

EDUCATION AND EVANGELISATION

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[short version for Durham conference]

1. My claim

Education and evangelisation, which we could easily think of as being two quite separate, perhaps even completely contrasting, activities, have some important similarities. It is misleading to treat them as completely distinct, in the sense that, to do one of these is thereby *not* to do the other. Education without evangelisation is incomplete, however valid and valuable. Evangelisation without education is also incomplete, however valid and essential. This view echoes that of Nicholas Lash, who regularly reminds us that Christianity is a life-long educational project, a school of prayer and of wisdom. As he says in his chapter in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ‘We are a people charged unceasingly to seek some understanding of how obedience to the Gospel is to be expressed and realized in the cultural, scientific, economic, and political circumstances of our time’ (Lash, in Murray, 2008, p.72) – a task that necessarily entails linking evangelisation to education.

2. Two Objections

- 2.1. Those **outside** of a religious faith position might well object to my claim that education and evangelisation have many similarities. Evangelisation can appear as a threat to what some see as central features of education. Evangelisation may come across as seeking a premature commitment. It may seem too confident in the truth it advocates. It may appear too judgemental about those who do not accept this truth. It may seem to want to embed people in particularity, in particular practices and communities, in such a way as to trap them, to disable them from a more appropriate universality. It may ask for a surrender of self that is demeaning of human dignity. It may attribute much too much importance to authority (biblical, ecclesial), thereby undermining individual freedom and inviting oppression. It may so prioritise fidelity to tradition that it fails to address contemporary needs and renders itself irrelevant. It may pay insufficient attention to the diversity of views (and situations) and to objections to its teaching, leading to narrow vision, tribalism, sheep-like acceptance, complacency, self-righteous attitudes, condemnation of those who differ and exclusive practices that do not promote human flourishing.

It *can* be the case that education and evangelisation come across as radically different activities, deeply opposed, in spirit and in practice, to one another. However, this does not have to be the case. My view is that education and evangelisation can be mutually reinforcing rather than incompatible, and mutually beneficial rather than hostile to one another.

2.2. From **within** the household of faith, some people have differentiated between evangelisation, catechesis and religious education. Evangelisation is an attempt to convey the Gospel to those who do not know it. It is proclamation of the message of Jesus and about Jesus. It seeks conversion, acceptance and discipleship. In evangelisation people are called out of their previous way of life and evangelists want people to come to know, to love and to accept as their saviour Jesus the Christ, so that their lives can be transformed by following him as the way, the truth and the life. By its nature, the kind of conversion and commitment sought by evangelists requires a rejection of alternative ways of life and it overrides all other affiliations. One's first identity becomes being a child of God, with all that this entails. Catechesis is the sharing of and dialogue about faith between believers, in an attempt to deepen and reinforce this faith so that it becomes mature, more lively, more enthusiastic, better informed, more coherent. Catechesis assumes one is already within a community of faith and has (at least) some rudimentary understanding of this and that one belongs willingly. It assumes evangelisation has taken place, the initial confrontation with the Gospel; it builds on this and seeks to extend one's engagement with the ramifications that flow from discipleship and ecclesial membership. It is an activity for insiders. Religious education tends to focus on literacy about religion, information, concepts; it does not depend on prior commitment; it does not (necessarily) assume membership of any particular faith. Its goal is to promote understanding about religious matters: the stories, scriptures, beliefs, practices, traditions and customs associated with a religion, or, more often in recent years, religions in the plural. Religious education is concerned to promote informed and intelligent thinking about religion rather than fidelity to it. It is led by the norms of education rather than by those of the Gospel, as if these were in some way opposed.

While there is validity in these distinctions, I have never been completely convinced by this differentiation. There are many factors that influence how both education and evangelisation are received, factors that can make a huge difference to the way that the same content is received and they can deeply affect how efforts to evangelise or educate are perceived, regardless of whether ostensibly it is evangelisation, catechesis or religious education that is taking place. Context, personal style, the type of relationships established are all part of these mediating factors. Thus, regardless of the intentions of the person leading the activity (and regardless of the expectations of those employing them) the same activity can be received by one person as evangelisation, by another as catechesis and by another as religious education.

3. How are education and evangelisation similar?

3.1. Education is about how the capacities of human nature are developed, oriented, ordered and integrated in service of what one believes is most important about human beings, the kind of society we want to live in and what we believe to be the good life. These capacities include energy, emotions, intelligence, memory, will and conscience. The best kinds of education have in view the **whole person**, not just a part of him or her. So too, evangelisation aims to bring the whole person to Christ so that people can share in God's life and be renewed and transformed in every part of their being. Neither

education nor evangelisation aim for minor or temporary changes in learners and disciples; ambitiously, they hold in view the whole person and consider that their endeavours are lifelong in duration.

3.2. A second similarity between education and evangelisation is prompted by reflection on **sacraments**. In sacramental theology Christians believe that God is ‘doing’ a similar thing in each of the sacraments, even if there is a difference in the focus of our attention as to which aspect of God’s work is operative at any particular moment. Thus, Christians want to say that God’s creative, redemptive, revelatory, liberating, forgiving, healing, inspiring, feeding, strengthening, consoling work is conveyed in all sacraments, rather than attribute feeding to one, forgiving to another, healing to another, and so forth. I want to suggest education and evangelisation are similar in the way that sacraments are similar. It might help us, in terms of focus and analysis, to break down these two sets of activities, education and evangelisation, into features that differ in some respects; this indeed might help us appreciate better how such activities operate. We also, however, need to look out for what lifts and integrates these ‘details’ into more lofty and enduring goals that make sense of and give purpose to our endeavours. Thus particular activities comprise and contribute to education more generally; similarly, particular acts comprise and contribute to the sacramental perspective more generally.

3.3. Education and evangelisation have in common that in both we are participating in **God’s work**, a work that precedes our proclamation. From a faith perspective, God is already present and his Word is active before we ever enter the scene, eliciting growth, development and response before we plan to give a sermon, to teach a lesson, to embark on either of the two Es which are the focus of this paper. Not only is God active prior to our involvement, but God is also active alongside our efforts, operating in ways unknown to us in the minds and hearts of would-be disciples and potential students, as well as in us. God continues to be present and active, inscrutably for us, long after we have left the scene.

3.4. In both education and evangelisation we are invited by our teachers and preachers to share in what they consider is the **more abundant life**. This more abundant life will be conceived of in different ways; it will have multiple dimensions; there will be ramifications for the way we think, feel, choose and act. Who we are, why we are and who we might be – these are questions central to both Es.

3.5. Both education and evangelisation, if they are to be internalised and effective, depend on a conscious **connection** being made between the **culture** that surrounds us and our inner life. It is highly likely that the culture we are immersed in will influence our imagination and sensitivity, our hopes and fears, our assumptions and habits, our relationships and expectations of others, our priorities and choices. If one is not aware of how one’s inner self is partly framed and constituted by the culture that surrounds us, something essential to both education and to evangelisation is missing. For self-knowledge and discernment about the sources of influence on one are usually considered important for both the E-processes.

Educators and evangelists need to be rooted in culture and local needs in order to be relevant and to get a hearing. However they also need to be able to transcend culture, in the case of liberal education, in order to be able to liberate people from the present and particular, or, in the case of evangelisation, in order to be adequately Christian and prepare people for God's Kingdom. The capacity to transcend culture, however, is strictly limited and the effort to do so should have the qualification 'so far as is possible', given that we cannot step outside our culture, for this would be to step outside of our very selves; but we should, nevertheless, be as discerning as possible about our culture and its assumptions, priorities, projects, entanglements and so forth, so that we can envisage possibilities for human flourishing beyond its current ways of thinking and acting.

3.6. In both education and evangelisation I think there is operating a very **similar** range of **factors**. These factors will influence how the work of the educator and the evangelist is interpreted by those on the receiving end, how it is accommodated or kept at bay, how it is accepted or rejected, how it is filtered or modified, how it is internalised and developed further. These factors include the cognitive ability of the learner or disciple, as well as that of the educator or evangelist, the degree of affection and warmth and affirmation and encouragement offered and received, the part played by example, the timeliness and clarity (or not) of explanations provided, the exercise and interaction of discipline and freedom, the power of motivation, the presence of challenge, the invitation and donation (or refusal) of commitment, plus the provision of safe places for exploration.

3.7. One cannot **bring alive** for others something that is not **living in oneself**. In both education and evangelisation in the end you communicate yourself; this is what will come across – for good or for ill. You will reveal a way of being, embodied in how you live, speak, act, relate, think and believe – and how all these hang together. Educators and evangelists, while entitled to privacy, nevertheless have to be ready to share themselves, to be vulnerable, to give themselves away to others. Before they can animate – something they do for others in relation to some truth - they must realise what they wish to convey by embodying it in their own lives. Their being will speak more cogently here than their words.

3.8. The character of educators and evangelists and their intentions towards those they address will, however, be revealed by what they say, or, perhaps, more precisely, by *how* they speak. Here the **tone of voice** is crucial as this is often what opens the door or closes it for hearers. This is a theme that receives prolonged and penetrating treatment in George Dennis O'Brien's book *Finding the Voice of the Church* (2007). I want to take two connected points from O'Brien: the first is about getting the tone of voice right; the second is about how this often depends on a prior deep listening. O'Brien compares the voice of an actor in a play with the voice of those who represent the church.

If the actor speaks in the wrong voice as lover, villain, hero, or clown, the play is ruined. So with the Christian voice ... spoken in the wrong voice – dictatorial, didactic, distant, or demeaning – the message fails. ... [A] presumptive tone, an over-assurance of attitude ... fails as the vehicle of faith. ... Speaking the faith in the wrong voice obscures the Church. ... A messenger in the wrong voice will distort the message beyond recognition (O'Brien, 2007, pp.xiv, 4, 5, 85).

Teachers know that this is 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. O'Brien puts it like this:

No one is finally outside the Church and no Christian is fully inside – at least “inside” as a personal assured achievement and possession. Christians are never wholly inside the truth; others are never wholly outside the truth. The conclusion is that Christian preaching to the outside has to begin with deep *listening*. ... The key to preaching the Gospel is not first defined by how one *speaks* but how one *listens* (O'Brien, 2007, pp. 77, 190).

To put this in terms not used by O'Brien: what we need is not a bigger megaphone but a better hearing aid.

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In the end both education and evangelisation face three certain and inexorable realities. First, there is sin, however we define it, and plenty of it, flourishing in the world. No matter how idealistic an educator or an evangelist may be, to deny or to ignore sin is simply to live in unreality. However, second, even more abounding, there is grace, grace that will help us overcome our worst selves and to collaborate with God in building and becoming a new creation. Third, we are given free will, the capacity, admittedly frequently weakened and damaged and obscured, but never totally obliterated, to choose, to change direction, to start again, to turn around.

In the face of these three realities, both education and evangelisation might be seen as kinds of capacity-building, capacity-building of minds, bodies and hearts, to live in the real world, God's world. Both Es clear the decks, remove debris, lift away obstacles, open ears, focus attention, stimulate imagination - so that we see differently, excite the heart, witness by our lives what is possible – but the real work of both Es is done by God and responded to by learners who are disciples and by disciples who are learners.

References

Murray, Paul (2008) (ed) *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Brien, George Dennis (2007) *Finding the Voice of the Church*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.