
Schooling, Religious Tradition and the Default of God

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The default of God and the divinities is absence. But absence is not nothing; rather it is precisely the presence, which must first be appropriated, of the hidden fullness and wealth of what has been and what, thus gathered, is presencing, of the divine in the world of the Greeks, in prophetic Judaism, in the preaching of Jesus.¹

– Martin Heidegger

(1) THE CURRENT SITUATION

To the contemporary reader the phrase ‘the default of God’ may suggest something shocking, such as a failure on God’s part to keep a bargain or a promise. Accordingly, it may seem a curious impertinence to make this ‘default’ an explicit theme in an essay on religious tradition and education. It is important therefore, at the outset, to secure the theme as far as possible against misunderstanding. Default here signifies ‘to be wanting’, or ‘to be in want of’, or ‘to be deprived of’. Hence, what is described as ‘the default of God’ is a *human, historical* event and, as such, it means, in Heidegger’s words: ‘that no god any longer gathers men and things unto himself, visibly and unequivocally, and by such gathering disposes the world’s history and man’s sojourn in it.’² Of course a relationship with God continues to live on in our own historical epoch, in individuals, in churches, in some homes and indeed within some schools. But the default of God is increasingly

1. Martin Heidegger, ‘A Letter to a Young Student’, printed as an epilogue to Heidegger’s essay ‘The Thing’. Translated by Albert Hofstadter in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 184.

2. Martin Heidegger, ‘What Are Poets For?’ in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 91. In the light of this quotation from Heidegger, it would appear that the theology of liberation, and the historical struggle associated with it, provide a dramatic instance of the precise *opposite* of the default of God. See, for example, the article on liberation theology by Peter Lemass in the February 1985 issue of *The Furrow*. The default of God is clearly not the problem in Latin America.

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evident in these spheres also, as well as in the patterns of present day discourse and relations among mankind, from the most personal to the most public and international. This eclipse of the sacred, Heidegger, echoing the poet Hölderlin, describes as 'the time of the world's night' – a time when 'the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history'.³

Bringing these observations to bear directly on the title of this essay, it can be said that the default of God is an event which has variously stunned, or frustrated, or perplexed, or even defeated teachers of religion in schools in recent times. An analogy may help to illustrate the point at issue here. One may sometimes be moved to pity for the honest salesman of an obsolete product; but if he continues to importune and to hamper one's busy efforts to reach the important goal one is pursuing, one's patience can quickly wear thin and one may easily become doubly dismissive of the salesman and his dusty wares. I suspect that few teachers of religion in Ireland at present, particularly at post-primary level, will fail to see some parallel to their own work – or to sections of their own work – in the analogy just drawn.

I should stress here that I am not suggesting that the teaching of religion is in a state of collapse in Irish schools. Indeed some quite remarkable instances of an engagement with religious tradition can be witnessed in various schools throughout the country. My argument is, rather, that the evidence presented during recent years by most student teachers of religion, as well as by qualified practising teachers of religion and indeed by a number of recent articles in *The Furrow*,⁴ seems to point inescapably towards the conclusion that teachers of religion experience much more than a normal share of difficulty, when compared to their colleagues in other subjects. This difficulty is directly connected, it is generally agreed, with a deeply rooted attitude widespread among teenagers that religion class is 'irrelevant', or 'a doss'. It is not merely the reported frequency of such attitudes, but also the self-assurance and apparently innocent nonchalance with which they are regularly voiced, which call forcefully to mind again the thoughts of Hölderlin and Heidegger on the default of God.

3. Ibid. On the phrases 'divine radiance', 'default of God', etc. – it is worth noting that the fashion of earlier decades, of describing Heidegger as an 'atheistic existentialist', has curiously given way to a hesitant speculation that his entire thrust may be towards a divine, as distinct from a 'metaphysical', God.

4. See, for instance (i) 'Short Ladder to Nowhere – the Crisis in "Senior Religion"' by Nicholas A. Casey, *The Furrow* (February 1984), (ii) 'A Ladder with Nothing to Stand on – the Crisis in "Senior Religion"' by Irene Ní Mháille, *The Furrow* (July 1984), (iii) 'Religious Education and Schools – a perspective' by W. Richard Maher, *The Furrow* (January 1985).

(2) RELIGIOUS TRADITION AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

We have traced above the outlines of a crisis in the effort to bring about a genuine response to religious tradition in increasing numbers of Irish schools. But the crisis is not merely an Irish one; nor does it concern merely the Roman Catholic religion – which just happens to be the most frequent point of contact with religious tradition in Ireland. Schools in Britain, in America and in other countries have experienced similar difficulties in recent decades. Indeed it is the *international* and *continuing* character of the crisis facing religious tradition in schools which forms the background to this essay.

Perhaps the greatest danger in a time of crisis in education is to conceive of a remedy in terms of a sustained campaign, or crusade, for moral rearmament. A good example of this is the rising concern felt in some quarters in the U.S. during recent years over a much reported decline in literacy standards. The events which expressed this concern culminated in 1983 in the publication of a number of critical reports, by far the most publicised of which was the alarmingly – perhaps polemically – titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*.⁵ Not surprisingly perhaps, particularly to any historical observer, these events led to a strident call-to-arms in American educational circles in the eighties (considerable impetus being given by President Regan's ready endorsement of the sentiments of *A Nation at Risk*). The main response to this latest crisis in American schooling is thus increasingly reminiscent of the furious and ultimately fatuous warfare between 'progressives' and 'traditionalists' in education in that country a few decades ago. Judiciousness, foresight, and sobriety in thought, which are particularly to be prized in a time of crisis, all too frequently become the first victims of the crisis itself.

As far as the crisis for religious tradition in education is concerned, perhaps the greatest danger lies in the tendency to conceive of the enterprise of education as a determined battle for the minds and hearts of the young. Many might argue that this tendency has never quite been overcome in Ireland. Some may indeed claim that it is not a tendency which *should* be overcome. A contemporary thesis suggests that it is a tendency which has lately reasserted itself with some force, against the spirit of Vatican II, and is even now seeking a controlling interest, particularly in Roman Catholic educational circles. Whatever about the prevalence or otherwise of this tendency, its underlying assumptions are of central importance

5. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

to our title and call directly for scrutiny here.

A concept of religious tradition which understands its educational purpose primarily in terms of the winning of adherents to the doctrines of a particular denomination is, from an educational viewpoint, a problematic one, and not merely because of the practical difficulties which it lays in its own path. More fundamentally, an attitude of spiritual proprietorship and an emphasis on possession of the religious sensibilities of others have characteristically been evident as central presuppositions of this concept – and not least in the educational history of our own country in the last century-and-a-half. Presuppositions of this kind, however, reveal an impoverished understanding both of the nature of educational experience and of the *educational significance of tradition*. Let us now examine these two points in turn.

Whatever one may think of Martin Buber's work from the strict standpoint of critical philosophy, the depth of his concern for religious tradition can hardly escape any of his readers. But it is precisely Buber, in his distinguished essay 'The Education of Character', who argues that, as soon as pupils feel that a teacher is attempting to win them to a particular viewpoint, the teacher will be resisted, and often by those who show the most promise for a rich engagement with tradition.⁶ Many people who have a strong commitment to a particular tradition tend to part company with Buber on this point, or feel suddenly let down by him, or that he has disappointingly side-stepped the issue. But unless the reasons for these kinds of reactions are themselves placed under critical scrutiny, the insight in Buber's argument (which concerns the nature of educational experience) may well be mistaken for some kind of pedagogical trick.

If Buber's concern were merely a practical, or methodical one of overcoming difficulties in a classroom in order to make way for a more subtle attack by the teacher on the pupils' sensibilities, perhaps one could then take issue with him for inconsistencies in the thrust of his work. Clearly, however, this is not the case, since Buber's chief efforts are concerned with *a reappraisal of our self-understanding in our world of involvements, and with the manner in which this understanding might most fruitfully be brought into relation – with others, with tradition etc.*⁷ The quality of this

6. Martin Buber, 'The Education of Character' in *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (Fontana, 1969), p. 133.

7. This point emerges clearly not only in the work cited in the previous reference, but also for instance in his *Ich und Du*, translated as *I and Thou* by Walter Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), and in *The Knowledge of Man*, a collection of Buber's essays edited by Maurice Friedman (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965).

bringing-into-relation, which is never something established, but must continually be re-attempted, is precisely what should concern us when we think on the nature of educational experience.

These initial remarks on the nature of educational experience raise now the second point mentioned above, namely, the educational significance of tradition; or more explicitly, the appropriate bringing-into-relation of tradition on the one hand and educational experience on the other. To suggest, as I should like to do here, that this bringing-into-relation is at heart a dialogue, is, however, to risk being seriously misunderstood. In a recent issue of this journal (November 1984) I ventured this suggestion in a preliminary way in an essay on 'Ethos in Schools'. In that essay I argued that the chief characteristic of dialogue was that it was a *disciplined, enduring disposition in one's heart and in one's outlook* (p. 701). I have added the emphasis this time because it is only when we focus our attention on dialogue as a *disposition*, that we begin to perceive tradition itself in a way which has an unforeseen vitality for education. This sharpening of attention also enables us to see that dialogue as a disposition challenges and runs much deeper than the more usual conceptions of dialogue, which characteristically see it mainly as a method.

(3) DIALOGUE AS A DISPOSITION

An outline – however brief – of dialogue as a disposition is called for here, in order to emphasize its distinctiveness and, it is hoped, to preserve it from any confusion with dialogue as a method. Wherever we hold a concept of dialogue as a method its importance will always – and not surprisingly – be ancillary to the matter or content or principle or goal under consideration. This point emerges clearly, I think, from the argument made by Maurice Curtin in his comment on my 'Ethos' essay (see *The Furrow*, February 1985, pp. 121-122) and for whose thoughts I am grateful, not least because they give sharper focus to the question which must be thought through.

Now, let us take stock of how we stand. For as long as we continue to view dialogue primarily as a method, or a useful strategy, the very notion of dialogue *as an enduring disposition in one's self-understanding* will seem curiously incomplete, perhaps even vacuous. Hence it is now to the historical, or *human* Socrates – as distinct from the Platonic Socrates – that we must chiefly go for some clues into the nature of dialogue as a disposition. Unfortunately, we lack a completely reliable picture of the historical Socrates; – the characterizations of Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, and later that of Kierkegaard, presenting in various

degrees their own insights *and* difficulties. From a reflective study of such sources, nevertheless, it is possible to suggest with some degree of accuracy, the following characterization of a Socratic disposition.

- (i) a sustained, alert, listening to the viewpoints or orientations of others;
- (ii) a disciplined noting of, clarification of, and reflection upon these viewpoints and their likely presuppositions;
- (iii) a commitment to a rational interplay of these viewpoints *and* presuppositions, seeking mutual enlightenment, and ultimately, the *ideal* of objective agreement;
- (iv) a continual critical review of one's own standpoint or orientation.

To take these four characteristics merely as guidelines for civilized debate, and thus to understand them primarily in the context of a method, is to lose sight of their proper significance. This deeper significance begins to come to light only when we notice that each one of these characteristics issues a challenge to our more customary ways of regarding and comporting ourselves. In other words, each of the four, represents in its own way, an attempted response to the Socratic injunction. Taken together, moreover, they signify a decisive shift in our self-understanding, particularly if this self-understanding has previously been marked by partisanship in orientation, or by more subdued kinds of dogmatic allegiance. Most importantly perhaps, dialogue as a disposition becomes properly intelligible only when one becomes aware that it presupposes a profound, enduring, fraternal faith. Such a faith, far from being something vacuous, can now be seen as a very practical matter, and seen moreover as the condition of possibility of characteristics such as the four listed above. Where such a faith is sincerely practised as a discipline, it builds its own ethos – a fraternal ethos, universal in its thrust; an ethos which can properly be called educational.

(4) RELIGIOUS TRADITION AND DIALOGUE AS A DISPOSITION

The question which poses itself at this point is: can religious tradition be brought into relation with the experience of pupils in such a manner that it sets under way a dialogue, in the sense described above? I suspect that many would answer a straight 'no' to this question and perhaps others might still regard such an effort as undesirable. In my own attempt to think through these two possible answers to the question posed, I shall also be attempting to show some practical ways in which the question might be given an enduring, affirmative answer.

First, in response to the viewpoint which holds that religious tradition should not be subjected to the critical rigours of dialogue, but should instead be instilled in the young in its confessional orthodoxy, one can recall our earlier argument, that any tradition which claims rights of proprietorship on the young, or on any group of people, discloses its own short-comings as an *educational* viewpoint. Indeed it is difficult to see how such a viewpoint can escape the charge of indoctrination. The inculcation of orthodoxy, insofar as it is accorded priority in the teaching of religion, almost invariably leads to an arrested development, or a disfigurement, of religious sensibility. That is not to say that people will thereby grow up irreligious. Perhaps some who rebel against the orthodoxy may, but for the rest, the probability persists that legalism or zealotry or brittleness or perfunctoriness, in religious matters will variously take the place of a more sustained engagement with the deeper wealth of religious tradition. The widespread absence of this deeper engagement in today's world should give serious pause to any renaissance of custodial orthodoxy. Let us recall that the default of God is a human and a historical event. Its origins are not unconnected with an Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment suspicion of ecclesiastical power, nor unconnected with what has been historically perceived as an ecclesiastical interest in domination.

Second, the argument which holds that it is simply not possible in practice to make religious education an event of dialogue, particularly where younger pupils are concerned, is an argument which seems at first sight to carry weight. When dialogue is viewed as a method, moreover, this argument gains added weight. By contrast, however, the teacher whose own relation to religious tradition is disciplined by the *disposition* of dialogue, is a teacher who is concerned not so much with the outward appearance of question and answer in a classroom. More fundamentally, such a teacher is concerned with the bringing-into-relation of young people with the stories, allegories, beliefs, practices, ideals etc. which reside in religious tradition. The quality of the teacher's *presence* therefore, will deeply influence the attitude to religious tradition which is gradually taken up by pupils, e.g. imaginative or doctrinaire or acquiescent or exploratory or pietistic or sectarian or fraternal, and so on. The presence of teacher and pupils together is never a neutral event. It always *brings into being* its own ethos, and the attitude taken towards religious tradition by the pupils, even the youngest pupils, will be closely associated with the quality of this ethos.

The first two characteristics of dialogue we described as listening and noting. Extended periods of silence on either side may

therefore be more important than ceaseless verbal interchange, if dialogue is properly to happen. The teacher who listens in a disciplined, critical way to his or her pupils; whose alertness discerns precisely what is noteworthy about their circumstances and deeper needs; the teacher who listens again to religious tradition *in the light of what has thus been noted*; this teacher reaches nearer to the 'presencing of the divine' than any custodial concern for orthodoxy in belief or behaviour could realistically hope to do. Probing this point a little deeper, we become aware that the judicious gathering of 'what has been' – whether in the preaching of Jesus, in prophetic Judaism or in any other religious tradition – the intelligent bringing-to-presence for the pupils of what has thus been gathered; all of this rests primarily on the quality of the teacher's presence. Its precondition, on the teacher's part, is a self-understanding which follows the path of an alert engagement with tradition, rather than an acquiescent or servile attitude towards tradition. The disposition which is dialogue, continually endeavours to make this engagement a regular and valued event for the pupils, and sees in this event the possibility of opening the way towards the more profound and enduring of intimations. Hence the various voices of tradition seek to make their address through the agency of teachers. But the crucial point here is that this is never any simple 'transmission of values'. Rather, the voices of tradition become critically engaged, or else become reified or distorted, depending on the event or non-event of dialogue.

The engagement we have described is thus an authentic responding, and in practice this means a responding to the particular tradition which is addressing us at the present moment of our experience – for instance a Christian or a Jewish or a Hindu tradition. More particularly, in schools and colleges, there may be a sustained engagement with a Roman Catholic or an Anglican or a Presbyterian tradition, within the broader tradition of Christianity. Inevitably then, the questions of confessional differences and orthodoxies will repeatedly arise during the interplay which the responding to tradition, properly undertaken, sets under way. What is important however is that these questions will now arise in a quite different context from the one in which they would arise if the inculcation of confessional orthodoxy were made the governing purpose of the teacher's work. Comparisons with other traditions, and therefore some exploration of other traditions, will moreover inevitably suggest themselves here.

The critical context within which confessional orthodoxies are now studied does not, however, imply an attitude of dismissiveness towards such orthodoxies. The fraternal faith which a disposition

of dialogue *attempts to exemplify in its own practice*, discerns readily enough, and discerns with sympathy, the intention of integrity which orthodoxy holds before itself. Dialogue retains a critical eye, nevertheless, for any tendency of orthodoxy to pass over into divisiveness, or to overemphasize custodianship, and thus to violate the deeper faith which is the foundation or the enabling condition of dialogue itself.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, we must limit ourselves here to a few remarks of a more general kind on dialogue and religious tradition. Firstly, the conception of dialogue as a disposition, which we have been examining, cannot in any justifiable sense be described as either 'liberal' or 'conservative'. This disposition, as a critical, disciplined, self-questioning engagement of the call made upon us by various traditions, is not of course neutral. Rather, its precondition is a profound, categorical faith. This faith becomes disfigured, even caricatured, if one attempts to locate it in any ideological spectrum of Left/Right. The thinking which views itself in this latter neighbourhood is simply of a different order. It is the *categorical* character of the faith of dialogue which makes it immediately self-questioning as soon as it discovers that it has become almost at home in one or other 'ism'.

Secondly, this categorical, and therefore demanding, nature of the discipline of dialogue, might lead one to conclude that it is too 'idealistic' or 'impractical' to expect any widespread acceptance in schools. This objection has a plausibility which must be seriously considered. Very many schools *are* bureaucratic places, given more to acquiescing in the face of pressures of various kinds than to the discipline of dialogue or the ethos which it engenders. The worldly-wise tend to remain sceptical of dialogue, or even suspicious, where dialogue is a disposition or basic orientation in outlook. Insofar as this objection is made by school managements, or teachers, who profess a concern for religious tradition, it seems to issue from a wisdom which remains curiously unaware of the default of God, despite repeated evidence of this default in the daily work of present-day schools.⁸ Indeed religious tradition is finally rendered irrelevant only where the default of God is no longer discerned as a default.

Finally, the bringing-into-relation of religious tradition and the

8. I am here thinking mainly of the phenomenal extent of acquisitiveness and competitiveness among schoolgoers at present, particularly at post-primary level. This is not so much an anti-religious phenomenon as a non-religious one.

experience of young people in a highly pressurized and technologically potent world, is work which demands substantial originality and resourcefulness on the part of teachers. Those who sincerely participate in this work sometimes find that the circumstances attending their efforts are so difficult that the place of recommended textbooks must be minimized, and, more than occasionally, that the recommended material, because of its difficulty or 'irrelevance', must be radically recast in its presentation if a *serious and sustained* engagement with religious tradition is to be brought about. If such teachers seem to be a minority who are out-of-step at present we can expect that in the years ahead they will increasingly emerge as a notable community. Such a community needs particular encouragement and support from Church authorities, from school managements, and in a special way, from centres of teacher education (e.g. arranging in-service courses and regular meetings). Teachers of religion show no great general optimism at present that such support will be forthcoming from religious and school authorities. Indeed within the last few years in the Republic a suspicion – and even a debilitating mistrust – of Roman Catholic authorities is increasingly evident among younger teachers generally. Considerable ambiguity and uncertainty about the thinking and future courses of action of religious authorities and teachers' representative bodies prevail at present, so it is difficult to judge the extent to which this suspicion is justified or misplaced. Teachers' unions, many religious authorities might claim, are suspicious to the point of paranoia. Some religious and school authorities may, for their part, still be suspicious of the disposition of dialogue, as sketched in this essay. To remain so, however, or to exact instead a public 'toe-the-line' submission from teachers in matters religious, may well be to invite in time – albeit unwittingly – that final extinguishing of divine radiance about which the philosopher speaks, but which ultimately touches all of us.