

The 'Sophistification' of Education – a theological critique¹

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In this paper I will examine the role of Christian religion in resisting tendencies in education which are detrimental to proper learning. I will also examine how, inversely if you like, proper learning can act as a *praeparatio evangelica*. As a theologian working in Ireland I will mainly focus on the situation in an Irish context. I am of the opinion however that what follows has a wider theoretical significance, and at any rate Ireland, because of its recent socio-economic developments, may very well foreshadow tendencies which may occur in the not too distant future in mainland Europe too (the "Americanisation" of education).

1) The growing instrumentalisation of education and religion in Ireland

Anyone who attempts to link religion and education can expect trenchant criticism from those in Europe who support a secularising stance. In some European countries public education is a "religion-free" zone altogether. The Irish context is rather different. Indeed, in a recent

¹ A shorter version of this paper was delivered during the Conference "Dove va l'Europa? Cultura, Popoli, Istituzioni," V Symposium of European University Professors, Vicariato di Roma and Libera Università Maria Santissima Assunta (LUMSA), Rome, September, 28th-October 1st, 2006: "The 'Sophistification' of Religion," in "Dove va l'Europa? Cultura, Popoli, Istituzioni," V Symposium of European University Professors, Vicariato di Roma and Libera Università Maria Santissima Assunta (LUMSA), Rome and published on-line at <http://www.lumsa.it/Lumsa/Portals/File/ConvegnoDocentiSett06/VanNieuwenhove.pdf>. I am grateful to the Research Directorate, Mary Immaculate College, for financial support towards attending this Conference.

paper on Vincent Miller's book *Consuming Religion*, Eamonn Conway makes the point that if it is the case that Europe's rampant secularisation is "an exceptional case" in global terms, then Ireland is "the exception to the exception."² That is: secularisation has not taken place in Ireland in any way comparable to Great Britain and Western Europe. In Great Britain and elsewhere in Europe secularisation has been underpinned philosophically and politically in a way that has never been the case in Ireland. In Ireland the economic prosperity the country is enjoying leads to a consumer culture "which, if anything, is taking on the characteristics of a post-secular culture without ever having been properly secularized."³ This post-secular climate – in Ireland, as elsewhere – is characterised by an individualistic and privatised approach: religion becomes spirituality, which, in turn, is understood primarily in terms of self-discovery, self-healing, and self-fulfilment, with little or no reference to the wider faith community, or the challenging and critical aspects of the Christian faith. Unlike the rest of Western Europe there is in Ireland little evidence of anti-religious sentiments (such as, for instance, in France), and this makes the Irish situation somewhat *sui generis*. The reason why the secularisation phase bypassed Ireland probably has to be seen in the light of its economic evolution: within two decades Ireland has evolved from a traditional, agricultural society to a technological society, effectively skipping industrialisation (which usually elicits growing secularisation). Outside of Ireland too, if it had not been for the resurgence of Islam, the secularisation agenda might have lost some of its strength: after all, if religion is reduced to the private sphere of self-fulfilment, it is hardly worth getting concerned about in the public sphere...

In short, although Ireland has been spared some of the secularisation process, here, as elsewhere in Europe, religion is increasingly seen as a private option, with no public relevance, merely

2 E. Conway, "The Commodification of Education and the Challenges for Theology," *ET Bulletin*, Vol 17, (2006/1), pp. 142-163.

3 E. Conway, "The Commodification..."

becoming an instrument towards personal well-being. In other words, it becomes instrumentalised or subjected to ulterior motives.

Worryingly, an analogous process is affecting education. Due to the pressure of a neo-liberal Government education has to be seen to be “useful.” Not only are all academic staff asked to support and contribute to Ireland’s overall national strategic research and development agenda,⁴ but on a micro-level courses are being (re)designed in the light of what is considered “useful.” This kind of “usefulness” is usually understood in crude economic terms. The need to increasingly draw on technology in the delivery of education is also merely driven by economic motives (introduce students to the “real” world of the 21st century) rather than by sound pedagogical principles.

In Ireland all students are asked to sit a “Leaving Certificate” Exam, organised by the State, which determines the allocation of Third-level subject choices; if students do not acquire sufficient points, they cannot pursue the studies they would like to pursue. The advantage of this system is that the failure rate in first year of the Third-level is relatively low (at least lower than in some countries, such as Belgium, where students can enrol for any study they like, which leads to a failure rate of up to 50% in some popular disciplines). The disadvantage is, however, that students at secondary level only want to study topics or subjects if they are “relevant” – that is: if they are likely to be covered in the all-important Leaving Certificate Exam. This leads to a highly instrumentalised approach towards education amongst students, including a tendency to focus on “packets of knowledge” that are easily memorisable: there is now widespread agreement that the Leaving Certificate Exam has become a mere “memory test.”⁵ This instrumentalised approach is in turn, as suggested earlier, furthered by

4 See *Towards 2016. Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015* (Dublin: The Stationary Office, 2006), p. 133.

5 See E. Holt, “Is our education system putting out Yeats’s fire?” in *The Irish Times*, Weekend Review, 26/08/06, p. 4.

Government policy which sees education merely in terms of its value to the marketplace.

A number of examples will illustrate this. The *History* curriculum includes a section on medieval ramparts and castle building – because that is useful knowledge for tourism and guided tours throughout the Irish countryside. However, the curriculum never even mentions Charlemagne and the Carolingian Renaissance. Similarly deplorable is the almost utter disappearance of Latin and Greek from the Irish curriculum – only to be replaced with “useful” subjects such as *Home Economics*, *Business Studies*, and courses on *Civil, Social and Political Education*. The latter is described as “a course in citizenship based on Human Rights and Social Responsibilities [which] aims to develop active citizens who have a sense of belonging to the local, national, European and global community; a capacity to gain access to information and structures [and] an ability to participate in democratic society.”⁶ It is revealing that a course of this kind is being put forward: it both reflects the inadequacy of the present educational system and curriculum, and – ironically – further enhances it. Teaching people to become responsible citizens is a typical example of an attempt to immediately target a “utility” which can only be attained indirectly. Some states can only be attained indirectly.

This point deserves some more consideration for it explains why we must be deeply critical of the educational developments sketched earlier (and the pressures that are brought to bear on it by policy-makers). Roger Scruton has made the point that the most valuable states and activities in life (e.g., friendship, love, worship, learning,...) cannot be instrumentalised. Or rather, if one attempts to instrumentalise them, one loses the benefits they indirectly confer: “We gain the advantages of friendship only when we do not pursue them: these advantages are

6 *Civil, Social and Political Education. Guidelines for Teachers*. National Council for Curriculum Assessment, 1998), p. 3.

the necessary by-products of a practice that does not and *cannot* intend them. One of persistent fallacies of modern (...) thinking is the belief that if something benefits us, then it is a means to the benefit that it confers. On the contrary, the things that benefit us most – duty, love, friendship, beauty, knowledge, and the worship of God – are ends in themselves, and vanish just as soon as we treat them otherwise.”⁷ This applies especially to education. Scruton gives the example of somebody who seeks only to learn those parts of mathematics that are useful to his present needs. Such a person will never really succeed in understanding what he learned; he will fail to acquire a real interest in the subject, and will be unable to teach others.⁸ It is illuminating that especially standards in mathematics are dropping in Irish education.

Educational reforms that attempt to make the curriculum “more relevant” are deeply flawed: true education is “the pursuit of useless knowledge – knowledge severed from its present purposes, and pursued wherever it may guide us. For, if we do not detach education from its application, we shall never acquire it.”⁹ The pursuit of relevance will merely lead in time to the extinction of knowledge. “Useless knowledge” is not knowledge readily applicable to solve everyday problems, but as E. Holt observes, “it can give its possessor a more enlightened context for the problem at hand. It assures people that there’s little new – that the world in 2006 is broadly similar to the world in 1956 or 1856 for that matter. In that sense, ‘useless knowledge’ stresses continuity.”¹⁰

Holt, quoting W.B. Yeats *dictum* “Education is not the filling of a bucket but the start of a fire,” argues that Irish education has made itself increasingly subservient to practical or ‘training’ aspects. In general this has also led to a “dumbing-down” of Irish education. Standards in Irish

7 R. Scruton, “On Humane Education” from *The Aesthetic Understanding. Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press: 1998), p. 245.

8 “On Humane Education,” p. 244.

9 “On Humane Education,” p. 244.

10 E. Holt, “Is our education system putting out Yeats’s fire?” p. 4.

education have been eroded to facilitate grade inflation: “A bachelor’s degree has become devalued because so many people have one and there is a sense that ‘real’ university work does not begin until post-graduate standard. There is a clear link to affluence in the current arrangement, which sees ‘education’ as a form of service industry.”¹¹ What policy-makers fail to see is that the demands of the economy are not the same as the demands of education.

I now hope to suggest how by drawing on the resources of the Christian faith tradition we can question these worrying developments in the educational sector. I will not address the specific issue of how the educational system (“the Catholic School”) can assist in the preservation and handing down of the Christian faith – a topic of major importance nonetheless, especially in a context where the family unit no longer passes on the Christian faith, and many children learn the basics of the faith only in the classroom.

In order to establish the connection between religion and education – a connection which may not be obvious at first – I will argue two points. My first point is that religion fosters a non-utilitarian disposition and that it therefore contains the resources to withstand the development of an instrumentalising mindset, allowing us to adopt a critical stance against instrumentalising policies in many areas of life, such as education, culture and human relations. My second point is that education, insofar as it is a search for truth and wisdom, has already an implicit religious dimension to it, and the onus is on us, Christian teachers, to safeguard this tradition of true learning, and to make its religious dimension more explicit.

2.1. Religion and the fostering of a non-instrumentalising disposition

Kant observed that if we want to contemplate art we must

adopt a disinterested or non-instrumentalising disposition; similarly, as I suggested earlier, in education too we must engage in a kind of ascesis and abandon a calculative approach if we want to learn anything genuinely meaningful and profound. However, religion differs from art and education in that the non-instrumentalising disposition is not just a requisite; its cultivation is actually one of its main "goals." Paradoxically, it is a kind of "goal" that cannot be pursued directly through our own efforts. If it could, religion itself would be open to instrumentalisation.¹²

Given the fact that Christians understand their relationship with God in terms of love, and love is, of course, its own goal and reason, we should abandon all concern for ourselves and our personal gain. Mystical-theological authors describe this love therefore as groundless or bottomless. "Groundless" means in this context that no ultimate reasons can be given as to why we love God – or anybody else for that matter.¹³ Similarly, Eckhart reminds us that we should not love God "the way we love a cow" (for what we can get out of it); this is why he admonishes us to live and love "without a why."¹⁴ We have to abandon all self-seeking reasons and claims, every trace of possessiveness and self-centredness. This disposition he calls *Gelassenheit* or *Abgeschiedenheit*, usually translated as detachment, renunciation or surrender – a notion that was to influence the later thought of Heidegger.

Eckhart may be one of the best-known spokespersons of this

12 Religion as religion cannot be instrumentalised; if one attempts to do this (for the sake of financial profit, or for personal self-gratification) it ceases to be religion. The same dynamic as with friendship holds here too.

13 When a wife asks her husband: "Why do you love me?" the correct answer is not: "Because you are intelligent, faithful, beautiful, wise, have a nice sense of humour..." The correct answer is: "Ultimately, I cannot say." The person wants to be loved in her own right, not for a number of reasons that may fall away through old age anyway. The "groundless" nature of love explains why love cannot be instrumentalised – or rather, when you attempt to do this, you cease to love.

14 For a discussion of this theme in Eckhart, see B. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart. The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroads: 2001), p. 147ff.

ideal but he is a merely one of the exponents of an ideal that has a long history in Christian spirituality. The theme is sometimes expanded by developing the analogy of servants (*servi*), hirelings (*mercenarii*), and sons (*fili*). This is important because it indicates that what we are describing here is a process of transformation: from an instrumentalised relationship with God to one that is being freely pursued for its own sake. John Cassian is the first to develop these metaphors in his *Conferences*. After having referred to the story of the prodigal son who first became a slave, then longs to be a hireling but is received by his father as a son, John Cassian writes: "If, by God's help and not relying on his own laborious effort, anyone deserves to possess this state, he will begin to pass from the condition of slave, in which there is fear, and from a hireling's hopeful desire, in which it is not so much the goodness of the giver but rather the payment of the wage that is looked for, to adopted sonship, where there is no longer any fear or greed but rather that love which never fails and always abides. (...) whoever attains by way of this love to the image and likeness of God will take delight in the good because of the pleasure of the good itself."¹⁵

St Bernard of Clairvaux adopts the same analogy in his insightful treatise *On Loving God* (*De Diligendo Deo*, chs. XII-XIV). Neither servile fear nor mercenary self-love convert the soul; they may change at times the external behaviour or appearances but they will never change the most interior disposition (*affectum*).¹⁶ Genuine love is its own reward (*Verus amor seipso contentus est*) and should not be pursued for personal gain.¹⁷ It is worth quoting Bernard in full: "God is not loved without reward, even though he should be loved without thought of reward. (...) It is an affection [i.e., something that happens

15 John Cassian, *The Conferences*, XI, 9, trans. by B. Ramsey (Mahwah, N.J.: Newman Press, 1997), p. 415.

16 St Bernard of Clairvaux, *Liber De Diligendo Deo*, XII, 34 (SC 393) (Paris: Cerf, 1993), pp. 148-49.

17 *Liber De Diligendo Deo*, VII, 17, pp. 102-103.

to us], not a contract [*affectus est, non contractum*]. It is not given or received by agreement. It is given freely; it makes us spontaneous. True love is its own reward. It has its reward in what it loves. For if you seem to love something, but really love it for the sake of something else, you actually love what you are pursuing as your real end, and not that which is a means to it.”¹⁸

What mystical theologians describe here is a growing transformation and increasing openness or receptivity due to renunciation of self-centredness. Ultimately, this is an openness to love. This is the significance of religion: it fosters a disposition of total selflessness in love. God is the most ultimate. As the last sentence from the quotation from St Bernard makes clear: you cannot and should not justify why you love God in the light of supposedly more ultimate concerns. If you could, then these concerns would obviously be your Ultimate. The acknowledgement and attainment – through grace – of this disposition of surrender is cultivated by religion. Religion creates a certain “purposelessness” in us – it creates a non-calculating or non-instrumentalising disposition in our most fundamental relationship – the one with God. So, there is something “pointless” about being religious.

This non-instrumentalising disposition fostered by religion

¹⁸ *Liber De Diligendo Deo*, VII, 17, translated by G.R. Evans, as *On Loving God* in *Bernard of Clairvaux. Selected Works* (NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 187. Another author who adopts the analogy of servants, friends and sons, and who developed it masterfully to describe our growing transformation from a calculative, instrumentalising disposition to a free, self-less one, is Jan van Ruusbroec in his little work *Vanden Blinkenden Steen* (The Sparkling Stone). Two elements distinguish Ruusbroec’s approach from that of Cassian and Bernard. First, more explicitly than his predecessors, Ruusbroec describes the evolution from calculated self-centredness to selfless love for God in terms of annihilation of self (*eyghen, hemselven, eyghenheit*). The second remarkable aspect of his description is that he explicitly makes the point that religious consolations can themselves become an obstacle to the selflessness that he propounds. In other words, religious devotion and interiority are always in danger of becoming subjected to an instrumentalising approach. See Jan van Ruusbroec, *Vanden Blinkenden Steen*, 307ff from *Opera Omnia* 10, ed. in chief, Guido De Baere, CCCM 110 (Tiel: Brepols, 1991). For a more in-depth discussion of this text, see R. Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), pp. 67-68.

(detachment) does not imply escapism or indifference towards the world; on the contrary: when we are detached in the Christian sense we are devoid of self-centeredness and possessiveness, and this allows us to reengage with the world in a proper manner, without instrumentalising it or subjecting it to our concerns.¹⁹ In that sense religion fosters a non-instrumentalising disposition which is crucial in order to deal in a proper way with the things that really matter in this world, including education.

2.2 Education as a raid on the inarticulate

There is, however, another way of looking at the relation between religion and education: proper education as a *praeparatio evangelica*. In an important contribution, Denys Turner draws an illuminating comparison between the Sophists of Plato's time, and some postmodern pluralists of today. He points out that Plato was especially concerned about their influence on the minds of the young. While Plato called them – with heavy irony – “sophists” (wise men), he thought they were really *merchants* of wisdom, not so much because they demanded payment for their teaching but more fundamentally because Plato “thought it possible for them to conceive of selling their teaching only because they had in any case reduced knowledge itself to a sort of commodity – the sort of thing you could *exchange* for some other commodity of equivalent value. The sophists, as Plato represents them, thought that knowledge ‘got you places’ – indeed it *was* knowledge only if it got you places.”²⁰ From this perspective we can describe recent policies aimed at making education – and the university sector in general – more “useful” in economic terms, as short-sighted “sophisti-fication.”

19 I have developed this theme elsewhere in some more detail. See “The Religious and Aesthetic Attitude” in *Literature and Theology* 18/2 (2004): pp. 160-72, especially pp. 165-68; “The Christian Response to Suffering, and the Significance of the Model of the Church as Body of Christ” in *Angelicum* 82 (2005), pp. 595-609, especially pp. 597-98; and “Technology and Mystical Theology” in *Technology and Transcendence*, eds. M. Breen, E. Conway and B. McMillan (Dublin: Columba Press, 2003), pp. 186-94.

20 D. Turner, *Faith Seeking* (London: SCM, 2002), p. 132.

As Turner reminds us, for Plato himself all teaching is a kind of memory-jogging, and all learning is an *anamnesis*, an unforgetting, a reminding of something you already know but have lost sight of.²¹ True teaching elicits a glint of *recognition* from students: ‘How surprising, but of course, that is how it must be, it fits’, as if they had known it all the time but only now perceive it.²² Ultimately, these moments of insight or recognition merely reflect that, as contingent and temporal beings, we are surrounded by a horizon of incomprehensible otherness, a strangeness which is at the same time familiar.²³ Herein lies the importance of true education: it leads us out of ourselves (*e-ducere*) into that which lies beyond ourselves and our ordinary knowledge. Thus, our desire for learning is ultimately a desire for God.²⁴ A teaching and a learning which lacks that ‘infinity’ to it are nothing but forms of pedantry.²⁵

This link between the desire for learning and the desire for God may perhaps remain anonymous in today’s universities. Nevertheless, as long as our search for learning retains this infinite dynamic and does not allow itself to be “sophisticated” or reduced to becoming merely an instrument for the marketplace, there remains an implicit religious dimension to our search for learning. As Turner concludes:

It is of this that the universities can require themselves to be from time to time reminded, namely that they themselves are places of memory, with a purpose of reminding which serves an *infinite* good, a good surpassing all utility because it breaks through the bounds of any calculation which could measure it. All religion teaches that in order *even* to be human, we must have the humility to be *more than* human, to acknowledge in humility the paradox that we can humanly know our end to transcend our

21 D. Turner, *Faith Seeking*, p. 133.

22 D. Turner, *Faith Seeking*, p. 134.

23 D. Turner, *Faith Seeking*, p. 134.

24 D. Turner, *Faith Seeking*, p. 135.

25 D. Turner, *Faith Seeking*, p. 135.

human powers to an unknowable degree, that we are by finite nature inserted into an infinite demand upon us. It is the same in the order of knowledge. What we do or can know, we know only because of a light which is unknowable, and so the desire to know is an infinite passion.²⁶

This link between learning and religion can be further developed by examining Simone Weil's notion of attention.²⁷ In a short treatise, revealingly entitled "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," Weil attempts to clarify what she means by attention, and its religious and educational significance. Attention, she writes, is an effort, but it is a negative effort. It refers to losing oneself in a problem (such as the translation of a text or solving a geometrical problem) through a radical openness by which truth will appear: "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. (...) Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it."²⁸ Attention is a concentrated effort to become open, receptive in everything we do; it is therefore an effort that entails a form of passivity, receptivity. She makes the point that it should not be confused with "a kind of muscular effort": "If one says to one's pupils: 'Now you must pay attention', one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply. They have been concentrating on nothing. They have not

26 D. Turner, *Faith Seeking*, p. 137.

27 I have discussed this notion in an earlier article, namely "The Religious and the Aesthetic Attitude," *Literature and Theology* 18/2 (2004): 174-186, especially pp. 182-83.

28 From S. Weil, *Waiting on God. Letters and Essays* (London: HarperCollins, 1977), p. 58.

been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles.”²⁹ In other words, attention must be governed by free openness towards the object, not a concentrated effort to master it. This is why, for Weil, every instance of attention is useful in our search for God, or rather in God finding us:

We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. (...) the solution to a geometry problem does not in itself constitute a precious gift, but the same law applies to it because it is the image of something precious. Being a little fragment of particular truth, it is a pure image of the unique, eternal and living truth, the very Truth which once in a human voice declared ‘I am the Truth.’

Every school exercise, thought of in this way, is like a sacrament. In every school exercise there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it. There is a way of giving our attention to the data of a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution, or to the words of a Latin or Greek text without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words.³⁰

For Weil, attention as a receptive sensitivity or mindset that can be developed and nourished throughout all kinds of learning can therefore function as a *praeparatio evangelica*. It is one of the ways in which proper education allows us to develop a sensitivity which finds its ultimate fulfilment in religion.

29 S. Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 56.

30 S. Weil, *Waiting on God*, pp. 58-59.

Conclusion

I have argued that there is a twofold connection between religion and learning. Religion fosters a non-instrumentalising disposition (detachment, *desasimiento*, *Gelassenheit*, *apatheia*, *indifferençia*) which allows us to encounter and enjoy all the things that are really valuable in their own right in this life: truth, beauty, friendship, and, of course, genuine learning. On the other hand, in our search for genuine knowledge and insight we are constantly reaching out for an ever-receding truth which surpasses and grounds us, as Augustine, Bonaventure, and Rahner attempted to show. It is the thrust of this paper that genuine learning and religion need one another, and the one cannot flourish without the other in the human community.