

Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning Conference

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What Prevents Christian Churches from Learning?

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Those of you who have any familiarity with the rather sparse British literature on adult Christian education will find my title more than vaguely familiar. The rest of you, perhaps, may welcome a clue from the early redactions of the programme for this conference, which advertised this topic above the name of the Emeritus Professor of Religious Education in the University of Birmingham, one John Hull, who was the author of *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (1985).

No one regrets more than I do that John was in the end unable to join us at this conference. I am, however, deeply conscious of the honour of being the next best thing to John Hull – unless, of course, as is likely, I am in fact the twenty-third next best thing.

Unfortunately, I do not know what John would have said this morning under this title, but I am confident that these are the kind of questions that Paul Murray would have wanted him to address:

Here the question is . . . what prevents Christian churches from learning?

What are the organizational, psychological, sociological and cultural bars to

effective receptive learning taking place and how might these debilitating factors best be negotiated and navigated?

(Murray, 2008a, p. 37)

Now when the fictional civil servant Sir Humphrey Appleby, from the TV series *Yes Prime Minister*, was presented by a set of similar detailed and demanding questions framed by the Prime Minister's political adviser, he responded – through gritted teeth – with words I should like to make my own: 'These are *good* questions. *Very good questions.*'

Unfortunately . . .

Building on the Hull

I wonder if John Hull's original book can point us to any sort of answer?

Hull identifies there what he regards as the pathological condition of the 'unlearning religious person', the adult Christian who is resistant to the change of learning.

The word 'change' is key, for learning is invariably defined as a change: most broadly, by psychologists, as 'a change in human disposition or capability, which persists over a period of time' and which is not simply the result of processes of growth or development (Gagné, 1977, p. 3).

This definition is wide enough to cover not only the acquisition of beliefs, but also changes in attitudes, values and interests; and in intellectual and motor skills. Although philosophers of education mainly concentrate on the cognitive outcomes of learning, as Hull himself does; in the context of Christian learning we must recognize along with these cognitive elements more *affective* states, including dispositions to act

and experience in particular Christian (or Jewish) ways. In this context we do need, as Peter Ochs put it yesterday, ‘to repair our over-focus on the cognitive’.

Hull claims that many adults are hindered in their Christian learning by a fear of it. This may be specifically focused as a fear that the cognitive content of Christianity, if explored in an adult reflective way, will be found to be wanting; or it may be a more general concern that thinking about the faith will involve too painful a change in the learner’s Sunday School beliefs. (In David Ford’s words, people ‘have to have their faith in line with their education’.) Such pain and distress, we may note, are things people feel. Acknowledging this, Hull’s book draws on accounts in the psychology of belief, such as George Kelly’s personal construct theory and Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance, to characterize our natural ‘need to be right’ and our resistance to ‘the pain of learning’.

Although his analysis deals mainly with the individual learner, Hull rehearses several games that churches play to avoid the changes that new learning would bring (Hull, 1985, pp. 117–143). His list incorporates such extreme ploys as intellectual, social or psychological separation from the world and its beliefs, and an uncritical respect for authority; but it also gives some more ordinary examples, including:

- *a spirituality of passivity*, where churchgoing leads to dreamy rumination rather than ‘contact with the dreaded belief system’;
- *mission* that is engaged in as a compensatory technique for avoiding the dissonance of doubt, by enthusiastically drawing in other converts (a technique sometimes practised by those married folk who encourage others to seek a commitment that they themselves are finding very uncomfortable); and
- *distractions* away from Christian beliefs towards ‘Christian’ fellowship, drama – or table tennis.

Perhaps similar techniques are sometimes used to avoid the pain of ecumenical learning?

But we need to dig deeper . . .

Critical Openness

Hull, as I say, concentrates on beliefs. Hence his therapy for unlearning is a form of Christian learning that involves what he calls *Christian criticism*, where an element of critical Christian education accompanies the formative educational processes. This, he argues, should enable people to reinterpret – he says, ‘re-ideologize’ – their Christian belief system, the better to fit their current, grown-up needs. We have here an extension of Hull’s call, taken up by two influential publications of the British Council of Churches in the 1970s and 1980s, for an element of *critical openness* within Christian nurture. In Hull’s analysis, critical openness is not only an educational outcome, expressed in terms of some form of interdependent qualified autonomy and a ‘critical, testing attitude’; it is also a proper feature of Christian educational processes themselves.

Now, it is perhaps not very helpful to say that churches should be more open than they are to ecumenical learning. Openness is, indeed, one of those ‘hurrah’ words, at least in liberal education circles. Such unbridled enthusiasm is not really my style, and especially not here. I fear that too much evaluative shouting encourages a black-and-white distinction between openness-and-closedness, whether in individual minds or in the activities of churches. (I believe, by the way, that the indoctrination criticism, which is so often triumphantly applied to the teaching of religion, can just as easily undermine the passing on of fundamental principles and concepts in morality, the natural sciences, and commonsense living.)

But openness is clearly a virtue – just look at its connotations. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* lists the following, among others, under the adjective ‘open’:

- 1 allowing access, passage, or view; not closed, fastened, or restricted.
- 2 exposed to the air or to view or attack; . . . ➤ (**open to**) vulnerable or subject to.
- 3 spread out or unfolded . . .
- 4 admitting customers or visitors; available for business. ➤ freely available or accessible. . . .
- 5 frank and communicative. ➤ not concealed; manifest. ➤ welcoming public discussion, criticism, and enquiry. . . .
- 6 (of a matter) not finally settled. ➤ (often **open to**) receptive to new ideas. . . .

Openness is clearly a virtue; until it isn’t. In the words of our local philosopher, the Blessed Mary Midgley, ‘Opening windows is a healthy habit, but it is not much use when you are lost in a snowstorm’ (Midgley, 1983, p. 13).

So Hull’s phrase is a qualified one. He advocates *critical* openness – that is, an openness constrained by the proper limitations of a proper judgement. And that isn’t the same as openness to every whim or idea, which is the way that madness lies: including the madness of the toleration of intolerance, and the teaching of the healing power of crystals or the claim that the earth may plausibly be said to be only a few thousand years old.

So much, so obvious. But how far does it get us? The real work is yet to be done and will remain deeply contentious, not least between different forms of Christian believing.

This time it's personal

But openness should never be taken merely, even primarily, as a cognitive stratagem. It is, as the dictionary shows, essentially a property of personal activity. Openness is best construed in human, relational terms.

For my money, we intellectualize too quickly, and – in a narrow sense – we *theologize* too quickly, in our ecumenical reflection. Let me quote some comments made by others in this conference. ‘We are concerned with the *disposition* to transformational learning’, ‘We all need help from others’, ‘What are the deep instincts behind the grammar of doctrine?’, ‘Receptive Ecumenism *is* an intellectual exercise, but it is also deeply rooted in love, in dispossessive love.’ We would do well not to stray too far from such personal language.

Hospitality

In the volume *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, Philip Sheldrake – late of this parish, as so many are – took up the theme of hospitality, distinguishing it from assimilation (in Murray, 2008b, pp. 55–9, cf. pp. 12, 16). At this conference yesterday, David Pascoe spoke eloquently of a ‘hospitality grounded in humility as a foundation for inter-ecclesial learning’. And David Ford has also spoken here of the importance of ‘mutual hospitality’.

Much recent theological writing would endorse this theme of a call to enter into relationship with, and even to accommodate, those who are different (Bretherton,

2004, 2006). We may note, for example, attempts to understand hospitality as the context and the other side of Christian ‘embassy’ (for example, in the Anglican report, *Generous Love*); and even to view the religious education classroom as constituting a home, where ‘the teacher as host bears the responsibility of welcoming students together with the various religious and secular traditions they represent’: a situation with mutual duties and responsibilities (Wright, 2007, p. 74).

Openness is surely an integral component of this hospitality.

Friendliness

Openness is also a central dimension of what the Canadian philosopher, Donald Evans, calls the ‘attitude-virtue’ of *friendliness*, which he regards both as an intrinsic value and as a deeply fulfilling stance for living (Evans, 1979).

We know, of course, that there is a grave danger of encouraging children to be wholly and uncritically open, hospitable or friendly. But we have yet to learn (as I fear we will) what a whirlwind our society will reap from our indiscriminately encouraging the young to see a danger in any and every stranger. Churches, like children, need to work out the limits of the openness of their embrace; but we all need something more of the very young child’s expectant, hopeful smile.

It is surely a big mistake, as John Drury used to say (Drury, 1972, pp. 40–41), to go and buy up the entire contents of the junkshop that is the church – or, indeed, of the junkshops that are the different churches. But if we grumpily stalk past, refusing to enter, we may entirely miss the chance of spotting the pearl of great price, hidden away in their darkest corners.

John Hull viewed unlearning adult Christians as standing in need of therapy. I know that we should be cautious of an over-therapeutic approach to life and

relationships, where the bottom line is the relativism of the counsellor and the hard edge of the concept of truth has softened to soggy uselessness. But I earnestly believe that education is deeply therapeutic, even in its most cognitive forms. It helps people to sort their ideas out and address their confusions, and to develop the courage to criticize their own beliefs and hear the challenges of others. All this cognitive activity is also therefore a form of pastoral ministry, a species of caring. So, and in another way, it has an affective dimension. Helping people to learn is a holy calling; it is a sacramental ministry that opens them to the educative grace of God.

The practices of churches express their postures, their dispositional stances. They constitute their ways of ‘leaning into life’ and ‘moving into the force field of life’, in the language of practical theologian James Fowler (Fowler, 1981, p. 4; cf. Astley, 1991, p. 3), language that is echoed by Murray (2008a, p. 36). Sometimes that stance, that posture, can be too closed-in, too hunkered down; not ‘open’ at all. But often, at least in part, this is because churches have hurt one another in the past. Perhaps a church has tried to be open, hospitable and friendly, and has been rebuffed, scorned – even jilted. We all hope that churches who now feel like this may come to open themselves sufficiently to the alien, other tradition so that they may begin to learn from it. But it is natural to say that this may need ‘a change of heart’; that they will have to ‘find it in their hearts’ to do this learning. They will need to be ‘redisposed’ to attempt it.

I don’t mean to underestimate the significance of the theoretical, and certainly not of truly theological concerns. But we are being foolish if we think that those elements are without an affective and practical penumbra and context. Doctrine, of course, is never just theory or abstract metaphysics, even in ecumenical debate; it comes to us as affect-laden, and causes a response in us that is essentially affect-

driven. And it does this in the midst of life – in the course of the practice of our living. Or it does not do it at all.

Teaching

The anecdotal and research evidence from secular education shows us that teachers can make a spectacular difference to how learners view the alien other of a subject. Much of this is expressed in affective language. Here, for example, is Sharon, who fell in love with maths:

I had a teacher who *loved* algebra, and made me feel it meant the world to him that I could love it too. . . . (Day, 1999, p. 26)

Is this too soppy perhaps? A bit risky? After all, Martin Buber, in his great essay on education, warned of the need for *asceticism* in teaching. But he insisted, too, that the true teacher is motivated by a proper, self-giving love:

[T]he modern educator finds his pupil there before him. He enters the school-room for the first time, he sees them crouching at the desks, indiscriminately flung together, the misshapen and the well-proportioned, animal faces, empty faces, and noble faces in indiscriminate confusion, like the presence of the created universe; the glance of the educator accepts and receives them all. He is assuredly no descendant of the Greek gods, who kidnapped those they loved. But he seems to me to be a representative of the true God. (Buber, 1947, p. 94)

However, if this ‘inclusive eros’, this *agapé*, is too extreme a form of love, perhaps we should return to friendship as a better, more manageable model. The writer on education, Parker Palmer, would have the teacher introduce her subject as one would a friend:

The students must know why the teacher values the subject, how the subject has transformed the teacher’s life. By the same token, the teacher must value the students as potential friends. . . . If I am invited into a valued friendship between two people, I will not enter in unless I feel that I am valued as well. (Palmer, 1993, p. 104)

I think this is a powerful metaphor, one that captures the best elements in the themes of openness and hospitality. I also note that making friends, unlike a generalized attitude of ‘friendliness’, is a properly discriminating thing. However friendly we are, we shall only have a few *real* friends. Hence it is even more of a gift if we say to another, ‘Here, come and meet my friend. Let me share him with you.’

Ecumenism needs teachers

In ecumenical relationships, we need such teachers. They may not be known by that name, but they will perform the role of real teachers – true facilitators of our learning.

We do not need, in the same way or as much, the big names, the charismatic personalities, the powerful leaders. I despair at the extent to which some churches have privileged visible, high profile *leadership* over the more hidden forms and works of ministry. Good teachers are Baptist figures, decreasing that another may increase. They are not, on the whole, authority figures in an authoritarian sense. Yet they may

be perceived as authorities: as people who know something, have some wisdom, some experience to share. And as such they can be true promoters, true ‘authors’ of a wider truth and a power beyond themselves: a truth and a power that has now touched – and in that sense ‘belongs to’ – the learner.

The ecumenical teacher can overcome the hurt of a learning church by gently introducing, or re-introducing, the alien stranger, in the confidence that this friendship is one to share. ‘I know you had a bad experience with him once before; but, honestly, I *know* you could get on. He is my friend, as you are.’

Receptive ecumenism is about learning from other churches. This involves at some point taking them seriously. That is more than respect; but respect is a good stance with which to start. And listening is a good marker of respect (cf. Astley, 2002, pp. 147–8). That is why it is so important in education, because people know when they are really being listened to; never fool yourself that they are fooled when you shut off and shut them out. Educators claim that adults learn best when their experience and ideas are taken up, and learn least when they are ignored.

In his paper yesterday, John Sullivan spoke of the importance of the *tone of voice* for those who would facilitate religious learning:

[T]his is often what opens the door or closes it for the hearers. . . . Teachers know that this is as true for them as it is for preachers. Getting the tone of voice right is a difficult and complex task and it must be admitted one that is not wholly in the control of the speaker, since there are many variables at work influencing how what we say and how we say it is received.

Nevertheless without careful prior listening to those we hope to reach out to,

in education and in evangelisation, we are likely to get the voice wrong in some way. (Sullivan, forthcoming)

There are, I would hazard, few ‘organizational, psychological, sociological and cultural bars to effective receptive learning’ (Murray, 2008, p. 37) that cannot be better transcended – ‘climbed over’ – by people who have the sensitivity to employ the correct tone of voice.

Yes it *is* what you say and do; but it is also the way that you say and do it . . .

Healing hurt

I shouldn’t pretend, however, that churches resist ecumenical learning only because they have been hurt before. Still, the tasks of healing extend more widely than responses to hurts. Sometimes, at the level of the denomination or the congregation, people just don’t fancy the sweat and pain of new learning. They may be particularly unattracted to the task of unlearning what they have now come to recognize as falsehoods and misconceptions that they learned long ago. The sensible teacher will notice these symptoms, and adjust her style appropriately.

Others, of course, do not think that they have anything to learn in the first place; or at least that this other denomination has anything to teach them – anything they need; certainly, nothing they want. These are the really difficult cases; but they must be distinguished from those groups and individuals who have begun to acknowledge their need of learning, yet are simply too embarrassed to ask. In my Institute’s research programme, our ‘ordinary theology’ interviews reveal this as a major obstacle to all sorts of further learning in the church.

And sometimes, of course, people just don't know what they don't know. Adult educators are often encouraged to find out what their students are looking for in embarking on a course of study. This can be an unhelpful tactic, if the learner does not yet know what there is to know about. With any luck, the teachers *will* know. In ecumenical matters, those who can best facilitate receptive ecumenism will be those who have themselves learned something valuable from a variety of traditions. What else could motivate such teaching?

In my own Anglican tradition, some congregations and clergy are obviously in need of learning from a wider experience of forms of prayer, worship, theology, and practice. Again, often it is not that they have dismissed these forms. Many are simply ignorant of them, even ignorant that these things exist within their own traditions. I have discovered the hard way how gentle one needs to be with that ignorance: no one enjoys being shown to be so wanting. Therefore I say to people, as it were, 'Have you ever met my friend – the Anglo-Catholic, the Evangelical, the Charismatic, the Liberal?' (Well, perhaps not the last. No one wants to meet liberals.)

If receptive ecumenism has as a primary aim 'promoting growth *within* each of the traditions . . . seeking to promote learning precisely *in face of* and *across* continuing difference' (Murray, 2008a, p. 39), this is something that will come not only as a consequence of learning from other traditions but also by learning from the continuing difference *within* each tradition. I suspect that those churches that are most resistant to learning from other churches may be the ones that are least willing to learn from – perhaps, in some cases, even to see – their own internal plurality. Many, of course, are so resentful of internal differences that they just cannot offer open minds and hearts to other confessions. There may be an element of hurt here too –

‘you strike out violently to those who are easiest to hit’, as someone commented during this conference. Once again, I suppose, we cannot expect too generous a response to difference where people are still hurting from suffering experiences of disrespect or spurned friendship within or across their ecclesiastical boundaries. For these are experiences of the failure of love.

Conclusion

I haven’t had much to say this morning, so it won’t take me long to summarize it. Whether operating inside or between the churches, a critically open ecumenical education will need to be sensitive to the affective dimension of our learning, our life, and our faith. It will therefore need to choose very carefully its tone of voice. Only thus can it lead to a learning that is also a healing of the wounded body of Christ.

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