

BOOK REVIEW

Critical Religious Education, Multiculturalism and the Pursuit of Truth.

Andrew Wright, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2007. Pp. xii+256. Hbk. £65, \$85.

Andrew Wright has undertaken a theoretical study that ‘focuses on the teaching of religion in community schools in England and Wales’ (p. 3). It is first of all relevant to present and future teachers in the secondary school, but its argumentation against what is called ‘comprehensive liberalism’ has general interest in the debate about religions and worldviews in all societies that want to be liberal and democratic.

The first part of the book outlines the task of religious education as empowering pupils to search for truth and to live a truthful life based on the-ultimate-order-of-things. The teaching should ‘empower pupils to pursue truth in an informed and critical manner’ (p. 7), and ‘enable pupils to grapple with disputed claims about the ultimate order-of-things and orientate their lives appropriately in response to their emergent understanding’ (p. 200). As we live in a plural society, the best framework for this search seems to be a kind of political liberalism where the state should make it possible for *all* citizens to ‘live rational lives and pursue the good life’ (p. 45).

In the second part Wright presents case studies of education in Hebrew, Hellenic and Christian antiquity, where all traditions combine the search for truth with the cultivation of wisdom and character; he tells the story of liberal religious education in England and Wales after 1970 as an ‘eclipse of concerns for truth and truthfulness’ (p. 4), and he ‘defends a form of critical religious education that, without losing sight of the virtues of freedom and tolerance, seeks to rehabilitate the pursuit of ultimate truth and reunite it with the cultivation of truthful living’ (p. 104).

The third part develops four perspectives that a critical religious education may use. Through the *ontological* perspective, discrete religious traditions like ‘Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, etc.’ (p. 141) appear as ‘the primary bearers’ (p. 140) of different ‘realistic accounts of transcendent reality’ (p. 132), combining belief and practice. Through the *semantic* perspective a critical religious education focuses on the language employed by religious believers and by adherents of secular traditions. It is important to study the metaphors and stories that people ‘live by’ (p. 171). Through the *hermeneutic* perspective critical religious education is seen as a dialogue between the present horizon of understanding of the pupil and what is at the heart of different traditions (p. 203). Through the *epistemological* perspective a critical religious understanding ‘does not seek definitive proof but reasoned and responsible judgement between conflicting truth claims’ (p. 235). Truth claims are strengthened when they are congruent with experiences,

coherent, fertile, simple, and containing ‘an illuminatory depth of insight’ (p. 224).

The fourth part presents pedagogical principles based on Ference Marton’s phenomenography. With background in research from Finland on pupils’ understanding of Lutheranism, the principles are applied to an imagined example in the lower secondary school: a study of ‘the creation myth in the first chapter of Genesis’ (p. 255). In the light of stories with literal and non-literal truth claims, the students explore creationist, orthodox Christian and atheist truth claims. While creationism is rejected, the two other positions see the Genesis myth either as complementary or redundant to an account of Big Bang and evolution. ‘One of the key spiritual questions that pupils must ask is whether they live in a purposeful universe created by a gracious and loving God, or in a world driven by impersonal natural forces’ (p. 259). The students learn that both positions may be held by rational people.

The book’s vision of a critical religious education has a multicultural context. There ‘is no consensus about either truth or truthfulness’ (p. 25). Wright’s understanding of truth is indebted to Roy Bhaskar and ‘the philosophy of critical realism’ (p. 8). A differentiation is made between objects that are and objects that are not dependent on human action. The intransitive reality is independent of our attempt to understand it. But our knowledge of this reality is transitive—dependent on our particular language, tradition and choices. The task, then, is to make rational (informed and critical) judgments about the relationship between our ‘transitive epistemic truth claims and the intransitive ontological reality they seek to engage with’ (p. 13).

With reference to Bernard Williams, Wright argues for a conception of truthfulness as an attempt to live a truthful life, i.e. a life embracing ‘the need to find out the truth, to hold on to it, and to tell it—in particular, to oneself’ (p. 17). According to Wright, this truth claim is central in what he calls ‘comprehensive liberalism’. He describes this as a worldview which contends that ‘the autonomous person constitutes the ultimate source of meaning in the world’ (p. 41). Comprehensive liberalism therefore advocates ‘a liberal morality’ (p. 40); for instance that ‘individuals should be free to express their sexuality in whatever way they wish, provided they do not harm others in the process’ (p. 34). The good life for human beings is seen as ‘to be free from coercion and hence free for the task of striving to satisfy personal desires and aspirations, whatever these may be’ (p. 47). This worldview ‘places individual human beings at the centre of the cosmos and invites them to construct their own systems of meaning and value’ (p. 3). However, this is only one of the answers to the question about ultimate reality. In pursuit of truth, this view of the ultimate order-of-things therefore has to be discussed in an informed and critical manner.

This can be done within the framework of ‘political liberalism’ in the tradition of John Locke. As a common framework for debate in a plural society, the function of political liberalism is ‘to enable adherents of various religious and secular traditions to pursue contested visions of the good life in an atmosphere of mutual respect and support’ (p. 51). Locke

thought it 'permissible to hold beliefs that were not demonstrable by reason'. However, 'there was to be no place for beliefs that conflict with the canons of reason', and 'it was illegitimate to hold beliefs that might harm others or threatened the stability of society' (p. 42). Political liberalism rejects totalitarianism (p. 29) and fanaticism (p. 42). The principles are actualised by 'the publication in Denmark of blasphemous cartoons of the prophet Mohammed' (p. 50). In this case 'most would agree that the issuing of death threats is intolerable, others would go further and argue that the orchestrated insulting of a religious community in the name of free speech is similarly reprehensible' (pp. 50-51).

Comprehensive liberalist religious education is described by Wright as three strategies to cope with 'the fact that different religious and secular traditions offer mutually exclusive accounts of the ultimate order-of-things' (p. 90). The first strategy treats particular religious traditions either as 'local manifestations' of a universal phenomenon or as constructions of individuals (pp. 90-91); the second implies a shift of focus from the study of 'doctrinal differences' to the study of 'cultural practices' (p. 91); the third strategy sees religion primarily as 'a modification of feeling' (p. 92). Wright believes that these strategies have helped comprehensive liberals to avoid direct confrontation with, and rational judgement of, the different mutually exclusive truth claims. By not 'confronting the possibility that one or other religious or secular worldview might actually be true' (p. 93), learning about religion is reduced 'to a neutral process incapable of having any direct impact on the lives of pupils' (p. 93). This reinforces the tendency to focus on truthfulness isolated from truth—'truthfulness perceived as the self-realization and self-expression of autonomous individuals' (p. 103). When the presuppositions of comprehensive liberalism are unexamined, the basic values of liberalism, freedom and tolerance—now seen as ends in themselves, as 'constitutive of the good life itself' (p. 33)—may be transferred uncritically to the pupils.

Comprehensive liberalism is in reality, Wright argues, one of the contested worldviews. The pretence of neutrality is addressed by Lesslie Newbigin: If critical thinking 'is an activity in which, on the basis of one set of beliefs (A) you examine another set of beliefs (B)', it follows that it is impossible to think critically 'except on the basis of some way of understanding experience which is (for the moment) assumed' (p. 99). Therefore 'liberal religious education needs to acknowledge its given values, commitments and presuppositions' (p. 99). Instead of 'simply inducting pupils into the liberal norms', it should teach religion 'in the context of . . . a real passion for truth' (p. 99). Trevor Cooling responds to John Hull's contention that philosophy 'rooted in rationality' is 'common to all people and, therefore, more basic than optional ways of life, such as the religious' (p. 101). Cooling questions the universality of philosophy: It 'is always contextual, never independent of specific cultures and beliefs, and as such necessarily committed to a range of prior presuppositions and value judgements' (p. 102). How can a philosophy that is subject to ideological influence 'have an independent, universally applicable rationality' (p. 102)?

Wright wants a religious education in community schools based neither in confessionalism nor in comprehensive liberalism. Though he has no references to David Carr's articles on religious education in this journal (Carr, 1994; Carr, 1996; Carr, 2007), like him, Wright wants to avoid pragmatist and relativist positions. Wright's thinking and practical examples are focused on secondary education and on common school education. He does not discuss parental responsibility and rights in education and he seems to think that parental rights can be safeguarded through private faith schools (p. 115). This is not the case in primary education. In Norway, where I live, there are many small communities where there cannot be more than one school. Wright recognises and appreciates 'the prepositions pupils bring with to the classroom'—their 'prejudices, beliefs and worldviews'—assuming that 'such presuppositions may be implicit or incoherent' (p. 201). But the question of how a child's 'horizon of meaning' (p. 203) is constituted from the very beginning is not addressed. How can parents and other educators find a good balance between 'openness' and 'rootedness' (Alexander and McLaughlin, 2003) in the broad context of upbringing and in primary education?

With principles developed by Marton, Wright sketches, what in the Nordic countries would have been called, a 'pedagogic' of critical religious education. The concept 'pedagogic' expresses better than 'pedagogy' the emphasis on theoretical underpinning. This 'pedagogic' ought to be critical to phenomenography as well. It seems to me that phenomenography studies the child's readiness for learning only from the perspective of what the teacher and the society *want* the children to learn (pp. 242–243).

I will briefly mention some other philosophical problems, which need more space than a book review admits. Wright contends that Aristotle's concept of practical judgment follows the tradition of Plato, where judgments are 'dependent on knowledge of the ultimate order-of-things' (p. 72). This is disputed by Pierre Aubenque (1986). And the presentation of philosophical hermeneutics as a perspective that comes in addition to ontological, semantic and epistemological perspectives, eclipses the fact that *Truth and Method* is an ontology—an understanding of being that is more fundamental than epistemology. Leaning on Habermas, Wright criticises Gadamer for not being aware of ideological distortion and 'the possibility that one or other horizon of meaning might be irredeemably mistaken' (p. 189). Closer reading of Gadamer could redeem this mistake. Gadamer (1979, p. 262) advocates a secondary psychological or historical 'understanding' of another's meaning, when the initial 'attempt to accept what he has said as true fails'. Alan How has studied this debate and 'finds Gadamer's hermeneutics well equipped to stand up to the criticisms levelled against it' (How, 1995, p. 225).

Andrew Wright's book is (with some exceptions) well organised and well written. It bridges the gap between theological and philosophical truth seeking, showing that all truth seekers are faced with some of the same challenges: to give true answers to questions about the invisible

ultimate order-of-things, to live by these truths, to defend these truths, to be open for possible truth in the answers of others and to risk personal transformation.

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