be unable to critique the way society operates from a Christian perspective. As a result we will always be captive to various secular philosophies of society and unable to see the roots of the confusion that results. We will always struggle with "sacred" and "secular" dualisms, and be unable to teach a comprehensive discipleship in school, and thus not be able to give genuine expression to the Lordship of Christ in our world. Our views of the nature of society will always be influenced by something other than the Lordship of Christ.

Education which is dominated by the need to train people with the skills with which to find employment is to subject education to external controls and purposes which are not intrinsic to education, but an restriction and constriction of those purposes. But how can we educate children these days without taking into account the need for them to gain marketable skills that will give them the best possible advantages in finding

scarce employment opportunities? While that must always be a concern, it must never be an over-riding concern, for to accept that is to distort and deform education to conform to external pressures. The answer is not to resist incorporating these pressures within the school system, re-directing education towards that end, but to seek to challenge and critique such pressures which are brought to bear upon the school by exposing the shallowness and spiritual poverty of a society which has allowed itself to fall prey to such a vision for education. We cannot expect to have healthy schools in a diseased society, since the people who are involved in education: teachers, pupils, board members, educational theorists, government officials, politicians, are all shaped and influenced by that society. If a particular view is endemic in society, we cannot expect the school to be exempt from it. Nor can we expect the school alone to address it and challenge it. This must be the task of all Christians, who are engaged in the multifarious areas of life. Such a vision of life must be critiqued at all levels, in all institutions, in all circumstances, by all those who hold dear a vision of life that comes from our faith in God. For if that vision is truly one we all hold, then we will of necessity be confronted with alien visions for life wherever we are. And if a particular vision for life is being promoted in society as a whole, it can and must be confronted in society as a whole: through the media, the political channels, the public debates, the chats over the fence with the neighbours, in sermons, Bible classes, and whatever other venues we are involved in. If that secular vision truly is seeking to shape society, then it must be dealt with throughout society by confronting it with an alternative, competing, Christian vision. To fail to do so, while expecting the Christian school to address the problem, is to fail to understand the nature of society, and at a crucial point to succumb to that secular vision by conceding that the school is the necessary and appropriate venue through which the ills of society will be addressed.

The place of the school within society

It is crucial for us to correctly understand the place which the school has in society. Whatever we consider the school to be will shape the kind of education it offers, and the end to which that education is directed. The school is not a social laboratory, nor is it a therapeutic structure. If we consider human life in society to be an enormous

experiment, an attempt for us to desperately discover some kind of meaning and purpose for our existence, a way in which we can work out a plan for survival in a hostile and unforgiving world, then the school will be part of that experiment, and we will seek to try out new ideas and concepts on fresh and malleable young minds. If we don't know why we are here or what we are doing in life, then it is cruel and intolerable to attempt to work that out through using young people as a laboratory to see what works and what doesn't, and unfortunately some of the policies and perspectives which have been used in state schools in New Zealand have all the character of a gigantic, desperate, undirected experiment to find some solution to our plight.

Nor is the school to be a form of therapy; a place where the problems of society can be resolved through the work of educators. Education is not a tool to repair damaged lives; it is not the task of teachers to be social workers and psychologists, providing aid and assistance to families in crisis. That is not to deny that teachers have a role to play in assisting in social work and psychological treatment, but it is in the role of assistants and not as principal agents. Teachers, and schools as a whole, are part of the whole community, and cannot be isolated from the problems of society. But their role is supportive, complementary, assisting what other professionals are doing and reinforcing their efforts.

A major influence in keeping education within the responsibility of the government is the widespread conviction, with the strength of a faith, that many New Zealanders believe in: that schools provide the means whereby we build unity, cohesion and co-operation in the nation. This was articulated recently on Radio NZ, in a programme on "school choice." One advocate of the state system put forward the idea that a unified, universal, state-operated education system was best because it was in this context that all New Zealanders, of whatever race, religion, class, or social background could learn to live and work together regardless of their differences. While I certainly do not advocate a multiple school system as a means of maintaining and reinforcing differences between people, nor do I accept that a unified school system is the best means of learning how to live together. We have come to accept as an article of faith that the state school system is actually the social glue, the means of cohesion and unity

for the nation, and to withdraw your children to send them to another kind of school, be it a privately-owned elitist school, a church or parent controlled school, an integrated school even, is an expression not of parental choice but in some senses of treason. It is to betray the vision of the nation as a unified whole, egalitarian, open, non-discriminatory, tolerant.

I wish to challenge this assumption, not that we should not want to have a nation that is unified, open, non-discriminatory, but because I do not believe that it is the role, the task, the responsibility and the mandate of the school, even a state-funded education system, to produce this result. The school is not meant to form the social glue for the nation. It does not lie within the task of the school to do this, and it is to distort and misdirect the school in seeking to use it as the means to achieve that goal, a goal which is not **educational** in nature, but largely **political**. Thus one of the reasons I am opposed to a monolithic state education system is that it too readily falls into the power of some to use as a means of promoting a particular ideology, a philosophy, a faith, even, which is not that which the community has, but which some wish the community to have. Thus schools are used not to transmit and inculcate the views and aspirations of the community at large, but to convert, to transform, to mould the community **coming into being** through the maturing generations, with a particular goal and vision in mind. What is that vision? In many ways it does not matter; because whatever it is, it is not the role of the government to promote it through a monolithic school system. How and why we can escape from that situation will be explored as we continue.

2

Origins of the New Zealand education system and their contemporary relevance

In New Zealand, we have had a largely monolithic system of education ever since the introduction of the 1877 Education Act. The place the school has in New Zealand society is by and large a product of the conflicts and debates taking place last century which occasioned the passing of that act, and so it is necessary to spend some time briefly considering those debates and what occasioned the passing of that Act, before we move on to examine some of the consequences of the way education has been structured.

When the various colonies were established in New Zealand last century, there was little communication between them, and they functioned largely independently of one another. It has been said that communication between each of the colonies and Australia was easier than communication between the colonies themselves. This isolation was of course a product of the small numbers of settlers, the difficulty of travelling between settlements, and the fact that this was by and large unnecessary. There was not much you could gain from visiting another colony that you could not find in your own, initially at least. As a result of this isolation, national government was considerably hampered, and so the Provincial Governments were born through the Constitution Act of 1852 (British Parliament). Each of the six provinces had their own Provincial Council and Superintendent, and one of the responsibilities which devolved upon the provincial governments was education. The central Government remained under the supervision of the Governors and the House of Representatives and Legislative Council.

As a consequence of the isolation and relative independence of the provinces from each other, each province had its own system of education, and also its own system of funding education from the public purse. The schools that existed were by and large established by the various denominations for the benefit of their own members. However, as most of the settlers were Protestants, and fiercely anti-Catholic Protestants for the most part, there was little sympathy for granting funding for the schools established by Roman Catholics. At that time, the denominational affiliations of the different schools had a more marked effect on the way various subjects were taught than you would find in schools of the same denominations today, and the one which was the most contentious, aside from the doctrinal teaching of each denomination, was **history**. The various schools continued and perpetuated different perspectives on history which originated in the experiences of their founders in Europe and elsewhere. You must bear in mind that at this time (1850's) religious freedom was by no means universal in Europe! In England, for instance, until **1871** only members of the Anglican church were admitted to Oxford and Cambridge universities, until the 19th century the **only** universities in England. For members of other churches, Protestant as well as Catholic, and also those who professed no religious affiliation at all, there was no means of entry to the professions such as medicine and law. Thus many of the other universities in England were established in the nineteenth century by non-Conformist (non-Anglican) Protestants because they were excluded from Cambridge and Oxford for religious reasons. Thus it was that when the school systems were founded in New Zealand, there was strong sensitivity to the religious restrictions on education still in force in England, and so subjects such as history explained not only what had happened in the past, but why certain people were still excluded from higher education.

Instead of learning from the problems of English education, the colonists unfortunately perpetuated many of the same attitudes, and education in New Zealand was as marred by denominational conflicts as it was in England. Funding was granted by provincial governments in accordance with denominational loyalties, not in accordance with justice and equity. Thus Catholic schools were frequently denied funding by the Protestant majority. In fact, the Protestants in Otago would rather refuse government funding for their own schools than countenance the possibility that

equitable funding would be available to Catholics. Such bigoted and short-sighted views, which allowed one group to deprive themselves of financial assistance merely to ensure that religious opponents would likewise be deprived, is the height of religious intolerance spilling over into political injustice. One minister actually advocated a totally secularised system for all schools, providing the Catholics would agree to participate on the same basis. He was certain that the reading of the Bible at home, in Sunday school and in church was more than enough to compensate for the loss of Christian input in the curriculum during school hours, an attitude which is by no means extinct.

That the fears of Protestants towards Catholics were rooted in their bitter experience of Catholic persecution and bigotry in other countries and earlier times is understandable. The Catholic church has until recent times sought to suppress Protestantism in nations where they held the upper hand. The Constantinian view that the state should uphold the true (Catholic) religion has been extraordinarily tenacious in many countries, and where the situation has been the reverse, Protestants have not been slow to treat Catholicism likewise. The solution is not to give either Catholicism or Protestantism a privileged position, but for both to be treated equally and impartially.

The only exception to this situation was in the Nelson province. The first private school was established by the Nelson School Society in March 1842, i.e. only a matter of months following the arrival of settlers, and was granted land by the Governor for a school for children from all denominations. Subsequently this Society opened eleven other schools in the district. The first public school opened in Nelson in September 1842, open to all regardless of the religious opinions of parents. In both the public and private schools, no catechisms or denominational doctrines were taught, and the Bible was read without comment. In addition to the public school and the private schools started by the Society, there were also denominational schools, one Anglican, three Methodist and also at least one Lutheran school. These were all absorbed by the Provincial education system by 1857. Several Catholic schools were also started, both primary and secondary, taking both Catholic and Protestant pupils. For a time these received subsidies from the Provincial funds, but this ceased on introduction of the

Education Act in 1877. The schools managed to continue to flourish while having to charge fees.

Nelson started out with an avowedly “secular” education system established in 1856 and funded by the Provincial government. The basis of the system was:

“That as every settler was to be called upon to pay for its support, whatever his religious opinions might be, the basis on which the scheme ought to rest, must in equity be a secular one.”

One member of the commission, Frederick A Weld (who was later to become Prime Minister from 1864-1865), resigned on the grounds that the Catholic church, to which he belonged, considered it dangerous to impart secular education to children unaccompanied by religious instruction. He preferred the following option:

“That Government should give assistance to all well-conducted schools that give a certain amount of secular instruction to the satisfaction of a Government Inspector, the Government not to interfere in any way in the religious instruction given in the schools.”

It is a recurring theme when reading through the history of education in New Zealand, to discover that the Catholics had a well-developed philosophy of education, while the Protestants assumed that the general cultural perspective was a broadly Protestant Christian one, and saw no need for developing their own distinctive, inherently Christian approach. This failure to be distinctive meant that identification of the surrounding culture as “Christian” made it impossible to critique that culture, and so Christianity became identified with participating in that culture.

The consequences of this approach in the realm of tertiary education in the United States have been well documented by George Marsden. He makes the point in his works that tertiary education in America was the only societal institution which was not taken from the hands of Christians by secularists, but actually voluntarily handed over by Christians to secularists, with no hint of struggle. The root of that problem

was the identification of the surrounding culture as Christian, and thus there was no reason for the church to continue to involve itself in providing tertiary education. The same arguments could be duplicated with respect to the secularisation of primary and secondary education in New Zealand (and no doubt tertiary education as well), a process which was taking place at the same time as that in North America. It would be an interesting exercise to trace any links or parallels between these two societies and their approach to Christian involvement in education.

After the primary education system was taken over by the national government, there was concern that a Christian component be retained in the education offered. As there was no conception of an education that was distinctively Christian, the culture around being a “generically Protestant Christian” one, this was restricted to reading the Bible and learning moral truths. Since this could not be incorporated into the official curriculum of a secular state education system, the compromise solution reached was the now-famous “Nelson System,” in which Bible lessons could be taught in the school, parents being able to withdraw their children if they objected, while the school was technically closed during that time. This continues as the basis of “Bible in Schools” today. The Provincial school system thus set up in 1856 was modified two years later to include equitable funding for **any** school offering satisfactory “secular” instruction and religious education given only if children could be withdrawn. Grants were made on the basis of the cost of educating pupils at the public schools.

The Catholics were the only ones to take advantage of this system, which continued until 1877. It was held that since all parents contributed to the funding of education through taxation, it was only equitable that all schools benefit from such funding. It has been claimed that this system satisfied everybody: the Catholics received a fair share of the taxes they paid, schools were inspected to ensure education was satisfactory, nobody was subjected to religious education they objected to, and it enabled the Bible to be read in all schools. When the schools were merged into the National education system on 1 January 1878, the public schools in Nelson had 3839 pupils and the Catholic schools 590.

However, the unseemly disputes over school funding, and the fundamental inequalities in the way this was done in the other provinces, were among the prime reasons for the abolition of the Provinces themselves in 1876. The squabbling between Catholics, Protestants and secularists gave no indication that the Nelson system of equitable funding could be applied elsewhere, leaving the way clear for the Central government to take over responsibility for education funding throughout New Zealand, and this it did through the Education Act of 1877. And so we were bequeathed an education system which in the words of its famous description is “free, compulsory and secular,” not because it was demanded by the secularists, but because the Christians were unable to come to any agreement concerning the funding of schools of other denominations. Mind you, it has to be borne in mind that for many people, funding of denominational schools meant funding schools established by the **Anglican** church, and this no doubt raised too many fears that education in New Zealand would follow the pattern which still prevailed in England, as for instance in the religious tests at Oxford and Cambridge, so their fears are perhaps understandable.

Just what “secular” meant in the description of the education system has been much debated, with two schools of thought on the issue: one, that it meant non-sectarian, that is, broadly Christian (read: Protestant) but not denominationally affiliated; the other, that it meant unrelated to Christianity at all; secular in the more modern sense. In my reading of the debates in newspapers of the time, it became apparent that this term was not being used unequivocally, it was, to be blunt, a weasel-word used by politicians and others **precisely because** it was ambiguous. It could be used safely in any context, as people interpreted it to mean **what they wished it to mean** when they heard it used. It was also used by some because it concealed their intentions; secular **could** mean non-sectarian, but it was **actually** meant by some to be secularised.

The problem was that prior to 1877, the education system **was** sectarian: education was not simply Christian, but denominational in flavour. The idea that education could be distinctively Christian without also being tied to the beliefs of one particular denomination was not conceivable at the time, and it is only perhaps possible to conceive of a truly non-denominational education that is also intrinsically **Christian** in the second half of the twentieth century. A major factor in this development is the

idea that schools can be established by groups of Christians that do not all owe their loyalty to one particular denomination, on the grounds that education has its own character as a Christian enterprise, independent of the character of the **church** as a Christian enterprise. We will be returning to this point later.

The debate over the establishment of a system of public schools was also hampered by the deeply embedded dualism of the day: the Catholics seemingly the only ones to maintain an integral conception of education and religion, even though their official philosophical position was more overtly dualistic than that of most Protestants! Protestants then, and still often today, accept a distinction between Religious Education and secular education, thus allowing them to work with the compromise of the Nelson System. This was in my opinion a fatal flaw that allowed the secularists to argue that religious instruction was separate from and additional to the education given in the schools, thus could be isolated either by being taught at a separate time when the schools were technically closed, or else taught outside school altogether.

After the passing of the Education Act of 1877, most schools were absorbed by the state education system. Various denominational schools remained independent, but also funded by the denominations which still shouldered full responsibility for them. The most extensive separate education system was that run by the Catholic church, and the schools run by other denominations tended to be eventually absorbed by the state system or to be closed down. Eventually it was mainly secondary schools that remained outside the state system, and these developed a reputation as elitist and expensive. It must also be said that there has been considerable ambivalence within the Protestant denominations as to the continued maintenance of these schools, and there have been sporadic moves to dispose of them as somewhat of an embarrassment to an egalitarian social-gospel that rejects inherited status and elitism. As most of these schools have become integrated into the state system their denominational character has apparently dwindled considerably.

As we can see from this very brief survey of the history of education in New Zealand, the way in which schools are related to the Government is the fruit largely of Christian in-fighting last century. But the fruits are more extensive than simply the removal of

schools from the influence and control of the churches. What has been established is a secular education system that has in many respects **supplanted** the churches.

Schools were originally seen by the first colonists as a way of entrenching, reinforcing and extending the influence of a particular denominational loyalty. Schools were not seen as a means to pass on culture and learning from one generation to the next, but as a means of social control. The debate was largely over **who** was going to exercise that influence and control. Since this then was the climate of debate which the churches had created, it is not surprising then that the secularists in the colony, of whom there were a considerable number, well educated and articulate and with positions of political power, maintained this same approach, and debated not the kind of education that should be offered first of all, but who was to exercise control and influence over that education. Since it was no longer to be the churches, then given the lack of other suitable social agencies in the young colony, that responsibility obviously fell to the government. Other than the churches, who else was there?

Thus it could be argued that education passed into the hands of the government largely by default, and not because of any positive principle that the government was best equipped or most suited or otherwise granted the mandate to do this. The tragedy of the situation arises when the whole educational enterprise continues to lie within the power and authority of the government, again not because of any positive principle, but by default. There has not been any clearly articulated alternative that has been able to capture public imagination and serious examination. What then is the consequence of this situation?

The problem we face in society today, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has put it, is that we get the schools that we deserve. Fundamental ailments in educational practice not only cause but are caused by fundamental ailments in society itself, and cannot be cured without a cure of those social ailments. Schools have often been assumed to be the culprits and society the victim. It is also assumed that the problems that afflict the schools can be addressed while leaving the various problems that afflict society as a whole unchallenged or unchanged. Educational reform can proceed without social reform.

Wolterstorff presents the dilemma for us in this way: if a society is committed to the idea of a common school for all, and its members agree on the kind of character and education they wish children to have, then they can organise schools which will produce that result. When a society is not committed to common schools, and as well, there is no agreement on the education that schools should offer, then the members of that society need to organise schools appropriately for each community. But the real problem comes, and this is where we in New Zealand stand, when the community is committed to the idea of a common school for all, but cannot agree on the kind of education that school is to provide. Then the issue is: **Whose** view of education will the schools adopt? **Who** has the authority to decide how children will be educated? This is our dilemma. For whoever is given the authority to determine the character of education, will also have the power to over-ride the objections and preferences of those who disagree with their view. And if the majority view in society accepts the decisions of that authority, then those who dissent from that view, for whatever reason, are placed in the invidious position of seeming to betray the values of the society as a whole.

It is obviously **impossible**, but at the same time **inescapably necessary**, for whoever has the authority to determine the nature of education in the common school, to establish one educational system that will satisfy the desires of everyone in the community. And that authority overrides all other authorities: those of parents, teachers, church leaders, businessmen, and so on. They have willingly conceded to that authority the sole right to determine the education offered in the common school. Since New Zealanders are committed as an article of faith to the idea of the common school, the obvious step they must then take is to justify that decision by insisting that there is indeed a common **education** which all are able to share. That is, we must convince ourselves that what is taught in the schools is what we indeed believe. To do otherwise is to introduce cognitive dissonance, or unresolvable paradoxes and confusion. After all, we are committed to the idea of the common school. And the common school must have a single educational focus, which all are able to share. That means, then, a “secular” education that avoids addressing every and any questions relating to religious questions.

But education is the process of introducing children to the heritage of our culture and training them to participate in and contribute to that culture. That can only be done if there is some coherent goal and perspective underlying the education, that is, what is the point of what we are trying to achieve? What kind of person are we seeking to develop through education? What place will they have in society when they are fully equipped by the schools? Those issues are not ones which can be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant: they stand at the very heart and centre of education. Obviously, therefore, the common school providing a uniform education for all must have a perspective, a vision, a goal, a guide for what it is seeking to achieve. But what if that vision is in conflict with the goals and perspectives of parents and others in society? That, unfortunately, is not the schools' problem, but the problem of those who are in dissent. Society has determined to have a common school and a common education, and we just have to like it or lump it. Christians reconcile themselves to this situation through adopting a dualistic framework: schools teach "secular" knowledge, families and churches teach "spiritual" knowledge. They are complementary, co-existing, partners, in the task of teaching children.

But what if what the schools and the churches teach is in conflict? Then one or other must fall into line, if they are not to lose their children. Churches have by and large acquiesced to this situation, and the paradox then is that many of them have both fallen into line **and** lost the children. The Christian faith is incompatible with the secular education offered in our schools, and when there is a conflict, whom will the children trust? Usually, as we can see from their absence from the church, they go with what the school has to offer. Why is that? Because it is the school that has the universal support, commitment, official sanction, and social respectability in our society, not the church. We have surrendered to the schools the authority and competence to educate children, and that education incorporates of necessity the inculcation of a particular worldview, a secular worldview that declares that God is irrelevant, absent, not worth mentioning, and therefore children form a worldview in which God does not exist. Why then go to church to worship a non-existent entity? Surely if God was important the schools would teach them about him? As they don't, he must not be that significant at all. Thus society is secularised by default, by

definition, **by necessity**, through our determination as an article of faith to maintain and continue a common school with a common education at all costs.

But is there an alternative? Can we have an education system that caters for all views and perspectives in society? Yes we can, not by teaching every perspective within the common school, a solution that would lead to chaos and confusion, but by abandoning the goal of maintaining a common school system that caters for all. That is, we move the locus of authority away from one centralised body, and so we provide a different answer to the questions, **Whose** view of education will the schools adopt? **Who** has the authority to decide how children will be educated? Rather than seeing one person or body as having that authority, it is instead decentralised, devolved, in the current jargon, returned to those who are the only legitimate holders of that authority: the parents. And because parents belong to different faith communities, have different views on the nature of life, its purpose, the place and task of education, then we cannot maintain a common school system.

The alternative is not the collectivist approach we currently have; not the individualistic approach some have advocated, but a pluralistic approach that recognises that different convictions about life are not deviations from the collective view, not expressions of the individual's absolute freedom to choose, but the convictions of communities within society as a whole. And it is to these communities that the responsibility of schooling must be returned. Parents then have the option of having their children educated according to the perspective and aspirations of the community to which they belong. After all, that is the context in which they live their lives and have their relationships and interactions with others and the world around them. But these communities are not **geographic** or **ethnic** communities, the basis on which government has decentralised or devolved authority in other areas. These communities are **faith** communities, unified by their common convictions concerning the nature of human life. It is to these communities that responsibility and authority must be returned, and given equitable access to resources, facilities, funding, and so on, which after all comes from the common funding pool to which we all contribute: our taxation. This means then that the common school system must be broken up, and

the resources currently allocated to one monolithic education system distributed equitably to all those engaged in the education of their children.

This then will achieve a number of unexpected benefits for the people of New Zealand: they will, probably for the first time, have to come to some self-consciousness regarding their own faith-convictions, a realisation of the identity and nature of the community to which they belong, and the need to reflect on what they want in terms of the education of their children in a deeper sense than simply choosing the “best school” for their child from the range of (fundamentally identical) options presented to them in the state system. And Christians can bring about this situation only by abandoning the false distinction between the sacred and the secular, the “common education” we can all participate in and the “personal options” of religious views. We need to be able to articulate not only the character of the “secular religion” that is established in the state school system, but also a social perspective which can present and defend an alternative way of organising education. We are able to debate what it is we expect from our political system; what we expect from our economic system; what we expect from our health system. We need to be able to stimulate debate about what we expect from our education system in a way that does justice to the pluralistic nature of our society. A school system is unlike a health system, a political system, an economic system: it has its own character and distinctives, at the heart of which is the goal of training children in a worldview. Unless there is parental sympathy and support for the worldview in which their children are being trained, schools cannot do their job. There will always be conflict between the home and the school, even if that is unexpressed and unarticulated. Parents then have no way of understanding the origin of their unease, their disquiet, their anxiety, which can easily develop to resentment and anger at what the “school” is doing to their child. The solution is not to move the child to another school in the state system, since that will not address the problem. The solution is to change the school system to conform to the worldview perspectives of the parents.

It is possible to establish a school system where all parents have the right to have their children educated in terms of their own particular worldview or life perspective, and that the government could support all these schools equally and impartially. After all,

consider the alternative: the government arrogates to itself the right to decide what perspective will shape the lives and beliefs of its citizens, and allocates its funding towards schools that support that decision on the part of the government. If the general population acquiesce in this situation, we call it democracy and social unity. If the general population resists this situation, but it is imposed anyway, we call it fascism or communism. What we have then is structurally and principally no different to a dictatorship in the field of education, where one government-sponsored ideology is given priority over all other perspectives. To challenge this we must demolish the belief that it is the government who should decide what perspective should be used in educating the nation's children. That is not the task of the government, it is the task of parents, and therefore the parents must have that responsibility returned to them.

The task of government is restricted to ensuring that children are educated adequately, ensuring that resources gathered by taxation from all citizens are distributed equitably to all schools regardless of their foundational perspective, and defending those schools from attacks by those who disapprove of their perspectives. Thus no one perspective will receive a privileged status above others; the government is to be impartial towards the perspective schools adopt at the direction of their supporting communities. It is not the task of the government to determine the life perspectives of its citizens, and to allow it to continue to do so is to acquiesce in the worst form of tyranny. Even if all the citizens of the nation acquiesce in the common school system which teaches a state-sponsored life perspective, it takes only one parent to dissent from that view to in principle challenge the basis on which that education system is founded. That is, can the state with any legitimacy say to a dissident parent that they must fall into line and have their children educated not according to the parent's wishes but according to the **state's** wishes? On what basis can this be defended, where the parents rights and responsibilities as a parent are over-ridden by the state? Or is the right to determine the worldview perspective according to which a child shall be educated outside the authority and responsibility of the parent to determine? If so, on what basis does the **state** have that right, and not for instance the church, or some other institution? Unless there is a clearly grounded principle on which these decisions are made, there is no way we can sustain an education system which has the support and endorsement of all the citizens of this nation.

And there is no way a common education system can be so endorsed, because there is no agreement among the citizens of this nation as to the right perspective for life, the worldview which we should all adopt. That being the case then, we can only hope for a properly grounded pluralistic education system to ever be able to win support and endorsement of all, except perhaps from those who still hold to the faith that society needs and must have one common education system which educates all children according to a state-endorsed life perspective. And they must be challenged to accept that this view is indeed a faith-commitment and not simply the obvious, rationally derived truth of the matter. For again, it takes only one person to dissent from that to raise the imponderable problem of whose view will be adopted by the state, and who will have their perspective dismissed, and their children forcibly educated according to **someone else's** convictions. We must insist that this question be answered by all those who want to maintain a unified, common school system: who has the authority to determine the perspective according to which all children will be educated, on what basis is that authority exercised, and on what basis are the views and convictions of parents to be over-ridden.

To be elected to govern, holding the office of minister of education, is not sufficient grounds to answer this, because the question then simply changes to: on what basis can you argue that it is the minister of education, or the government as a whole, that has been given this authority, and by whom? If governments are indeed elected to govern on behalf of all, upholding the rights of all without favour or privilege, then to insist on a uniform, universal education system is to violate their office, because it not within their authority to determine that their views be imposed on all, and to do so is to call into question the legitimacy of their office and the credibility of a democratic government. To argue, as is usually the case, that the common schools teach a neutral, non-sectarian, universally acceptable perspective, is not only patently untrue, but irrelevant, because even if they did, which I deny, then any parent who did not want their children educated according to **that** perspective would still have the right to demand that the government provide alternative education for them in accordance with their own principles. No matter how we look at it, the concept of a unified, state-sponsored school system teaching all children on the basis of a single perspective is

indefensible and unsustainable, and will eventually break down as society becomes increasingly pluralistic and diverse. Only a school system which acknowledges that pluralism, and gives institutional expression to it, is able to survive the complexities of a pluralist society, and only a pluralistic system, incorporating the full variety of life perspectives represented among us, can hope to hold us together. A state-imposed, unified system, on the other hand, paradoxically can only ever drive us apart.

Returning then to the point I made earlier: schools are not independent of the societies which they serve. The problems that confront society will also confront schools, and it is perhaps in the school system that the problems will be exacerbated and exaggerated, because it is here that all those problems in society meet. Here is the one social institution in which all families have a stake, and here is where all their children are sent, bringing with them the diversities of their social, economic, ethnic, political, ethical, religious backgrounds. How can a single unified school system cope with these problems? It cannot, and to expect it to do so is to expect the impossible. How can they bring unity out of such diversity of perspectives? Only by imposing on all a perspective which must transcend them all, comprehend them all, relativise them all, and ultimately debase them all, because it can only value and affirm the differences of perspective within society by maintaining that there is a still higher perspective to which all our individual perspectives are subject. And to do that is to violate the integrity, validity, and credibility of those perspectives, which do not support such relativising by a still higher view.

Paradoxically, then, by insisting on unity we destroy the diversity we claim to preserve, and generate instead an amorphous, rootless, directionless and contentless perspective which has no power to give direction, hope and understanding to a new generation. What then can we expect except complete social breakdown, moral decline, despair, suicide, depression, alienation and spiritual poverty. The gospel gives us hope, because it does not demand of us that we force all people to conform to our wishes, but holds out a way for us to live together in peace, while respecting one another's differences. It is this hope of the Gospel that we need today in the New Zealand education system. It is my hope that Christians will present the Gospel as the

basis for peace together, even with those with whom we disagree. What greater proof is there than that, that the Gospel is the one and only light shining in the darkness.

3

Social Justice and Education in a Pluralistic Society

What do we mean by a pluralistic society?

Contemporary society is often described as “pluralistic.” Society is no longer seen as a unified and coherent whole in which we all share the same ethical standards, religious beliefs, attitudes towards institutions and customs. We now have in our midst a diversity of ethnic groups, refugees and immigrants from many nations, who have brought with them their own customs, beliefs, lifestyles and religions. There are also many people actively exploring pre-Christian religious beliefs, reactivating long-dead practices and rituals. There is no longer a uniform Anglo-Saxon look to society, with a small proportion of Maoris on the fringe. Ethnic diversity is now a mainstream phenomenon, and people are very much aware of their own and others’ ethnic and cultural origins. This is a more or less undisputable fact: we live in a pluralistic society with many different ethnic and cultural groups highly visible in it.

But if that is all we mean by pluralism, then what else can we say about it, except to celebrate the richness and diversity of cultures and beliefs in our midst? This approach to pluralism is sometimes advocated in schools and in the community generally. But indeed there is more to it than that. There are a variety of ways that pluralism can be understood, and it is possible to create confusion and dissension, if we fail to be explicit about what we mean. Apart from the basic form of pluralism I have described, which could perhaps be more accurately and simply described as “cultural diversity” rather than pluralism, there are two main ways in which pluralism can be understood:

philosophical pluralism and social pluralism. These are not necessarily related to each other and should not be confused.

Philosophical pluralism is the belief that because there are many different ways of living, believing, thinking about the world, there is therefore no single **right** way, and that all beliefs and views are equally valid. This philosophical pluralism is basically relativistic: whatever is true for you is true **for you**, even if it is not true **for me**. Thus it is claimed that we must accept all religious beliefs as equally true, while claiming a privileged status for none. Nobody has a privileged access to the truth: we can approach God in our own ways. It has been said that for scholars in religious studies all religions are equally **true**, for philosophers all religions are equally **false**, and for politicians all religions are equally **useful**. The biggest but not the only flaw in the philosophical pluralist approach is that it abdicates any claim to truth at all: if all religions are equally true then they are all equally false. That is, there is no possible standard by which we can determine what it means for a religion to be true, and so we cannot accept any of them as true, since we do not know how to determine which of them **could** be true. Because different religions do not hold to the same beliefs, their mutual contradiction is taken to mean that truth cannot exist at all, but even more importantly, **that this does not matter in the least!**

On the other hand, the frequently espoused claim that we can accept the kernel of what is true in all religions, i.e. some minimal set of ethical beliefs, is to reduce all religions to a common denominator, and means that they are basically a common ethical belief with an extraneous and unnecessary superstructure that can be safely jettisoned. However, this is in fact not a pluralistic approach to religion, but an imperialistic approach that seeks to make all religions conform to a minimalistic rather bland ethical position typical not of the religions of the world as a whole but only of post-Enlightenment Western humanism.

It also rules out of contention any religious view which claims that it is true while other religions are false (in whole or in part). Such a view is, on the philosophical pluralist viewpoint, intrinsically false, and this position is not entitled to be considered equally true alongside all the others. Thus all religions are equally true except those

that claim to be the only true religion. The problem is, all religions make this claim, which is why they continue to exist alongside each other. It is only the minimalistic Western humanist viewpoint which claims they are at root all the same: no authentic adherent of any religion would accept such a position. Even Hinduism which is claimed to accept all religions as true actually accepts these other religions on its **own Hindu basis**, not on their own basis. The gods of other religions are incorporated into the existing Hindu pantheon, and understood in a **Hindu** way, not in the way they are understood within their own religious context. Thus Jesus Christ, Mohammed and other such figures are simply further incarnations of Hindu deities, and not acknowledged to be who they are considered to be in Christianity or Islam or whatever religion they are taken from. This was the option left open to the early Christians in the pagan Roman empire, but one which they firmly rejected by asserting that Jesus alone was Lord.

Therefore the relativistic approach to truth is incoherent: there must be a possibility of truth which is not socially, culturally or politically conditioned. It is incoherent and self-contradictory to claim that the only truth is that there is no one single truth. Philosophical pluralism is thus implausible and unacceptable for Christians, as well as probably every other person holding to their particular religious beliefs. But to reject this philosophical pluralist approach is to incur the accusation of insensitivity and intolerance with respect to the social phenomenon of religious diversity which confronts us in society. Is it possible to say in this context that any one religion is true, and that others are false? Many people say no, we must accept all religions and beliefs as equally valid and equally true.

But this approach confuses the two meanings of pluralism: while we cannot claim a privileged **social or political** status for any one religious confession or group, this does not mean that we cannot claim that one **religion** is true while others are false. It simply means we cannot expect as of right that society will grant a privileged status to one religion and that this religion can claim the right to dictate the direction of society as a whole. The issue is, then, how do we avoid making the fatal step from accepting the social phenomenon of religious pluralism, and somehow accounting for that in terms of a social or political theory, to accepting the philosophical position that all

religions are equally true? The mistake has been in the attempt of Western humanism to eradicate the privileged status of one religion, Christianity, by denying its inherent truth. There is no basis for claiming that Christianity should have a privileged status in society. Unfortunately, Christianity has often claimed to have some kind of privileged status. This can be seen for example in the way in which the Church of England is “established,” that is, declared to be the official religion of England. The same is true in other countries where the established or privileged religion [i.e. denomination] is Catholicism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and so on. In fact one country [Sweden] has only several years ago abolished the privileged status of Lutheranism. Its ministers are no longer civil servants, and the church is supported by the voluntary contributions of its members rather than through taxation.

The claim of a privileged status for Christianity follows a Constantinian model of society. This approach developed following the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine, which saw the State intermingled with the Church. This inevitably leads to the concept of a “Christian nation” in which the main institutions, structures, laws and ethos are supposedly Christian, and that Christianity has an exclusive privileged status within such a society not given to other religions (whose adherents frequently were barely tolerated within that society, i.e. the Jews in Mediaeval Europe).¹ Christianity cannot claim a privileged status, not because it is not true, but because it is inappropriate and wrong for **any** religion at all to be given a privileged status in society. If we are to accept the legitimate existence of those of other religions, then we must accept Christianity can claim no superior social status over them. The alternative is to revert to some kind of social control which restricts or hinders the exercise of religion on the part of others [cf. Fiji after the coups].

Even the claim to “tolerate” other religions implies the right of one religion to generously allow the practice of other religions within its rightful domain. We do not “tolerate” other religions, but accept the right to religious freedom alongside of other religions. By this we are not accepting that they are all equally true, but accepting the

¹ Note the “logical progression” from the Mediaeval position to the Nazi position: You are not entitled to live among us as Jews. You are not entitled to live among us. You are not entitled to live.

existence of a social phenomenon that we cannot and should not seek to control by legal and political means and methods. The main argument I wish to raise against the Constantinian claim is that Christianity is not a “national” or “ethnic” religion but a religion for all people, thus it cannot be identified with any one ethnic group or nationality, nor can it be seen as the basis for ethnic or national identity. The consequences of violating this principle can be seen in the rejection of Christianity as “white man’s religion” by many former colonial countries, and by the conflicts in places like Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia, where religious identity is intermingled with ethnic and national identity.

The response in Western society to the Constantinian claim of Christianity to a privileged position has been to promote the concept that society should be “secular,” that is, free from any particular religious affiliation or commitment. This approach is being promoted again as the solution to the place of religion in an increasingly pluralistic society: to avoid a repeat of the religious wars of the Sixteenth century, we should rigorously exclude all religious arguments from public issues. This has produced what Neuhaus has called the “naked public square.” For those who are believers, it is an unacceptable approach. But can we find a position which avoids religious warfare, and the imposition of a religious faith on those outside it? That is the problem facing us.

Many of the problems faced by Christians arise from their failure to adjust to the pluralist character of modern society. There has been much anguished complaining about the presence of Moslems in New Zealand. Some would deny them the right to build mosques, or to be allowed to kill their meat in accordance with their religious convictions. The catch-cry of “This is a Christian country” has been used as if it were a self-evident truth which thereby allows some to deny rights to others on grounds of their religion. That some New Zealanders are finding Islam more attractive than Christianity should not be the spur to bigotry and prejudice, leading if possible to oppressive measures, but an indictment of the carnal and apostate church whose materialistic and self-interested spirit is a denial of the gospel it seeks to profess. But even if the church was more truly Christian, some would still turn to other religions. This must be seen as arising in the conflict within the heart of every one of us,

between the call to obedience to God and the sinfulness of human nature, from which none of us are exempt. Thus seeking a **political** solution in this situation is probably rooted in greater apostasy and spiritual blindness than those who have sought elsewhere for their religious convictions. To proclaim the truth of the gospel is fine, to seek to impose it at the point of a gun, or even by legal sanction, is to deny the very gospel itself.

The idea that New Zealand is in any sense a “Christian” nation is not only fraught with difficulties in definition, it is also out of touch with reality. The idea that any nation should or could be described as “Christian” since the beginnings of the universal church is unbiblical. That a nation can have a heritage that was more strongly influenced by Christianity than by any other religion is acceptable and undeniable. That any nation should be attempting to enshrine that heritage in legislation, above and beyond all other perspectives, is patently unjust. We must accept that almost every nation on earth is now a mixture of many different religious communities, and to claim precedence for any one of them in the political sphere is to invite not merely resentment, but bigotry, discrimination, and injustice, leading to terrorism, bloodshed and civil war. Northern Ireland, Lebanon and the Iran-Iraq war are but few current instances where a specific religious allegiance has been interpreted as granting (or denying) access to political power. Here, being a Christian or Moslem, Catholic or Presbyterian, Sunni or Shi’ite Moslem, is not merely a private religious conviction, but also the focus of political power-seeking. This abhorrent situation is the antithesis of the biblical Christian political perspective. In that view, justice and political power are not the possession of one religious group, to be granted or denied to others at whim, but rather the means by which people of many different persuasions can live in harmony together.

A Christian pluralist political perspective is however, not merely restricted to the legitimization of the co-existence of those of various religious convictions. It also provides a perspective on the structure of society as a whole; that is, a philosophy of society and its component institutions and individuals with their many and varied relationships. This follows from, and is grounded in, not only the acceptance of the phenomenon of religious diversity, but also in the way in which it understands

creation. There are basically two ways in which non-Biblical thought understands creation: dualism and monism. These false alternatives are in stark contrast to the Biblical doctrine of creation. We do not find God forming creatures from a combination of form and matter in a dualistic manner, nor do we find creatures emerging from the one source in a monistic manner, as in evolutionary theory. Rather, we find a diversity of specific creatures formed **as such** by God, characterised by a web of interlacing relationships so that together they all form a harmonious order of creation. The unity of creation is not found in the common substance from which things are made, as in dualist theories, nor in the common origin they share, as in monist theories, but in being subject to the one law-order established by God for the creation, which does not generate uniformity but provides for **diversity** within the creation. Unless we can ground the diversity of life and our institutions in the law-order for the creation, we can have no sure basis for social diversity or the independence and legitimacy of any of our institutions and relationships. That law-order provides the conditions for the existence of all God's creatures, and ensures their functioning according to the intention of God for them. Thus we can see society as a complex of many different societal groups, schools, churches, business enterprises, political parties, media organisations, social clubs, and so on, each of which has its own special character. How are these related to each other? What theory of society can explain their character and distinctiveness? There can be no adequate explanation of this in the false alternatives of collectivism and individualism presented to us by non-Christian perspectives on society, but only in the Christian doctrine of sphere sovereignty.²

Sphere Sovereignty: A Christian Social Theory

Indispensable to a world-formative Christianity is the idea of an architectonic vision and critique of society, that is, an analysis of its structure and dynamics, which provides an adequate understanding of the structure and task of its various institutions. The most comprehensive and highly-articulated Christian theory of society is the theory of sphere sovereignty, which was first espoused in that explicit form by

² Gordon Spykman. "Pluralism: our last best hope?" *Christian Scholars Review* 10 (1980) 99-115.

Abraham Kuyper, who was a pivotal leader in the revival of evangelical Calvinism in The Netherlands during the second half of the nineteenth century. Kuyper held that as God is the creator of the whole universe who has subjected all creatures to constant ordinances based on his sovereign will, their tasks are given by God, which gives each sphere a relative sovereignty, derived from and delegated by God, to carry out those tasks. No other sphere has the right to interfere or hinder that work. Kuyper thus asserted that nobody has the intrinsic right to rule over others, since that right immediately becomes the **rule of the strongest**.³ The authority to rule is instead delegated from God. The sovereignty of the different spheres of society refers to the authority and freedom which exists within the spheres and not between them, that is, externally. While the state has as its task the ensuring of just relationships within society, it cannot interfere with the activities within the spheres which do not pertain to justice. Thus the spheres are all equal; none is **sub**-ordinate to another, or **super**-ordinate to another (as in the Mediaeval and secular views).[See Diagram 1] Nor are there three principal spheres in society, the family, the state and the church, which are ordained by God, from one or other of which the remaining spheres in society are derived, as in the traditional Evangelical view. [See Diagram 2] The principle of sphere sovereignty is simply the recognition that in society there is a diversity of structures each having their own internal structure and authority, which arises from their own special tasks, which are **co**-ordinate with each other. [See Diagram 3] The spheres of society receive their sovereignty from God and not from the state. That means that no one sphere or bearer of authority is the highest, from which all the others derive their power and right to exist. Rather, society is comprised of all the spheres together, co-ordinated with each other, not subordinated to any one or more of them in a hierarchical fashion. That is, they are jointly and individually subject to the ordering Word of God, which is immediately directing each and every structure in society. Each structure must respond in its own way to the Word of God, which is not mediated by another structure, nor may they be hindered from doing so by another structure.

³ Abraham Kuyper. **Calvinism**, p. 103.

Diagram 1

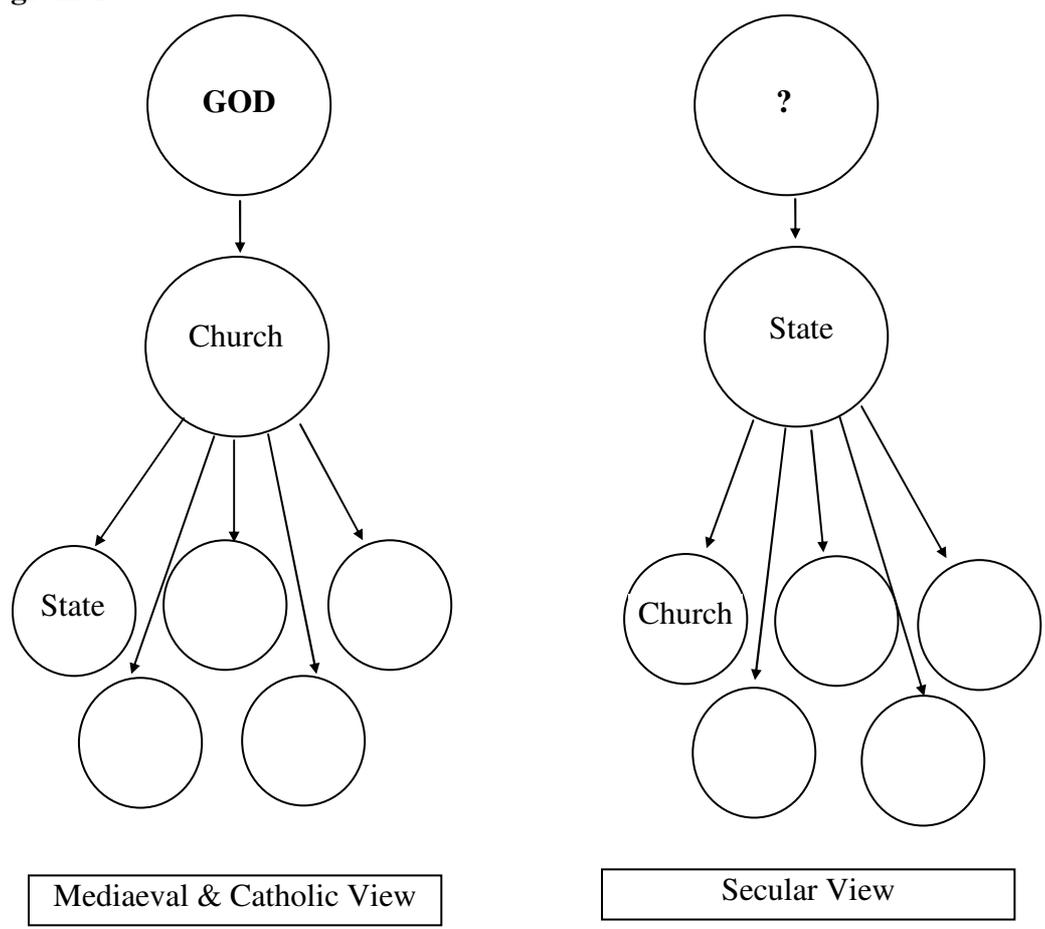


Diagram 2

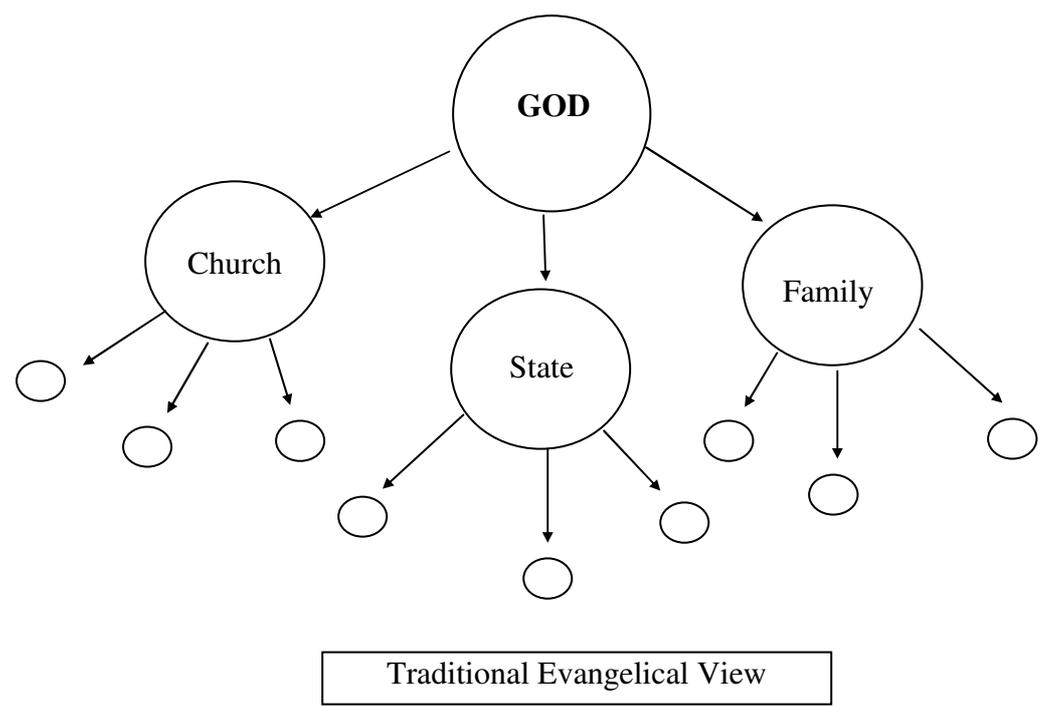
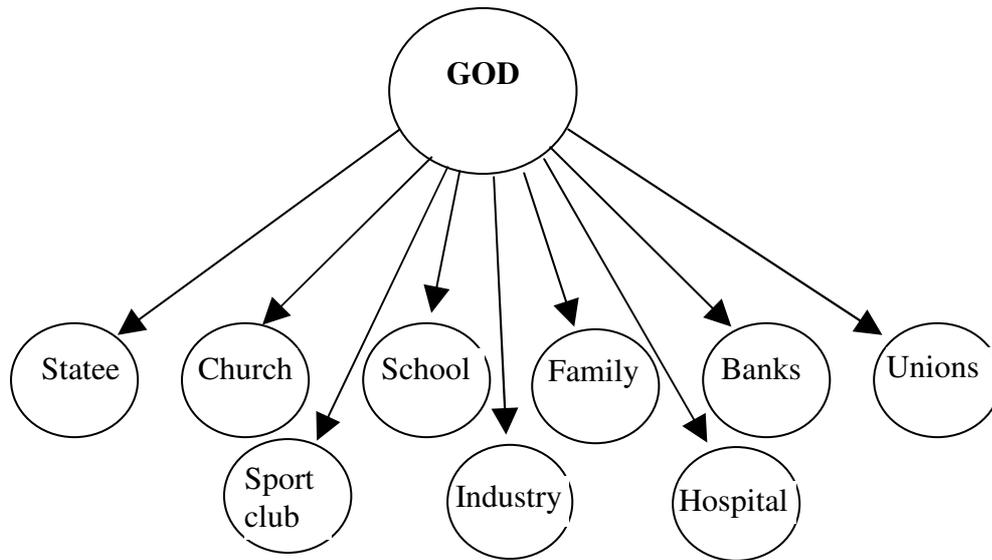


Diagram 3



The liberty of human beings is assured through the freedom which pertains to the spheres in society, since if they remain independent, then the activities which characterise them remain free. Dictatorships then cannot dominate society, as there is a principle embedded in society which precludes such domination. As a result, Holland was one of the few countries which managed to resist the Nazis on a society-wide basis. For instance, the attempt to control the universities resulted in the universities going into recess rather than surrender their liberty, a liberty they had come to cherish as a result of the freedom granted to them through the legislation passed by Kuyper. The Nazis were mystified by the Dutch claim that they had merely taken over the government, they had not taken over the nation as a whole, since the Nazi political philosophy was collectivist, with all institutions subordinate to the government.

Similarly Kuyper rejected the idea of a “social contract” made in earlier ages which now binds us into a political order. This is again the right of the strongest to enforce a contract in which we had no free part in making, as well as being a view based on an entirely fictitious conception of society. Kuyper rejected the idea that we should bow down to any human being **by right** since they are no different to us. God alone is

sovereign. He thus rejects the idea of the right of the majority to rule as the tyranny of numbers, since sovereignty comes from God, not from any number of people no matter how great. As a result, Kuyper fought long and hard for proportional representation, since only in that way can justice be done to the needs of all. Kuyper stressed that the idea of freedom can reach its fulfilment only with a correct view of society, that is, with the protection of the sovereignty of the various spheres, since otherwise there is no check on the power of the majority. Thus he rejects the idea of popular sovereignty, since the view that the state derives its authority from the will of the people leads only to the tyranny of the majority, violating the rights of minorities.

Kuyper held that the state can only prosper where it gives due recognition to the differences between various minorities in the nation. He accuses the modern state of destroying the rightful diversity and cultural differences of the various cultural groups. He claims that “uniformity is the curse of modern life.”⁴ Herman Dooyeweerd further developed Kuyper’s theory, and he sees **differentiation** as the norm for human history. Cultural activity and therefore human history should move in the direction of increasing differentiation, that is, the disclosure of that which God has hidden within the creation. Any cultural activity which does not increasingly disclose this differentiation is regressive and disobedient to God’s command. Dooyeweerd saw this exemplified in Nazi Germany where the attempt was made to reverse the historic disclosure of society and to revert to a tribal ideology of “blood and soil” under the inspiration of romantic nationalism.

Differentiation of society results when the respective callings of humankind are respected and allowed and encouraged to develop. Differentiation is the process of specialisation of human tasks and of human societal structures, allowing the various spheres of society to come into their own by disclosing their own inner nature. In an undifferentiated culture the various spheres of society are still absorbed within the tribal or state structure, as in feudalism. We can see this in the Scriptures in the history of Israel, which moved from being a tribal people under the authority of the head of the clan (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) to the leadership of Moses and under him tribal

⁴ J M van der Kroef. Abraham Kuyper and the rise of Neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands. *Church History* 17 (1948) 330.

elders, to the establishment of the kingship and various government officials in the kingdom. The priesthood was separated off from the political leadership, and the heads of families were no longer the supreme authority with power of life and death, as with Abraham, who served as father, political leader, head of the army, priest, and every other leadership function. All these were concentrated in Abraham, a situation we find in any undifferentiated tribal society. But over time we see the increasing differentiation and diversification of tasks, with specific responsibilities given to some and not to others. This is a recognition of the inherent diversity of human life created by God, and the different tasks he has entrusted to each of us. Through differentiation we are enabled to carry out these tasks without interference, and without demands on us to perform other tasks. Non-Christian views of society sometimes seek to reverse this differentiation, as with the Nazis, and in some sections of the hippy and counter-culture movements of the past. Communes which were set up under such views were often opposed to the differentiation of society, which was interpreted as fragmentation, and the attempt was made to revert to undifferentiated societal life. Such attempts failed because they run counter to the inner dynamic of human life.

The differentiation and disclosure in human society of the hidden potential of the creation is driven forward by its own inner dynamic, that is, granting freedom to human cultural endeavour in a non-idolatrous manner will inevitably lead to that disclosure. Kuyper saw this as the special work of the Holy Spirit within the creation. One of the greatest weaknesses of the dualistic approach to culture found in evangelical and liberal Protestant Christianity, and in Roman Catholicism, and I might add particularly in Charismatic Christianity, is the inability to successfully relate cultural activity to the work of the Holy Spirit. But in Kuyper's vision of the Holy Spirit driving the creation on towards its consummation in the full disclosure of its potential to the glory of God we have a means of understanding both why cultural formation occurs, and what part God plays in it.⁵ Dooyeweerd describes the cause of the differentiation of various spheres as the work of God governing the creation in ways that call for a dynamic unfolding of human social life. Human response to God's call whether in obedience or disobedience gives us the differentiating world we have

⁵ For details of the work of the Holy Spirit in driving the creation to its destiny see Abraham Kuyper. **The work of the Holy Spirit**. Chapter 1, Part iv and passim.

today, where we see both the tragic consequences of human disobedience as well as the greatness of God's grace at work in our midst.

While we can distinguish proper areas of responsibility and authority in life, discerning a variety of sovereign spheres which have been disclosed by human cultural formation, human beings live into all these spheres as whole beings, not as fragmented beings. This differentiation is to permit the carrying out of specialised tasks within human society, and not to allow people to live as though they had no responsibility or accountability to others. This process of differentiation and the realisation of a variety of norms is to serve humankind in its responsibility before God, to care for and develop the earth in a stewardly way, and to allow human life to unfold in all its fulness. Without proper development and differentiation of human life, possibilities which God has laid before us are prevented from being realised to the full, or even in any measure. The purpose of disclosure in society is to bring the human potential to actualisation. It is a life-affirming process, a process of liberation and restoration to wholeness: it is not a process of fragmentation or restriction. Without this process of disclosure we would not even know what our possibilities were; but in disclosing society in this way new and exciting possibilities continually open up before us. It is a creative and open-ended process, stimulated and borne along by the Holy Spirit.

The disclosure of society and its resulting differentiation is a **normed** disclosure. It does not follow arbitrary directions but is governed by the **norm** for that structure or institution. A norm is that by which we discern the normal and the abnormal, and is given by God in the ordering of creation. These norms are frequently discovered intuitively, and confirmed by empirical analysis of society. That is, we have a sense of what should and should not be happening in the structures of society, which can be verified through examining the inner nature and task of those structures to see whether this truly characterises what is happening.

While each sphere is sovereign in its own field, and has its own norms to follow, that does not mean that it is isolated or independent of the other spheres, since the norms for the spheres are norms for human life as a whole, life which is intrinsically of one

piece and is subject to the one Law of God for life. Political institutions follow the norm for the state, economic institutions for the norm for those particular structures, marriage and family life according to the norms for those structures. In that way, life within each sphere can unfold and develop in its own unique but normed way. This means that one sphere cannot dominate another, since to do so would hinder or prevent the development of both spheres according to their own proper inner nature and the norms they should follow. This then leads to the concept of the sovereignty of each of the spheres: they have their own task to fulfil which cannot be performed by any other sphere, nor can they fulfil the task of another sphere. Each has **sovereignty** over its own task and the responsibility before God to ensure that that task is carried out in obedience to the norms for that task. That task and mandate is given to it by God, and it is to God, and not to other spheres of society, that it must give account of its stewardship. Over-expansion of the power of any one sphere threatens the other spheres, since their unfolding must be retarded by that illegitimate domination by that sphere. Nor can that sphere properly fulfil its own task since it is expending its effort erroneously on tasks which are not proper to it.

An example of this in New Zealand is the way virtually everything has been subordinated to economic growth and to the norm of profit-making. As a result we see the reduction of all our institutions to economic enterprises, so that model is the only one considered appropriate for a wide variety of institutions. The privatisation drive with free-market and user-pays economics shaping the nature of every institution shows how distortion comes as a result of the domination of the whole of society by one sphere. Hospitals, schools, housing, the media, the churches even, and everything else are all being forced into the mould of economic enterprises under the influence of an economic ideology that refuses to accept the legitimacy of institutions which exist for purposes other than making a profit.⁶ Unless this drive towards economic reductionism is halted then New Zealand society will cease to develop and differentiate and will become what Dooyeweerd calls a closed down society: vast possibilities and potential will have no opportunity to be disclosed because they do not

⁶ Cf. Goudzwaard's stress on simultaneous realisation of norms. **Capitalism and Progress: a diagnosis of Western Society**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, pp. 205-207.

fit the only acceptable model of human life: the economic enterprise.⁷ This is what Goudzwaard calls a “tunnel society,” and a tunnel it must be stressed which has no light at its end since it is leading us **into** the darkness away from the light of God’s Word, which calls us to open up society not to close it down.

The other problem which has constantly beset New Zealand political life has been the endless and sterile debate over “interventionism.” This debate is based not on what is the proper understanding of the nature and task of government, but whether or not it is proper for the state to arbitrarily intervene to adjust, prevent or stimulate some development or other in non-government areas of society. Instead of attempting to discern what the proper task of the state is, and then to do it, the debate over interventionism focuses on whether or not the state should act to produce a desired result. By rejecting “interventionism” the Government has frequently made it impossible for itself to act so as to ensure justice in non-government spheres of society, leaving many issues to resolution by “market forces,” while many “interventionists” seem to want the state to arbitrarily impose its will on such non-government spheres of society so as to produce what is seen to be a desired outcome. There is no principle underlying such intervention which would ensure that the state is not overstepping its proper responsibilities nor neglecting others. Only a grasp of the proper nature and task of the state can resolve such issues. Sphere sovereignty is an attempt to clarify this situation.

The state is only one of the spheres of society, with the task of protecting the other spheres of society. Its task is to ensure the establishment and maintenance of just relations between all spheres, including the proper sovereignty of those spheres. Those that are weak must be enabled to become strong, those that overreach their proper bounds must be drawn back. The areas of sovereignty of each sphere can be discerned from God’s revelation both directly and as it illuminates our experience and understanding of the world he has created. The state may not interfere with the proper exercise of the authority of those sovereign spheres. This derives from Kuyper’s conception of society as made up of individuals in organic relationship with others in

⁷ For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon see Bob Goudzwaard. **Capitalism and Progress**.

various societal structures. Individuals in isolation do not exist: they have their being only in and through the spheres of society. “No man is an island” is Kuyper’s view. Kuyper held that the individual person can only find true freedom in ties with the institutions of society. Therefore Kuyper also rejected individualism, the idea that the individual is the basic unit of human society, since the individual is unthinkable outside of his or her family. He also rejected collectivism, since this violates the rights of persons to free development and responsibility. Society is correctly understood as individuals in relationship; relationships that are not externally imposed, whether voluntarily or compulsorily, but relationships within which we stand as created beings formed by God in the community of humankind.

All human beings are placed in a number of communities. We are born into a web of relationships, which constitute our societal existence. There is therefore no such thing as the autonomous and isolated individual, and so individualistic views of society are excluded. Margaret Thatcher is one example of a radical individualist. She has said that there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals. We cannot accept individualism, since society cannot be seen merely as an aggregate of individuals functioning in structures which lack any real existence, since these structures are real, founded in the order of creation. Similarly, collectivist views are excluded, since human beings do exist as individuals, and not simply as members of society. The collectivist conception of human society sees the relationship between the different spheres of life as that of a whole and its parts. It accepts the idea of a totality community in which all other communities function as autonomous parts. The individual also exists only in relation to the totality community. This collectivistic concept almost always accepts the state as the whole in which other spheres function as parts. In collectivism, individuals are submerged under the whole as merely constitutive parts. The consequence of collectivism is that the tasks of the parts form part of the task of the whole, and thus all of life is reduced to merely one aspect of life.

The Kuyperian idea, by contrast, sees human beings as living in a multitude of different relationships which are real, constitutive parts of the human personality and which all have their own proper meaning, originating not in human will but in the

creating and ordering power of God. Because all these spheres with their specific individual tasks exist because of the ordering Word of God for creation, to which they are subjected, it is not possible for them to be subjected to one another without abrogating their proper tasks and responsibilities. They can only fulfil their tasks if they are co-ordinated with one another, and not subordinated or superordinated. They are subject to God alone, and not to each other. It is only the principle of sphere sovereignty which prevents absolutism in which one sphere seeks to dominate and control all others and subject them to its will. This can be seen the desire to dominate every other sphere, by the church in mediaeval society, and by the state in communist and fascist regimes.

There have been many problems caused by the concept that the church is the institution *par excellence* where the grace of God is operative, while other institutions can experience God's grace only through the mediation of the church. This is the Roman Catholic concept of sphere subsidiarity, but it is not the neo-Calvinist view. Rather, the church institution is distinguished from the body of Christ, the covenant people of God who wish to walk in obedience in all that they do. The church institution is seen not as the primary or sole means of expression of the life of discipleship, but only as **one sphere** in which that discipleship is expressed.

Because all spheres of society are rooted in the creation, coming from the hand of God, and because God's redemptive grace in Christ comes to human beings in the wholeness of their being, that grace is worked out in everything they do. It can come to concrete expression in any kind of institution whatsoever. In the church institution, we see that grace expressed in explicitly articulated form, in worship, in proclamation of the Scriptures and discipling and teaching, in creedal affirmation, in the sacraments and in the fellowship of the saints. But that redeemed life of grace can also come to valid and full expression in politics, in the arts, in education, in leisure activities, in banking, in building construction, in short: in any conceivable human activity whatsoever. By that I mean that the new life given by Christ to the covenant people of God shapes the direction in which they mould and unfold their lives and the institutions and activities in which they are involved.

The various structures of society are not human constructs, as the ideology of the Enlightenment and revolution would contend. If that were the case, then they could be changed and altered or abandoned without consequence should we so choose. Instead, what we find is that these structures are enduring and rooted in the indestructible order of creation. The neo-Calvinist approach to creation sees the structures of society established by God in the creation order, and that humankind shapes and moulds these structures according to their desire (whether in sin or in obedience). The possibility of the structures of society is therefore a **given**, and while some of them are sometimes left latent in any particular society, we cannot create structures which are not based on the potential God has created, nor can we simply abolish such structures since they are rooted in the enduring creation order established and upheld by God.

Unless we enter into a detailed analysis of the institutions and structured relationships between institutions in the world then we cannot develop a theory which supports the struggle for justice. The functional analysis of such institutions and relationships provided in neo-Calvinist theory is the kind of jumping-off point we need in our social vision, and without such an analysis our critique of the injustices of society can only be arbitrary and groundless. This problem can be seen in Michael Walzer's book **Spheres of Justice: A defence of pluralism and equality**.⁸ While Walzer has independently developed a theory of the spheres of society which parallels that of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd in a remarkable way, he does not want to accept the kind of ontological basis for these spheres found in the neo-Calvinist tradition. Instead, he holds that the different spheres are the product of *convention*, social choice or social habit. This cannot really explain the enduring nature of such spheres or their existence in widely diverse cultures and societies, and thus does not lead to any coherent account as to the nature of these spheres or their content. Similarly Wolterstorff wants to retain the idea of spheres of society, but without the content or underlying theory of reality that Kuyper and Dooyeweerd have postulated. But such an approach leaves the whole theory hanging in mid-air, as it becomes then an arbitrary theoretical construct and not an empirically-based interpretation of the way things are.

⁸ Review by Paul Marshall. *Anakainosis* 6 (1984) 4:20.

It is necessary to understand the structures of society in order to be able to discern both the way in which God has ordered the creation, and the way in which human sin has distorted and obscured that ordering. The consequence of such distortion is the denial of human rights and both personal and structural injustice. Dooyeweerd's philosophy of society built on the insights of Kuyper's view of sphere sovereignty. Kuyper fought to preserve the independence of the school from the state, the independence of the state from the church, the independence of the church, etc. not by denying their place in the kingdom of God, but by recognising their true place in the Kingdom and allowing them freedom to respond to God in their own way, not as modifications or sub-sets of other institutions. We need to see what forms of institution we have in society today and how they are related. Obviously there are not an infinite number of types of institution and formal relationships between people, but we need to examine what is really there. Many people simply rely on a model of society that is inadequate because it is arbitrary, that is, ad hoc or insufficiently thought through. Only a model that does justice to society as it confronts us, and demonstrates how it is normed by God will suffice. As we have such a model in sphere sovereignty, the onus is on anyone who advocates an alternative to demonstrate that it is inherently superior in its account of society and the norms that govern it.

4

Systems of Education in a Pluralistic Society

One of the issues which has been to the forefront of attention in recent years is the problem of monoculturalism versus biculturalism, and occasionally multiculturalism. What is really going on in this issue is the status of conflicting visions and ways of life in society, and the institutions which are built on those differing visions. The issue is which vision and way of life will be dominant, and provide the governing perspective for all that we do. But this question is always going to lead us into difficulties, for in modern society there is no possible answer. Only a pluralist vision can ensure that justice is done for all.

But the problem we face with an education system, which should no doubt be, as it has been for over a hundred years, a **compulsory** one, is that no one person or group of persons has the right or the authority to insist that education be carried out in one particular way. Nobody has the right to insist on a particular worldview being promoted through education, and to do so is unavoidable because education is inherently world-view oriented. The problem with a monolithic, single state-sponsored education system is that at some point, someone has to decide what worldview will be foundational to that system. What then, for those whose worldview is different? Will they be justly served by such a system? I believe not, because such an educational system is at odds with the very character of the society which it seeks to serve.

If we take for example the co-existence in New Zealand of a diversity of groups with a wide range of religious world-view convictions, and seek to incorporate all these into one educational system, how can those worldviews all be respected? There have been two approaches to this question: firstly, submerge all of them under an over-riding, integrating world-view which seeks to discern a deeper unity and agreement between them, thus allowing everybody to work together for common goals. Secondly, suppress those that differ and promote a worldview that is a radical alternative to all of them, seeking to demonstrate their fundamental untruth or at best, irrelevance for life in society. It is this latter approach that has traditionally been the way state education in New Zealand has tried to address the complexities of a pluralistic society. However, the former approach is emerging as an increasingly popular option. It is the educational counterpart of the New Age movement, and seeks to **submerge** difference into a wider unity, whereas the other approach is to **subvert** difference with a new unity.

But whether the state system prefers the first or second option, it cannot escape from the fact that it is a particular worldview approach, and as such, will be unacceptable to those who do not believe that the appropriate response to diversity is to submerge it or to subvert it. What if we do not want that to happen? To whose worldview will we be called to submit? Who has the right, the authority, to insist that we must submerge or subvert our differences in the interests of forging a wider unity for society through the state education system? That is the unresolvable problem: no matter what worldview is proposed as forming the basis for a monolithic education system, it will not be acceptable to those in society who do not accept the validity of that worldview. Unless we are to forcibly suppress dissidents, we have no option but to concede that plurality of worldviews precludes imposition of one worldview in a pluralistic society.

What is the solution then for the problem? The solution is in fact simple enough: it is to acknowledge the pluralist character of modern society, and to allow that pluralism to be expressed through the education of children in schools. The idea that there should be only one state-sponsored education system with a unified, monolithic character, grounded in one particular worldview, is not self-evidently true, except within the bounds of the worldview that sees that to be the character of education.

Those with a divergent worldview are not convinced of the truth of this assertion at all.

Every community which sees itself as having a specific identity, vision of life and cultural customs which it seeks to preserve, will seek to give expression to its communal life in institutions of various sorts. Since many of the institutions in society are held in common, the problem is deciding which of the many differing communal visions will hold sway. In education, for instance, the views of parents and teachers often do not coincide. Who shall have pre-eminence in this situation? The problem is not who shall ultimately hold the power of decision-making, but how those who hold such decision-making power will be accountable to those they serve.

Teachers with a specific perspective, say for instance Marxism, will see the practice of education, the role of teachers and of parents, its relationship to the rest of society, and the function of its various component institutions, in a way which will be vastly different to a Maori community which seeks to affirm its traditional culture and perspective in the education of its children. Should a Marxist teacher be appointed to a school with a large component of Maori children from such a community, how will the inevitable conflicts be resolved? Such conflicts can be multiplied across the land: Marxists and political conservatives, traditionalists and Christians, humanists and New Agers, and so on.

The issue is not how we can maintain a unified education system in an increasingly diverse society, but how education can be changed to serve the increasingly diverse needs of a pluralist society. The idea of a unified education system, presenting a “neutral” perspective acceptable to all, is not an accepted view of many differing communities in New Zealand, but is the accepted view of one of those communities, one which has been able to exercise the power to shape the school system. The Maori desire to see taha Maori in schools follows the dogma of a monolithic, unified educational system which should make room for all perspectives. This is in fact a denial of the basic character of the Maori claim: that they have a perspective on life which is radically different to the European model, which as they no doubt justly claim, has prevented them from succeeding in an education system based on an alien

perspective. If the Maori claim has any justice, then it should be permitted to come to full expression in a school which follows that perspective, but it is inconsistent to adopt the Pakeha monolithic system and expect to have the equivalent of “Bible in Schools” as an adequate means of expression for a radically different view of life and community. Similarly, it is inconsistent for Christians to expect a perspective which is radically at odds with the humanism of modern society to have any meaningful presence through the “Bible in Schools” programme.

The responsibility for education

Who then has responsibility for education? In New Zealand education is conducted in a social sphere distinct and separate from the state, the church and the family. The school in our society has its own tasks, its own responsibilities and its own kind of authority. Education is the responsibility of the entire community, and especially of parents. As Christians we believe that the responsibility to educate is entrusted to us by God. No government can confer this responsibility; neither can any government withdraw it. We do not claim that parents personally must provide all the education for their children, but we do believe that parents are entitled to choose the kind of education their children should receive. We also claim that because education is the responsibility of the entire community, then the entire community can legitimately be taxed to provide that education, including those who have no children or whose children are no longer receiving an education. Why is this just? Because education is not simply a private benefit, of advantage solely to the one educated, but provides strength and benefit to all. By educating our children, we are enabling them to participate in and contribute to the society we have formed. We are ensuring that they understand the significance, the origins, the character of our nation, and thereby to enable them to maintain and support it. Education does not benefit merely the one who is educated, but the society which has educated its people derives numerous and largely unquantifiable benefits.

Education is not the conveyance of factual material in some sort of philosophically neutral vacuum. It is a process of training the powers of interpretation and judgement in the perspective of a way of life; a process requiring implementation within a

worldview concerning the human being in relation to God, other humans and the universe. Different worldviews generate different philosophical systems. As a direct result of these differing viewpoints there is a divergence of opinion among parents as to the philosophical framework within which they would have their children educated.

The problem confronting many parents in this country is that they do not share with other members of society the right to educate their children according to their basic religious convictions without financial penalty. This gross injustice derives from the existence of a single state education system which alone is fully supported by public tax monies. Parental responsibility in determining the kind of education their children receive has been lost from sight in New Zealand as the state has necessarily assumed a central role in financing education. To share in the benefits of the present state school system, without coming into conflict with its basic philosophy, one must adhere to the philosophy which gives content and direction to the New Zealand state school system.

The philosophical standpoint of the New Zealand state school system is secular humanism. Under the supposed guise of “religious neutrality” the religion of self-regulating autonomous humanity is taught in New Zealand schools. It is frequently asserted that there is freedom of religion in New Zealand. We contend that such an assertion is false. The falsehood of such an assertion is founded on the mistaken assumption that religion is intended only for private life and institutional ecclesiastical organisations, and therefore should not be allowed to influence public life. As Christians, we reject this humanistic dogma. We believe that religion is not just a segment of life; as Christians we believe that the whole of life is religion. In conformity with this belief we submit that the state endorsed religion of the public state school system is secular humanism. Secular because religion is said to be limited to churchly activities and the inner spiritual dimension while the rest of life is said to be religiously neutral, while under the guise of this supposed neutrality the religion of humanism reigns supreme in the classroom.

The humanistic religion referred to above holds full sway over the state educational system. Consequently it is maintained that although religion has its place it must not be allowed into the classrooms. Therefore, to share without reservation in public

education, one must share this common view of the place of religion. Christians who wish to give their children a truly Christian education rather than a humanistic education are financially disadvantaged in New Zealand today.

The state justly taxes persons irrespective of their religious standpoint, but with these taxes the state supports a school system of a secular humanistic sort. We believe that as the state taxes without reference to religious opinions so also ought tax monies be spend on education irrespective of the religious standpoint of the educational institution.

Freedom of education

Full freedom of religion must be extended to the educational sphere if “freedom of religion” in New Zealand is to become a true reality and not merely empty rhetoric. Those who desire for their children an education in harmony with the religious principles that they teach in the home must be given the necessary facilities to do this. The present taxation of Christians to support state operated schools which are religiously unacceptable to these Christians as educational institutions for their own children amounts to an unjust denial of true freedom of religion. At the present time Christian parents suffer injustice in one of two ways: **either** they must either try to find the money to pay for the education of their children outside of the state system, in addition to paying taxes to fund that state system, **or** they must consent to send their children to a secular humanist school that is radically at variance with the religious standpoint of the home.

While New Zealand has compulsory education, that compulsion should not extent to the compulsion to participate in education of a particular philosophical type. The compulsion relates to being educated, not to being educated in a particular way or according to a particular philosophy. Any attempt to compel education according to a particular philosophy is repugnant to a free and open society. Yet in the failure of the government to fund equally all public schools regardless of their philosophical basis amounts to compulsion with respect to educational philosophy.

The task of the government with respect to education

Following the principle of sphere sovereignty, it is possible to see that the task of the government with respect to education is centred on ensuring that justice is done in the field of education, rather than determining the nature and character of that education. The task of government can be seen as involving the following basic factors:

1. The establishment and maintenance of relationships with foreign communities and the protection of the home society from assault by them.
2. The establishment and maintenance of order in society so that its various tasks may be properly carried out.
3. The establishment and maintenance of laws to ensure fair dealings between individuals, families and organisations to enable them to develop and fulfil their various tasks of providing for themselves, commerce, cultural traditions and education.

The task of the government then can be summarised as the maintenance of a just order in society so that all citizens can develop their lives to the fullest extent. This means then that the task of the government is **limited**. It has a specific mandate to carry out, and to neglect any of its proper tasks, or to exceed its mandate to intrude into other areas of life, are both equally illegitimate. By using the term “limited” for the government, I do not wish to imply any support at all for the libertarian approach which seeks to **confine** the government, with the intention of minimalising its task. The theory of sphere sovereignty means not only that the government is restricted to its proper sphere, it is also required to ensure that it does not neglect anything that lies within its proper sphere. Only a coherent theory, such as sphere sovereignty, can ensure that debates as to what falls within the government’s mandate are carried out in terms of **principle** and not **pragmatism**, on the basis of **norms** and not **arbitrarily**. All institutions have their integrity and proper task to fulfil; that of the government is to ensure that the relationships between these institutions, between these institutions and individuals, and between individuals, are characterised by **justice**. The state does

not have a mandate to regulate and control the whole of society or the whole of life. Its task is to regulate relationships in society so that these are **just**. The state does not have the mandate to **take over** institutions which are unjust, only to order their affairs in such a way so that the injustice is brought to an end. The state is to establish an order in society such that all individuals and institutions are free to pursue their own mandates without being subjected to the unjust activities of others, and the state must be held to account if it fails to fulfil its proper task.

Any attempt to extend the task of the state to include areas such as establishing and promoting one particular educational philosophy not only exceeds the proper mandate of the state, but in doing so creates injustice, in that it must of necessity impose that philosophy on many who do not support it or agree with it. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that **parents have the prior right to choose the education their children will receive**. That can only be possible if parents are also not financially disadvantaged if they choose an education based on a philosophy of education different from that offered in the state school system.

The task of the government is to maintain justice in education, so all parents are able to choose the education they wish for their children, in accordance with the worldview or life perspective held by those parents, without financial or other reward or penalty.

It is not appropriate for the government to determine the educational philosophy which schools adopt, since this does not fall within the responsibility of government. The government therefore cannot subsidise one educational philosophy while denying others equitable funding without violating the rights of the parents to choose the education they prefer. It is unjust for parents to be taxed for an educational system which they are in principle unable to participate in by having their children educated in it, if equitable funding is not made available for the school they would prefer. It is not within the task or competence of the government to determine which educational philosophy is appropriate or acceptable for children; that right belongs to parents alone. Rather, the educational philosophies at work in schools should be open and public, rather than implicit and unacknowledged as is currently the case. This then

would give parents the opportunity to choose the appropriate education they desire for their children, that is, to send their children to the school which espouses the educational philosophy they prefer. The government should not slant this choice by funding one (or more) educational philosophy at the expense of others, which are not entitled to equitable funding.

As the funding for education is raised by taxation on all, regardless of their philosophical viewpoint with regard to education, then the monies raised should also be disbursed to all schools regardless of the educational philosophies they adopt. Anything less than this is to unfairly disadvantage some educational philosophies and to unfairly advantage others. That is, the distribution of funding for schools is a matter of **social justice**, something that **does** fall within the task of the government to ensure. The actual mechanism by which this should occur can vary from society to society, depending on the best way of administering it, but the goal remains the same no matter what mechanism is adopted: social justice for all, with neither preferential treatment nor disadvantage created because of convictions held.

Since the Government does provide for education out of public funds, because it is too expensive to be paid for only by parents, the principles of justice and equity require that these funds should benefit the entire community, and not just those who hold the majority secular humanist opinion. Christians believe that the task entrusted by God to government is to grant, uphold and promote justice and equity for all persons living in this country irrespective of the faith-community to which they belong. We believe that the state flagrantly betrays this divine trust of the task to uphold justice if it imposes one educational philosophy on all regardless of their convictions in the name of democracy. In the present system of tax-supported secular-humanist state school education, the government, which should be God's minister of public justice, has become an agent of injustice by depriving of their equal standing before the law of those who cannot accept the religious and philosophical viewpoint of the state school system.

The present public state school system is not **justly** open to the children of all New Zealand parents. The present public school system is only justly open to those

members of the public who wish to have their children educated in that system according to its particular educational philosophy. It is not denied that Christians have the legal right to send their children to a state school. They have the legal right to do so, but they do not have the freedom to do as they are conscience bound, namely to educate their children in such a way as is in full harmony with the worldview and religious principles taught in the home.

It may be argued that in the current economic climate that we cannot afford equitable funding for private schools, and many who work within the state school system have protested against the allocation of funding for private schools on the grounds that the lack of resources in state schools demands that all available funds be directed to that system.

But the issue is one of justice and not funding levels: what is just policy for the government to initiate in this respect? We need to look at this as an issue of justice and integrity, and from that basis decide what a just and equitable solution would be. We would then have to decide whether we were prepared to pay for it, for undoubtedly there would be both social and financial costs involved. On the grounds presented here it could only be argued that equitable funding for all schools regardless of educational philosophy is the only just approach. If there is a shortfall in funding for schools, then it is unjust for some schools to benefit at the expense of others. Similarly, if there is an increase in funding available, it is unjust for some schools to be given an increased share while other schools continue to be funded on a less than equitable basis.

Under the present system parents who wish to have their children educated in Christian schools are only free to do so if they can afford the financial burden involved, whereas a Christian education ought as a matter of justice to be available to all at no more than the cost of a secular humanist education in the state-supported education system. Anything short of this standard of justice is discrimination in favour of one particular philosophy in a publicly-funded education system. The present position involves the placing of a severe financial penalty upon parents in New

Zealand who cannot accept the secular humanism of the state school system, and who wish to see their children educated in conformity with their religious convictions.

An alternative approach is that equal and proportional state funding be allocated to all schools that are open to the children of the general public, irrespective of their religious standpoint, whether that is Christianity or secular humanism. As all members of the faith-communities of New Zealand are taxed, so also they are entitled to receive a proportional share of the tax funds spent on education of the young. Identical provision should be made for all faith-communities or other groups of parents who wish to provide an education that is in harmony with their convictions, and is open to the children of all members of the general public. This should not in any way diminish the appropriate regulatory power of the state over all educational institutions in such matters as the maintenance of necessary accommodation, staffing and academic standards. This is a legitimate and just task of the government, providing it takes into account the different perspectives operating in those schools, and does not discriminate in favour of or against any perspective.

Religious schools

It is sometimes asserted that the state should not support schools of a religious character, on the basis that these schools are not neutral and unbiased. However, we believe that all schools betray a religious character, and none are neutral and unbiased. The secular humanist basis of the state school system is in no way neutral, and the education provided in these schools involves a specific perspective on life and an educational philosophy. No school can be neutral with regard to life perspectives and philosophy. Therefore, no school can lay claim to any greater support by the government than any other, on the basis that it is free from bias with regard to any of the issues of life, or that it has a neutral life perspective or educational philosophy. In this respect, the state school system has as much of a bias as a Christian school. It is not exempt from having to operate with a perspective and philosophy, for without these it would be impossible to educate.

No conflict between Christianity and secular humanist education?

It is occasionally asserted that there is in actuality no conflict between Christianity and secular humanist education, and that they are not incompatible. We assert that such a belief is contrary to a Christian perspective that holds that all of life is service of God, and that this perspective shapes and directs every activity of life. The humanist and the Christian are bound to come to differing conclusions about the nature of human life, because of the radically differing starting-points. The humanist perspective is rooted in the belief that humankind is sovereign with respect to our life in the world, while the Christian believes that God is sovereign with respect to our life in the world.

The Christian philosophy of education holds that religion is not some sort of addendum, which can be added or taken away at will. Christian education is more than overt expressions of spirituality such as prayers or Bible lessons. These things do not make a Christian school. Christian education involves the teaching of a biblically directed view of every subject in the school curriculum. We do not maintain that the Bible tells us all about all things, but we do believe that the Bible tells us what all things are about. The basic difference between the Christian faith articulated in the Christian school curriculum and the faith of secular humanism as articulated in the state school curriculum is that the former believes in God as creator and ruler of all things and acknowledges the full authority of the Scriptures, whereas the latter rejects this full authority and seeks a substitute within humankind or in the world.

It is frequently argued that one public school system is a unifying force in New Zealand society, and that this unity is undermined by the establishment of schools outside the state system. Such a contention is untenable, for Christian education involves full allegiance to God in whom all things are unified as well as respect for law and authority. The influence of Christian educational institutions will therefore not be divisive but unifying. Attempts to erase fundamental differences in the name of a superficial uniformity are not conducive to true unity. The claim that the differences between Christians and secular humanists do not affect education marks a failure to take these differing perspectives seriously. The recognition of such fundamental differences as they come to proper public expression in the field of education is a

mark of true tolerance and not a sign of bigotry. One of the characteristics of genuine freedom is that people of different beliefs can live together peacefully in a single nation and enjoy equal rights and privileges. The freedom to differ and the right to act accordingly, constitutes the basic difference between a free and a totalitarian society.

Conclusion

As Christians we are to advocate full and equal choice in education. This proposal is not to be viewed as a vested interest plea. The equality, freedom and justice which we seek for persons of our own faith community we would seek for others also. Every faith-community in New Zealand deserves impartial treatment by the state in the field of education as a basic legal entitlement. We conclude that in a society such as New Zealand, with its claim to be a just and pluralistic society, justice demands a pluralistic education system, with equal distribution of governmental educational spending in this regard. We look forward to the day when New Zealand will enjoy and benefit from the healthy interplay of a variety of equal, public schools within a common framework of a mutual respect for each other's viewpoints and common respect for law, order and justice.

Could such a scheme work? Yes, it can, and it has. A pluralistic education system is not an impossible pipe dream, and we have a precedent in our own history. The reason I spent some time exploring the Nelson Provincial education system earlier is that I now wish to draw on that experience. Not only was a pluralistic system of education possible, it was actual: it was widely acknowledged to be the best approach to education at the time, and not only that, had the highest rate of participation of any of the Provincial education systems, over 70% which was high for the early colonial years. There was considerable disappointment expressed that this system could not be adopted throughout New Zealand, and the reason for that was not that the Government would not allow it, it was not that the radical secularists would not allow it; it was that the Protestant churches would not allow it, because it meant that the Catholics would be entitled to support for schools in which their hated doctrines were taught. Thus we lost the chance for a genuinely pluralistic education system, and more than that, we lost the chance for the development of a genuinely pluralistic society. It was not only

the school system that lost out: every area of society where plurality of convictions is important became subjected to the myth of common unity underlying or overlying our differences.

The essence of the Nelson Provincial system was that as all settlers paid taxes to fund schools, it was essential that for reasons of equity all settlers had access to those funds for their schools. Thus grants were made on the basis not of ownership or control, but whether the schools offered an acceptable programme of education, with no imposition of religious instruction on those who did not wish it. That I believe is the way we should seek to go in promoting equity and justice today in educational funding. The only reason we have an on-going dispute in New Zealand over funding for private schools, is because of the myth that the State school is the only one that is open to all, has no religious axe to grind, and more importantly, is providing the social glue we need to prevent our society from fragmenting under the pressure of increasing cultural and ethnic diversity.

One of the areas in which a Christian pluralistic vision for education, and for society as a whole, would make a valuable contribution, is with respect to Maori education. We have seen a considerable growth in Maori educational institutions, from kohanga reo, kura kaupapa Maori, and similar initiatives. One of the grievances of the Maori is over the way Maori schools from earlier in our educational history have been closed or phased out, in the interests of a uniform, monolithic education system. Thus the distinctive aspirations, perspectives, convictions and culture of Maori have been compromised and marginalised. Surely a pluralistic perspective, that left educational choice to those who would use the schools, rather than imposing a uniform approach through a national bureaucracy, would do more justice to the true nature of society. Maori have not been treated fairly in education in New Zealand, nor have those who object to the secularism of the state school system because of religious convictions, whether Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Muslim or other. A pluralistic educational system would make it possible to enable all those who dissent from the state-sponsored secular curriculum to establish schools in which their own beliefs are fairly represented.

Other educational systems overseas are able to operate on this basis. For instance, the Dutch educational system has over half of its pupils in non-state schools, a proportion which is possible solely because of the recognition that different worldviews require different approaches in education, something the government has no right to refuse. This system is the direct result of Kuyper's work in exposing the religious roots of the whole of life, and the responsibilities and rights of parents to choose the education they wish their children to have. Australia has a much more open approach to education, and there are fewer restrictions on funding for non-government schools than in New Zealand. And in Canada, an entire provincial education system, that of Newfoundland, is pluralistic. It can and should be done, and it is time New Zealand was confronted with the injustice of maintaining its current discriminatory educational system which gives privilege and preferential treatment to one particular vision of life, a vision which is leading not to the unity and development of society, but its decay and fragmentation.

I leave this as a challenge and a possibility for us to consider as we look for a way forward in our current impasse between state-sponsored secularism with social acceptance, and faith community schools which are seen as breaking ranks and perpetuating social divisions. We Christians have an alternative model and vision for education to offer. Let us make the effort to present it in a coherent and attractive manner for the consideration of the wider New Zealand public.

5

The basis for a Christian theory of knowledge

Every theory of education presupposes a theoretical anthropology as to the nature and make-up of human beings, which is in turn founded upon a religious conviction concerning what it is to be human. To understand what it ought to mean for us as Christians to educate, we must therefore first explore what our anthropological assumptions are. What is a human being? What is our human task? How does our education prepare us to carry out that task? In what way is that education distinctively Christian? This last point is important, as there is no guarantee that the character of the education we in fact provide is necessarily connected to the claims we make for the Christian character of our starting point.

A human being is, according to our Christian convictions, one of God's creatures, made in God's image, to have fellowship with God, to serve him as the stewards of creation, and to care for and nurture each other in that common task. This is then to assert that the most foundational relationship we can have as human beings is to God our Creator. To have fellowship with God means not just to engage in practices of piety and worship, singing praises to God, praying and reading the Scriptures, but to live as partners of God in the world he has made. All that we do is as God's fellow-workers, sharing with God the activities we are engaged in. That is one aspect of what it means to be created in the image of God: to live like him and to join in what he is doing. That is, our common task is not simply one we share with fellow creatures: it is one we share with God.

To be the stewards of creation means not only environmental stewardship, but stewardship of all that exists, since we are charged with the care of **all** of creation, not just its living creatures and the environment. Thus the richness, the diversity, the variety we find around us comes not from ourselves but from the creaturely character of the creation: it is given by God. We are stewards of the full range of human activity, its diversity, complexity, and richness. We are called to increasing diversity, not to uniformity or conformity. To be a steward of the creation is to work with it in its developmental character, what has been described as its complexifying activity.

As the stewards of God we are called upon to care for and nurture each other as fellow workers in the task of caring for God's creation. An essential component of that care for each other is education. We provide education for a specific purpose: not to train docile workers for the economy; not to enable free expression of the human personality; not to equip themselves as best they can to survive in a hostile economic and social environment where each is to look out for themselves, but to enable each person to discover, to explore, to develop and to put into active service those gifts which God has given them, so that as they mature and grow in responsibility and understanding, they can take their place in the common task of caring for God's creation as one of his fellow-workers.

Understanding education in this way will lead to a different understanding of how we educate, and what it is we are doing when we educate, from the other views as to what education is all about. I wish to argue then, from this basis, that our understanding of the nature of knowledge, the nature of knowing, and the nature of the knower as well as that which is known, reflects the basic assumptions we make as to who we are and why we are here, and that these assumptions then directly and unavoidably shape and direct the education we offer, both at a macro-level (institutional forms, courses provided, funding priorities, etc.) and at a micro-level (what happens in the classroom or other teaching environment, and the interaction between teacher and student). Thus it is not a luxury but a **necessity** to reflect on our theory of knowledge, and to consider what impact this could and should have on our educating.

Where then does our theory of knowledge fit in this?

A theory of knowledge is not simply of solely academic interest; since the way in which we educate presupposes a particular understanding about the nature of knowledge, which in turn presupposes a particular view of the knower, which in turn presupposes a particular view of how we come to know, which in turn presupposes particular view of that which we have knowledge of. Thus education must work with a particular philosophical view concerning what we are doing; my concern here is to deal with this in a way which is Christian. My aim then is to help us all come to understand in a fuller way the nature of knowledge, which includes these three facets:

the nature of the knower

how we come to know

what it is we have knowledge of.

However, as these three things are all so closely intertwined, we cannot deal with them strictly separately, but must take them all together. Now you will of course realise that this is one consequence of the particular theory of knowledge that I am working with: with other views of knowledge it is easier to split up these things because they are not thought to be so intertwined. It seems to me that we can best deal with them in reverse order, moving from what it is we have knowledge of, how we come to know it, and what that tells us about the nature of the knower.

What it is we have knowledge of.

What we have knowledge of is of course, the world which God called into being and structured by his word. What is the character of that world, and what does it mean to have knowledge of it?

We have knowledge not only of the so-called ‘physical creation’ but of everything that God has brought into being. That includes such things as economic life, artistic works, systems of thought, and so on, not that God directly created these, but that he provided for them in the structure of the creation he has made. What we produce as humans,

regardless of what it is, is not to be thought of as the creation of human hands, but solely as the result of human formation and moulding of God's creation. Thus even our political life, our history, our science, is possible only because God provided for us to do these things, and unless these activities were rooted in the order of creation, it would not be possible for us to engage in them.

The creation of God, brought into being in the beginning, exists solely because God took the initiative to create it. There is nothing within the creation that is self-originated, nothing within the creation that stands alone, independent of the rest of the creatures God has made. Everything is related to everything else, in myriads of complex and sophisticated ways, ways which are in many instances beyond our comprehension. This can be seen from the unintended and unexpected effects which our activities can have: we often touch upon hidden and unsuspected relationships within the creation, producing results which can be either disastrous or wonderful, depending on the nature of the outcomes.

The creatures that God has made are whole creatures, concrete things, actual entities, along with their inherent relationships to other creatures around them and the creation as a whole, and not least of course their constant relationship to God as their creator. The Psalms give us ample evidence of this. We exist as whole creatures (until at least we are disintegrated by death). We cannot exist except as whole creatures, complete functioning entities. Thus we cannot accept the Greek dualism of form and matter, even the Christianised versions which saw God creating matter first, then imposing form upon it to bring into being separate creatures. God created whole creatures from the start; "matter" as an unformed, generic "stuff" that underlies all actual beings does not exist. There are only actual, whole beings, creatures of God made as they were meant to be. This Genesis 1 reports not that God made pieces of creatures that were then assembled, or generic "stuff" that was given specific form, but God made actual, real identifiable, distinct creatures with all their own particular characteristics and properties. But when we examine these creatures, we soon see that they have different ways in which they function, different characteristics, which are shared between them all. They are unique and distinct creatures in that these characteristics are specifically realised in each one, and function appropriately according to their creaturely being.

What then can we say about these specific functions? Can they be identified in any coherent, systematic and comprehensive way? Yes, they can. And Christian philosophers have come up with a list of fifteen different functions of creatures, which cannot be reduced to each other, nor is it necessary to postulate extra functions to explain creaturely functioning (at this stage anyway; like any human theory it remains revisable and tentative).

The functional aspects of created reality

	Humans	Animals	Plants	Minerals
Pistic				
Ethical				
Juridical				
Aesthetic				
Economic				
Social				
Lingual				
Techno-formative				
Analytic				
Sensitive				
Biotic				
Physical				
Kinematic				
Spatial				
Quantitative				

Key: Subject functions Object functions

These **functions** are ways in which creatures act or are acted upon. They are not things, as if we could go and **find** them in the creation. They can be seen only as they are exercised by real entities within the creation. They are **adjectives** and not **nouns**.

The subject functions are the ones in which each “kingdom” within the creation is **active**, while the object functions are the ones in which each “kingdom” within the creation is **passive**. Thus it can be seen that humans are active in **all** functions, while other creatures are active in only **some** functions, but are passive in the remainder. Thus a rock may not actively express faith (the pistic function) but it may passively be taken up as an object of the faith of a human being, for instance, by being worshipped as an idol, or by being a symbol of faith, e.g. “the rock that followed them was Christ.” A plant does not have a sensitive function, it cannot itself “feel” anything, but because it has the passive sensitive function, it can **be** felt, for instance, the rough texture of a leaf, the silkiness of a rose petal, the “crunch” of celery. There are no creatures which do not have at least physical functions; and thereby also kinematic (motional), spatial and quantitative functions. That is, they are discrete entities, take up room, can move, and have particular physical and chemical structure and components. Thus we can describe a rock, a liquid, a pile of sand, as having all these functions. A rock can move (roll down a hill, be tumbled in the waves on the shore), it can be weighed, counted, measured for area.

A plant, in addition to the functions which a rock has, also has life; an animal, in addition, also has a sensitive function (ability to feel), while humans function in all fifteen aspects, and have no object functions. That is, we are not acted upon by any creature in the creation in ways that we cannot likewise act. But a number, or a line, or a movement, for instance, cannot exist apart from some other creature who exercises those functions of quantity, space and motion. A number cannot “move,” nor can it be weighed or measured for area. It does not exist as a “thing,” but things have a quantitative aspect; in other words, we can distinguish one thing from another thing of the same (or different) kind, they can be counted. Are numbers real? No, they are human symbols for quantity, expressing this created aspect of the world we live in, and we cannot have a quantity **as such**; we must have a quantity **of something**. We cannot have an area **as such**; we must have an area **of something**. We cannot have a movement **as such**; we must have a movement **of something**. But we can talk about a quantity, an area, or a movement **abstracted from** actual things, so for instance we can add numbers, without worrying what they are numbers **of**. We can discuss the properties of area, without worrying what it is an area **of**. Similarly, we can discuss

motion, with its various features such as gravity, friction, impetus, speed, acceleration, etc. without worrying about what it is that is the movement **of**. But motion, or number, or area do not exist as creatures **on their own**. They are always functions or properties of other creatures.

These functions are the different, irreducible, unavoidable ways in which all creatures function. We find that if we seek to reduce these features or ways of functioning then we run into problems, for instance in the paradoxes of Zeno the Stoic, who sought to conflate motion and space, or if you will, the kinematic and the spatial functions, thus producing irresolvable paradoxes that flew in the face of common everyday experience but which were rationally correct. These are some of his paradoxes, in other words, conundrums which seemed to be impossible but for which there was no possible explanation within his philosophy.

Zeno: The race between Achilles and the tortoise - no matter how fast Achilles runs, he can never catch up with a tortoise that has a head start - when he reaches the place where the tortoise was, it has already moved on, albeit only a very short distance.

 The flying arrow - an arrow is always in a particular place at a particular time, i.e. at rest, during innumerable indivisible moments in time. How then can it move from one place to another?

Thus Zeno was forced to make a choice between what he **perceived** to be the case, and what he **knew** was right on the basis of his philosophy, which after all gave access to the rational nature of things and could not therefore be doubted. In this case, as with many others since, ordinary perception lost out to a theory. This is always the problem with reductionism: some feature or other of real life is denied, suppressed, or re-categorised, because it does not otherwise fit within the theory. A clue to seeing that reductionism has taken place is when we feel that some aspect of reality is not being given its due by being redefined or having its validity denied altogether.

The relationship between subject and object functions is also important to consider. The real difference between these is the difference between the active and the passive

nature of the functions in a real creature. Minerals are active only in four functions, and passive for the rest, while plants add one more, and animals one more still. In all the other functions they are passive; in other words, **on the receiving end**, they cannot initiate or generate activities in those functions. A relationship between two creatures in one of these aspects, where one is active and the other passive, is called a subject-object relation. However, note that these terms have different nuances than the usual way they are used.

Humans are only ever active in these functions; they are never passive, that is, objects, even if the function is latent or under-developed in any one person's life. But the important issue in this respect is that the relationship between a subject and an object is that the object cannot **reciprocate** in the relationship: it is strictly one-way. Thus we can use a rock, or water, or a tree, to express something of our faith, in which we are actively using the pistic function, whereas the rock, or water, or tree, must be passive in this situation: it cannot **itself** exercise faith, but can be used by human creatures to express their faith. Thus relationships between human beings, or between animals, are strictly not subject-object relations, but subject-subject relations, since they are reciprocal and inter-active. Thus to treat a person, for instance, as a sex object, is as we all instinctively feel, wrong. A person is not the passive recipient of our sexual desires, but an interacting, responding, subject with similar desires. So to use a person sexually in this way is to deny their responsibility before God to be active, mutually responsive, consenting. No one wants to be the object of other people's desires in this way (unless they have a disordered sense of what is involved). Thus we can give an unequivocal rejection to sexual relationships between adults and children, because the children have not yet developed to the point where they are able to reciprocate in a mutual relationship as a fully functioning subject.

What then is the point of considering these different functions of creatures? Simply to point out that what we consider the structure of creation to be reflects what we know of it and how we come to know. So if we consider the creatures with which we have to deal, simply as matter which is evolving according to fixed natural laws, then we will educate concerning them quite differently than if we consider them to be unique creatures of God, governed by the laws which God gives to and for the creation, and

functioning according to specific irreducible, distinguishable ways. It is thus important for us to have a comprehensive concept of the nature of reality, so as to ensure that when we are educating, we are not either implicitly or explicitly denying, neglecting or misconstruing the creatures we are considering. Since all creatures function according to these different functional aspects, then if we neglect to consider how they all function in each aspect, then we have not truly educated children concerning the creation, but only our arbitrary, limited and deficient conception of it.

Every creature functions according to all these particular aspects, and our teaching needs to reflect that. I want us to reflect for a moment on one particular topic: the weather, and from that illustrate how seeing the world as comprising integral, whole creatures, brought into being by God, entrusted to human care, and functioning in a rich and complex variety of mutually irreducible ways, can be seen in Christian eyes.

What can we say about the weather in the light of this perspective?

Now, having considered what we can know about the nature of the creation, we need to reflect briefly on our knowledge of **God**, the Creator. Since I have restricted the possibilities of human knowing to the creation that God has brought into being, how then is it possible for us to know God, who is not part of the **creation**, but is instead its **Creator**. Do we know God any differently to the way we know creation, and is our knowledge of God different in character to our knowledge of creation?

I would argue that the answer to each of these questions is, in terms of a theory of knowing, No. We do not know God differently, nor is our knowledge of God different to the knowledge we have of creation. However, that knowledge, and that knowing of God, comes about in an entirely different way, namely, by means of **revelation**. By revelation I mean that our knowledge of God (both means - **knowing** - and content) comes to us in humanly-accessible ways, but originates not in our desire to know but in the desire of God to make himself **known**. It is not possible for human beings through their own powers to know God - “Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the almighty? They are higher than the heavens - what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave - what can you know?” Job 11:7-8.

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” Deuteronomy 29:29. As creatures, we are entirely restricted to knowing that which falls within the creaturely realm. We cannot know that which lies outside of that realm. And there is of course nothing outside of the creaturely realm except the Creator. Therefore, anything that exists it is possible for us to know, apart from God, by means of human powers of knowing.

But how then do we know God, if we cannot come to know him ourselves? Simply because God has revealed himself to us. He has made himself known, through speaking to humankind in words and visions, through Scripture, through the creation, through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and of course supremely through Christ. But none of these things are God himself; we cannot know God directly, but only through the means he has taken to reveal himself. Even in Christ, we do not know God by human powers of knowing, but because God has revealed himself in Christ, so that Christ makes known to us the Father. It was not possible for those of Jesus’ day to observe, consider, and come to know that God was in Christ [cf. John 8:25-52, Matthew 16:13-17]. Thus many of the Jews refused to accept Christ’s witness to himself, and the witness of others such as John the Baptist. But since God was making himself known in Christ, and it was possible to know this solely through the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter was told when he confessed that Christ was God, that it was not by human means that he came to this, but that it had been revealed to him.

Will we ever know God directly? The Mediaeval hope was that we would eventually receive the Vision of God, the *Visio Dei*, as they called it. Thus we would enter heaven with spiritual eyes able to perceive God himself in his divine glory. But this is I believe mistaken. When we finally enter into glory and immortality in the age to come through resurrection, we will indeed see God, but even then I believe it will not be the direct viewing of God by human eyes, even resurrected and transformed eyes, which will for all that still be **creaturely**. Rather, God will then reveal himself in a new way, so that we will be able to perceive God in a humanly accessible way, but we will not see God himself. We will see his revelation of himself to us, an eternal,

never-fading sight of God the Creator as he makes himself known to us as creatures. And surely that is more than enough for us to be satisfied with. To know God, then, is a matter of faith, which is not a **lack** of knowledge, but a particular **kind** of knowledge: knowledge granted through revelation by the one who has the power to grant it. We cannot know God the same way we know the creation; because God is not an object, or even a fellow subject, within the creation order. God is not the object of our scrutiny, our analysis, our reasoning, but is the object of our **faith**.

Why have I digressed somewhat to discuss our knowledge of God? Because there are streams of thought within Christian circles, and even more so in New Age thinking, which take a different view of humanity and our relationship to God. We need to be clear that at all times, in all places, even into the age to come, we always will remain human, and are able to know only that which is creaturely, or that which God has revealed of himself in a creaturely way. All our knowledge is of one piece, whether it be knowledge of God or of his creation. Let us be satisfied to be God's creatures, his fellow-workers, the ones bearing his image in the world, and not to strive for that which is not possible for us to have.

Also, we are to teach others about God, leading them not to theoretical understanding of God, not to scrutinise him and his ways, but to trust, to faith, to confidence in God as the source of all our being and life and redemption. What we consider our knowledge of God to be like will shape our teaching and learning about him. Thus we must also consider our knowledge of God, since God is not to be omitted from the school curriculum: he is there, bringing into being, upholding, sustaining, directing, empowering all the things which we study, and to ignore him, pretending he does not exist, is to falsify not only our faith but also the nature of that which we teach about. Knowledge of God then is inherent in all that we do as educators, and we need to reflect also on what our knowledge of God entails, and how it is possible to know him.

6

Knowing and the knower

How we come to know

We come to know by firstly, being a **part** of the world we are seeking to know. In order to understand what it means to have knowledge of the world, we need to know what the world is like, and how it is possible for us to know it. We have considered already some of the features of God's creation as a multi-faceted, richly diverse complex of creatures exercising a range of mutually irreducible functions. But what of our knowledge of God's creation?

That this world is God's creation means first of all, that God has placed us here, given us the commission to care for and work with the earth and its creatures, and that we are to engage in this task together. That means, therefore, that **it is possible** for us to know the world we live in, and that this knowledge **is shared** among us. The world is not something external to us, we are a part of it, and share its characteristics and functions (as we discussed in the first session). There is a fundamental orderliness to the creation, given by God, which impinges upon us all in a coherent, integral fashion. We know or experience this world with our whole beings, not just with the mind or the intelligence or reason. We do not accept Kant's view, that our perception of reality is a result of our thinking, something our minds impose on a disorderly external reality. Rather, the orderly reality we experience impinges upon us, it is the "given" on which our thinking depends, which makes that thinking **possible**.

Thus the problematic nature of knowledge in many philosophies is not accepted: we do know the world, we do have reliable, coherent, genuine knowledge of the world, and it is possible for us all to share in that knowledge. Many philosophical systems start from assuming that there is a problem involved in understanding how we can have knowledge of the world, and whether that knowledge is held in common (solipsism). But we understand on the basis of our faith, that it is possible for us to know the world truly, because God has placed us here with a task that requires us to know. Our problem is not, **Can** we know the world? Is it **really** possible for us to know the world?, but: What is the knowledge that we have **really like**?

I want to posit a view that is at odds with the Western tradition that sees the possibility of knowledge as a problem to be explained, and accept that we do indeed have knowledge. Also at odds with the Western tradition is the view that knowledge comes in to broad categories (this is accepted by some philosophies but in a different way): namely, **concrete** knowledge of everyday life, and **abstract** knowledge of concepts and ideas concerning the world. A simple definition (which is rather crude but will serve as an initial entry) is that **concrete** knowledge of everyday life is expressed in terms of a **description** (what, when), and **abstract** knowledge is expressed in terms of an **explanation** (why, how). In other words, we can communicate our everyday experience to another person by **narrating** (describing) it, but we can communicate abstract knowledge only by explaining the way in which it really is knowledge: it will not be self-evident, as it is the product of human thought, requiring argumentation, proof, verification, etc., whereas everyday experience is self-evident, as it is common to us all.

The emphasis in a Christian philosophy is the complete opposite of non-Christian philosophies, and that is, that concrete knowledge of everyday life in the world is **primary**, more important, more accessible, more essential, than abstract knowledge of ideas and concepts, theories and hypotheses, which is a form of knowledge that is **secondary**, derivative, reduced with regard to concrete knowledge. Not only is concrete thinking primary, abstract thinking must be able to account for that primary thinking. If it cannot do so (as is the case for most humanistic theories) then it is seriously **deficient** at explaining the wholeness of human life in all its aspects. That is,

to take abstract thinking as primary is to render the wholeness of life, and the place of thinking in that life, **problematic in nature**. How can a partial aspect of something account for the whole? Thus emphasis on rational thought (abstract, theorising, thought) makes it impossible to render a credible account of life as we experience it as a whole, without engaging in reductionism or outright denial of the reality or validity of some other part of life.

Abstract thinking is commonly considered in many circles as a refinement, a correction, an improvement, of ordinary everyday (concrete) thinking. Thus science can come to our aid by explaining what it is we are **really** experiencing, when we actually imagined we were experiencing something **quite different**. Thus the sun does not “really” rise and set: the earth is rotating while the sun stays still. Science can “correct” our ordinary experience for us. Similarly, a sunset is not “really” a magnificent experience of colours, but simply light being refracted through a dust-laden atmosphere. A rainbow is not “really” a sign of God’s covenant, it is merely light being refracted through water droplets in the air.

Concrete thinking, or everyday experience, is not simply a crude, unrefined form of abstract theoretical or scientific thinking; it is an entirely different form of thinking altogether. Such ordinary, everyday experience has been described by a humanist thinker as “unorganised, irregular, and largely bare of meaning,” while science gives our experiences form, regularity, predictability, clarity, and gives us “what we really know.”⁹ Concrete, everyday experience is no more than the raw material for scientific thought to go to work on. It has no real significance or value in itself. This, then, is the way in which humanism eradicates the God-given validity of the whole of life, reserving the status of true knowledge for that which scientific endeavour achieves. One of the consequences of this kind of view, intended or otherwise, is that ordinary everyday experience of human beings is not considered important enough for science to spend time examining. What really matters is theoretical knowledge! To take this approach is to denigrate the goodness and integrity of God’s creation, since parts of that creation are wrenched out of their context, the context denied, and the theories

⁹ Al Greene. **Reformation or reconstruction?**, p. 19, referring to Margenau.

formed from this reduced, abstracted thought elevated to the status of “the Truth” about the world; the rest hardly matters.

One obvious way in which the fullness of human experience is denied through abstract thought being elevated in this way is by the “universal” being considered really true (that which is true for everyone) and thus is “public” truth accessible by all, while the concrete everyday experience of real people is considered “private” because not universal and experienced by all, and therefore not really “true” at all. When we thus identify personal, everyday experience of people with the private and the abstract, theoretical thought with the public, then what happens to faith? This is not shared by all, so it cannot be “true” in any meaningful sense, because it cannot be verified by scientific research. Thus anything remotely relating to faith in God is expelled from the classroom, and only objectively verifiable, universally valid, theoretical ideas are considered true in any meaningful way.

A fascinating comment from William James, himself no Christian but the founder of the humanistic philosophy of pragmatism, indicates that it is not the exclusive prerogative of the Christian to recognise the distinction between concrete and abstract thought, and to see how the latter has throughout history denigrated the former.

The world of concrete personal experience to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed. The world to which your philosophy professor introduces you is simple, clean, and noble. The contradictions of real life are absent from it. Its architecture is classic. Principles of reason trace its outline, logical necessities cement its parts. Purity and dignity are what it most expresses. It is a kind of temple shining on a hill.

In point of fact, it is far less an account of this actual world than a clear addition built upon it, a classic sanctuary in which the rationalist fancy may take refuge from the intolerably confused and Gothic character which mere facts present. It is no explanation for our

concrete universe; it is another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a remedy, a way of escape.¹⁰

This then from a humanist, who did not appreciate the God-given character of life as an integral whole, a concrete, richly diverse experience, in which different features are accessible to abstract thought only by reducing it, breaking it apart, so as to be able to remove them from the context of the whole. When we engage in abstract, theoretical knowing, we are not dealing with whole creatures, but only with features or characteristics of these whole creatures and their functions and relationships. Abstract thought is legitimate, valid, essential, but we must recognise its true character: it is removed from the wholeness of life **for the purpose of** deeper explanation of a small part. It is not accessing a deeper truth, it is not gaining real knowledge as opposed to the inadequate or defective knowledge of everyday experience. It is knowledge of a different kind, for a different purpose, and cannot be placed on a pedestal over and above the other.

To put this in readily understandable terms: it is more important to have faith in God, than to have extensive understanding of what it means to have faith in God. Having faith is a concrete activity of real people, understanding what it means to have faith is a derived, secondary abstraction of that activity, connected not with real people but with abstract persons. In other words, we can discuss the content, structure, function and depth of faith in God without ever considering real persons who exercise that faith. We can discuss faith “in abstract,” that is, removed from real life situations, for the purposes of understanding what faith is. But to have concrete knowledge of faith requires experience of real people exercising faith in everyday life. That is more important, that is primary, that is essential, for “without faith it is impossible to please God,” while it is possible to live a godly, faith-filled life without ever studying what faith is. This approach is in complete contrast to the dominant approach of the West, following the Greeks, that sees theoretical, scientific knowing as true knowing, while disparaging non-theoretical, or everyday, concrete knowing of the world in which we live. A Christian approach appreciates, acknowledges and affirms that concrete

¹⁰ William James. *Pragmatism*. New York: Meridian, 1942, pp. 21-22. Cited in Al Greene. **Reformation or reconstruction?**, p. 27.

knowing of the world of everyday life. It is not inferior to abstract knowing, it is a fundamentally different kind of knowing, and it is the abstract knowing which must be explained and justified by our theoretical approach.

Does this mean then that we can ignore secondary, abstract knowledge and just focus on concrete faith-life? By no means, for we are called not simply to exercise faith, but to have understanding, insight, and knowledge of what faith is and how we can better exercise it. But all the knowledge about faith is useless unless we actually have faith. Thus the purpose of abstract knowledge is not for its own sake, but for enhancing, enriching, deepening, clarifying real everyday life for real people. Other than that it is mere idle speculation, producing dilettantes and not people with enriched lives.

That abstract knowing is not less real, less valid, less significant, because it is founded likewise in the creation of God, who calls us to abstract knowledge also. But it is less important in that the concrete knowing comes first, the abstract knowing is derivative and dependent on it. It can immediately be seen from the fact that it is possible for anyone to know the current state of the weather; all they need to do is go outside and look, but for us to be able to form theories about weather patterns which will enable us to explain **why** the weather is the way it is today, we must **first** look at the weather itself. It will not do to simply sit inside and speculate or cogitate; we must have some knowledge from which to begin, with which to work. Thus a Christian approach to knowledge is **empirical**, in that we cannot know without actual experience of that which we seek to know, but it is not **empiricist**, which is the view that experience should be reduced to isolated, atomistic units, which are called ideas or impressions, while ignoring the relational structures that belong to that experience. Reality is not **given** in abstract, theoretical thought, it is **given** (by God) in concrete, everyday, ordinary experience, on which our thinking goes to work to find explanations for what is going on.

The concrete experience we have of the world is “the almost infinitely rich mosaic of self-centred awareness that fills our every waking hour - and some sleeping ones as

well.”¹¹ In contrast, our abstract knowledge is derived from our concrete, everyday experience of the world, “which endeavours to avoid the personal frame of reference through a strong preference for universal statements.”¹² What do these universal statements refer to? They are, simply, abstractions of the functions which every creature is engaged in. The problem which we face in contemporary life is that abstract (scientific, theoretical) knowledge is given primacy, but the essence of that kind of knowledge is that it deals with fragments of life, removed from their wider context, for the purpose of deeper explanation of a **limited range of functions**. Now that is quite legitimate in itself, but the problem comes from seeing that as providing true knowledge of the world as a whole. Knowledge, even in depth, of the world in all its parts, does not add up to knowledge of the world **as a whole**. The whole is not simply the sum of its parts, it is a rich, profound, complex reality that cannot be taken apart and then just put back together again, as if that can reconstitute the world we once knew before taking it apart.

This was the error of Descartes in his method of philosophy: to reduce the world to its component parts, and then reconstruct it by the processes of the mind to arrive once again at the whole, in the process achieving complete understanding of how it is put together and what it is composed of. Try to imagine for a moment, taking a flower apart. We pick it, remove the leaves, separate the flower head, removing petals, stamens, pollen, etc., cutting them up finely and examining them under a microscope. Can we then put it together again and expect it to live, to bloom, fade, produce seeds, reproduce itself? Of course not. But we imagine that by mentally reducing a flower to its component parts, its features, its functions, and so on, we can mentally reconstruct a flower from our rational articulation of what we have found, so that it will be the whole flower again. But a flower is not a combination of our abstract thought about it; no matter how true or valid these may be. We cannot create a flower; nor can we recreate it, having once dissected it (mentally or otherwise). Part of the reason for that is that this is not the way it was originally put together, and we cannot replicate the process of God’s creating in this way, even though there are many, Christians among

¹¹ Al Greene. **Reformation or reconstruction?**, p. 16.

¹² Al Greene. **Reformation or reconstruction?**, p. 16.

them, who see God's act of creation in such terms. This can be seen from the frequent, but completely mistaken, description of God as Mind, or Intelligence, and the order of the creation as evidencing intelligent design. What is meant by the term "intelligent design" except an extrapolation of a human experience of the world onto God? We are "intelligent" beings, but is God? Is he merely a human being on a much bigger, grander scale? Or is God entirely different from that? I believe the latter is the case, we are images, reflections, of God, not vice versa. And we are not images of God because we are intelligent, but because we are placed here to carry out our tasks on behalf of God.

The nature of the knower

The knower is, as one of God's creatures, enabled to know because we have a relationship with the world that is a **given**. We do not have to generate, or originate, or otherwise bring into being that relationship: we are related to the world in which we live by virtue of being one of God's creatures. That is, we share with the rest of creation, and by no means less obviously, with the rest of humankind, the character which God gave to his creation and which is upheld and structured by his sustaining and developmental word.

We also are able to begin our knowing in an attitude of **trust**. We can be sure of our knowledge, and we can be sure of ourselves as knowers, because we have trust in God who created us and gave us the world in which we live. We are part of this created order, and thus can have confidence that we are able to have true knowledge of it. Thus insofar as we are trusting people, we can be sure of our knowing. If we see ourselves as uncertain of our relationship with the world, we must begin our knowing not in an attitude of trust, but in an attitude of **suspicion**. Something, someone, out there in the world, is trying to pull a swiftie over us. We cannot be sure of what we think we know, because we are not sure of ourselves, who we are, what kind of relationship we have with the world around us.

We are also "knowers," that is, our knowledge is not something distant from us, outside of us, apart from us. Knowledge is possible only if there is someone who

knows it. We are intimately, inherently, inescapably involved in our knowing. To use the approach of Michael Polanyi, the British philosopher, all our knowledge is “personal knowing.” There is no knowledge apart from that which is known by persons, and as all knowing is an act of the person, it presupposes the “I” who knows. Thus Descartes’ attempt to arrive at a certain ground for knowledge could go back no further than the “self” that knows. “I think, therefore I am.” The “I” is inescapable, there can be no knowledge without a knower. But if we have to demonstrate then the existence of the “I” that thinks, then we have a problem. Descartes could not do it, he had to presuppose the existence of the “I.” Thus he had to trust in the self, for without that there is no basis for knowledge. Yet we cannot have trust in the self, for to do that is simply to place our faith in ourselves rather than in God. We trust our selves as real knowing subjects, not because we are trustworthy in ourselves, but because we have trust in God who made us and calls us to be knowers.

We know with our whole person. We do not know the world as abstract beings, nor do we know the world as abstract things. We know as whole persons knowing whole things, and thus have immediate, concrete, everyday, ordinary knowledge of the world through our direct and constant experience of it. That world, and ourselves within it, are “givens,” that we cannot escape from, we cannot ignore, we cannot deny. Our knowing of that world, even our abstract knowing, is possible only because we are whole, concrete, living, human beings. When we are no longer alive, we can no longer have knowledge of the world. Our knowledge is not that of disembodied spirits, but that of bodied, human beings in a specific place and with a specific history.

To know then, is to be persons who are knowers. Who we are is as important as the things about which we have knowledge. And it is clear that we cannot understand ourselves, we cannot know anything truly about ourselves, except as we stand in relation to God. The “self,” the “I,” which is the knower, is a religious self, created by God, called into being and gifted for life by God, given a mandate and a commission to fulfil, given direction and commands for governing that life, dependent totally and wholly and constantly upon God for its very being. To assume that we can consider what it means to be a “knower” in isolation from God is immediately to deceive ourselves and to enter into falsehood and error. If we truly believe that we are indeed

created in the image of God, then we cannot know ourselves unless we first know God in whose image we are made. And to know God now means, post fall, knowing ourselves as sinners, as rebellious subjects. And if knowing is an act of fallen, self-deluded subjects, then the knowing will also be prone to, falling prey to, deception of various kinds, and hampered by the sinful character of the knower.

The nature of knowledge

Knowledge is therefore, personal knowledge, knowledge which is held by, and known by, real people in real life. Thus our knowing is a concrete act, even if that knowing is of abstract things such as theories and ideas. We cannot **know** abstractly, we can only know **concretely**, because we exist solely as concrete beings. There is no abstract knower, no abstract knowing, but there is the concrete act of knowing abstractly, having knowledge of abstract things. Thus the personal nature of knowledge is established securely.

What is knowledge, then? It is simply the description of the relationship between the knower in the act of knowing of that which is known or knowable.

What is the point, or the nature, of abstract knowledge? As mentioned above, it is the attempt to find the universal statement about the world which is isolated from a particular personal frame of reference. This is then to seek to discover the character, the function, the specifics, of the laws which govern the world (including ourselves), and our experience of it. What are these laws which we seek to discern? They are not the abstract Laws of Nature, which are considered simply to exist in and of themselves. They are the laws which God has given which govern the world he has created. But can we know those laws given by God? In a real sense, no. We cannot know what those laws are, because they are beyond human apprehension. But we can know, and do know, that God has indeed established laws which govern the world. What **we** call the laws for the creation are in actuality, our human articulation of the regularity, the constancy, the trustworthiness of our experience of the world, given in abstract form, so that they can be considered aside from the distractions of a particular event or entity. The laws of which we have direct knowledge are human formulations,

and thus are to a certain extent necessarily fallible, revisable, correctable, even disposable, if we find that we have apprehended the world incorrectly, and inadequately. To confuse our human formulation of the laws for the creation with the Laws given by God by which the creation is regulated and sustained is to commit the sin of **hubris**, the arrogance or pride of a human being in thinking they can become as gods.

True knowledge comes not from scientific research, not from theoretical abstract thought, but from loving and serving God, who gives knowledge of his world to all those who seek for it. It is not restricted to the scientist, the academic, the professional. Their knowledge is of a particular kind, but even that knowledge is true and valid only in so far as it is received from the hand of God.

Lastly, then, what can we learn from the endeavours of those who do not acknowledge God? Are they able to discover anything at all about the creation that is true and valid? What can we as Christians accept from those who do not believe as we do? This is a difficult and frequently controversial question, and the range of answers that have been given to this are found within Christian history right back to the first century. Then there were debates about whether or not the pagan philosophers knew anything true about God and the creation. There were numerous debates concerning this, debates from which we have such memorable comments as that by Tertullian: “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? ... Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic and dialectic composition!” However, the conflict was not settled as easily as that. After all, many of the pagan philosophers, naturalists and other thinkers of the day appeared to have valid and true insight into the world.

Unfortunately, there was a strong stream of dualistic thinking which was admitted into Christian thought very early in the history of the church, and this made it easy to accept the knowledge of the pagans, while rejecting their religious beliefs. This dualism continues to plague discussions of this subject, frequently being posited in terms such as the distinction between the “facts,” which all rational people have access to, and “values,” which we ascribe to the facts differently depending on our

religious or ethical beliefs. But this very way of seeing things is not a Christian one but humanistic to the core. It derives not from a believing perspective on the world but from Immanuel Kant. Attempts to maintain a public school system acceptable to all frequently revolve around this distinction: the school's task is to teach the facts, it is the role of parents and church to teach moral and spiritual values, which are laid over the common denominator facts like a veneer. This I believe is the wrong approach altogether.

There are no facts separate from the person who holds them to be a fact, because a fact is a fact only within a particular view of the world within which it is a fact. Divorced from that worldview or perspective, it is not a fact at all but a meaningless statement. A fact has meaning and significance only within a worldview: outside of that worldview it is necessarily false, and is of no "value" to anyone else. There is no such thing as an isolated fact which can be acceptable to all regardless of their perspective. How then do we understand common agreement as to the nature of the world which we do undoubtedly find between people of different views? There are a number of ways in which we can explain this. Firstly, there is the approach based on synthesis; that is, a perspective that allows several different approaches to the creation to be combined, merged or blended together to produce an overall picture of reality. This is basically dualistic, as it posits the validity of several approaches, each of which has its own field of investigation. Christian views of science often take this approach: science investigates the material world, theology investigates the spiritual world, and together they complement each other by providing a total picture that neither can attain on its own. There are major problems with this which we can't explore now. Suffice it to say that both science and theology on this basis function independently and on different terms, and the blending of results must always be artificial and open to criticism.

Secondly, we could argue that agreement between different perspectives simply illustrates their common validity, and that the agreement between them is the result of a convergence of perspective. This presupposes a higher perspective within which others are subsumed: it is not really a combining of perspectives at all, but the claim to a new, more comprehensive view which can account for the views of others as partial and inadequate except if taken into a new perspective that transcends them. This is the

basically monistic approach that we can find in New Age worldviews, or views such as the New Physics.

Finally, we can account for agreement across different perspectives on the grounds that all people, regardless of their approach or views, must inevitably deal with the commonality of creation order to which all are subject. We all live in the same world, we are confronted with the same phenomena and entities, and we must explain them in ways which do justice to them. There is a given-ness to creation which cannot be denied. The world does not come into existence on the terms given in our perspectives; the world came first, and our perspectives must contend with that commonality of creation. So then, we can account for the possibility of non-Christians coming to valid understanding and insight of the world we live in, but how then do we incorporate their insights into our teaching? This if anything is an even more controversial point to be considered. I would contend, in line with what I have already said, that there is no such thing as an isolated, independent fact, which we can simply absorb into our perspective as such. Rather, a fact is a fact only within a perspective within which it is a fact. What we must do, is become self-consciously aware of the perspective with which we are working, and aware also of the deepest roots and motivations of the perspective with which others are working, so as to be able to understand why and how insights and discoveries are accepted as valid and true. Then, when we have a clear grasp of our own perspective, we can see how and why the insights gained by others contribute to and enlarge the understanding we can have of the world **on the basis of our own perspective.**

I would insist at all points that we cannot simply adopt the views and insights of others as they present them; rather, they must be fitted within our perspective **on our terms** and in accordance with the fundamental principles on which our perspective is based. And to take an insight from within another perspective, adopting it for our own, does not simply mean moving a fixed, static “fact” from one perspective to another, because that fact has validity as a fact only within the perspective for which it is a fact. That is, to take an insight from somewhere else, say an evolutionistic materialist philosophy, and incorporate it within a creation-oriented, multi-aspectual philosophy, necessarily and unavoidably **alters** that fact and makes it into a different

fact. It now has a new meaning, a new significance, a new place within an overall, comprehensive, structured, integral perspective, coherent with the rest of that perspective, and strengthening it with regard to that feature of creation with which it deals. If that does not happen, if we are merely collecting facts and insights unchanged and unmodified from wherever we can get them, then we do not have a coherent and structured perspective on the world but a merely eclectic and incomprehensible jumble. To teach on this basis will generate confusion and misunderstandings. Teaching must always and in everything present a comprehensive, coherent, structured, integral perspective on the world in which we live. I argue that only a Christian perspective makes that possible, and every other approach is distorted and inadequate, as it fails to deal with the world as it really is: God's creation, structured and upheld by his word and subject in everything to his wise and loving rule.

7

Knowing and learning in education

The place of knowing in a Christian worldview

Having considered then what it means to know, how we know, what we know, and who we are as knowers, we then need to see how this fits in with a Christian worldview.

Our knowing does not take place in a vacuum. Instead, it happens in real life, in the world that God made. But that world is no longer functioning in the way God intended it to, because human beings, created and called to rule over and care for that world, have fallen in sin through breaking the covenant we have with God. But God has not left us in our rebellion, but took steps to reconcile us to himself, calling us back to faith and obedience once more. For all those who respond to God's call to faith, there is renewal and re-empowerment by the Holy Spirit, and the promise to be included in the grand consummation of the whole creation as the arena of God's glory.

Our knowledge, then, that is, we as knowers, in relationship of knowing to that which God gives us to be known, is both a given from the hands of God, who created us to know and gave us the creation of which to have knowledge, that creation itself, and our relationship with it, are all contaminated, distorted, and corrupted by our rebellion and sin, but equally being redeemed by God through Christ, and renewed and redirected by the Holy Spirit, being turned again towards its one great purpose of revealing the glory of God through all that he has made.

The four worldview questions

Discerning the worldview which drives different people is possible through examining the way in which they approach the ultimate questions of life. The four ultimate questions which worldviews deal with are defined by Walsh and Middleton as:

1. **Who am I?** - what is the nature, task and significance of human beings?
2. **Where am I?** - what is the origin and nature of the reality in which human beings find themselves?
3. **What's wrong?** - how can we account for the distortion and brokenness in this reality?
4. **What's the remedy?** - how can we alleviate this brokenness, if at all?

Each worldview provides the answers for four basic questions, and in the light of Scripture, the source and guide for our worldview, we can summarise the answers as follows:

Who am I? I am a creature of God, called to serve him, to care for his world, and to enjoy fellowship with him together with all other creatures he has made.

Where am I? I am in God's world, a world brought into being by God, ordered and sustained by him, a world which he rules over and provides for in every way, a world which he gave us as our home; a world in which we are to live in relationship to God.

What's wrong? We have rebelled against our creator, rejecting his wise and loving rule over our lives, deciding instead to make our own choices as to what's right and what's wrong. As a result, the whole creation under our care is fallen into bondage and decay.

What's the remedy? God has made provision for the redemption of all things through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of his own Son, so that all who have faith in him will be turned from their own way and brought into reconciliation to God, who has revealed his will to us in Scripture, and works unceasingly to bring redemption to the whole creation, which moves towards the goal God has set for it: that it will show forth his glory in every part by the time the end of the age comes upon us.

In the light of these, what can we say about the nature of knowledge, the knowers, the knowing, the known? We cannot ignore the created context of our knowing and that which we are to have knowledge of, nor can we ignore effects of sin and likewise of redemption on all these. Similarly, what is the significance for the consummation towards which all creation is moving under the hand of God?

Firstly, that we are creatures of God, and that our knowing is possible because God created us as knowers, that we live in the world he gave us to know, that we can communicate what we know to others. Knowing is not a problem for us, because it is made possible by God, we are sure that it happens, and can have confidence that we can truly know the world around us in a way appropriate for human beings. That is, we will not know the world as God knows it; nor should we seek to do so, nor do we need to do so. We know in human ways, because knowledge arises from the relationship of the knower to that which is known. We cannot know in any way other than a human way, because we may have only human-kind relationships with the world. We are not God; we will not know as God knows, and we must learn to be content with that. Speculation, hubris and other efforts to transcend our human-ness to know other than as it is given to us to know are merely symptoms of our continuing rebellion against God.

Secondly, we can say that our knowing is distorted because of our sin. We have limitations and hindrances placed upon our knowing, not because God resents us knowing, but because of having put ourselves into a distorted relationship with God and with the world he has given us to be stewards of. If we are to be stewards, then we

cannot be masters, and if we cannot be masters, then we cannot know what it is appropriate only for a master to know. Our knowledge is stewardly in nature and that which we have knowledge of is that which we are to be stewards over. We cannot alter our created relationship with all other creatures so as to relate to them in any other way. We cannot be anything other than their stewards. To elevate them to the status of sources of meaning and purpose, in other words, to fashion them into idols, prevents us from truly knowing them, because our relationship with them is distorted. As knowledge comes from a true relationship to that which we are knowing, we obviously cannot truly know that with which we have a falsified or confused relationship.

Thus a view of learning which places the student at the centre, seeing them as that around which everything else revolves, falsifies the relationships the student has not only with the creation they are called on to know, but also their relationships with other students and with teachers: how can there be many centres in a class? To distort relationships in this way is to distort the process of knowing and the fruits of that in their knowledge. Similarly, to place one of the functional dimensions of the creation at the centre, allowing all others to revolve around that, is to distort the creation and its creatures. To reduce all creatures to matter and energy, seeing life as a chemical process, seeing human relationships and functions as the product of genetic determination, seeing social interaction or intellectual achievement or physical prowess as the centre of life and focusing on the social, intellectual or physical developments of students is to distort who they are and how they are related to others and the world around them. We are God's stewards, called to care for each other and for his world in stewardly ways, and that must be reflected in our education.

We must also recognise that both teachers and students, as well as others involved in the education system, are sinners before God. That does not mean we must expect the worst from them, or that everything they do is wrong. But it does have a bearing on the way we educate, the way we instruct and direct students. What effect does sin have on our teaching? Are we misusing the teaching process in ways which distort and subvert our calling? Are we expecting too much or too little from students? From our teaching? Students need guidance and supervision, correction and direction. They will

not always make the right decisions, sometimes because of immaturity or lack of knowledge; sometimes because of sinful rebellion. Teachers have a part in training students in the way they must go. But we must also recognise that teachers, board members, parents, and others, are also sinners, and as such sometimes need correction, direction, reproof, instruction, and so on, so that they too are held accountable, called to responsible action, exhorted to greater obedience to God. We cannot ignore the impact of sin, but neither can we assume that it is always the children who are the sinners. This is not just a matter of good discipline in the school: knowing is dependent on right relationships, not just with that which we are seeking to know, but also with those who are seeking to teach, those who are seeking to learn, and above all, with God who calls us into this process in the first place. Unless these relationships are right, then teaching and learning, and ultimately our knowing, will be subjected to distortions and misconstruals that will ultimately hinder our task as stewards of God's world, called to know what we are to do and the world in which we are to do it.

Other ways in which sin distorts our knowing is through our refusal to acknowledge that this is God's world, governed according to the laws which he gives for each of his creatures and for the whole of his complex creation. Not only is our knowing distorted, we also have to contend with the fact that the creatures which we know are subject also to distortion, as we read in Romans 8. We cannot truly come to know the creatures we are confronted with in God's world, particularly those that are subject to human formative action such as political life, family relationships, our physical selves, without also taking into account the distortion these have undergone. That is not to say we have to try to arrive at knowledge of these things in some pure, ideal or uncontaminated state, something that we cannot attain because that is not the condition in which these creatures currently exist, but that our knowledge of them must also take into account the distortions which have been generated because of the failure of human stewards to care for the earth and its creatures with responsibility and obedience before God.

Redemption, then, can be known not only in our own lives, but also as God is working through his Spirit to bring renewal, new life, new direction, new empowering, to all

his creation, as the redeeming work of Christ counters sin and disobedience, restoring the affected creatures and countering the powers of evil and darkness. Our redemption also means that our knowing is brought back into its proper path: knowledge is not simply something we possess; it is something we acquire through understanding the relationships of things in the world as God placed them in community with each other. If we are to understand them truly, then we must be in right relationship with God who created them, in right relationship with the creatures whose stewards we are, and in right relationship with each other as we learn and know together as a communal and corporate enterprise. To know, then, is to be in right relationship with that which is known. To have a distorted relationship with something is to fail to know it truly. To take a crude example, if we consider an animal or force of nature to be divine, how can we truly know that creature? We can no longer understand it as one which God made, placed in community with other creatures, subjected to the law he made for it and the norms which are to govern and direct it. To fail to understand that basic character, is to fail to understand it truly. Any knowledge we do have will be partial, distorted, fragmented, misleading. Only as Christ redeems us, placing us again in right relationship with God, with other human beings and with the rest of creation, can we truly know anything at all.

All the creatures God made are intended to show for his glory; that is, to enhance his reputation and reveal his greatness and power. The creation was established in the beginning not in a complete and perfect state, but as the beginning of God's work. God has a goal for what he has made: it is being developed, disclosed, unfolded, matured, so that it will finally reveal God's glory in all its fullness. At the moment, we can but partially discern the glory of God in what he has made. There is much more of his wisdom and power to be discovered, and made known to all creatures. We have a crucial part to play in this, for God did not simply create us to care for the earth and preserve it. We have been given a part to play in bringing forth out of the initial creation the final glorious state which all things are intended to have. We have been given power and freedom to form, to mould, to shape, to explore, to discover, the manifold riches, diversity and complexity of God's creation, so that we can be his partners in making his glory evident through what he has made. That includes ourselves as well: we are to develop our personal gifts of skill, expertise, insight,

imagination, technique, and so on, so that through what we are able to do God's glory will be known. When we hear a glorious symphony, see a magnificent painting, read a moving epic poem, do we instinctively give glory to God, not only for the product of human skill, but also for the skills which God gave so it could be produced? To do so is to reveal the glory of God; to fail to do so is not to truly know that fine work, because its relationship to God is concealed, distorted or denied.

The relationship of knowing and knowledge to education

Having considered the place of knowing in a Christian worldview, we now need to reflect on what it means to educate in the light of what we have learned about knowing and knowledge.

How we view the learner and the nature of their learning depends on what we see them actually doing in their learning, and in the comments that follow I am drawing on the work of Doug Blomberg. The learner could be seen to be actively expressing instincts and needs, seeking to realise inner potential. Or they could be seen as essentially passive or reactive, the product of a stimulus response history in a determining environment. Or they could be seen as a purposive person interacting with the environment. These conflicting and contrasting views of human nature lead to different approaches to understanding teaching and learning. A Biblical approach does not allow us to see the person as an instinct-driven animal or a programmed machine, but as someone created by God and called to live responsibly before him. We are to focus our lives on God, and if we repudiate God as the focus for our lives, we will instead put our faith in a God-substitute. We have responsible freedom, not absolute freedom or autonomous freedom, and we must recognise this in our teaching. Thus we will not allow students simply to follow their own interests and desires, because life is not the product of an individual person. We will not seek to have them conform to a pre-determined pattern, regurgitating what we have fed them. They must instead be challenged to take up their calling and their task to responsibly serve the Lord, acknowledging their personhood and seeking to fulfil their God-given mandate in life.

Learning is a matter of coming to know. We may follow the tradition of rationalism, initiated by the Greeks and followed by much of Western civilisation. In this view, knowledge is an abstract, objective entity given in the natural order of things, whether within or without the individual. Education is then a process of imparting as much of this content as possible, and measuring learning by the amount that is retained of this body of knowledge. This approach both distorts and obscures the fact that much of what we learn and what we know comes to us not in “rational” ways but in non-rational ways, and our learning does not take place according to that narrow view.

But neither is learning empiricistic, a view which denies that rationality is an innate property, and denies that there is any order or normativity in the world. Thus it is the meaning that the individual or group forms for itself which is ultimately true. Teaching in this perspective seeks to promote various forms of growth and development, for persons to learn to be autonomous in making their own meaning, and the validity of such meaning is thus relative to the individual or group.

A third approach is to see knowledge as a matter of mastering a certain technique, so that proper use of mathematical or scientific method, formal logic and linguistic analysis becomes the guarantee of truth.

Blomberg asserts that the Biblical view is that knowledge emerges from the interaction between the knower and the known, under the authority of the law of God. It is not abstracted from but involved with the world; it is not merely intellectual but involves responsibility; it is not self-authenticating but is subject to God and the given normative order for his world. Thus education is to be orientated to the development of understanding as both an individual and communal enterprise in rightly placing things in relationship to one another.

Knowledge of the world, according to the Scriptures, cannot be gained by abstract contemplation using the Greek rationalistic model. We can use abstract theoretical or logical thought, in association with empirical investigation, to describe the regularly recurring features of the creation, but only if we are prepared to lose any understanding of the individual as a knower. Our everyday knowledge occurs within

the realm of concrete experience of whole things, animals, plants, institutions, people, events, acts, and their complex interwoven interrelationships. That is, we know **whole** things in their many-sided functioning. Our learning must deal with life as it is: life as we experience it in its wholeness. Thus we need to know how to apply **this** particular skill to **this** particular situation in **this** particular relationship, or to **this** particular piece of equipment, to **this** particular decision we need to make. A strictly theoretical knowledge of principles can guide us in our decisions in these situations, but only insofar as we have learned how to integrate them in our concrete experience. A curriculum which focuses on an abstract academic learning isolated from concrete experience may certainly produce knowledge of theoretical principles on their own, but this is not true learning.

“Knowledge” is a way of describing the relationship between the person-in-community, the world and God. To “know” is to be able to place things properly under the law of God, not in relation to abstract principles but in the context of the dynamic holding together of all things by the Spirit and the Word. It is to be able to see the inter-connections that exist between all things in the complexly-interwoven fabric of creation. Knowledge is thus a growing fabric within the mind and heart, body and soul of the person, reflecting also the many sides of humanness. Such knowledge can be gained only by acting on and into the world. And it is necessarily religious in character because it is rooted in the relationship of the self to God. Both the teacher and the student are individually **and corporately** responsible before God for the way in which they discharge their respective offices: neither the teacher nor the student is the source of authority in this relationship.

The teacher is not the fount of all wisdom, imparting that to the minds of students; nor are students to determine what and when and how they will learn; but the authority and calling of the teacher to teach, and the authority and calling of the student to learn, must be exercised in mutual submission to the call of God for us to know and understand the creation over which he has placed us. The teacher is to guide students into learning, using the authority of one who serves. It is genuine leading and directing, not facilitation, not domination, but serving the task of the student in their responsibility to learn. The student has the task of learning in the context of

discipleship of Jesus Christ. This cannot be second-hand discipleship, nor can it be learned by rote or by accepting someone else's explanations. The teacher must challenge students appropriately to take responsibility for their own learning, by actively involving them in learning. What is learned cannot be separated from the process of learning. We do not simply communicate knowledge to students, we do not simply require them to learn; teaching is a process of showing how and providing them with opportunities to practice for themselves in responsibility and accountability for their need to know. This must include testing all things in the light of Scripture, by showing them how and enabling them to do that for themselves. Only in such a situation will true learning take place, and only thus do we gain true knowledge of the world God has placed us in and calls us to know, and only thus do we truly become knowers.

Because teaching is not something "done" to students, we cannot focus on the mastery of correct techniques as the basis of our teaching. Thus teaching takes place within an inter-relationship between responsible, God-gifted people, exercising different but correlated callings: to teach and to learn. Both must take responsibility for their own particular tasks within this relationship. Learning is something that students must **do** themselves. No one can do it for them. For instance, we cannot manipulate students into learning by memorization or rote learning, by providing appropriate rewards and punishments for particular behaviours. Nor does it suffice to facilitate the learning process by providing structured learning situations. Learning is something that the students must **do** themselves. So we cannot focus on techniques for teaching, although these cannot be ignored. Our first responsibility is to understand the whole teaching and learning process in the light of our Christian faith. Since everything we do is an expression of our heart orientation towards God, then our teaching and learning also must take place in the context of our relationship with God and our response of faith, either positive or negative, to God's call to us to place our trust in him.

Because students are integral wholes, not fragmented collections of parts, the student must be taught in a manner that respects that. Learning must take place then in an integral, wholistic manner, a manner which also respects the integral, wholistic nature of our knowledge of the world: a world composed of wholes in complex inter-

relationship with one another. The world is not a collection of fragments that together form whole entities: the world is made up of whole entities. This distinction in itself has enormous ramifications for our teaching and learning, apart from anything else we have considered. How can we have true knowledge of the world if we consider it to be fragmented, when it is actually whole and complete, subject to the Word of God for what he has brought into being?

Since a human being is a responsive, direction-giving being who has initiative and purpose in life, knowing must be seen to take place within the life of such a being. We are not passive containers, waiting for knowledge to be poured in; we are not active learners, seeking out and making our own truth; we are responsive beings with initiative and purpose, actively involved in a complex web of inter-relationships with many other beings like ourselves, and many more who in many ways are unlike ourselves, all within the context of the law of God which brings into being and provides the conditions for their existence. Because we are given initiative and purpose, with the freedom to pursue our lives, we are able to make our own choices concerning our teaching and our learning. But this must always be tempered by the knowledge that we are also responsive beings, called to exercise responsibility and to be held accountable for our choices, both by God and by those in relationship to us. We are personally responsible for our actions and our choices, a responsibility which however is not purely individual, because it is responsibility and accountability within the context of a community of others like ourselves, also accountable and responsible.

We are responsible for our choices, but we are not **solely** responsible: others bear responsibility in that situation also. That does not mean we can avoid being accountable, but it does mean that we cannot be held accountable without taking into consideration the context: what others are involved; what responsibility do they bear? A child may be failing to learn: who is responsible? The child? The teacher? Parents? Other pupils in the class? The school Board? The Principal? The Ministry of Education? The Biblical answer is that all of these people, and perhaps others as well, bear a proportion of the responsibility according to their particular office and relationship with the child, and how they have carried out their appointed tasks, and also how the complex inter-relationships of all these people impact on the child's

learning. We are not individuals in isolation, bearing all the responsibility for our own lives. We are not a collective, bearing the responsibility as a whole, but with no one person shouldering specific responsibility within the whole. We are individuals-in-relationship, and as such, bear responsibility before God together according to the specific tasks and mandates we are accountable for within the situation. For true teaching and learning to take place, all those involved must fulfil their particular tasks with integrity and diligence; otherwise the tasks of others in the situation will be hampered and impaired to some degree.

This freedom also means that as students mature, an increasing amount of choice should be incorporated into the lessons, so that students can learn to exercise it in an environment where they are accountable, responsible for their choices, but also guided and supported as they seek to make appropriate choices. They must not be left to make up their own minds, as though they are autonomous beings who are accountable to nobody, nor to have all their decisions made for them, as though they had no personal responsibility at all. Rather, they must be allowed to make choices appropriate to their maturity, but guided and supported in their decision-making so that they are aware of the responsibility they hold. They should not have inappropriate choices simply overridden, but called to reflect on their choices and to consider again in the light of the norms for what is appropriate. This is as much part of the learning process as the acquisition of information and the content of learning. Their responsibility as learners, as co-stewards of the creation and all its resources, including their own time, skills, priorities, and so on, are part of the formation they must undergo if they truly are to know themselves and the world in which they live, their relationships with others and ultimately their relationship to God.

This is the context within which knowledge is gained. To deny that is to falsify our knowing, teaching and learning. All our knowledge is human knowing, the knowing which we as God's stewards in God's world are called to seek for. To know truly is to know while in right relationship with others, with God and with that which is known. Outside of our personal knowing, we can know truly nothing at all. We are created to be knowers, called to be knowers, enabled by God to be knowers. This then is the focus of our education, so that in all things God may be glorified above all.

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